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### THE END OF THE ART CONNOISSEUR? EXPERTS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE VISUAL ARTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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# Payal Arora & Filip Vermeylen

## THE END OF THE ART CONNOISSEUR? EXPERTS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE VISUAL ARTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

*In this digital age, declarations surface of the death of the expert and the democratization of information. Crowd wisdom is seen as the new guide in 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 expert in the evaluation of art in contemporary times? Do social media dismantle age-old hierarchies and established priesthoods in the art world? And can we assume that mass participation in valuation results in better judgments? This article addresses such popular notions of participation and expertise concerning social media in the art world through a historical lens by re-examining and positioning art experts from past to present. Particularly, characteristics of intermediaries in the art market are examined closely regarding their strategies in knowledge production and the establishment of expertise. This historical situatedness enables us to move beyond the hype of new media expectations, generating more appropriate avenues of investigation to better grasp possible changes amongst actors within the contemporary art world. This examination is not just theoretically relevant but practically so, given current pressures on art institutions to embrace and reach out to new audiences online.*

**Keywords** art; knowledge constructions; participation; experts and amateurs; social media; popular and high culture

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### Introduction

The role of the expert is being questioned, 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 museum 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 of what is quality art. From an economic point of view, art experts and gatekeepers perform a variety of functions in a market that is characterized by great uncertainty and risk. They have the potential to facilitate the trade by lowering search and transaction costs, add value through their expertise and generate network effects whereby the value of a good increases with the number of users. They connect the artists and art consumers. Furthermore, they reduce information asymmetries by mediating and stimulating knowledge construction among the various institutional actors in the art world (Adelaar 2000).

While a comprehensive typology of the various intermediaries operating in this arena is still lacking, there is no doubt that dealers, critics and gallerists have performed a crucial function in the art markets in western society for both the artists and their consumers (Velthuis 2005).<sup>1</sup> Historically as well as today, they have been credited for determining the artistic, social and financial value of a work of art. For instance, there exists a widely held belief that it is quasi-impossible to establish the quality and value of an artwork objectively, which underpins the need for intermediaries or gatekeepers. That serves as a challenge in the art market arena wherein the quality and value of an artwork is difficult to determine. Many believe (Bonus & Ronte 1997; Yogev 2010) that there are no objective criteria on which the valuation and valorization process takes place, which explains why intermediaries such as art critics, art historians, museum curators, dealers and auction houses play such a crucial part in the art world and how these elites have monopolized the discourse on artistic worth for centuries.

Paradoxically, this very lack of objectivity not only gives legitimacy to the above experts but also theoretically opens doors for new voices, particularly with the advent of social media. While the internet has a low barrier of entry for participation, high cultural institutions have conventionally had high barriers of entry that entails expertise, insider networks and capital. However, the bridging of these two realms begs the following questions: Are conventional art experts under threat with the rise of amateurs in the digital art world? Do social media dismantle age-old hierarchies and level the playing field in art evaluations? What is the role of the expert in the construction and evaluation of art in this digital age? And can we assume that mass participation results in better judgments?

The art world serves as an excellent space for us to investigate such questions, as it is one of the few contexts wherein expertise is privileged and positioned centrally in the process of knowledge production and evaluation. While it is tempting to believe that mass opinion gains significance and weight in the art world through social media, it is worth reminding ourselves that historically, mass opinion on art has existed and yet, for a range of factors, experts have managed to secure their positions in this elite sphere. Hence, this article, through a historical investigation of experts and expertise in the art world, helps to critically re-examine the amateur–expert debate at the onset of social media in the arts. By exploring the historical trajectories of art experts and expertise and their means of gaining legitimacy over time, we can better position expectations of experts and amateurs in the contemporary art sphere.

In doing so, we propose alternative ways of approaching popular notions of digital participation, namely, that (1) virtual amateur participation still adheres to hierarchical structures; (2) it does not necessarily result in a more equitable say in art valuations; (3) expertise is privileged, not only because of knowledge but also 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. Instead, it can also be viewed as a process that serves as a novel platform for institutional marketing and entertainment in the new media age, possibly reinforcing and strengthening the role of conventional experts.

With contemporary art institutions under tremendous pressure to reach out online to their audiences, a range of expectations emerge, making this discussion not just theoretically relevant but also practically so. By delving deeper into notions of participation and expertise, we will identify the starting points for more appropriate avenues of investigation when examining virtual art spaces and its knowledge productions.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we explore the contemporary phenomena of social media infusion into the art world and its current and critical concerns, particularly in relation to experts and knowledge production. In the second section, we survey some of the major trends in art connoisseurship and expertise since the Renaissance, whereby we focus on the eighteenth century when commercial experts such as auctioneers became an important part of the art world, and on the role of art critics in the rise of the Impressionist movement in nineteenth-century Paris. Besides the French school, we draw on examples of expertise production and circulation in the market for Netherlandish paintings that were traded and admired on a global scale from the fifteenth century onwards.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, the third section juxtaposes the historical section against contemporary popular notions of expertise in the virtual art world, facilitating more grounded and appropriate avenues of investigation.

## Democratization of the art world and social media

For centuries, the art world has constructed its identity against that of the masses. Its innate elitism and hierarchical character are what have shaped it as an institution and cultural leader of society. The growing complexity and commodification within the art world resulted in the establishment of the roles and positioning of experts at the centre of art evaluation (Joy & Sherry 2010). Artists, museums and galleries, auction houses, art dealers and art critics engage with each other in defining what constitutes good art.

The 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 & Throsby 2008). While members of the public no doubt express their opinions on such matters, it has been conventionally left to the experts 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. by artists, curators, dealers), this is still limited to buyers who comprise a small minority of the larger masses.

In the last decade, we have seen a shift within the art world as the 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 compelled to become more accessible and to engage with their audiences through new media platforms. For example, we see this in the embracing of online video platforms for the sharing of art by credible museums such as the Metropolitan Museum, the Guggenheim Museum and the Tate Modern and the launching of Arttube, a digital arts video forum by the Boijmans Museum. This is part of a larger shift in the museum management culture from museums being predominantly custodial institutions to becoming increasingly focussed on audience attraction through museum–visitor interactions (Gilmore & Rentschler 2002). To be successful in this endeavour, it is found that museums need to recognize their differentiated audiences, to be able to engage them in ways that are meaningful and appropriate to their interests, values and tastes. Web 2.0 is seen as a natural platform for such a challenge given its innate emphasis on collective participation of the audience in the creation and/or evaluation of web content: the web structured by users and for users (O'Reilly 2005).

However, with the virtualization of several prominent museums and their art products, issues of transparency on how art is framed online and who determines this process are brought to the fore. In other words, our engagements

online with art are actually with the information about art, including its visualization, historical context and relevancy, all potentially deeply political. Bowker *et al.* (2010) argue that with each new mode of communication, in this case the internet, new info-architectures are produced that evoke a host of human activity around it. These embedded technological frames are often invisible in their effects on social systems such as the art world; hence to genuinely comprehend its impact, it involves the unfolding of 'the political, ethical, and social choices that have been made throughout its development' (p. 99). This social constructivist stance opens up opportunities for reframing and re-clustering art that allows for diverse and historically excluded voices to take part in this indexing process. A good example, shared by Srinivasan and Huang (2005), is how indigenous artist communities play an instrumental part in constructing and preserving their histories and cultures online through a digital museum. In this case, Native American tribal groups exercise their agency to participate in making themselves more visible and accessible online through a conscious design of their knowledge architectures and profiling.

Such digital platforms of Web 2.0, which is characterized by its 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006), also allow for art consumers (e.g. buyers and museum visitors) to directly interact with art producers (e.g. artists), potentially challenging conventional market mechanisms and circumventing traditional institutions that mediate engagements with art. eBay, for instance, is looked upon as a liberating and alternative platform for emerging artists who desire to gain more freedom and control over their art from the 'repressive chains of galleries and art dealers' (Dalton 2002, p. 84). Also, there are now virtual spaces that allow the public to comment on the art and engage in discussions with curators, art dealers and critics, signalling new kinds of engagements with the institutional gatekeepers of the past. However, would this necessarily lead to questioning of their expertise? Will there be a revolution after all against the ivory towers of the art world? Is it time to say goodbye to the experts in this new media age? Undoubtedly, the consequences of the internet on the art world are potentially significant and substantial, but are yet to be systematically and empirically studied.

To put it simply, there is a dominant contestation of perspectives on the impact of social media in the art world. Some celebrate this intervention, 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 2006; 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, home-spun moviemakers, and attic recording artists. (Keen 2007, p. 16)

In this ever more chaotic environment where millions of voices blare out their preferences and desires, it can be argued that the need for credible experts in the art world might in fact increase. Nevertheless, the crowd, once reviled as the common masses, are now seen as spinning wisdom from 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.

After all, if we are to draw upon contemporary social media enactments within popular culture to gain insight into user behaviour with digital tools within the art world, we recognize that there are multiple and complex dimensions to this issue that do not fall neatly on one or the other side of this dichotomy. Today, the business of popular culture has integrated the usage of new media practices into their marketing and branding, building on the digital fan culture, electronic word-of-mouth and social networking (Hargittai & Walejko 2008). Audiences are found to pursue, construct and sustain their cultural preferences through online communities, blogs and other participatory digital platforms. Here, opinion and evaluation are formed that can have a significant positive or negative effect on the future of the cultural product, be it a new film release or video game.

Yet, these can equally serve as obstacles to quality and diversity such as the formation of news where editorial control on the nature and depth of journalism is subject to the whims of the masses (Keen 2007). Peripheral and/or manipulative evaluation online can dictate the future of a cultural product such as manufactured reviews and disguised corporate marketing efforts online that capitalize on social networks to reinforce their positioning (Otterbacher 2011). Also, it is naive to believe that current social divides in participation are mitigated through this new venue. In fact, studies show that educated, white males are dominant actors in producing and distributing online content (Helsper 2010). Hence, these tensions are worth considering when mapping these cultural and digital practices onto the art world where hierarchy has been the soul of its structure and identity.

## **Expert intermediaries and the art market**

A number of scholars have attempted to identify the characteristics that define expertise and what constitutes an expert in a certain field. Shanteau *et al.* (2002) surveyed the various elements that can be used universally to discern



experts from non-experts: experience, certification, social acclamation, consistency, consensus, ability to discriminate, behavioural characteristics and knowledge tests. This framework for the most part can easily be applied to the art world, albeit with certain limitations (Dikov 2011). For instance, we recognize experience as a sign of expertise among seasoned art connoisseurs and dealers, since they have been exposed to countless works of arts over the years during which they trained their eye. Through certification, many professionals receive recognition. Art historians who obtained a doctorate have greater credibility than an art aficionado without a degree. Social acclamation is essential in the art world as well. According to Shanteau *et al.* (2002), being recognized by one's peers gives legitimacy to the art expert in an arena in which objective quality assessments are virtually unattainable. Consequently, consensus building is instrumental in the art world. For instance, this is apparent when establishing the authenticity of old master paintings. If a clear majority of the recognized experts agree that a particular painting is a genuine Rubens, the broader art community – not least the buyers – tend to follow suit. The true art connoisseurs make these decisions based on their ability to distinguish and discriminate between subtle and not so subtle differences within an artistic oeuvre. Being able to read the brushstrokes, assess the style and elucidate the meaning of a painting and its iconology separates the expert from the non-expert.

In addition to Shanteau's list, we can add institutional linkages as an endorsement of the expert. The curator who works at a renowned fine art museum, the art historian who teaches at a prestigious university or the appraiser from an international auction house instils trust among visitors, students and buyers. The status that comes with these affiliations adds to the authority of the expert whereby his or her standing in the field becomes proportionate to the reputation of the host institution. An art critic writing for a widely disseminated and respected journal is expected to have a greater impact than the blogger operating independently.

However, the many caveats and fallacies mentioned by Shanteau *et al.* (2002) also highlight the difficulties in identifying the true producers of artistic expertise. Experience at times denotes little more than seniority, and an art history degree in itself does not reflect the skills of a connoisseur. Other forms of certification are largely missing in the art world, and the mediatized and most visible expert is not necessarily the most knowledgeable one. Furthermore, the consensus reached by the expert community has been known to make erroneous judgments. New indisputable technical evidence revealing date of creation of an artwork (when it has been established that the work was painted well after the death of the perceived author) or the exposure of fraud has more than once eluded and exposed the mistaken opinion of the most renowned art historians. Telling examples can be found in the reduced corpus of Rembrandt paintings as a result of a critical scrutiny of the oeuvre of the celebrated Dutch master (Von Sonnenburg 2005). In these instances, the discriminating capacities of the

experts carried little weight, as they mistakenly ascribed authenticity to a copy or failed to identify early imitators.

The result is that the process of identifying the true art expert remains contentious and debatable, and as a consequence, so is the construction of knowledge itself in the art world. With the onset of social media, it is assumed that the pool of actors involved in the decisions regarding art quality and knowledge has expanded and substantively added to this challenge of gauging experts and expertise in the art world. Thereby, to create rootedness in this discourse and to gain a broader perspective, it is essential to look at the historical trajectory of this phenomenon.

## Art expertise and knowledge production from past to present

### *Art experts in early modern times*

During the Renaissance, artistic quality was largely determined by art theorists. For instance, following the enlightened example of Giorgio Vasari, Netherlandish art biographers such as Karel van Mander, Cornelis De Bie and Arnold Houbraken manifested themselves as the leading experts in the Dutch and Flemish art (Hecht 1998). Through biographies and treatises on the value of art, they monopolized the standards for what constitutes a good painting referring to the Renaissance quality criteria of composition, design, colouring and drawing (De Piles 1708; De Marchi 2008). As such, these artist-biographers had a seminal impact on the formation of the canon of Netherlandish painting. They constructed hierarchies of artistic genres whereby (for instance) history paintings were held in higher regard than say scenes from everyday life. Furthermore, they indicated which artists excelled in particular genres or eras. For instance, the Italian theorist Bellori (1672) bestowed on the Antwerp artist Pieter Paul Rubens the title *pictor doctus*, a learned painter who produced ‘extraordinary’ works of art. A few decades later, the French critic Roger de Piles (1677) spared no praise in his *Conversations* to further canonize Rubens by (among others) pointing to his superior manner of applying colour. Within the artistic community, these and other publications such as Van Mander’s *Schilderboek* (1604) carried great weight and were the standard bearers, as many generations of painters and collectors owned and were influenced by these bibles of art.

In the evaluation of the actual paintings in the market place, officials of the artist guild and the painters themselves were called upon to ascertain the quality of the pictures – usually in the context of a dispute. Especially the deans of the Guild of Saint Luke acted as the certified quality assessors of the worth of a work of art (Lyna 2009). Even if their verdicts were not always followed by the buyers, art theorists and guild-appointed artists thus monopolized the discourse on art

quality, as they set the standards of what constitutes a good painting. They did so by focusing on the intrinsic value of a work of art, or the excellence of a piece.

*Commercial expertise: art dealers, auctioneers and gallerists*

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw a remarkable change in the way art was evaluated and valorized. The advent of specialized art auctions and the internationalization of the art trade called for a new kind of expertise which was much more centred on the process of valorization in a market context (for price setting among other examples). Already in the second half of the seventeenth century, international art dealing firms operating out of Antwerp had made use of a network of agents in foreign markets such as Paris, Vienna or Madrid to gauge demand for Flemish paintings (Vermeylen 2006). They facilitated the export of Flemish masters by supplying information regarding the reigning tastes of local consumers. Detailed correspondence reveals indeed an increasingly sophisticated language to describe paintings (a new terminology), in an attempt to accurately pinpoint and fill very distinct market niches abroad.

A fundamental shift occurred with the proliferation of specialized public sales for works of art, the introduction of the printed auction catalogue and the accompanying newspaper advertisements announcing the sale. The implications of the introduction of art auctions and the use of catalogues were manifold: Art auctions were a suitable mechanism for redistributing old artwork of which the value was unknown. This changing state of affairs particularly affected the role of the intermediaries, and the profile of the early eighteenth-century art dealers changed fundamentally as a result of these developments. What the market required from now on were expert-auctioneers (Vermeylen & Lyna 2009). These middlemen – who did not necessarily have an artistic background – would claim an increasingly important role in the art market. They developed commercial expertise needed to market paintings at auctions, and which required insights into the price setting mechanism and the translation of artistic value into a price through the bidding ritual. A fine and well-known example of this new type of dealer is the Frenchman Edme-François Gersaint (1694–1750), active during the first half of the eighteenth century, and who was responsible for the resale of large stocks of Flemish and Dutch pictures in Paris (Van Miegroet 2005). He ran an art shop in the French capital, but also organized auctions of Netherlandish paintings he had (to a large extent) acquired during extensive buying trips in the Low Countries. He developed the auction and the accompanying catalogue (which he had discovered in his journeys to the Dutch Republic) into sophisticated marketing tools to influence his growing clientele. His intelligent use of advertisements as means of marketing auctions during the 1720s and 1730s was also unseen in France and the rest of Europe (McClellan 1996).

In the sales catalogues that accompanied these public sales, Gersaint included much information regarding the provenance and perceived quality of the paintings. He bundled particular groups of paintings with similar characteristics into 'family' clusters in order to improve their marketability. In addition, Gersaint scheduled viewing days so that potential buyers could familiarize themselves with the objects for sale. This approach was novel and points to the further professionalization of the art trade (De Marchi & Van Miegroet 2006).

Men like Gersaint, representatives of this new type of expert dealer, could boast an excellent knowledge with respect to artists and painterly styles. The spread of their annotated sales catalogues in which value judgments were made about the paintings that were put up for sale underscores this assumption. Art dealers seem to have actively promoted particular kinds of paintings, and their role as mediators and agents in taste increased (for instance, by ranking, praising and clustering paintings). These commercial experts made use of sale catalogues and other publications to persuade even the most learned and well-informed collectors to make certain purchases. In doing so, they not only substantially contributed to the formation of the art canon, but also highlighted the role of new media of that time in the processes of taste formation. Printed auction catalogues and advertisements announcing the sale placed in newspapers – another innovation – provided the commercial expert with the tools to reach a wide audience.

So with the increasing complexity of the market for artistic goods, dealers gained prominence. However, this does not mean that these new-style intermediaries were always well regarded in artistic circles. Johan Van Gool, a Dutch painter-turned-art critic and biographer, noted with much dismay in 1751 in his *Nieuwe Schouburg der Nederlantsche kunstschilders en schilderessen* [New Theatre of Netherlandish Male and Female Painters] that particularly during the preceding 30 years in Holland and Brabant, men who were formally active in other trades (he mentioned wine sellers whose grapes had gone sour), now were involved in art dealing. Many of these so-called art dealers, Van Gool lamented, knew as much about painting as a blind man knows about colours. They valued art according to what was currently in fashion, paying no respect to the inherent artistic value of the work in question – and all this for mere financial gain (Van Gool 1751).

### *Modern artistic expertise: art academies and critics*

More layers of expertise were added to the art world in the nineteenth century, personified again in new types of experts. The most important of these were the museum curators, trained art historians, gallerists, (members of) art academies and art critics writing for journals.<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of our argument, we will focus on the latter two and draw on the French example of the *Académie de*

*Peinture et Sculpture* during the nineteenth century. By this time, the government-run Academy embodied the official French taste in the arts. It controlled the training of young artists through the *Ecole des Beaux-arts* and launched artists' career by awarding prizes and medals, thereby making them eligible for the much sought-after government purchases of their works. Most importantly, the Parisian Academy organized the official annual or bi-annual Salons in which artists could present their work. The jury largely consisted of members of the Academy who consequently controlled the access to the dominant outlet of French visual artists. As a result, the Academy became the official voice of the French art world and monopolized the flow of information and the process of art evaluation for much of the nineteenth century. Using its multiple channels of publicity and endorsement, the Academic apparatus effectively propagated Neoclassicism as the official French style with national history, mythological and biblical scenes as its most suitable topics. This resulted in a state-sanctioned hierarchy of respectable art (Galenson & Jensen 2002; Renneboog & Spaenjers 2011).

However, since the 1860s, the Academy's hegemony was seriously challenged by the so-called Impressionist painters who proposed a radical departure from the artistic norm. Works by aspiring artists such as Renoir, Dégas, Manet, Sisley and Monet had been rejected by the jury of the Salon. With the support of Napoleon III, a counter-exhibition was organized in 1863 which is now regarded as a turning point in French art history. The so-called *Salon des Refusés* featured subversive paintings such as *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* by Edouard Manet (showcasing a nude woman in the presence of clothed men) and James McNeil Whistler's *White girl* (Chilvers 2004). The alternative exhibition proved to be an instant success in terms of the number of visitors and media attention. A number of these counter-exhibitions would follow in subsequent years and provide a forum for disenfranchised artists. The government-sanctioned Salon system had come under increased pressure from rising popular demand stemming from the French middle class who wanted smaller, more intimate works to adorn their houses rather than the often 'pompous' academic paintings (Galenson & Jensen 2002).

However, the ultimate breakthrough of the Impressionist movement had not been possible without the massive attention art critics bestowed on the *refusés* exhibitions. They publicized the novelty of the Impressionists in dozens of reviews in a myriad of publications ranging from the prestigious *Gazette des beaux-arts* to run-of-the-mill daily newspapers. The 1874 show alone generated 51 individual reviews (Galenson & Jensen 2002, p. 26). The growing cohort of Parisian art critics produced and disseminated information on the new art trends favoured by the middle classes, thereby developing a novel rhetoric to describe its qualities. As a result, the Academy's role as arbiters of taste was increasingly challenged by the new experts who dominated popular media of the time.

## Mapping historical understandings of expertise onto the virtual art world

Based on the select examples and discussion in Section II, we have gained some insight into how experts and expertise shaped over time and the role of media tools in knowledge constructions on art quality over the centuries. In juxtaposing these historical understandings against key speculations on the role of social media in the art realm and ongoing digital initiatives in this field, this section suggests some critical ways to view these normative discussions.

### *What does equal participation mean in art evaluation?*

The notion of equity and its relationship to the art world is in itself interesting. The idea of the internet as a level playing field in the art world connotes that somehow a larger and more diverse audience will enhance our understandings of the value of a piece of art. There is an implicit assumption that the conventional characteristics of what constitutes as an expert may take a backseat in this new media age where what is said counts more than who says it. Conventionally, art evaluation has been dictated by expert actors in the West, marking, say, certain African arts as 'tribal' or perhaps framing the colonial history of an artefact through a more muted lens, masking the origins and placement of that piece of art. However, with the onset of social media, there is an expectation that there will be more transparency in such knowledge constructions (Srinivasan & Huang 2005).

When we look at some of the historical examples on the broadening of the art realm and the framework for art evaluation, this has run parallel more with market mechanisms and less due to social equity. Strong economic reasons have propelled the opening of the art market as, for example, we saw in the internationalization of Flemish art at the turn of the eighteenth century, thereby also leading to the opening up of new expertise. The expansion of the art market across Paris, Vienna and Madrid propelled for a new terminology, clustering and genre, allowing for more pluralistic interpretations of art. Similarly, with the rise of the new middle class in the French art scene of the 1800s, there was more opportunity to carve out a niche of new expertise through counter-movements such as the *Salon de Refusés*. The new consumers here indirectly but definitively contributed to the shaping of how art knowledge was categorized and marketed.

Currently, the synthesis of art information online is happening across different museums internationally, from Amsterdam to Mumbai, propelling the need to share these efforts to reduce costs (Trant 2009). The need to agree on indexing and categorizing is becoming part of the process of standardization, creating a negotiated space for knowledge construction and dissemination. This serves as an opportunity to possibly re-evaluate certain categorizations and clustering of art,

allowing for new interpretations that are less dictated by past western hegemonic structures. In other words, technical affordances, efficiencies and expansion of consumer interest in virtual art consumption allow for a larger group of expert actors, in this case, museums from emerging markets to come together and construct knowledge collectively.

Furthermore, a problem arises when we speak about equity as a flattening of hierarchies and an understanding of an all-inclusiveness approach. Instead, we propose that when examining participation, we look at this through interaction amongst different and new experts as well as a special segment of the masses rising within this realm of discussion. For instance, the curators of the Metropolitan Museum are now compelled to engage with curators in Saudi Arabia to participate in the framing of Islamic art and how it is 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 substantial base of new art buyers, the notion of the prototypical western collector/ consumer is now being challenged.

As for the notion of the generic masses participating online in this process, we should rather look at this as an expansion of a specific segment of the population and extension of the offline art consumers who share a particular cultural capital and art acumen, making them amateur-experts in this process. An interesting study done by DiMaggio (1999) reveals that there is indeed a range of characteristics that mark this specific group of amateur-experts such as being secular, trusting, politically liberal, racially tolerant and open to other cultures and lifestyles. Thereby, there seems to be underlying criteria for membership that marks this group of amateur-expert participants.

So herein, we argue that what needs to be examined is not how social media allows all voices regardless of culture, class, gender, and ethnicity but that in the world of expertise, how the actors are changing and/or increasing due to the rise of new markets and new consumers, international institutional linkages, cultural tourism and digitalization efforts that demand for greater cooperation and re-negotiation of knowledge constructions. Thereby, the tension lies less between the nebulous categories of the generic amateur and the expert; rather, between different types of experts emerging with the rise of economic opportunities and new markets as well with specific amateur-experts who potentially influence such art arenas, online and offline.

### *Does participation impact art valuations?*

The reason why participation is celebrated is not just in its act, but in its consequences. There is a tendency 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 art critic for the *New York Times* or an art historian

working at a university. However, this assumption needs to be questioned, as the relationship between participation and art valuation is a complex one. For instance, one can expect vigorous discussion about art online and yet, these spaces may have little connection with the professional art worlds such as auction houses and gallery spaces. Furthermore, even when correlated, the result of positive mass endorsements need not necessarily translate to higher valuation. In fact, a million 'Likes' on a Flickr image of an art could just as well work negatively, gaining a 'commercial' label and thereby make it seen as low quality art. On the other hand, as we have seen through the numerous historical examples in Section II of the strategic leveraging of public interest, there are indeed times where public opinion does impact valuation. For instance, The Parisian Academy demonstrated its dislike of the early Impressionists by not admitting them to the official Salons, which only put the rejects in the spotlight at the counter-exhibitions resulting in the enduring popularity and canonization of this new artistic genre.

An interesting avenue of research entails an investigation into how and to what extent crowd wisdom may impact the price paid for works of art in the art market. Few doubt that expert opinion directly influences the validation of a work of art in the market place, whether it being a gallerist pricing the work of young aspiring artists 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-honoured 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 fuelled hype will challenge the existing pricing scripts in the art market, or whether art lovers and buyers will seek out the guidance of trusted experts 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 instils trust in potential consumers (Bonus & Ronte 1997).

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, as stated earlier, this may in fact create an additional barrier for that artwork to be valued as a fine art piece through its popularity. In addition, we need to ascertain the nature of the virtual audience in terms of their cultural capital and informal social membership to gauge their amateur-expert position and thereby, their spectrum of influence. Hence, it is worth examining these relationships at the onset rather than using the staid amateur–expert dichotomy as an assumption in such investigations.

*Is participation inherently positive and bottom-up driven?*

Participation can in fact be a strategic and engaging marketing scheme on the part of art institutions. We need to step away from the typical associations of participation as a grassroots-driven public initiative. With state funding for art institutions and artists declining due to budget cuts, these institutions are now viewing their public as customers to attract, engage and entertain (Kirchner, Markowski & Ford 2007). Thereby, virtual museums and interactive art spaces like the Google Art Project are emerging, promising novel means through which art can be experienced. This not only serves as an edutainment tool but 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 to attract visitors and attention.

These phenomena as we see from Section II are not new. With the rise of the new middlemen in the age of auctioneering, the sales expert with possibly little artistic background enters the fray, expanding the elite world of experts in the art world. The astute Frenchman and art marketer Gersaint is a good case in point where one could hardly distinguish art knowledge from his marketing efforts, in the guise of his sophisticated and influential auction catalogues. In fact, media tools, as seen in Section II, have been used across the ages in the form of biographies, treatises, canonical publications to museum catalogues, giving legitimacy to art evaluation and, thereby, endorsing and marketing the art as well as the institutions and actors with which it is affiliated.

## **Final remarks**

Traditional art experts – ranging from the Renaissance theorist to the contemporary art critic – have played a crucial role in the art market’s past and present. They can make or break the reputation of an artist and negotiate taste among potential buyers and collectors. These established experts have a tendency to emphasize the intrinsic value of a work of art and its autonomous character. However, it is evident that other players have entered the art world and market. The changing environments and especially the expansion of the art

trade resulted in new types of intermediaries who fulfilled different and in many ways widening functions. By the eighteenth century, for instance, art dealers boasted a considerable knowledge on art historical issues such as styles and artists, in addition to the necessary knowledge about the art market. Their expertise was necessary for potential buyers to decide which goods they wished to acquire. Consequently, these specialized art dealers were in a position to influence the consumer behaviour of collectors. A century later, the Parisian art critics writing for newspapers propelled the Impressionist movement to fame by maximizing the impact of the popular press, hereby slowly but surely shifting taste away from the Academic norm.

Much of the diverging roles of experts and appearance of new expert categories has to do with the segmentation and fragmentation of the art market at large. We have demonstrated that this process is not a new phenomenon, but was set in motion with the commercialization and internationalization of the art trade since the eighteenth century, if not before. Different types of experts came to the fore, as the art market expanded and became more layered and segmented. Particularly the introduction of new media – from printed auction catalogues and newspapers to the web – created new platforms for discourses on art. Art theorists had to yield first to the commercial experts and recently to the ever-louder voices of consumers on the internet. As the established hierarchies were being challenged, art quality moved from a regulated to a negotiated concept with profound repercussions for the art world and its consumers. Moreover, in the digital age, consumers themselves are becoming increasingly involved in art evaluations and in doing so, are at the very least challenging if not eroding the role of the traditional gatekeepers. New media platforms have allowed for a participatory culture which appears to be challenging the top-down art evaluations of old, but many issues – particularly those involving trust – remain unresolved in the contemporary art market, be it online and offline.

One can argue that in this increasingly chaotic environment, art consumers are ever more in need for guidance, and that even traditional experts are regaining some of their prominence. However, in light of the information asymmetries, trust and status appear to be still central to this discussion. Status derived from training, experience and institutional linkages instils trust in the potential consumers of art. Examples are museum curators or art historians affiliated with universities. The same holds true for auctioneers working for the brand name sales houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's. It is noteworthy that the traditional elite expertise by theorists and critics has not necessarily been replaced by new players, but rather that new voices have been added to the chorus.

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 that equality in participation is necessarily an improvement on hierarchical approaches to knowledge construction. In fact, as argued, participation can serve as an extension of these hierarchies through social media marketing by art institutions. And further in-depth research is certainly needed to gauge the wider impact and significance of new technological intermediaries on the art world, as some platforms appear much more effective than others in the construction of art expertise. Also, through historical illustrations of the involvement of new actors within the art world, it is evident that these boundaries are stretched more due to economic drivers than socio-cultural ones. In other words, as the nature of art consumers shifts, so does the type, role and strategy of expertise. To conclude, hierarchies in the art world are here to stay; institutional linkages matter. The question is rather, how are new actors able to mobilize and exert their weight in these traditional art spaces through social media, leveraging on age-old agencies and practices?

## Notes

- 1 Terms such as intermediaries, gatekeepers and experts are used interchangeably in the literature and it is not always clear what is meant by them precisely. In this article, we will primarily talk of experts whereby we disuses the roles and functions of art theorists and critics, dealers, auctioneers, art historians and so forth.
- 2 The enduring popularity of Netherlandish painting is underscored by the many exhibitions organized across the globe devoted to the Dutch and Flemish school, the attention given to them by art historians and the often exorbitant prices paid for their work when they appear on the market.
- 3 Museum curators and art academies were not new to the nineteenth century, but it can be argued that only gained real prominence and influence after the French Revolution.

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