

### **Regarding**

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### **Title**

The rise of the new experts:  
Consumers and the art world in the digital age

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### **Abstract**

In this digital age, declarations surface on the death of the expert. Crowd wisdom is instead seen as the new guide to constructing and evaluating knowledge. In the context of the art world, this tension between the amateurs and the experts becomes particularly pronounced as popular meets high culture. Questions arise such as what is the role of the amateur in the evaluation of art in current times? Does social media level the playing field here and can we assume that equity in participation results in better judgments? Does online participation on art valuation impact its actual market pricing? Who is the expert in the virtual art world? This paper re-examines some popular notions on participation and expertise concerning social media in the art world to gain a better foothold in policy and practice.

**Keywords:** art, knowledge constructions, participation, expert and amateur, social media, popular and high culture

### **Introduction**

The role of the expert is being brought to question as social media infuses our popular communicative modes and relationships. Crowd wisdom is seen as the new guide to

constructing and evaluating knowledge. In the context of the art world, this tension between the experts and the amateurs is particularly pronounced. After all, the very definition of high culture lies in its acceptance and privileging of hierarchies. For centuries, experts claimed an important role in the art world as a result of perceived information asymmetries. Art theorists, dealers and museums curators are believed to exhibit the necessary expertise acquired through lifelong learning and experience, and these traditional gatekeepers have declared what constitutes as good versus bad art. Art historians and critics have conventionally disseminated knowledge on what is quality art.

So while the Internet has a low barrier of entry for participation, high cultural institutions have conventionally had high barriers of entry that entails expertise, inside networks and capital, begging the following questions: what then is the role of the amateur in the construction and evaluation of art in this digital age? Does social media level the playing field in art evaluations and can we assume that equity in participation results in better judgments? How does crowd wisdom play out in the art world? Does online participation on art valuation impact its actual market pricing? Who is the expert in the virtual art world? Hence, the art world serves as an excellent space for us to investigate these tensions.

This paper argues that we need to critically re-examine certain avenues of reasoning in the amateur-expert debate through situating it in the art world. Here, we propose

alternative ways of approaching these notions, namely, (1) equal participation still adheres to hierarchical structures (2) and does not necessarily result in equal say in art valuations (3) expertise is privileged, not only because of knowledge but because of institutional linkages, separating them from the amateurs and, (4) the role of participation itself needs to be extricated from the normative assumptions of it being positive and inherently democratic and instead, view this process as perhaps also a novel tool of marketing and entertainment in the new media age.

With contemporary art institutions under tremendous pressure to reach out online to their audiences, a range of expectations emerges, making this discussion not just theoretically relevant but also practically so. This paper, in delving deeper into notions of participation and expertise, establishes the starting points for examining how virtual art spaces should be constructed and what to expect from these new art worlds.

### **Death of the expert and birth of the amateur**

Is it time to say goodbye to the experts in this new media age? Some celebrate this notion, highlighting the supposed democratic and global character of this new medium where walls between high and low culture crumble, where individuals and institutions become blurred and where producer and consumer share power within this new liberated sphere (Jenkins, 2004; Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008). The average Joe is not just anybody; he is somebody with a voice. Such optimism is countered with a foreboding

cry, viewing the rising cult of amateurs and the breaking down of barriers between amateurs and experts as the cause for the downfall of the culture around us:

...free, user-generated content spawned and extolled by the Web 2.0 revolution is decimating the ranks of our cultural gatekeepers as professional critics, journalists, editors, musicians, moviemakers, and other purveyors of expert information are being replaced by amateur bloggers, hack reviewers, homespun moviemakers, and attic recording artists. (Keen, 2007, p. 16)

In this ever more chaotic environment wherein millions of voices blare out their preferences and desires, it can be argued that the need for credible experts in art world might in fact increase. Nevertheless, the crowd, once a reviled entity- the common masses, are now seen as spinning out wisdom through collective thinking and enactments (Sunstein, 2006; Surowiecki, 2004). While this debate is timely and heated, there is little denial amongst such parties that there is a critical need to re-evaluate this relationship. Furthermore, much of this debate has centered on popular culture as we see the rise of YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Blogger, WordPress and the like which allows for the sharing of opinions, tastes, and amateur products. However, there are few studies that map this debate onto the art world where hierarchy is the soul of its structure and identity.

### **A digital revolution within the art world?**

For centuries, the art world has drawn its identity against that of the masses. Its innate elitism and hierarchical character is what has shaped it as an institution and cultural leader of society. The growing complexity and commoditization within the art world resulted in the establishment of the roles and positioning of experts at the center of art evaluation (Joy & Sherry, 2010). Artists, museums and galleries, curators, auction

houses, art dealers, and art critics engage with each other in defining what constitutes as good art.

Valuation of art is a nebulous process. The difficulty of defining quality in the arts is one of the aspects that set cultural products apart from other goods. For instance, in the visual arts, quality tends to be associated with aesthetic judgments, but this definition has been expanded to include a multitude of properties such as craftsmanship, originality, novelty, power of expression, coherence, complexity, intensity, etc. (Beardsley, 1958; Hutter & Thorsby, 2008). While the public no doubt expresses their opinions on such matters, it has been conventionally left to the experts to weigh in on these aspects to determine the relevancy of the art in question. Also, even though there is tension between the economic valorization process by consumers (price) and the evaluations made by actors in the art world (e.g. artists, curators, dealers), this is still limited to buyers who comprise a minor part of the larger masses.

Yet, in the last decade, we have seen a shift within the art world as pressure to communicate and treat the public as active consumers rather than passive recipients has taken charge (Marty, 2007). Traditional intermediaries such as galleries, museums and auction houses are being compelled to become more accessible and engaging with their audiences through new media platforms. Moreover, this digital platform of Web 2.0 characterized by its “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006) allows for art consumers (e.g. buyers) to directly interact with art producers (e.g. artists), challenging

conventional market mechanisms and questioning the relevancy of art dealers. And with the virtualization of several prominent museums and its art products, it brings to the fore issues of transparency on how art is framed online and who determines this process. In other words, our engagements online with the art are actually with the information *about* the art including its visuals, historical placement, and relevancy, all potentially deeply political. While there are spaces now online that allows the public to comment on the art, and engage in discussions with curators and art critics, would this necessarily lead to the questioning of their expertise? Will there be a revolution after all against the ivory towers of the art world?

### **Critical examination on virtual participation and art expertise**

In this section, we highlight popular beliefs regarding social media in the art world, and suggest alternative ways to view these normative discussions.

(1) What does equal participation mean in art evaluation?

The notion of equality and its relationship to the art world is itself interesting. The idea of the Net as a leveling playing field in the art world connotes that somehow a global audience will contribute to our understandings of the value of a piece of art.

Conventionally, this has been dictated by the actors in the West, marking say, certain African art as “tribal” or perhaps framing the colonial history of an artifact through a more muted lens, masking the origins and placement of that piece of art. However, with the onset of social media, there is expectation that there will be more transparency in

such knowledge constructions. Also, the digitalization of the arts is happening across different museums internationally, from Amsterdam to Mumbai, propelling the need to share these efforts to reduce costs (Trant, 2009). Thereby, the need to agree on indexing and categorizing becomes part of the process of standardization, creating a more negotiated space for further knowledge construction and dissemination

The problem arises when we speak about equality as a flattening of hierarchies. Instead, we propose that when examining participation, we look at this through interaction amongst different and new experts per se who are rising within this realm of discussion. For instance, curators of the Met are now engaging with curators in Saudi Arabia to participate in the framing of Islamic art and how it's portrayed online. Part of this can be attributed to the financial sourcing from Saudi Arabia, propelling such partnerships. Or, given that the emerging markets of India, Brazil, South Africa and China have produced a substantive base of new art buyers, the notion of the collector/ consumer is now being challenged. So herein, we argue that what needs to be examined is not how social media allows all voices regardless of culture, class, gender, ethnicity etc but that in the world of expertise, the actors are changing and/or increasing due to the rise of the emerging markets, international institutional linkages, cultural tourism and digitalization efforts that demand for transparency. Thereby, the tension should not lie merely between the nebulous categories of the amateur and the expert but between different types of experts emerging from a range of unequal art institutions.

(2) Does participation lead to impact in art valuations?

The reason why participation is celebrated is not just in its act, but, in its consequences. There is a need to believe that a greater degree of participation will result in a fairer evaluation of a piece of art (McLaughlin, 1996). There is faith that crowd wisdom will prevail, being closer to gauging the real value of an art than say, some armchair art critic for the New York Times or an art historian working at the university. However, this normative linkage needs to be questioned as participation and art valuation need not be correlated. One can expect vigorous discussion online on art and yet, these spaces may have little connect with worlds such as auction houses to gallery spaces. So in approaching the analysis of these phenomena, we need to start by understanding the character of these online participation forums and whether they are in fact linked to spaces of existing power in the art world. What such virtual discussions can do is popularize a piece of fine art, putting it in a similar trajectory with mass cultural phenomena. However, this may in fact create an additional barrier for that artwork to be valued as a fine art piece through its popularity. Thereby, we propose that it's worth examining the relationship at the onset rather than using this as an assumption in such investigations

That said, an interesting avenue of research entails an investigation into how and to what extent crowd wisdom may impact the prices paid for works of art in the art market. Few doubt that expert opinion directly influences the validation of work of art in the market place, whether it being a gallerist pricing the work of young aspiring artists

in his gallery or an auctioneer who discloses the pre-sale estimates in the auction catalogue. Being written up by an art critic or granted a solo exhibition in a museum can have a decidedly positive effect on price as well (Velthuis, 2005).

However, it is believed that social media are undermining these time-honored processes by giving the public at large a multitude of forums to make their personal preferences known. A bandwagon effect may occur whereby masses of amateurs join in the praising of a particular artist or art form, often based on reasons that are unclear and which have little in common with the discourse and logic adhered to by the experts in their quality evaluations. Nevertheless, the resulting extraordinary attention being bestowed on the chosen artist will raise demand for his or her work, and thus the price. The question arises whether this bottom-up fueled hype will challenge the existing pricing scripts in the art market, or whether art lovers and buyers will seek out the guidance of trusted expert even more. After all, in a market that is characterized by great uncertainty and volatility relative to the value of art, it can be argued that there is an even greater need for gatekeepers who signal quality, 'staying power' and investment potential. The key to this appears to be the notion of a trustworthy expert, often a trained art historian or artist with institutional linkages who instill trust into potential consumers (Bonus and Ronte, 1997).

(3) Is participation inherently positive and bottom-up driven?

Participation can in fact be a strategic and engaging marketing scheme by art institutions. We need to step away from the typical associations of participation as

grassroots driven and a representation of public initiative. With State funding towards art institutions and actors declining due to budget cuts, these institutions are now viewing their public as customers to attract, engage, and entertain. Thereby, virtual museums and interactive art spaces like the Google Art Project are emerging, promising novel means through which you can experience art. This not only serves as an edutainment tool but also can foster further interest in the practice of museum going that, in turn can serve as a justification for further funding of museums by the State. Thereby, museums can use these cyber-art spaces as a marketing tool.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, it is important to keep in mind that as novel art spaces emerge online, we need to bring to question common understandings on experts, art institutions and relationships between art knowledge and art valuation, participation and grassroots action, and the very role of hierarchy in the contemporary art world. We need to move away from assuming equality in participation is implicitly an improvement on hierarchical approaches to knowledge construction. We need to re-examine the relationship and space between the amateur and the expert, their positioning and their temporal role-play in knowledge construction and valuation in the art world. Is it so wrong to celebrate hierarchy, sustain it and revel in it when it comes to the art domain? Does participation equate to having a say in the way art is evaluated? Are there new experts and can we give credit to social media for their involvement? Such are issues worthy of discussion.

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