

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A small painting of a postcard of the Statue of Liberty and Staten Island Ferry, which is listed in the “Postcards” category, highlights a series of lessons and methods from eBay.¹ It is difficult to understand what is being auctioned because the shape and color of the ferry depicted in the postcard is similar to the yellow ruler that is at the top of the image. Such rulers are a typical part of eBay auctions and illustrate the problems conveying the aspects of objects. In this case, the ruler is difficult to read because the numbers are upside down, almost cropped from the image, begin before the six-inch mark instead of at zero, and are part of a painting of an eBay listing rather than a postcard. The artist Conrad Bakker, who uses the eBay ID `untitledprojects`, auctioned a series of these paintings at the “original” listing price of the postcard.² He titled the listing “Staten Island Ferry Statue Liberty 1980’s color postcard: an UNTITLED PROJECT: eBay/POSTCARDS/INDIANA” to reference the quirky spelling, uppercase and lowercase typefaces, punctuation, and spacing that eBay sellers deploy. Typographical errors and eccentric textual elements are common and conceptually important aspects of Internet content and are thus referenced by people like Bakker and quoted in this book. Through his project, Bakker proposes methods for thinking about Internet texts, consumerism, the ways things are categorized, the aspects and limits of the objects that are listed on eBay, and the terms of eBay selling. Images like Bakker’s series, the people who produce them, and colleagues and friends have helped me understand the processes and critiques of eBay.

I began using and thinking about eBay in 1997. This was about the same time that I was considering dissertation research on “virtual museums,” which

provide views and accounts of museums rather than physical structures. While this book is not part of that early project, eBay also produces shifts between different representational and material versions of objects and can be understood through collecting and related literature. I therefore appreciate the grounding in collecting and critical understandings of visual objects that were provided by Bill Agee, Carol Armstrong, Rosemarie Haag Bletter, William Boddy, Patricia Clough, Setha Low, Linda Nochlin, Jane Roos, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Ella Shohat, Chris Straayer, Michelle Wallace, and Sharon Zukin.

In a series of extremely productive conversations at the Console-ing Passions Conference in 2004, Mary Desjardins, Ken Hillis, Mark Williams, and I began to think collaboratively about eBay. During the same period, Ken Wissoker and I started discussing eBay. His intellectual and editorial assistance have been invaluable in conceptualizing this project. These conversations encouraged me to write about the ways vintage photography sellers use terms such as “gay” and “gay interest” to constitute a viewing public, sell items, and forward gay politics. This research appears in the *Everyday eBay: Culture, Collecting, and Desire* anthology that Hillis, Michael Petit, and Nathan Scott Epley edited.³ Some research on the critical use of these terms in underwear and swimwear auctions, which is expanded and developed in chapter 4 of this book, was graciously supported by Blu Tirohl and published in the *Journal of Gender Studies*.⁴ Work on heterosexuality, including the means through which the company and members profit from their wedding narratives, received enthusiastic support from Lisa McLaughlin and Cynthia Carter and has appeared in *Feminist Media Studies*.⁵ David Beer and Roger Burrows edited a special issue of the *Journal of Consumer Culture* that includes my study of how eBay’s heteronormative focus is challenged by the disorder of the site and messes of members.⁶

Colleagues also have invited me to present parts of this book and provided invaluable commentary. Caren Kaplan graciously included me in the Cultural Studies Colloquium Series at the University of California, Davis. Susanna Paasonen involved me in her provocative conference on identity and sexuality at the Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki. Ann Cvetkovich, Ann Reynolds, and Janet Staiger encouraged some research on how doll producers render themselves as artists and mothers on eBay. I spoke at their rigorous Political Emotions Conference, and Staiger’s thoughtful commentary improved the chapter that appears in their anthology.⁷ I also owe thanks to Batya Friedman, Gilly Leshed, Carman Neustaedter, Helen Nis-

senbaum, and Phoebe Sengers for including my consideration of eBay and free labor in their busyness symposium, which was sponsored by the National Science Foundation at the University of Washington. Early versions of some chapters were also considered in the Seminar on Historical Change and Social Theory at Tulane University. Emily Clark, Joel Dinerstein, Kate Drabinski, Marline Otte, Anthony Pereira, Allison Truitt, Edith Wolfe, and Justin Wolfe were among the many participants who provided careful readings and bibliographic suggestions at the seminar.

My ability to spend time researching eBay has also been facilitated by generous grants from a number of institutions. The National Endowment for the Humanities funded the very important summer seminar on literature and information technologies that Kate Hayles led at the University of California, Los Angeles. Kate is an amazing mentor and colleague and an astute scholar with a wide knowledge of new media practices. Other seminar participants, including Kathleen Fitzpatrick, William Gardner, Tara McPherson, and David Silver, continue to contribute to my intellectual inquiries. Colleagues at my current and previous academic institutions have also supported expenses for technology and travel and included me in their scholarly conversations. Tulane University and its School of Liberal Arts have funded this project with Committee on Research (COR) Summer Fellowships, Lurcy Grants, and a Research Enhancement Grant. The Newcomb College Institute offered me a number of research grants, and the Newcomb College Center for Research on Women provided a reading group grant that has been key to my intellectual development. I am particularly grateful to George Bernstein, Michael Bernstein, Carole Haber, Tara Hamburg, Sally Kenney, Rebecca Mark, Brian Mitchell, Jan Mulvihill, Molly Travis, and Laura Wolford for their support through these grant opportunities. I also thank the students who considered eBay in the classroom and Michael Garrett, Julie Schwartzwald, and Megan Weinlein for their research on eBay. My departmental colleagues, including Connie Balides, Kai-man Chang, Kukhee Choo, Carole Daruna, Marie Davis, Ana Lopez, Jim Mackin, Vicki Mayer, Mauro Porto, Beretta Smith-Shomade, Frank Ukadike, and Ferruh Yilmaz, have been encouraging. While evacuated from Tulane for Hurricane Katrina and just starting to work on this book, the University of California, Santa Cruz—especially the Center for Cultural Studies—offered me an intellectual home. I owe particular thanks to Stephanie Casher, Chris Connery, Dana Frank, and Gail Hershatter for their kindness and intellectual support.

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