

**eVery Day**  
Culture, Collecting  
and Desire  
**eBay**

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**The Contradictory Circulation  
of Fine Art and Antiques on eBay**

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The fine art and antiques sector of the economy has long been dominated by nineteenth-century patriarchal business practices and high-end auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's. In this chapter I argue that eBay has helped effect a set of democratizing shifts in this sector. As a technological assemblage, eBay provides for a new form of commerce that opens up certain social possibilities even as it forecloses others, and I point to contradictions between democratic notions of "community" and how eBay's language of "community" operates discursively within what is essentially a site for commercial transactions based on free-market libertarian "ethics." eBay's Feedback Forum system instills a form of seemingly transparent community self-governance that obviates the need for eBay the corporation to regulate and monitor transactions closely (see chapter 7). Transparency and its implied qualities of trust and social bond underwrite eBay, a setting where business transactions take place as an open expression of supply, demand, and evaluation. eBay thus exemplifies a new economic efficiency at work, one where flows of goods between buyers and sellers bypass costly intermediaries who once monopolized access, stock, and expertise.

As I detail below, eBay has enabled a move away from corporate intermediaries such as Sotheby's and Christie's and their traditional social filters based on elite assumptions about gender-, race- and class-based forms of social relations. Email as a direct yet impersonal form of communication and the anonymity afforded by eBay user IDs play an important role in the erosion of gender and class barriers in the fine art and antiques market. eBay also offers an almost immediate market access previously unavailable in the bricks-and-mortar international art market of old, and it has aided the flourishing of the fine art and antiques sector outside of older metropolitan centers. eBay's democratizing influences are complex, and I examine eBay in

relation to the rise and fall of other internet auction houses such as the former Sothebys.com and the role of internet research sites such as Artnet.com and Artfact.com. This account highlights the culture of traditional auction houses and shows how eBay has influenced bricks-and-mortar businesses. I also assess how eBay's democratizing influences work differently for buyers and sellers. I bring to this study my academic training in visual cultural and gender studies and my insider's knowledge as a seller on eBay of fine art and antiques.

To examine the complex changes that working for an online auction house brings to the embodied experience of these workers, I draw from my ethnographic research conducted with a small group of individuals working for a woman-owned American company selling fine art and antiques on eBay. The company started business on eBay in May 2000 and was a Sothebys.com associate from May 2001 until Sothebys.com's demise in February 2003. Through its association with Sothebys.com and eBay, the company quadrupled sales between 2000 and 2005.

### SOCIAL CLASS, EBAY, AND BRICKS-AND-MORTAR AUCTION HOUSES

Given eBay's populist founding myth that it was built on trading Beanie Babies and Pez dispensers and on message board chatter, it seemed unlikely there would ever have developed much of a connection between the world of fine art and antiques and the online auction site. But the record shows that the eBay community bought and sold both popular culture and fine art and antiques since eBay's inception. Indeed, collecting communities and art and antique dealers were among the earliest and most enthusiastic posters to the discussion boards on eBay's predecessor site, AuctionWeb. As Pongo, one of AuctionWeb's more famous characters, explained, "[A] lot of the early users were retired antiques dealers who could barely turn on their computers."<sup>1</sup> It was in part because of the strong presence of these individuals on eBay that in April 1999, at the peak of the U.S. dot.com boom, eBay bought Butterfield & Butterfield, a well-known West Coast auction house, for 260 million USD. eBay then launched "Great Collections," the firm's Web portal entry for selling high-end art and antiques consigned to Butterfield & Butterfield. In January of the same year, Sotheby's, the international auction house, announced it would spend 25 million USD to start Sothebys.com, and a few months later it unveiled the joint venture SothebysAmazon.com. In June 2002 Sothebys.com also initiated a collaboration with eBay, and while this alliance lasted only one year it had more lasting influence on

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the art and antiques business than is commonly acknowledged: the alliance demonstrated the viability of sites such as eBay for buyers and sellers of fine art and antiques, particularly in the low- to mid-level price range.<sup>2</sup>

Though these early online ventures were influential in many ways, a significant reason for their failure—including that of eBay's Great Collections, unsuccessfully rebranded as "eBay Premiere" in January 2001—to secure a niche within the high-end fine art and antiques market lies in the fact that the economic efficiency that online auctions offer is less valued in this market than in others. In the words of Sotheby's chronicler, Robert Lacey:

When people buy at Sotheby's, they are seeking to satisfy a variety of needs. They may explain their motives in terms of taste, or history or sentiment, but they are laying out their money fundamentally in hopes of acquiring something that can bring a new dimension to their lives. They are bidding for class. The ostentatious and insecure are seeking to validate themselves in the eyes of others. The passionate collector is driven by the quasi-spiritual impulse to possess beauty. But all are making their purchase in pursuit of some extra validation for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The experience of bidding in a high-end auction house cannot be duplicated online. The interpersonal dynamics peculiar to the kind of internet commerce championed by eBay make it harder to engage in the personalized face-to-face chit-chat through which personalities and social attributes become manifest in live auctions. Sotheby's management had difficulty distinguishing between and providing for the differing needs of the face-to-face side of its traditional business and the new cultural demands faced by the dot.com venture. Management applied Sotheby's long-standing practices of expensive banquets, lavish pampering of clients, and heavy spending on marketing to its far less lucrative dot.com business. The abundance of spending on the internet department itself was evident through the uncharacteristically high salaries for its tech and marketing employees and large sums spent on print ads in venues such as the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. This aggressive spending on marketing, particularly in the beginning, was seen as a way to lure high profile art and antique dealers to become participants in the Sothebys.com online venture through the inclusion of dealer property in expensive dot.com advertisements. Another rationale for its aggressive investment in marketing was to set itself ahead of the competition, particularly against the rival auction house Christie's, who initially considered starting its own online venture but eventually changed course and decided against it.

On eBay, clients as well as businesses are not so easily coded through appearance, age, education, class, or gender as they are in traditional auction settings. In general, online interactions tend to be less hierarchical and in theory promote diversity in an online organization's culture. One of the most commented upon advantages of the internet is the depersonalization of interlocutors through their assumption of online screen names. On eBay the ability of buyers and sellers to use anonymous user IDs can allow for a less inhibited presentation of self; however, sellers must adhere more strictly to traditional codes of ethics premised on a unitary, professional self. Nevertheless, email introduces compensatory advantages—sellers read correspondence and respond to it when ready. This can reduce the pressures of aggressive or manipulative telephone and face-to-face conversations, particularly those dealing with issues of price.

eBay's more democratic example inspired the organization of Sothebys.com. According to one woman interviewed for this project, Sothebys.com was more innovative than Sotheby's bricks-and-mortar operation in limiting hierarchical differences and reducing formalities among employees. Sothebys.com practiced more open hiring practices and promoted and rewarded younger employees, including women, who were not from the same high-elite social class from which the traditional firm recruited many of its employees. Sotheby.com's Content and IT employees were all under thirty, largely middle class, and paid at least double the salary of staff members whose positions did not require specialized skills or experience.<sup>4</sup> The company also took the (then) unusual step of training international dealers in how to sell their inventory on its site. This less centralized model of shared expertise and initiative comes closer to an eBay business model than what one would usually associate with an elite auction house.

The pressures of ongoing lawsuits at Sotheby's<sup>5</sup> and overspending on customer relations at its online division (already 100 million USD in debt) forced the firm to terminate its joint venture with eBay in February 2003.<sup>6</sup> Sotheby's minimized its internet presence and refocused on live auctions of valuable fine art and antiques. In the wake of this collapse, smaller internet-based fine art and antiques businesses and U.S.-based regional auction houses that had been important to eBay from the beginning acquired greater market shares of internet-based fine art and antiques sales. Yet this period was short-lived, as many of the medium- to large-sized established auction houses such as Doyle's and Swann's resumed their internet presence through eBay live auctions—a hybrid format combining live auction and internet-based sales.

### THE ROLE OF ONLINE ART RESEARCH SITES

Art-related sites such as Artnet.com, Askart.com, Artprice.com, and Artfact.com that survived the dot.com crash repositioned themselves as research and advertising sites. They remain significant online presences and exert enormous influence on the way fine art and antiques are bought, sold, and valued. While subscribing to these services can be costly (especially to Artfact.com and Artnet.com), they have been a great leveler in providing access to expertise, standardized information and pricing, images, and auction records for listed artists and decorative arts that were previously available only through very expensive reference books. In certain ways, these sites actually provide more information since online auction records often feature digitized color images of the object, a feature less economically feasible in book-based auction records. Websites such as Artnet.com have become important mechanisms internationally for determining prices in a more detailed and direct way, and they enable individuals located outside of metropolitan centers with the best public art libraries to access the same information as experts working for major auction houses or museums. These sites, combined with the eBay search engine of completed auction listings and search engines such as Google, have made the internet essential for researching the history of fine art and antiques.

Sites such as Artnet.com and Artfact.com have also given workers in online fine art and antiques businesses an edge over clients. In some cases, this is because employees are more adept at Web-based research than clients, who often are less comfortable with computers and lack the skills to use sites such as Artnet.com properly and on a regular basis. Thus, knowledge and confidence gained through using these sites have opened up commercial and social possibilities for women and a younger generation of eBay sellers of fine art and antiques. Another advantage for these sellers is eBay's provision of access to an international fine art and antiques virtual marketplace that bypasses costly antique fairs and auction houses and that gives customers who are located anywhere and have Web access the means to buy and sell across spatially dispersed markets. This is significant since following the decline in value of the U.S. dollar relative to other major currencies, U.S.-based objects have become cheaper to acquire for foreign buyers and eBay businesses located anywhere in the United States now benefit from access to national and international clientele. Indeed, many regionally based American auction houses that simultaneously conduct live and eBay-based auctions now claim that their sales are international as well. An examination of networked art auctions therefore reveals that the work involved links people globally in a virtual space of international commerce. eBay

and the internet have facilitated the rise of smaller firms selling fine art and antiques. Because such firms are more horizontal in their organizational structure than older firms such as Sotheby's they can be seen as maintaining aspects of the myth of eBay as the quintessential American small town writ virtual, built on word of mouth, and sustained by people's feelings of belonging.

### **SELLERS, INVISIBLE LABOR, AND COSTS OF EBAY**

Despite the desirable democratic possibilities for which eBay has allowed, many of the above-noted technological and social changes in the way commerce is conducted on eBay have taken place at considerable cost to sellers. While the internet's technological structure helps foster the illusion of costless reproductions and instantaneous sales, the labor entailed in listing an object on eBay in a highly professional way and completing an internet transaction is enormous. To compensate for buyers' inability to personally examine an object before purchase, many serious online sellers provide very detailed cataloging information including extensive condition reports and photographs. Requisite skills range from expertise in photography to fine art cataloging, research, writing condition reports, expertise with computers, and shipping and packing, among others. These practices of cataloging and photography follow those of older art catalogs produced by bricks-and-mortar auction houses, but often include greater detail, including biographies of artists, four to six photographs per item, and extensive condition reports. While the form of these descriptions may not be innovative, a crucial difference is the amount of labor involved, part of it in producing the seemingly effortless transparency required in online selling and achieved in part through the labor required to provide more detailed cataloging information.

Just as issues of labor get erased from eBay's discourse of friction-free ease, myths about eBay's "community" and democratic structure tend to occlude issues of costs, particularly those incurred by sellers who must pay listing fees whether or not their item sells.<sup>7</sup> Conflict lying just beneath the surface of this myth is seen in message board discussions of eBay's fee structures: eBay's transaction fees are considerable if one consistently sells hundreds or thousands of items at one time. For high-volume or high-value sellers, transaction fees can equal the cost of retail space rental in major metropolitan areas, and any fee change has a fairly large impact. It should be noted, however, that since fine art and antiques dealers typically use eBay to supplement their bricks-and-mortar businesses, eBay fee increases

frequently are not considered high relative to, for example, fees for participating in live art and antiques fairs. Nevertheless, since eBay remains understood as a site for bargains (versus art and antiques fairs, where objects sell at full retail price), fee-related costs, advertising included, remain contentious for many eBay sellers, particularly those with relatively low profit margins. A central concern related to fee increases is that there is little competition from any comparable auction site. This exposes all smaller sellers, such as those employing a small number of individuals working in basements, garages, or spare rooms in a house, to arbitrary fee changes: eBay's democratizing influence, then, should be understood in relation to the size of a seller's business and her or his ability to survive changes in market conditions, fee increases included.

### **GENDER AND CLASS IN INTERNET-BASED FINE ART AND ANTIQUES SALES**

The size or scale of a business is an issue of particular importance to women in the field. Female employees at a woman-owned fine art and antiques eBay-linked business pointed out the difference between eBay small businesses with ample staffs and those with one or two employees. These women indicated that the larger the staff, the less isolated they felt when dealing with aggressive or harassing clients, most of whom were older men. One way these employees dealt with harassment was to post egregious client email in a public place such as the bathroom door and have other staff comment on them publicly. Such correspondence would range from the mildly flirtatious to outright condensation and hostility. These oftentimes gendered forms of aggression would manifest themselves when a buyer objected to an object's sale price, when he was buying fine art somewhat erotic in nature, or if the object arrived damaged or was lost. In certain ways, this continued the patriarchal social relations of the male-dominated fine art and antiques business. Regardless of an individual's sexual orientation or gender makeup, the structure of the communication situation remains presumptively heteronormative and heterosexual, and those with less power are feminized and discursively positioned as passive (even in those situations where aggressive email originates from women buyers). Further complicating these exchanges is the fact that, of the employees I interviewed, most have more formal education than their clients. Clients often hail from rather complex class positions; though they may operate within a very elite world of collectors, museums, connoisseurs, and high art, they are not always of that world and were not born into it.

For the women and men working for this eBay-linked art and antiques business, questions of expertise and knowledge also were commonly areas of contention, for clients often presume their expertise is superior to that of employees, especially if the buyer is male and the employee female. In the estimation of some well-heeled clients, many of whom are collectors or dealers, their expertise is always superior, even when they deal with highly educated individuals in online situations that allow for more democratized access to fine art and antiques research sites such as Artnet.com and Artfact.com.

Working for a smaller online seller did have some advantages over working for firms such as Sothebys.com, according to one of the women I interviewed for this project. She claimed to enjoy more power and control over clients in being allowed to block the bidding of more difficult clients. Wealthy clients, therefore, had to be polite to staff if they wanted to purchase a particular object only available through this business. Clients also had to accept they would not be pampered merely because they wanted to do business. As at Sotheby's and Christie's, this firm's employees still had to contend with a power imbalance in social class, age, and wealth between themselves and clients. However, online performances of class, gender, and social privilege were not as charged as in face-to-face encounters.

The explanation for this lies, in part, in the ability of an online business to dispense with the gendered expectations placed on women's self-presentation in businesses such as Sotheby's and Christie's, with their tradition of *bon chic, bon genre*—well-dressed, attractive individuals with prep-school demeanors and vocal and verbal abilities indicating high cultural capital. Women working for these firms are also expected to appear more docile as befitting a “feminized” support role for the men in charge. I have already noted, however, that the move by women to use the internet and eBay to break out of this mold is less unproblematic than one might expect. The internet does work to women's advantage in that differences in age and social class, expressed through money, appearance, and class versus education, may not be as apparent through email exchanges as in face-to-face encounters. However, these women must also work with dealers and collectors who routinely maintain more than one username and who prefer anonymity, even as these women are expected to reveal their own personal identities. For example, buyers are often dealers working as middlemen; they use different screen names to conceal from their own clients the fact that they originally acquired an object on eBay that they hope to sell to a client at a higher price. Thus, it is difficult for employees to readily know whether they are dealing with a buyer looking to purchase an object for his or her own collection or

one operating as a middleman for an unknown third party. This introduces an unfavorable imbalance for the men and women working at the internet company I studied. As a result, a split has developed between online sellers and buyers in terms of ethical behavior, and is reflected in the imbalance of communication behavior noted above.

It is in building client relations that contradictions between democratic notions of “community” and commercial-based transactions become most evident. On the one hand, eBayers often share expertise as members of a civic-minded community, but on the other, expertise can be used as a weapon in business transactions to set the terms of an unequal power relationship. Significantly, no one I interviewed believes eBay propagates entirely new and nonsexist modes of interaction, since much of the correspondence between sellers and buyers reflects the culture at large, including still-intact stereotypical cultural narratives and underlying patriarchal assumptions. In the same way, the performance of social class is recirculated online. A shipping coordinator for a small fine art and antiques business explains,

I often notice how some customers really try to force an impression of their social status on me by going out of their way to claim that “expense doesn't matter” for shipping methods while, on the other end of the socio-economic spectrum, there are those who complain about paying \$100 [USD] for shipping a \$1000 painting to another country. Plus, a lot of buyers overseas will ask me to mark items as having a lower value than they actually possess on customs forms so they don't have to pay extra fees that their countries impose for expensive items, as if every penny matters. There have even been a few occasions when people will call my line and ask about an item still up for auction about which they are very enthusiastic. When I explain to them that I'm “just the shipping coordinator,” and that I rarely see any items that are not already sold, their tone becomes condescending, as if I'm out of my league in speaking with them because I don't have the appreciation for the piece that they do.

This class narrative extended even to the form of payment itself. The shipping coordinator continued,

I was also reminded of what X was just telling me the other day. He said that it seemed to him that people who buy paintings tend to pay by money order or wire transfer while antique/decorative arts buyers use PayPal, as if the former are older elitists who don't even know what PayPal is.<sup>8</sup>

Since even different forms of payment can connote cultural and social functions, one needs to understand eBay's democratization of markets still infected by the cultural practices of older, more sanctioned art and antiques businesses.

## FEEDBACK AND COMMUNITY

Social relations limited to exchanging payment and address information during the transaction and buying period play out differently through the feedback mechanism on eBay than in traditional venues such as Sotheby's. eBay's feedback mechanism is crucial since it makes the site appear more transparent and therefore more egalitarian for online trading, and it is where the ethics of a "self-regulating community" are most visibly manifest. Feedback has a double-edged nature: a substitute for adequate corporate regulation of the site, yet also a tool for unscrupulous buyers to intimidate legitimate sellers in a marketplace with little to no oversight. Feedback offers the appearance of transparency and helps sustain the myth of community constantly invoked by eBay, but as Laura Robinson (see chapter 8) argues, it is also a widely contradictory mechanism that functions poorly when self-interests clash and competition is intense. Feedback remains a permanent, public record of buyer-seller communication and sets up a permanent consumer rating for eBay sellers who often risk their reputations if they receive poor feedback. This is less the case with buyers, unless their feedback is consistently negative.

The feedback mechanism has been used by eBay management to transfer the work of site regulation onto community members (see chapters 6 and 7). However, forms of online fraud have become too complex for the feedback mechanism to adequately police, and eBay plans to introduce a "report this item" button on each listing. Fraud is a growing problem on eBay in terms of both the electronic takeovers of sellers' accounts by hackers and the increase of fraudulent messages purporting to be about fraud to eBay sellers and buyers. Because hackers mimic official eBay emails in style and graphics, their activities have created an enormous communication problem: eBay buyers and sellers can no longer readily differentiate from a real or a fake message from eBay. Moreover, counterfeit goods and cheap knock-offs plague the online marketplace in a number of categories, including artwork, jewelry, designer accessories, and autographed sports memorabilia. Tiffany & Company launched a lawsuit against eBay in late 2004, accusing the company of trademark infringement by facilitating and promoting the sale of thousands of pieces of counterfeit Tiffany jewelry. Analysts predict

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outcome of the case, expected to go on trial in 2006, will have a major impact on e-commerce no matter how it is decided and may adversely affect eBay's successful business model as solely a facilitator of sales among buyers and sellers.<sup>9</sup>

## THE PARADOX OF DEPERSONALIZATION AND COMMUNITY IN EBAY FINE ART AND ANTIQUES TRANSACTIONS

Utopian ideals structured eBay's founding moment, and it is not surprising that some of the myths of the internet and eBay persist, such as the idea that eBay is a "a great leveler giving people with social disadvantages a place to excel."<sup>10</sup> Such an assertion trades in the same utopian logic parodied in the famous *New Yorker* cartoon depicting two dogs seated at a computer, one saying to the other, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."<sup>11</sup> eBay might fulfill these kinds of utopian desires more for buyers, but sellers cannot hide behind their screen names in the same way that buyers can, and eBay regulations enforce this "ethical" imbalance.

Buyers and sellers in the fine art and antiques sector do not share the sense of fervor and community on eBay equally. Clearly, there has been more enthusiasm on the buying side as evidenced by the superlatives often used in feedback to describe successful transactions. eBay has been so successful with buyers in this regard because it offers the kind of immediate consumer satisfaction traditionally enjoyed by the wealthy who are able to pay to have their exact desires translated into a satisfying object combined with the pleasurable experience of having made the winning bid. In certain ways, eBay has been able to offer an extreme form of niche marketing at bargain rates for people of average means, or for those with means who want items traditionally available through high-end retail customer service but who do not want to pay full price. It is in this respect that an eBay commercial transaction can nourish a sense of "community" in the self-interested competitive environment of the marketplace. This is where the small-town metaphor makes the most sense since it establishes a deep, reiterated reciprocity between objects of consumption and consumers' desires as well as between buyers and sellers.

Opposite the cheerleaders, who are mostly buyers, stand the detractors, who are often the sellers. For the most part they are more worried that eBay, as a putatively alternative online community, has evolved into a virtual monopoly. Rosalinda Baldwin, an eBay message board regular, claims that eBay at the beginning was "a great leveler—one of the most powerful democratizing forces [I] had ever encountered," but "Meg changed us from a community

into a commodity. And you know, like sheep, if she had to slaughter a few million of us for profit, it was for our own good, she will say."<sup>12</sup> For Baldwin, eBay has evolved into a near monopoly that controls access to a unique marketplace and increasingly displays the classic indifference of monopolies toward the needs of small businesses and communities.

The discourses of eBay commerce certainly promise greater efficiency for all by cutting out intermediaries and increasing direct trade across regions and national borders. These shifts have helped erode traditional hierarchies of class, gender, and geography—hierarchies long associated with bricks-and-mortar fine art and antiques business models. Yet these shifts have also given rise to a newly minted sense of community linked to forms of consumer satisfaction in which buyers purchase what they want from their office or home. eBay has given birth to an intriguing, at times contradictory form of social space in which the relative impersonality of the internet, combined with more personal customer service, enables new forms of businesses in which sellers and buyers nourish a sense of "community" not directly based on social class, appearance, or personal relations. Direct yet impersonal emails between buyers and sellers partially hidden behind user IDs make the site work, paradoxically, as a community that also allows younger sellers, women, and minorities to enter a field previously organized by the assumptions prevalent within elite older male social networks. Given eBay's contradictory directions, it is not surprising that many business writers as well as community board posters have written about the company with extreme idealism and enthusiasm and later with disappointment. It is, therefore, only through more sophisticated and nuanced assessments of eBay from the perspective of both buyers and sellers that we can begin to understand the contradictions of eBay's market-based democratic populism and its influence on digital markets and digital capitalism in the area of fine art and antiques.

## NOTES

1. Adam Cohen, *The Perfect Store* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002), 68.
2. The online auction site Igavel.com, started by Lark Mason, a former employee of Sothebys.com, is an important example of an alternative site to eBay that has been successful in selling low- to mid-range fine art and antiques.
3. Robert Lacey, *Sotheby's Bidding for Class* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998).
4. Thanks to Amy Huntington, former senior producer of Sothebys.com, for allowing me to interview her on this topic.
5. Samuel Pennington, "Sotheby's CEO and Chairman Resign, Dividends Suspended," *Maine Antique Digest*, April 2000.

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6. Brooks Barnes and Nick Wingfield, "Sotheby's Ends eBay Venture, Citing Losses," February 5, 2003, <http://sg.biz.yahoo.com/030205/72/372pr.html>.
7. See "Ebay's Joy Ride: Going Once ... A Seller's Rebellion May Be the Least of Its Worries," *New York Times*, March 6, 2005, sec. 3, 1.
8. Thanks to Dustin McWhorter for his helpful comments.
9. See Katie Hafner, "Seeing Fakes, Angry Traders Confront eBay," *New York Times*, January 29, 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/29/technology/29ebay.html?\\_r=1&mc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/29/technology/29ebay.html?_r=1&mc=eta1) (accessed January 29, 2006).
10. Cohen, 68.
11. On the intersection between communication technology and the prosthetic community, see Sandy Stone, "Split Subjects, Not Atoms; or, How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis," in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995), 393–406.
12. Cohen, 220–1.