Before Us Is The Salesman's House: Exploring the Contingent Aesthetic of eBay

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Abstract

In 2012, data artist Jer Thorp and statistician Mark Hansen collaborated on an installation called *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*. Commissioned by the eBay/PayPal corporation, and inspired by Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, this data art project has been described variously as "an investigation of eBay as a cultural artefact," "a kind of fly-over of [eBay's] rich data landscape," and "a portrait of humanity in the purchases we make." Based on big data from eBay and Project Gutenberg, it uses sheer random contingency to show the interweavings of literary texts with everyday commodities. This essay seeks to read the challenging project that is *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* variously as literary text, a piece of corporate art, an opening for social critique, and an example of Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics.

1. Background: Literature, Contingency, Data

Let me begin by sketching out some parameters for the issues I wish to raise herein. Some thirty years ago, Richard Rorty famously pointed out the fundamental contingency (or, better, contingencies) that lie behind our language and our vocabularies, our thought and subjectivity, and our communities and society. Three decades later, the seemingly random and haphazard nature of our lives and our cultures, mutating with ever greater speed and with ever less discernible direction, would appear to suggest that contingency, *pace* Rorty's anti-foundationalism, has become the grounding property of the twenty first century. And yet, in spite of appearances, we live in an age where 'big data' makes ever bolder claims about explaining, predicting, and containing the random contingency that pervades our world. My questions, then, are these: can literature mediate between the apparent contingency of our lives and the senses made of them by big data? Or, can the act of reading do so? What new forms may literature have to take in order to rise to this challenge, and how might we go about reading them? In short: how will literature,

and our readings of it, adapt to an age where data threatens to contain all possible contingencies.

In response to these challenges, in March 2015, Tom McCarthy published a short essay in the *Guardian*, under a title "The Death of Writing" which seemed, at first glance, like an all-too-predictable prediction foretelling the impending demise of the literary novel, in the same vein as recent jeremiads by Philip Roth, Will Self, and Jonathan Franzen.[1] McCarthy implies that the traditional novel is ill-equipped to meet these challenges and that literature that truly wishes to engage with these issues will probably need to take a different form. Its provocative strapline, however, hinted that McCarthy's views on this topic were rather less conventional than those of his contemporaries: "if James Joyce were alive today he'd be working for Google

He adduces clear reasons for this stark and startling assertion. Today's truly creative minds, he claims, do not waste their labour trying to "pen great tales of authenticity and individual affirmation." Instead, he writes "that people with degrees in English generally go to work for corporations" and that

> ... the company, in its most cutting-edge incarnation, has become the arena in which narratives and fictions, metaphors and metonymies and symbol networks at their most dynamic and incisive are being generated, worked through and transformed. ... If there is an individual alive in 2015 with the genius and vision of James Joyce, they're probably working for Google, and if there isn't, it doesn't matter since the operations of that genius and vision are being developed and performed collectively by operators on the payroll of that company, or of one like it. (McCarthy)

According to McCarthy, a "tipping point" has been reached that "renders the role of [the] writer redundant." The traditional novel, which aimed, at its zenith, to fathom the human condition, has been trumped by "the issue of data saturation." If you are an ambitious visionary whose aim is to "[map] the world you have been observing at its deepest and most intimate level," then the novel is no longer the vehicle through which you would choose to do it. Insight into life in the twenty first century is provided not by fiction but by data; what facilitates our understanding of our lives and how they are (or aren't) organised and intertwined is no longer a gripping plotline, but a smart piece of software that "[documents] our lives" and "maps our tribe's kinship structures, our systems of exchange, the webs of value and belief that bind us all together." As McCarthy puts it, "if we want to think of what it means to write today," then we must understand that writing takes place "in the shadow of omnipresent and omniscient data that makes a mockery of any notion that the writer might have something to inform us." We must concede, he suggests, that writing and reading literary texts inevitably offers less insight into the condition of humanity than "a technologically underwritten capitalism that both writes and reads itself." The upshot of McCarthy's position, then, is that speculations and lamentations about

the future of the novel are beside the point: the real question is whether there are new literary and artistic forms out there that can better encapsulate the play-off between contingency and big data to which twenty first century life has been reduced. I do not presume to say here whether McCarthy is wrong or right – not least because, on his terms, predicting the future of the novel would be a task not for literary critics but for data analysts. Instead, this essay attempts to read Jer Thorp's "site-specific artwork" as an experimental piece of literature structured around the very issues McCarthy addresses here –a piece whose content is big data and whose form is pure contingency.

2. Introduction: *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*

In 2012, data artist Jer Thorp and statistician Mark Hansen designed a fascinating project called *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* which, strangely enough, meets the challenges McCarthy describes head-on. This project not only freely admits and accepts the premises of McCarthy's reasoning, but embraces them and takes them as its very point of creative departure. Commissioned by eBay and its sister company PayPal for the ZERO1 Biennial —a technology-themed arts festival in California's Silicon Valley— it was described by one of its creators (Hansen) as "an investigation of eBay as a cultural artifact"[2] and by the *New Scientist* as "a portrait of humanity in the purchases we make" (Giles 2012). These assertions are strikingly similar to McCarthy's stating that "funky architecture firms, digital media companies and brand consultancies...have assumed the mantle of the cultural avant-garde." So, what kind of artwork is *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*? Let us begin with a physical description. Projected onto a semi-transparent screen measuring 30 feet by 20 feet, it hung above the vast glass entryway to the main building of the eBay/PayPal headquarters at the companies' North Campus in San Jose. It ran continuously from dusk till midnight every evening from September 11th to October 12th 2012. According to eBay, "The piece is named after an excerpt from Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*, and uses data related to the exchange of books to create visualisations that illustrate how shopping ties into larger economic systems" (eBay blog, 2012). Yet the "systems" explored in this piece are not reducible to financial transactions and this is surely the point of the entire experiment. *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* is driven as much by the reading of literary texts as it is by online shopping. We might almost say it draws its information from the system of literature if that phrase did not invoke an old-school semiotics that is methodologically inadequate to the task at hand because, instead of trying to explore 'the' 'system' 'of' 'literature' (each term so contested as to render the phrase useless), the aim of *Before Us Is The*

Salesman's House is to reveal the systematic yet contingent intermeshing of literature with other facets of twenty first century life.

Put simply, "The process starts with a book" (Giles). The first book of the day, each day, was *Death of a Salesman*. The famous opening text –Miller's evocative stage directions– appears in white against a black background:

> A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon. The curtain rises.
>
> Before us is the Salesman's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. The kitchen at center seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen. At the back of the kitchen there is a draped entrance, which leads to the living-room. To the right of the kitchen, on a level raised two feet, is a bedroom furnished only with a brass bedstead and a straight chair. On a shelf over the bed a silver athletic trophy stands. A window opens onto the apartment house at the side. (11)

As the text appears on the screen, certain nouns are singled out, highlighted in boldface type, picked out from the text, and numbered. Jer Thorp has explained that they began "by extracting items that might be bought on eBay" such as "*Flute, grass, trees, curtain, table, chairs, refrigerator." By compiling lists, the artist "examine[d]" the distribution of these objects "in a small set of data sketches.*"

> From this map of objects for sale, the program selects one at random to act as a seed. For example, a refrigerator being sold for $695 in Milford, New Hampshire, will switch the focus of the piece to this town of fifteen thousand on the Souhegan river. The residents of Milford have sold many things on eBay over the years – but what about books? Using historical data, we investigate the flow of books into the town, both sold and bought by residents.
>
> Finally, the program selects a book from this list and re-starts the cycle, this time with a new extracted passage, new objects, new locations, and new stories. Over the course of an evening, about a hundred cycles are completed, visualizing thousands of current and historic exchanges of objects.[3]

The books read and studied in this peculiar way were themselves selected from a database —namely, Project Gutenberg's repository of over 40.000 eBooks. Since these books are mostly out of copyright, it stands to reason that little to no contemporary literature featured in *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*. Instead, it was driven by consumption of texts that, by virtue of their inclusion in Project Gutenberg,[4] have some kind of historical or literary interest, and hence form part of a canon. Though Thorp never makes this point explicitly, the implication seems to be rather clear: the literary canon is itself a vast inventory or database, and placing

it in dialogue with eBay can be revelatory about both. This dialogue is, literally, the driving force behind *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*.

But before embarking on any analytical discussion, let us first pause to note the coinciding circumstances under which Thorp and Hansen produced *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, and the circumstances under which McCarthy says today's writers must operate. Most obvious, of course, is the fact that these artists chose to work for a corporation which, though not Google itself, is a corporation very much "like it," in McCarthy's phrase. By doing so, they gained access to precisely the kind of databases that McCarthy argues have supplanted the novel as the final word on life in the twenty first century. Indeed, Jer Thorp's reflection on his artwork provocatively refers to literature as "a much more traditional creative form than the database." As *The New Scientist* puts it,

> eBay [is] a company that controls some of the most culturally interesting data produced since the birth of the internet. The value of goods traded on the site last year averaged $2000 per second. More than 100 million people use PayPal, eBay's sister company, to send and receive money. And within the records of these transactions are innumerable stories about peoples' lives. (Giles)

Thorp himself argued that "the most important cultural artifacts left from the digital age may very well be databases" and wondered how "will the societies of the future read these colossal stores of information." Thus, eBay is surely every bit as apt an example as Google (if not more so) of what Tom McCarthy sees as the kind of writing that outmodes the contemporary novel –namely, the "technologically underwritten capitalism that both writes and reads itself." Interestingly, Thorp uses very similar terms to describe eBay –"eBay is this giant thing that's being written … It's full of people and places and objects" (qtd in Giles) –lending strength to the claim that the database is the new novel and the corporation is the new novelist, a full two and a half years before McCarthy suggested it.

Perhaps this combination of intertextuality and random selection is how one could go about writing a *Waste Land* for the digital age.[5] Yet, as Mark Hansen put it, "The project uses the sale and exchange of books as a narrative thread; a thread which exists within and alongside a dense layer of buying and selling of vast numbers of other items, new and used" (eBay blog, 2012). Thus, whereas Eliot's *The Waste Land* shattered convention by taking voices from the canonical pages of literary tradition and placing them in a "dense layer" of interanimating juxtaposition along a (fairly thin) "narrative thread," *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* goes further, in that it "ties together texts, objects, and transactions pulled directly from data to create stories that reveal societal trends" (Hansen qtd in eBay blog, 2012). Thus, it combines the narrative-driven interest in human transactions (both with one's fellow

humans and with the objectal world) found in the classic novel, with the intertextually-driven making and breaking of sequences and patterns found in modernist poetry. Indeed, as an artwork that consists largely of words written for others to read, it seems to me an inescapable conclusion that *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* needs to be read also as a work of literature. Though other commentators have characterised it as a "data art-visualization-installation" (O'Neil and Schutt), we will see later that it both bears and repays careful close reading in the same way a literary text does. But first, I wish to add another, more specific claim: *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* is a work steeped in what Nicolas Bourriaud terms relational aesthetics.

3. Before Us Is Relational Aesthetics.

In *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud's central hypothesis is that, from roughly the 1990s onwards, artists were no longer best understood in terms of a postmodern aesthetics involving (for example) the triumph of the image or the presentation of the unpresentable. Rather, he argues, contemporary artworks "prompt models of sociability" (58). More specifically, his basic argument is that "artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments"(Bourriaud 9) Hence, Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics" designates what he describes as "an art focused on the production of ... forms of conviviality" consisting of artworks that are "convivial, user-friendly artistic projects, festive, collective and participatory, exploring the varied potential in the relationship to the other" (16; 61).Put more simply, the experience of relational art is an experience of community – an artificial, momentary instant of community convoked by the experience of the relational artwork itself. Thus, in describing or analysing it, "we might talk in terms of micro-utopias, and interstices opened up in the social corpus *Relational* Bourriaud's suggestion is that contemporary art requires art critics to reconceive its very nature in order to approach it aright. 'Art is a state of encounter', he asserts (*Relational* 18).

I want to suggest here that *Before Us Is The Saleman's House* can best be understood in roughly these terms. It takes as its content the interactions and transactions that traverse the breadth of contemporary American society, and it presents them in a relational form. In making this argument, let me begin by taking into account the public-facing nature of this particular artwork: obviously, like Lemn Sissay's landmark poems, or London's Poems on the Underground scheme, it is designed for communal consumption by an audience who are all reading the same thing at the same time. Projected onto a large screen, it takes the same physical form as the cinema and hence implies a spectacle or spectators. Now, Bourriaud takes some trouble to point out that cinema as an art form aimed at passive non-

participating spectators is not very conducive to relational aesthetics because, however large the audience is, there is not much prospect of people isolated in their individual seats and transfixed by the audio-visuals on screen overcoming the in-built alienation of this art form and interacting as a community. *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, however, provides a much more sociable experience, and not simply because it allows members to position themselves in informal, contingent, self-determined groupings (though this is important). Moreover, *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* is completely silent. Hence, it simultaneously provides the perfect conditions for reading *and* discussion. Many of the goods for sale on eBay suddenly flagged up at random on the screen of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* are likely to serve as talking points for discussion amongst the audience.

Take, for example, the moment where the computer program alights on the following item: "GRAY'S ANATOMY 1859 American 1st SUPER RARE Blanchard/Lea LEATHERBOUND 363 Engravings," selling for \$5212.99 in a place called Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. This may strike one spectator as an amazing find and another (who perhaps is unaware of this medical textbook and its immense significance) as a sentence of unintelligible gibberish. Many might baulk at the price of an outdated textbook while a few would consider it a bargain. Some will be agog at the outlandish name of the town, while others will recognise it as the name of an old-time TV/radio game show, and may wonder at the connection. Perhaps certain spectators might be struck by the mismatch between such a venerable tome and such a frivolously named location. Others may find it a coincidence that while the town is named after a TV show, the book's title inspired one: namely, the long-running medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*. All these are, of course, interpretations suggested by a very short, randomly chosen text which appears on screen for just a few seconds. But such texts are presented to the public as moments for reflection and discussion of a rather different kind from the utilitarian conversations which normally take place when reading eBay –say, that of a book dealer debating with his partner whether this purchase would be a profitable acquisition or not.

A short extract from *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* can be viewed over the internet: three cycles, each taking their cue from a literary classic found on Project Gutenberg, are completed in around twenty minutes. The journey takes us from the flute, table, refrigerator, bedstead, chair, bed, and trophy mentioned in the opening paragraphs of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, moving us onward in space to the city of Trenton, New Jersey, and back in time to the nineteenth century – specifically, to the opening of Charles de Bernard's *Gerfaut*, selected at random because someone in this city used eBay to sell a refrigerator, as mentioned in Miller's text, while someone else in the city used eBay to buy a copy of this book. It is a strange

coincidence: in all likelihood, the two people have never met, though the possibility also exists that they are next door neighbours, or even the same person. More coincidental still is the fact that the opening paragraphs of this novel –a loose baggy monster written by a friend of Balzac's in 1838– are explicitly set in Alsace, yet they yield a set of search terms redolent of American history and culture: "cattle," "bible," and "whip." "Cattle" invokes the old west, "bible" the pilgrim fathers, and "whip" the horrors of slavery, though none of these connotations could have been intended by the authors, because, like most relational art works, *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* "depict[s] the artist as an operator of meaning" (Bourriaud, *Relational* 93) – and is powered by pure contingency. The next leg of the journey takes us to LaBelle, Florida, and to *The Life of the Bee*, a 1901 work by Belgian Nobel laureate Maurice Maeterlinck, better known as a writer of symbolist drama. The opening paragraphs of this text yield a more disparate set of search terms: "bee," "queen," "microscope," "bees," "light," "woodcuts," "engravings," and, appropriately enough, "books." Reassuringly, it turns out that books are in fact one of the most commonly sold commodities on eBay, notwithstanding competition from Amazon. And, just as one tries to imagine the absurdity of buying bees on eBay, the map pinpointing each sale location with a cross zooms onto the screen, and for a moment, the thick host of crosses could be mistaken for a swarm of bees flying out of the screen.

The journey is a wholly contingent series of trajectories between texts, commodities, and locations. Yet it is nonetheless the ever-mutable, ever-contingent network of human interactions and transactions it reveals that makes *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* remarkable as an example of relational aesthetics. It is interesting, for example, to note the flow of books and their titles into the various randomly chosen communities: on the screen, they fly past so quickly that very few can be made out, but every now and then one picks out a familiar phrase (eg "Nancy Drew," "Jedi Knight"). In fact, the video clip shown on the internet ends on a book title winging its way like a comet to Schaumberg, Illinois: as chance would have it, it is called *Bringing Words To Life*.

Above all, though, the journey as a whole should remind us of one of the key claims in Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community,* which asserts that "'community' cannot be thought as subsisting somewhere beyond the singular acts by which it is drawn out and communicated, and is therefore thoroughgoingly contingent. A similar argument is made by Lars Bang Larsen, whose designation of 'social aesthetics' is widely seen as a close neighbour to Bourriaud's relational aesthetics: "What I choose to call 'social aesthetics' is an artistic attitude focusing on the world of acts" (172). The acts documented in *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* are mostly transactions, yet all the same, the project aims to "provide a window on

the human stories within eBay's databases" (Giles). There is more to these interactions than buying or selling, hence the project does more than convoke its audience as a micro-community: it shows that eBay itself is a community, and no doubt it thereby provokes members of the micro-community of its audience into reflecting upon their membership of the macro-community of eBay.

4. Corporate Art or Social Critique?

Notwithstanding that *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* "construct[s] models of sociability suitable for producing human relations" (Bourriaud, *Relational* 70), and would therefore class as an instantiation of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, it is possible to take a very different view of it. After all, eBay is not a community but a marketplace, and perhaps not even a marketplace so much as an overmighty corporation. Bourriaud is quite clear that the marketplace is precisely the kind of thing that a truly relational art needs to pit itself against: "The enemy we have to fight first and foremost is embodied in a social form: it is the spread of the supplier/client relations to every level of human life, from work to dwelling-place by way of all the tacit contracts which define our private life" (*Relational* 83). Thus, the argument would go, corporate capitalism is unlikely to provide a very fertile soil for Bourriaud's micro-utopias and social interstices. It is telling in this regard that, at the end of each cycle, the computer animation takes us on a flyover across a map of the United States. Rectangular objects loom up out of this map like corporate skyscrapers, and most of them are indeed concentrated where the big American cities ought to be. Yet these rectangular objects are the photographs provided by each seller of an item advertised on eBay –refrigerators, for example. Thus, *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* shows us an America densely populated not by people, but by commodities. Is this compatible with an aesthetic of community? A moment ago, I compared *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* with the landmark poems of Lemn Sissay, but surely there is something important that distinguishes them from one another: Sissay's poems are written on the walls of pubs, apartment buildings, and bus stations; *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* is projected onto the front façade of the corporate headquarters of a vast global company. Public-facing though this may be, it is public-facing in the way that all forms of corporate art are. Milking its investment in the arts for all its worth, eBay's blog on the project reads 'eBay, Inc. is the first visionary company to join arts nonprofit ZERO1 in prototyping a new form of collaboration between tech companies and artists' (eBay blog, 2012). This is precisely the language of corporate patronage that reduces art to a mere brand image exercise. *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, on such a reading, is not only corporate art rather than

relational art, it is an exaltation of consumerism and a glorification of the commodity fetish to boot.

I wouldn't want to argue that such a reading is altogether wrongheaded. Some eyebrows will inevitably be raised by the sponsorship of a corporate giant like the eBay/PayPal enterprise: its investment in the arts is proportionally miniscule, and in this case, tends admittedly towards sheer self-aggrandisement. Moreover, the attention paid to price tags and commodities in this project may seem distasteful in an artwork, and it's not hard to see why the link between literature and commodities on which the entire project pivots might appear troublesome. Nevertheless, what is missing from this reading is the awareness that *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, in its inventories of commodities, prices, places, and literary texts, nevertheless conveys a remarkable and unique form of social critique. What is portrayed in its portrait of eBay is a society riven by economic inequalities and contradictions. This is done simply by making available and comparing information about the sale of objects on eBay, and giving these simple quotidian data a striking aesthetic impact. In doing so, it exonerates itself from the charge that it is a mere paean to online shopaholism.

Consider the case of the flute –the first item mentioned in the text from *Death of a Salesman*. At the moment that this item was singled out from the text of Arthur Miller's stage direction by Hansen and Thorp's programming, there were quite a number of flutes being sold on eBay across the United States –perhaps a couple of hundred or so. As the map showing their geographical distribution switches to the graph showing their relative price, the computer begins by highlighting the most expensive item, and one thing immediately becomes strikingly apparent: one flute is substantially costlier than all the others. According to eBay, it is located in Chicago, Illinois, and is described as a "Pearl 14k yellow gold handmade flute, C foot, split E, just back from COA." It is retailing for no less than $20,750.00. Below this, on the graph, there are around 20 or so flutes retailing on eBay for over $1000, but the costliest of these is still substantially less than half the cost of the expensive flute in Chicago, and most are less than a tenth of the price. Then, below these twenty or so flutes, there are hundreds priced below $100. In short, what is shown by this analysis of the sales patterns of flutes on eBay is a breathtakingly accurate portrait of the social makeup of America in the early twenty first century: the much-discussed 'wealthy one percent' has put a clear and insuperable distance between itself and the rest of the country, and a vanishing middle class is being assimilated into the ranks of the proletariat. The graph of flute prices, one suspects, would hardly be different from a graph of randomly sampled household incomes. The same is true of the market for tables. The vast majority of the hundreds for sale on eBay at the one

particular instant picked by *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* were modestly priced, with the majority below $50, and almost all below $100. A typical example, from Rahway, New Jersey, reads "Glass and brass end table," and retails for $50. Yet right at the top of the scale, again far above the rest and sitting proudly aloof from them (in Pompano Beach, Florida), is an "Antique 18th century 'concertina' dining table" –surely a snip at a mere $7500. In showing us these things, *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* offers at least as probing a portrayal of American society in the early twenty first century as Miller's *Death of a Salesman* did in the mid-twentieth. In its ghostly invocation of the squeezed middle and the vanishing bourgeoisie, it shows that Miller's prophecy of the downfall of America's middle class has been practically fulfilled. This demographic analysis, so revealing of the 'wealthy one percent' and its relation to the rest of society, is all the more surprising for the implication it carries with it –that even the fabulously wealthy are as happy shopping on eBay as they are at Sotheby's.

At times, though, this pattern is broken in ways that are themselves completely unexpected, though reveal much nevertheless. It's not just that, as anyone who has ever bought anything from eBay knows, the search process can return some random and unexpected misunderstandings (as when the search for the word "Bee" yielded lots of returns that turn out to be cars). Some of these misunderstandings are economically suggestive too. Thus, the most expensive outliers for "Bed" and "Refrigerator" were, respectively, a "Flat Bed Truck" and a "Refrigerator truck." Compared with the results for "Flute" and "Table," it is almost reassuring that the costliest items in these searches turned out to be capital goods for (one imagines) the use of small businesses rather than goods for conspicuous consumption by the mega-rich. Equally, it's comical that searches for terms with somewhat tawdry connotations of glamour, such as "Trophy" or "Queen," inevitably yield hundreds of returns listing what might best be described as cheap junk.

No work of literature can hold our interest if it merely reflects what we already knew about the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure. So it is a relief to find *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* also flags up patterns that defy economic explanation along the above lines. Take the case of the bedstead. At the time of searching, there were only 14 bedsteads for sale on eBay across the whole of the United States. The most expensive of these –an "Antique birch w/flame cherry veneer double bedstead" from Janesville, Wisconsin– was selling for $1495. Remarkably, however, it would seem that the other items were also antiques, and, unlike their pricier cousin from Janesville, most had been dated (one from 1892 in Portland, Maine; one from 1873 in Lafayette, Indiana; one from 1916 in Whitewater, Wisconsin). Yet these antiques were surprisingly reasonable in price: $39.99; $49;

and \$32.95, respectively. Indeed, only two of the fourteen bedsteads for sale on eBay at that time were priced at more than \$100. It is hard to make any economic sense of this: if there are only fourteen on sale across the United States, then these items are rare. If they are over a century old, then they are antiques. Supply is low and is presumably inelastic, while the American appetite for antiquities is rarely sated; thus, one would expect these items to be highly prized, hence highly priced. Yet these antique bedsteads seem to defy the fundamental laws of supply and demand: one could buy all fourteen of them twice over and still have change from the price of a certain antique table in Pompano Beach, Florida.

Of course, it is extremely unlikely that any of those who saw *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* at the eBay headquarters in 2012 was in a position to go into anything like this amount of interpretative detail: the installation could not be paused, rewound, or repeated, and a close reading along the above lines is probably only possible thanks to the twenty minute extract posted on the internet, which can. Virtually everything about this project is a fleeting one-off moment, and a totally contingent one at that. For example, the searches for bibles, cattle, and whips were almost certainly not rerun in the project's month-long life cycle, because there are over 40,000 other texts for the computer to select instead of Bernard's *Gerfaut*. Since the seven items taken from *Death of a Salesman* were the only constant, repeated at the start of each night, it might have been possible, for instance, for a curious and persistent viewer to check on a daily basis to see whether someone had bought a flute from a seller in Chicago for a sum that a modern day Biff Loman might struggle to earn in a year. But that is about the full extent of the project's re-readability: in any given day, an unpredictable number of flutes will have been bought and sold, and a number of others will have come onto the market, so even the nightly searches for the seven items mentioned in the opening of *Death of a Salesman* will have changed by the next night's viewing. It therefore goes without saying, I hope, that any social, economic, or political critique in this work is not intentional, but purely contingent, being randomly authored by machine each night, and that any readings of it as such are merely dipping our toes into the vast pool that is big data.

5. Close Reading, Distant Reading, Communal Reading

We will move on to consider the implications of these facts for the act of reading the project in just a moment, but I want to pause first to come back to *Death of a Salesman* itself. The constantly changing, constantly shifting nature of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* as a text is, of course, a function of the changing and shifting nature of eBay, which is itself a function of the breakneck pace of the digital economy

in an age of highly advanced capitalism. Any viewers trying to engage in some kind of detailed reading of the project will find themselves constantly struggling to keep up –precisely the position of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's play. Willy complains that he is "always in a race with the junkyard!" (73), but even that race moves at a gentler pace than the race that is eBay-style online shopping. It is poignant in this connection that the project's nightly search for refrigerators on eBay typically yields short texts emphasising the reliability and "good working order" of the merchandise, since Willy –who bought his from the company that had "the biggest ads of any of them!" (35)– finds himself stuck with a fridge that falls short of the reliability guaranteed by many eBay sellers. The result is no doubt familiar to many purchasers of these goods: "The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddam maniac. They time those things. They time them so when you finally paid for them, they're used up. ... Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken!" (73). The creators of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* have said that their inspiration came from the obsessive detailing of commodities in Miller's play. (Linda inventories the monthly payments not just for the refrigerator but also a washing machine, vacuum cleaner, etc., and "the stage directions mention a table, chairs and refrigerator. The link between a salesperson and objects 'just felt so perfect' for eBay, says Thorp" (Giles). Yet what is arguably just as striking about the project as a whole is less its exploration of the commodity fetish, and more its evocation of the relentless and rapid speed of the marketplace.

This speed clearly has implications for how we read *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*. Its ever-changing subject matter and its contingent structuring mean that the project itself carries a built-in evanescence and "onwardness" which, according to Alan Kirby, are integral features of digital textuality: very few digital artifacts ever reach or remain in a state we could call finished or complete (1). The same is true, of course, of most of the relational artworks described by Nicolas Bourriaud. Thus, *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, and eBay itself, are constant works-in-progress, that is, processes without products. Hence, "reading" them —paying close attention to its language, its inflections of genre and form, construction and interpretation, and so on— is not really possible. The text mutates before our eyes, and does so at a speed that makes close contemplation impossible. Like one of Bourriaud's relational artworks, *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* is more time-specific than site-specific, in that anyone who wasn't there at the time of its coming into being (and in this particular case, probably the only people who would have been present throughout, every evening for a month, were the graveyard shift security guards in eBay's lobby) can experience this art only through a small archive of documentation that might, or might not, give a sense of it. In the case of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, that

archive is tiny: a short blog post by the artist, a shorter blog post by the patron, a paragraph in the brochure for the arts festival it appeared in, a brief review in *The New Scientist*, a mention in a book about data science, and a 20 minute film that represents a fraction of one percent of the entire project.[6]

Jim Giles feels that this is the most salutary point made by *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*. The underlying message he takes from it is that 'a lot of important data sets are … cultural artefacts that we all have a share in' (Giles). What interests me is less what it says about the value of data for the community, and more what it tells us about the place of art and literature in the community. To study *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* for its data about book consumption patterns is precisely to overlook the value of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* as a text in its own right – a challenging, difficult one, because the text is built so as to make itself impervious to traditional models of literary interpretation. As I have argued above, it paints a remarkable picture of twenty first century society and the precarious position of the individual within it, yet it does so in a way so frenetic that deciphering this picture is nearly impossible. And in doing this, it once again evokes perfectly our precarious positions as individuals in twenty first century society, since none of us is in a position to decipher our position in this society, though the signs are all around us, all the time. Finally –and I will return to this point again shortly– instead of a close reading, it gestures towards the possibility of a communal reading, since the text is displayed to a public (of almost any potential size, from lone individuals to an unrestricted crowd) in an open, convivial setting, and it presents its public with scraps of data that I have called earlier on "talking points."

Jer Thorp expressed his hope that his work would "make people think about the data we leave behind on the internet" (Giles). It certainly does that, but, *pace* Jim Giles, my thoughts on this matter are not that databases are fragile cultural artefacts in need of preservation for posterity –rather the reverse. Seeing these myriad transactions of individuals displayed to the public, I am moved to wonder whether there is such a thing as a private transaction or private individual left: "Every website that you visit, each keystroke and click-through are archived: even if you've hit delete or empty trash it's still there, lodged within some data fold or enclave, some occluded—yet-retrievable avenue of circuitry" (McCarthy)— and this returns us to where we began, with the concerns McCarthy has expressed for literature in the digital age.

McCarthy argued that our databases collectively constitute a "Great Report" on twenty first century life that is so vast, so all-seeing, and so omnipresent that it ends up being completely illegible: it cannot be "viewed, surveyed, interpreted" (McCarthy) except by another piece of software. *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*

bears out this point, to an extent: it is a piece of software designed to produce readings of the eBay and Project Gutenberg databases. The legibility issue, though, has nothing to do with ubiquity or omniscience: after all, since the Flaubertian narrator who is present everywhere but visible nowhere, the traditional novelist has staked a solid claim to these virtues, and this is precisely what makes the novel so vulnerable as a form in the face of the database. Rather, then, the issue has everything to do with vastness: a database is unreadable because its potentially infinite scope easily dwarfs even *War and Peace* or *Ulysses*. Moreover, *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* shows its persistent readers that time is also a factor: databases are forever mutating, at remarkable speeds, and do not have a permanently fixed existence of any kind, physical or otherwise. We have already seen how the speed of change presents an obstacle to reading beyond its ephemeral renditions of the eBay database.

Thorp and Hansen, though, whilst not exactly disagreeing with McCarthy's view, created *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* with a view to challenging this idea of the illegibility of the database. What would 'reading' a database mean? The reading public may well be baffled at such an idea –and that is perfectly in order, because the reading public has tended to be similarly baffled at reading most startlingly new literary forms: witness the moral panics at anything from Restoration drama to Ann Radcliffe's gothic novels to Tristan Tzara's cut-up newspaper poems. Instead of conceding that the eBay database is unreadable, Thorp explains that the thinking behind *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* was not simply to find ways of making it possible for the public to read a database, but to challenge what is implied in the idea of 'reading' in the process:

> Ultimately, the size of a database like eBay's makes a complete, close reading impossible – at least for humans. Rather than an exhaustive tour of the data, then, our piece can be thought of as a distant reading, a kind of a fly-over of this rich data landscape. It is an aerial view of the cultural artifact that is eBay. (Thorp)

It is not hard to see why such a method would appeal to Thorp and Hansen: their project, predicated on a model of reading that scans just the opening paragraphs of 40,000+ texts looking for only nouns which name commodities, seems like a perhaps too literal interpretation of literary critic Franco Moretti's idea of distant reading as "a *condition of knowledge*" which "allows" us to "focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text." And, as the critic goes on: "if between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more" (57). Indeed, Moretti's vocabulary when claiming that world literature "is now unmistakably a planetary system" (54) itself recalls a description of the databases of global companies like eBay or Google.

Moretti argues that distant reading takes place "in the form of an experiment. You define a unit of analysis … and then follow its metamorphoses in a variety of environments –until, ideally, all of literary history becomes a long chain of related experiments" (61). It could certainly be argued that we could say something similar of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*. It has the haphazard, contingent, unpredictable properties of experimental art; it is an experiment designed to investigate a specific idea (how eBay and literary culture intersect with each other and with twenty first century society); and it proceeds through a series of textual readings that are themselves experimental in Moretti's sense. Indeed, one can imagine Moretti citing *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* as an example of how "the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be" (57). However, just because *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* is a text built around the principle of distant reading, it does not follow that the only way, or even the best way, for us to read that text itself is to read it distantly.

Some clarification may be needed hereabouts, since I have already argued that individuals are as unlikely to be able to carry out much in the way of a close reading of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* as they are to carry out close readings of the data that form its subject matter. If close readings, carried out by individuals, don't get very far, those individuals still have other modes of reading available to them besides the experiment's in-built mode of distant reading. Due to the relational form of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, they are free to construct communal readings, sharing and discussing their insights and responses to the data even as new data are presented to them that will invariably modify these insights and responses. Thus, the communal reading of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* can be conceived not as the close reading of an isolated individual, nor as the distant reading of an abstract experiment, but as a reading that turns out to be socially-authored and multiply-authored —like so much of the digital textuality of our time. To participate in this community of readers, though, it is not enough to switch on your computer or your phone: you'd have to go to see *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, and you'd have to talk face to face with real people who've also gone to see it at the same time as you. You have to enter into community with others.

Thus, the idea of communal reading returns us to the place from where we set out: the issue of what place literature has in a digital era when a constant reading and writing have become part of our basic conditions of existence. Yes, distant reading is an apt mode for these times, but it is not the only mode. The relational character of *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* invites us to read it together. The 'birth of the reader' famously announced by Roland Barthes needs to be reconceived in cases like these. Indeed, Bourriaud claims that in relational artworks, "because the

individual does not have a monopoly on subjectivity, the model of the Author and his alleged disappearance are of no importance"*?* (*Relational* 93). But, by the same token, because the individual does not have a monopoly on subjectivity, the birth of the reader need not be pictured as the birth of yet another isolated individual human being. I'd like to think that Arthur Miller would have approved of such a conclusion, since he often said that one of the reasons he resurrected the form of tragedy in *Death of a Salesman* was because of the genre's power to bring the people in the audience together: "we must be a terribly lonely people, cut off from each other by such massive pretense of self-sufficiency, machined down so finely we hardly touch any more. We are trying to save ourselves separately, and that is immoral, that is the corrosive among us" ("The salesman"13).

6. Conclusion

To sum up, then: Thorp and Hansen's title, *Before Us Is The Salesman's House*, obviously involves a pun, since to view the experiment first-hand (as opposed to a distant reading) you had to be standing in front of the headquarters of the company that runs one of the world's biggest sales networks. Yet this pun actually turns out to be an empty one, since what this experiment reveals is that eBay has made salesmen of us all. Anyone who has ever bought and sold anything on eBay becomes a Willy Loman of the digital age, caught up in a spiral of selling commodities often in order to be able to buy others. Thus, as we have seen, the experiment's meditation on consumerism doesn't just explore the goods for sale on eBay at any given moment: it gives us a financial profile of twenty first century social trends, it invokes the frenetic pace of advanced capitalism, and it shows that both of these things envelop us all –to the point where, thanks to eBay, millions of us have become salesmen hoping to palm off our old junk on other salesmen of old junk, and (bizarrely) hoping to turn a profit in the process. Perhaps McCarthy is right that if James Joyce were alive today he would be working for Google. But if Willy Loman were alive today he would be working in a call centre. And since he would probably find that the various databases containing his financial records had decided that his credit rating was not good enough for him to buy his refrigerator on an instalment plan, his wife, Linda, would probably try to find a nearly new one going cheap on eBay.

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¹ Self, Roth, and Franzen have all prophesied that literary fiction will not withstand competition from digital technology. Philip Roth claimed, in a 2009 interview, that within 25 years, the novel would be read only by a small devoted cult. Will Self makes a more detailed argument in his 2014 essay "The Novel is Dead (This Time It's For Real),"while as long ago as 1996, in his *Harper's* article "Perchance to Dream," Jonathan Franzen was voicing his pessimism about the modern novel being outmoded by new communications technologies. This article was expanded into a more considered discussion of the novel's fate in his essay "Why bother?" in Franzen's *How To Be Alone*.

² As quoted in the exhibition.
catalogue: http://2012.zero1biennial.org/category/program-type/program?page=5. Accessed 9 June 2019.

³ Jer Thorp, "Before Us Is The Salesman's House," blog post, December 1ˢᵗ, 2012. Jim Giles, writing in the *New Scientist*, described the project more concisely and in layman's terms: "Each iteration of the work takes the viewer on a tour through eBay's data universe. The process starts with a book – a different one each time. The system finds a digital version of it and extracts the names of objects from the text. Next, the software searches for those objects on eBay, generating a tour that hops through a map of the US, showing images of the items for sale alongside the seller's location. Finally, the software picks a book that was sold recently on eBay from the last town on the tour, and the cycle starts again" (Giles).

⁴ Dating back to 1971 and the pre-internet days of ARPANET, Project Gutenberg is the world's oldest digital library, and the largest free repository of e-books. Created by author Michael S. Hart, and continued by a dedicated band of volunteers, its initial aim was to digitise the 10,000 most widely read books in the world before the end of the twentieth century. Today, it's approaching 60,000 titles. Inclusion in Project Gutenberg is not a reliable proxy indicator of canonicity: the holdings have always favoured Western literature, generally in English, and out of copyright. However, though it's undoubtedly true that not all canonical texts of world literature are listed on Project Gutenberg, those that are listed there have been regarded as canonical.

⁵ Since I have been comparing the rationale behind *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* with the ideas of Tom McCarthy, it is a fortuitous coincidence that he, too, has tipped a nod of recognition towards Eliot as a precursor to the literature of the digital age in *Transmission and the Individual Remix.*

⁶ The film on Vimeo shows three complete cycles of the experiment. Jer Thorp estimated that the project got through about one hundred cycles per night, and the project lasted for about thirty days. Thus, what is archived on Vimeo is three out of around three thousand cycles, or 0.1% of the entire experiment.

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