

ART REVIEW

Economic Ekphrasis of a Broken Table: Goldin+Senneby, *Banca Rotta*, 2013

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ART EXPERIENCES AS ECONOMIC EKPHRASIS

In the heart of Stockholm School of Economics' (SSE) open library, we encounter a strange object (Figure 1). What sort of UFO is this? It seems another alien piece of art has been landed in the library by the school's Art Initiative. For more than five years, artworks have popped up, first in the school's common open spaces, for



Figure 1: A Broken Table Has Landed in Stockholm School of Economics

Note. Photograph courtesy of Mikael Olsson.

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example, the so-called Atrium, then in many of the central corridors. In its main staircases, the Bonnier-Dahlin art collection began curating a selection of young and upcoming Swedish artists.

Recently, whole classrooms have been reconfigured into full-fledged installations. Visual artists like the Swedish Jens Fänge and Jacob Dahlberg and now, in 2022, Anglo-Nigerian Yinka Shonibare are generously commissioned to reconfigure entire classrooms, one after the other, in full artistic freedom.

The students and faculty of Stockholm School of Economics are immersed in art experiences. Not only are they encountering single pieces of art but they spend their school time in fully art-based atmospheres. In addition to an ever-growing permanent collection are constant projections of temporal video artworks on the Atrium's large screen. The president, seconded by an engaged advisory board of patrons, artists, and heads of the Royal Institute of Art (KKH) and the Moderna Museet of Stockholm, has given SSE Art Initiative the explicit mission to curate art's vibrant presence. The president has explicitly stated that art, literature, and culture are to be conceived not as instruments of but as foundations for economies and its management (Strannegård 2021). Wall by wall, piece by piece, the spaces of SSE are inviting experiences that SSE Art Initiative is busy framing not as museal but as aesthetic instances of business education. For instance, high under the dome of the library tower right above the alien art object to which we will soon return, a fifteen-meter-wide, almost two-meter-high, eighty-six-minute-long video work by artists Lina Selander and Oscar Mangione is displayed. The artwork, named *Soli Deo Gloria*, is "a montage of precisely selected, layered fragments of academic texts, ancient coins, historical bills, film sequences, and references to economic events covering a time span of almost 4000 years" (Selander 2022). The academic role curated by SSE Art Initiative to such artworks is to impact educational discourses according to the school's mission, FREE. FREE is an acronym for "fact-based and scientifically grounded," "reflective and self-aware," "empathetic and culturally literate," and "entrepreneurial and responsible." The "core competence of humans is to be human, and SSE's educational aims take this ad notam" the school explains on its web page (Stockholm School of Economics, n.d.).

This very special educational reception of art in business school that generates narrations subversively merging with traditional managerial discourses has in SSE been labeled an "economic ekphrasis." The etymological origin of *ekphrasis* is the Greek ἐκ and φράσις, which mean "out" and "speak," respectively, and the verb ἐκφράζειν, which means to proclaim or call an innate object by name. Dictionaries define *ekphrasis* as "a literary description of or commentary on visual work of art," and *economic ekphrasis* is an extension of the definition to include "literary descriptions of or commentary on visual work of art as a research-educational method in the social and economic sciences" (Guillet de Monthoux and Wikberg 2021, 19).

Let's now see how aesthetics might inspire ethical considerations by such ekphrastic processes. How might such aesthetic sharing, as when business schools become installations, open up ethical reflection by collective aesthetical experiences as implied in Jacques Rancière's (2004) theory of distributing the sensible, whereby

he, for instance, implied that poetry reading gave the basis for collective judgement? Let's follow the process of narrative creation of economic ekphrasis and see how it spurs ethical judgments through aesthetic experiences much in the way in which Richard Rorty once, in a lecture from 1994 available on YouTube, urged us to tackle ethics through narration. Whereas Rorty refers to narratives, Rancière (2004) speaks more directly of experiences of art.

SPOTTING ART

Let's zoom back down to the UFO in the library to see how a strange object can inspire a Rancièrian turn in business ethics that might liberate us from eternally rehashing old deontic or utilitarian principles for do-good businesspeople.

So, this is an art object! The Stockholm-based artist duo Goldin+Senneby inform that it's a seventeenth-century oak table cut in half. The historical table appears to be a fine work of craftsmanship by a now forgotten carpenter. One could imagine that such an object could be a sought-after and expensive antique in the auction house—a historical design piece ideal for nicely decorating such a solemn space as the SSE library, only that it is so brutally cut in half that it destroys every link to some smooth, pleasant lobby-art decoration.

This object is hardly relaxing; it's a straight provocation. We cannot help turning to its makers. And mind you, they hardly seem eager to please interior designers. We discover a rather mysterious Goldin+Senneby artist duo and their uncanny and sly artistic practice. According to their web page, "Goldin+Senneby is a Stockholm-based artist subject. Since 2004 their work has explored the structural correspondence between conceptual art and finance capital, drawn to its (il)logical conclusions. Currently their practice is mutating" (Goldin+Senneby, n.d.-b).

Rumors say that Simon Goldin was attending SSE's finance educational program before dropping out to join the Royal Institute of Art. Jakob Senneby seems to have a business background, too, in advertising. Actually, many of the artists represented in the school's permanent art collection have, on closer inspection, connections to the world of economics. But that is not why their work is in the school; rather, its presence is a sign that today's artists are seldom keeping art and capital as hermetically separated as earlier generations did. Contemporary artists accept that they work *in* the market, although they don't work *for* the market. Art no longer is a means to picture reality but rather, as Nelson Goodman (1978) once said, a way of world-making. They swim partly in the same waters as the SSE students and faculty! We become curious! Are there facts behind the rumors?

TRACKING DOWN ARTISTS

In our day and age, it's impossible not to leave traces online, so we probe deeper. But there are hardly any pictures of Simon and Jakob together. Oh, yes, now we remember another rumor! In what seems to be a strategy of mystification, they do not like to have their photos taken and don't even show up at their gallery openings. Are they recluses, suffering from social phobia? No, wait, there are some photos; we just missed them at first! That guy looks young but familiar. *Simon in the Snow at*

Dawn, Christmas, Umea (1997), *Simon Simon on the Subway* (1998), *Laughing. Yvon's House, Avignon* (2001)—these are not just any pictures; they are artworks by Nan Goldin! Interesting, Simon must be somewhat related to the famous American artist known for her beautiful photographs of drug addicts and drag queens. Cool! And Senneby, doesn't that sound familiar too? We google and connect the dots. Annette Senneby, the talented Swedish artist, appears on the screen. That's why it sounded so familiar. Annette must be Jakob's mother! These things are not unimportant. It is widely known among artists that social capital is key to success, and Fraiberger and colleagues (2018) convincingly showed in an article in *Science* how early access to prestigious art institutions offered lifelong access and reduced dropout rates, and vice versa.

LIFE AND ECONOMY

Now the mental image of two oddballs with social anxiety disorders quickly withdraws. These artists seem well connected within and well beyond the art world and the borders of Sweden. As we continue browsing the World Wide Web, we start to trace more connections to other acclaimed people of various professions. They have collaborated with Thea Westreich Wagner, the famous art patron and collector in New York; fiction authors, such as Mara Lee, Katie Kitamura, Jonas Hassen Khemiri, and the pseudonymous K.D.; academics like Ronny Ambjörnsson, Théo Bourgeron, Donald MacKenzie, Sarah Thornton, Ismail Ertürk, Angus Cameron, and Mary Poovey; and numerous other playwrights, poets, actors, arborists, costume designers, graphic designers, carpenters, and magicians. All these people, of whom many are very familiar with the economic performativity of imagination in business realities, constitute the ekphrastic melting pot of Goldin+Senneby.

No one can get to know Goldin+Senneby, but we begin to understand how they do their art in networks inspired by the complex interaction of imagination and entrepreneurial realities. As Clare Birchall (2021, 205–6) puts it in the book that SSE Art Initiative wrote jointly with Goldin+Senneby and their cooperating partners, “by testing the limits of both revelation and concealment; populating their worlds with illusionists, proxies, speculators, actors, and subverters; creating mysteries and tricks to match those of the market; and infiltrating spaces of capital to plant provocations, Goldin+Senneby are key players in an appropriation of a secret.” The interaction of revelation and concealment surfaces on the work-life-centered social media platform LinkedIn. Goldin+Senneby has a company page that is blatantly empty of posts and content, except for the following *Frieze* magazine quote by João Laia (LinkedIn, n.d.):

Goldin+Senneby define themselves as a “collaborative framework exploring juridical, financial and spatial constructs.” The elusiveness of this description is somewhat apt. Since 2004, when Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby started working as a duo, they have speculated around the layerings of contemporary economics, analyzing and employing different dimensions of financial markets. Their collaborative strategies have shaped a withdrawn approach wherein the artists are akin to puppeteers: their production mostly comprises choreographing the labour of others.

We hence start to understand these conceptual artists' role in the economy they coconstruct and the allusion that comes to mind. The broken table speaks to businesspeople's concepts of value creation. By destroying an already valuable piece and slapping the Goldin+Senneby brand on it, they cleverly make it even more expensive. The unique table is streamlined into a series, eradicating the initial creator's marks. Students who are taught to refine everything from raw materials to branding strategies point to the artwork and suffer from existential anxiety and identity crises. How will their future professional lifework be characterized? Instead of being the creators or preservers of great businesses, they might just as well end up as destroyers, mirroring the auspicious, powerful Shiva in the Hindu trinity rather than the creative Brahma or the protecting Vishnu. The higher up in the divine value chains they end up, the higher the risk that they will definitely alienate from any production and work reality.

The artwork thus speaks to management ideas of division of labor and outsourcing. Let others do the work and reap the profits for yourself, the table seems to whisper. Never mind if you break my back in the process! We learn that the artists almost have not touched the table themselves. We even find pictorial evidence that another person in earmuffs, in service of the artists, did the actual cutting with a machine saw, transfiguring production to destruction (Figure 2). Is this how art reconfigures John Locke's ([1690] 1980) property rights? And we notice how



Figure 2: The Artists Outsource the Manual Work of the Wood Cutting to Moa Ott

Note. Photograph courtesy of Fredrik Stenberg.

faculty, students, and staff gather around the object and start to talk about it, telling us what they see. It suddenly occurs to us that the business school setting and its natural inhabitants can't help but practice the ancient exercise of the ekphrasis. Long before the camera was invented, one way to preserve and disseminate a visual work of art was to give a vivid, often dramatic verbal description of it. In the ekphrasis, we are seeing ethics coming out of aesthetics in the Rancièrian (2004) mode of distributing the sensible.

DEATH AND BUSINESS

We meet the object. It speaks to us much in the way envisaged by Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (Nilson and Wikberg 2021). We track down artists as puppeteers of complex open networks as ways of world-making. But, remember how it all began: by facing the object, that seventeenth-century table. When we focus on this very object, we realize the uniqueness of exposing such a piece in a business school. The acuteness of the puppeteers who have succeeded in connecting this educational network usually focused on what they thought was the basis of an economy, namely, eternal success of project and undertaking. In this library crammed with success books in management and leadership, we are faced with something completely different. Investigating the background to this piece of art, we read that it is one of "a series of money changer's tables from the 1600s that Goldin+Senneby have had sawn in half."

So what is the meaning behind this table? But when we continue our desktop research and google "Goldin+Senneby," this leads us far beyond such static and obsolete a conception of art's meaning as rooted in the artists' intention. Why sawn in two? We read, "When a money changer in Florence went bankrupt, his trading table was destroyed" (Goldin+Senneby, n.d.-a).

During the Renaissance, business failure was made visible by cutting up the banker's instrument of trade. One wonders how this could be envisionable with contemporary finance technology? In the old days, we knew that this meant the end of the banker as a businessperson—often for generations to come. In today's companies, with limited liabilities, the cat has more than nine lives. By placing the artwork centrally in the school's library, the artists might have given students a powerful memento mori of management. And indeed, in the SSE Art Initiative book (Guillet de Monthoux and Wikberg 2021), we see how economists have been mesmerized by this broken table. They have engaged students and colleagues in debates on the role of failure in economies, on the importance of responsibility and the consequences of its legal limitations by joint stock companies. We make a business ethical turn in confronting this artwork. By placing this strange object as a centerpiece of our business school, we make a very surprising monument over the preconditions of a thriving live capitalism, namely, the death of business. By legally instituting limited liability, entrepreneurs are ethically permitted to fail and avoid having their whole lives and careers terminated, as Venetian bankers did. This piece of art makes obvious to business students that business ethics has changed fundamentally from times when failure meant the death of the salesman, not only of the

company. The aesthetic experience of the table does not generate rules of ethics but provides a narrative that inspires ethical reasoning in the way Rorty recommended.

From the naive vitalism of successful business as the sole preoccupation for an economy, this goddamn table forces us into thought experiments exploring the importance of tolerating failure in modern capitalism. Goldin+Senneby live in the modern economy of eternal life, but their artwork makes us consider how often we forget the “finitude” of bankruptcy. Here we touch upon the core ethical question of the artwork we present: is eternal life in a capitalistic economy more dependent on finitude and death in business than we realize?

Ekphrasis is about calling an innate object by name. What, then, is the name of this artwork? We read the title, *Banca Rotta*, on a plaque and seek an explanation on the artists’ web page (Goldin+Senneby, n.d.-a):

The word bank derives from the Old Italian word for these tables, “banca” (comparable to bench in English). When a money changer in Florence went bankrupt, his trading table was destroyed—“banca” became “banca rotta,” broken bench.

Finally, the penny drops. What’s in a name? Everything, it seems! The ekphrasis of a name conjures the spirit of the broken table. That which we call a *banca rotta* would not have been the same without this name, as Örjan Sjöberg (2021, 79–80) argues:

Banca Rotta induces us to think—so is the intentions of the artists—about the world of finance. It does so in a rather open-ended fashion—meanings no doubt occasioned as much by the experience and knowledge of the observer as by the angle from which the physical object, the broken table, is observed or the degree of surprise by its location, physical state, or intriguing details (such as the sliding mechanism) might engender. Yet had it not been for its name, *Banca Rotta*, the physical object itself is unlikely to trigger any thoughts about finance at all.

Our account of Goldin+Senneby’s art in the business school makes evident that a physical artwork plus its ekphrastic effects might attract onlookers to a Rancièrian (2004) distribution of the sensible, in turn stimulating the development of a Rorty-like discourse on business ethics.

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