

saw no reason to stop the escalation. They steadily raised estimates on paintings, placed high reserves on paintings below which they were not allowed to sell, and started the bidding at high levels. They created an inflated atmosphere in which auctions would contain dozens of paintings estimated at over a million dollars. There simply was not enough money to buy them all. Paintings were priced out of the market, and many went unsold. People who had paid good money just a few years ago could no longer liquidate their "investment." This sent shock waves through the art market, which shook confidence in buying art in general.

The critics are also culpable for their part in creating a helter-skelter "anything goes" aesthetic environment. There is no longer any unified body of aesthetic knowledge to which values can be assigned. Everything and anything cannot qualify as a work of art lest art lose all sense of definition. Critics are busy cultivating their own aesthetic orchards, and no one dares trespass to pluck his neighbor's fruit. This fragmentation of aesthetics leaves no foundation on which to justify the dollar values of the art market, allowing dealers the opportunity to promote anything without discretion. The highly esoteric and obscure nature of contemporary art criticism offers the enticement of entry into a private and privileged club; this is manna for dealer and snob alike. The magazines that disseminate art criticism today are the dealers' trade journals, which depend on advertising dollars, and their purpose is to promote sales. The critics welcome this scenario, indeed look favorably upon works of art attaining astronomical prices.

Ultimately, it is the artists themselves who must assume responsibility for the present state of affairs. They have abnegated their role as propagators of the aesthetic message. The decades of the 1950's and 1960's were the age of the critic. The 1970's and 1980's were the era of the dealer. During these years the "aesthetic ball" was taken away from the artist. Without any sound criteria for value judgment, artists allowed their aesthetic choices to be made for them and were finally left with no choice of their own. Artists today are working naked in a barren wilderness. They have no means of providing for themselves, and their surroundings offer them neither direction nor comfort. This is the symp-

tom of spiritual separation. Artists are groping, hoping to become the next important discovery. Works of art designed to shock the sensibilities are fed into a system that has become anesthetized like an addict in need of a more powerful fix. And like the addict, who at the center of his discontent fails to recognize his own problem, so must the art world reach rock bottom before it can come to its own rescue.

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COMMONWEAL



Our Lady of The Price Is Right

by Stephen Provizer

Let the Buddhists have their mandalas; give the Muslims Mecca; we have *The Price Is Right*. Five days a week at 11:00 A.M., soaring audio and video levels, howling graphics, and dizzying camera shots herald the appearance of a ministry as fervent as any in the world. The names of the chosen few are called out in demographic perfection—a black or two, Latins, perky coeds, Marine sergeants, and Sun Belt retirees. Exhorted to "Come on Down!" they spring from their seats like human Pop-Tarts and race to take their places at the bidding rostrums. Released from purgatory, they have taken the first step on the path

to ultimate redemption in the Showcase Showdown.

When they have settled in, the name of the All-Powerful One is finally intoned; the stage doors part, the congregation rises, and Bob Barker—High Priest of the Temple of Conspicuous Consumption—strides on stage, his impeccably tailored suit fluttering lightly in the breeze. His crop of snowy white hair lends him an aloof yet benevolent air. I am touched by the transformation of the man from the cynical, satanic persona I once saw on *Truth or Consequences* to this present magisterial incarnation. His canonization marks a minor triumph of one of America's greatest inventions: the reinvention (see Reagan and Nixon).

Now, the emotion heightens another notch as ravishing models emerge to serve as Guardian Angels of the Sacred Treasure. Their semi-erotic enthusiasm for the first item—a trash compactor—is so compelling that it seems to lead the first group of bidders astray. Priest Barker subtly chastises them for their wayward bidding, and finally a devout Latin shopper triumphs and ascends to the altar. To prove that she is worthy of the Church's redemption, the Heavenly Host demands she recite her catechism: how much is this sunscreenhot-saucemiraclegrowsnugglefabricsoftenervclamint? She displays a woeful ignorance of the sacred pricing structures, but skillfully manipulates one of the Church icons—a golf club—to make a long putt, propitiate the gods, and win a red Subaru.

Two bidding rituals ensue and it's time for a major Church sacrament—the spinning of the Prayer Wheel. Manipulation of a giant wheel inscribed with numbers will determine which penitent has the best relationship with the Gods of Fate and will thus proceed to the Showcase Showdown. A hyperventilating Black Priestess, a stoic thirtyish male Initiate, and a pert Vestal Virgin in a short white dress all spin, under Host Barker's supervision. They spin for our sins, but regardless of whether our contestant wins—like the Vestal Virgin—the Host still wants us back; he bellows: "Write for tickets! Join me in Southern California—dream capital! Spiritual locus!"

Our next devotee arrives wearing a sexy halter-top, and a concupiscent gleam lights up Priest Barker's brow. Leering affably, he's the People's

Priest—sexist and paternal. The Angels roll out a stove for the audience's adoration, along with some sacramental Rice-a-Roni (the Saint Francisco treat). Doris the grandmother bids last and wins. Overwhelmed with The Spirit, she can barely mount the stage and gets lost approaching the host. Alas, Doris loses at "Squeeze Play" and the general morale plummets, but cameras pan the crowd, "Applause" signs flash, and spirits soar once more. No place for depression in The Temple!

George ascends next. He sports a natty white moustache, white polyester clothes of the retirement sort, and long, roguish sideburns—the "Fallen Rector" look. In order to gain access to the Church treasury, he must acquire giant tablets by correctly bidding and skillfully drop them into a giant maze. But the Devil seems to have his paws on the huge wafers, for they all fall with a thud into worthless slots. The Rector slinks off, hoping for later redemption at the Big Wheel.

With no contests left, the cameras pan the losers, forcing them to assume courageous smiles while their paltry consolation prizes come up on the screen: Dessert-of-the-Month-Club memberships, multivitamins, and Fi-Bars with semidiscredited oat bran. We have one more go-around at the Giant Prayer Wheel and Doris triumphs. This means the Matriarch must confront the Vestal Virgin in the culminating ceremony.

Priest Barker now presides over the final and most austere ritual of the service—the Showcase Showdown. The first showcase is wondrous—Lakers season tickets, a computer, and a car. Will a bid of \$12,500 get Doris into the *Sanctum Sanctorum*? The second showcase features the disconnected legs of a model emerging from a huge black bathtub, a bedroom set, and, finally, a houseboat.

By the grace of the Television Gods, the more photogenic Vestal Virgin bids closer to the mark and is declared the winner. Canned music swells and, with the bounty of the Church treasury as backdrop, we close out the service with High Priest Barker gazing out over his flock and joking contentedly with the nubile Temple Angels.

We viewers must now brace ourselves for a jarring descent from the sacred to the mundane—the midday news. Our only solace lies in knowing that approximately seven hours later we will be able to reconsecrate ourselves by observing

the austere rituals involving another Sacred Wheel—this one presided over by the great goddess Vanna White.

Stephen Provizer writes from Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Guerrillas In Our Midst

by Sarah J. McCarthy

The L.A. Riots Remembered

Grappling with the meaning of the L.A. riots, wondering with Rodney King why we can't get along, I muse about days long ago when I was a terroristette for the women's movement. I cared so much about violence against women that, with a group of my sisters, I participated in a rampage of window-smashing, targeting theaters showing films such as *Dressed to Kill* and *He Knows You're Alone*. I know the thrill of the brick in the hand that smashes the plate-glass window of the oppressor. "I wish we would've known about this in high school," shrieked one of my cohorts, "this is fun!" We ran through the night spray-painting on streets we dare not usually walk, mini-looting by ripping off magazines from pornography stores, and chanting "We're together, we're not alone."

And so you see, I understand the terrorist impulse, or at least the terroristette one, for we would never have carried out such impulses had there been people—men or women—who had their faces or arms or jugulars cut by this rain of glass. The brick that crushes the human skull is what separates the terroristette from the full-blown variety. The rage that fuels the aggrieved rebel can be understood and indulged by society up to that point where the brakes are gone, restraint is thrown to the wind, reason and fair play are smashed, and the oppressed are transformed into monsters worse than the ones they are fighting. Too many blacks in America have reached that point.

I remember the precise moment when I first noticed that oppressed people transform themselves into monsters. It was when Arab terrorists aboard the *Achille Lauro* threw Leon Klinghoffer,

helpless and wheelchair-bound, overboard into the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Enough, I said; I no longer cared a whit what nightmares of oppression had been suffered by these terrorists from the Middle East. A cheer rose from deep within me when Reagan put a missile through Muammar Al-Qaddafi's front door. Ronald Reagan and I knew we were looking at the face of evil, and we both had had enough. My antimilitary, anti-American-power stance melted away. This ex-Jane Fonda wannabe realized that American military power could be used for good as well as bad, used precisely to limit destruction, to remove surgically jets carrying terrorists from the skies.

The people of this great country should not be pistol-whipped and hit with a brick in the head by every punk with a grievance. We have been guilt-tripped enough—we have been sufficiently blamed and held responsible. We have had the word racist taped over our mouths like electrician's tape. The voices raised against black terrorism are now just a trickle, people tip-toeing gingerly on dangerous ground. The voices will rise to a crescendo as the terrorists become more and more outrageous, as the threats about wake-up calls and long hot summers become more disgusting, as the excuses and remorse of the "we are all responsible" apologists begin to sound more and more implausible. Many more will realize there is no appeasing the unappeasable, the permanently aggrieved.

A powerful metaphor for black guilt-tripping can be found in *Meridian* by black poet and author Alice Walker. Written before *The Color Purple*, Walker's book tells the story of a white woman, Lynne, who has gone South in the 60's to work for civil rights, where she marries a black man, Truman. Lynne and Truman have a black friend, Tommy Odds, who had his lower arm shot off in a demonstration. Because he was angry and people owed him and because Lynne was white, he wanted to make love to her. But Lynne was married to Truman and considered Tommy Odds only a friend. Walker writes:

For of course it was Tommy Odds who raped her. As he said, it wasn't really rape. She had not screamed once, or even struggled very much. To her, it was worse than rape because she felt that