

[\$490.35]: SEAN WEISGERBER'S PRICE PER SQUARE INCH

By Cole Thompson

An arrangement of acrylic paint price tags neatly placed one-by-one in grid formation across the surface of the canvas. Each tag relays the market value of the square inch it occupies at the time of its making:

(28 x 35 inches) x (\$3.99 per square inch) = Market Value
(980 sq. in.) x (\$3.99 per sq. in.) = Market Value
\$3,910.20 = Market Value

(56 x 70 inches) x (\$2.49 per square inch) = Market Value
(3,920 sq. in.) x (\$2.49 per sq. in.) = Market Value
\$9,760.80 = Market Value

This pricing procedure might be familiar to those who have read an artwork appraisal report or are in step with the evaluation structures used by commercial galleries. On occasions where market values for artworks are uncertain or slippery, previous sales records are compiled, aggregated, and divided against the total surface areas of all considered works. The resulting figure is then multiplied by the surface area of similarly sized works to determine the final price. This regularly utilized price-per-square-inch structure is where both the title and conceptual schematic of Sean Weisgerber's most recent series of paintings is derived.

[\$67.55]

Using the median price per square inch (PPSI) for emerging painters in Canada—culled from the likes of benefit auction catalogues and gallery price lists—Weisgerber presents the market calculations of the commercial artworld in logical, matter-of-fact expressions. As viewers move through the series, minor deviations between the PPSI of different works show changing purchasing tendencies and fluctuations within the market. For example, despite having a higher total sales price, larger works tend to have a lower PPSI than smaller works since they are more spatially demanding and are therefore more difficult to sell than their conveniently packaged counterparts. Similarly, works might exhibit different PPSIs resulting from any number of events that might spike or deflate market interest: a well-received exhibition (↑), a scathing *Times* review (↓), the favour of a prominent collector (↑), a

published essay by an obscure author (↓↑?). Most significantly, the retail price of any work from the *Price Per Square Inch* series is the aggregate of the actual ticketed prices indicated on the work's surface.¹ Weisgerber's works *really do* sell for the publicly disclosed amount.

[\$62.30]

The calculation is shockingly transparent when considered against the artworld's enigmatic and often absurd relationship to monetary value. The last decade has witnessed a constant barrage of new auction house records, topped by the \$475.4 million purchase of the *Salvator Mundi* by the Louvre Abu Dhabi. More recently, a JPEG file sold for \$69.3 million as a result of the relatively new NFT craze, and, at the time of this writing, an 11.7 million dollar gold cube sits guarded by security in New York's Central Park. Momentarily sidestepping the seedy ethical entanglements of these uber-affluent-artnet.com-clickbait-spectacles, it's apparent that these grotesque amounts are shuffled around as cultural capital investments in speculation of future accumulation: more return, more visitors, more hype, more revenue, more tax write-offs when assets are made "public."² In essence, the complete financialization of the artworld where us toiling commoners are left behind, twiddling our thumbs as we come to recognize two things: 1) the absolute and total impossibility of participation, and 2) that we, brusquely stated, have no idea what the fuck is going on.

[\$63.00]

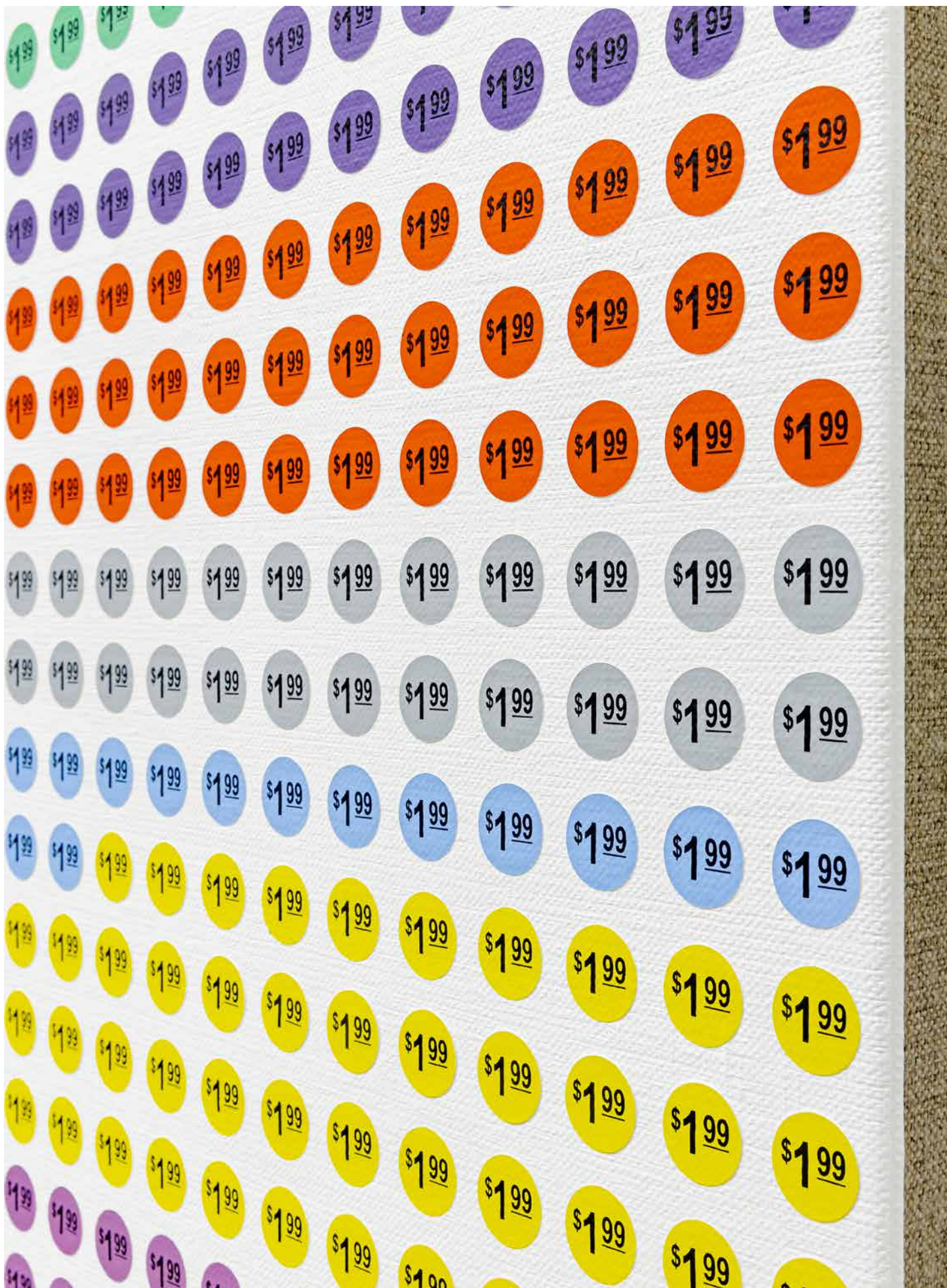
Weisgerber's PPSI works straddle the divide between stoppage and speculation. On one hand, the paintings bring the art object as a speculative capital asset to a grinding halt through their insistent indexicality. The price of *here* at the moment of *now*. A freezing of the constantly shifting contingencies that mingle and collude as they approach something called value. When a work from PPSI is sold, Weisgerber further marks this stoppage by using the sale date as the title of the work (e.g. *OCT. 27, 2018* or *JAN. 17, 2022*). Not to mention that the process determining the PPSI listed on each of the artist's acrylic price tags mirrors

Pg. 42-43: Sean Weisgerber, *Price Per Square Inch* series, 60 x 170 inches, acrylic on linen, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Pg. 45: Sean Weisgerber, *Price Per Square Inch* series (detail), 60 x 170 inches, acrylic on linen, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

¹ Sean Weisgerber, "BlackFlash essay: a few questions," email response to Cole Thompson, January 25, 2022.

² Patricia Cohen, "Writing Off the Warhol Next Door: Art Collectors Gain Tax Benefits From Private Museums," *The New York Times* (2015), accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/business/art-collectors-gain-tax-benefits-from-private-museums.html>.



that used in the field of economics to calculate price indices for any class of goods or services. They index a specific value at a specific time. However, on the other side of the coin, these clear markings might serve as benchmarks to measure the success of the artwork as investment. The financial and temporal parameters are laid bare in such a way that one can anticipate, and eventually advertise, the sum of their return on investment:

Purchase date: OCT. 27, 2018
Purchase price: \$3,910.20

Resale date: MAR. 1, 2022
Resale price: \$6,114.60

Total days: 1,222
Total growth rate: 56.38%
Compound Annual Growth Rate: 14.35%

It's contradictory that such clear-cut transparency would heighten the complexity of where one stands in respect to machinations of markets and capital, but it almost always does. We're always yelling *shut it down* while at the same time trying to eke out some provisional mode of living on.³

[\$94.15]

In considering *PPSI*, one is—myself included—easily seduced by the dollars and cents of Weisgerber's series in an effort to elicit meaning from the cold hard economics of the work. Certainly, this is a necessary feature of the work that has to be accounted for, but at the same time, this interpretive default shows our inclination towards value as a monetary category, where artistic and conceptual merit is reduced to a tidy sum. Weisgerber gives us a push, and we are happy to continue down the heavily trodden path. There is a saving of interpretive labour akin to Sianne Ngai's account of the capitalist gimmick, where the thing in question is always a labour-saving device—a gadget, a formula, a *PPSI* evaluation—that we look upon with distrust since we intuitively understand capitalism's aspiration to replace human labour with machine and technology; the gimmick "proliferates in tandem with rising proportions of machines to workers."⁴ As Ngai describes, the gimmick "irritates and charms us" by "the way in which it seems both to work too hard and too little."⁵ However, this irritation is less caused by qualities inherent to the gimmick than by our own internalized propensities for the rational productivity that gimmicks seem to avoid. Ngai notes that pre-capitalist gimmicks were objects of wonder and admiration, and it is here that Weisgerber's work finds company in Rube Goldberg's machines or Fischli and Weiss's film *The Way Things Go* (1987) discussed by Ngai. In *PPSI*, the gimmick—I use this term

with critical affection that differs from those products pushed on late-night infomercials—is the clearly presented formula that points us towards a labour-saving process of evaluation. But what makes Weisgerber's work a gimmick of admiration and not one of disdain results from its intensive materiality. Whatever efficiency transpires upon reception is soon reneged once the sheer presence of inch-by-inch labour begins to take its toll. And, when considering the relatively low price of each handmade acrylic tag, all notion of the capitalist gimmick begins to fade. There is no labour saving here.

[\$117.95]

Through all this discussion of money and labour-saving tricks, it is the laborious process of *PPSI* that directly opposes capitalist modes of efficiency and finds lineage in the beloved precapitalist gimmick. They are *wonders* more than *tricks*.⁶ My first job was at Madill's Drugstore in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, and I remember priding myself on the speed at which I could price items using the ticket gun, churning out fluorescent stickers to meet the never-ending demand for paper towel and Pot of Gold chocolates—the same stickers Weisgerber references. *That* was the internalized desire for efficiency. *That* was the hope to render oneself valuable under capitalism. While Weisgerber's work addresses these concerns head-on, it is through meticulous and irreducible labour that they sharply break from full immersion in market discourse. When streamlining is the order of the day, modes of irrational productivity must have the highest critical registers.

[\$51.10]

Sitting with *PPSI* for the last month or so has provoked consideration for other forms of piecemeal creative work. Where a painter might opt for smaller canvases to increase their value per square inch as dictated by market forces, or work larger to increase their total sales amount for a single work, writers might self-indulge in a personal anecdote or become highly and most-frequently adverbial. "In consideration of" is lucrative compared to "considering." Is this why International Art English persists despite our rolling eyes? Do we mine for every square inch and word to muddle out an existence?

[\$34.30]

Cole Thompson is an essayist currently residing on Treaty 6 territory and the traditional homeland of the Métis. His current work and research centres on the horizon as an aesthetic and political genre.

³ I owe this sentiment and language—to eke and live on—to Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁴ Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (Winter 2017): 471.

⁵ Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," 472.

⁶ The language of "wonders" and "tricks" in describing gimmicks comes from Sianne Ngai's "Theory of the Gimmick."

Pg. 47: Sean Weisgerber, *Price Per Square Inch* series, 50 x 40 inches, acrylic on linen, 2020.

