

**To cite:** Arora, P. & Vermeylen, F. (2012). The end of the art connoisseur?  
Experts and knowledge production in the visual arts in the digital age,  
*Information Communication and Society*, DOI:10.1080/1369118X.2012.687392

**Title**

The end of the art connoisseur?

Experts and knowledge production in the visual arts in the digital age

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## **Abstract**

In this digital age, declarations surface on 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 current times? Do social media dismantle age-old hierarchies and established priesthoods in the art world? And can we assume that mass participation in valuation result in better judgments? This paper addresses such popular notions on 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 looked at closely and their strategies in knowledge production and 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.

**Word Count:** 208/250

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

## **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 on 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. Indeed, the art market is an arena wherein the quality and value of an artwork is difficult to determine. Many believe (Bonus and Ronte, 1997; Yogev, 2010) that there are no objective criteria on which the valuation and valorization process takes place, which explains why 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 can, not just give legitimacy to the above experts but theoretically, open doors for new voices, particularly with the advent of social media. While undoubtedly 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? Do social media dismantle age-old hierarchies and level the playing field in art evaluations? Are amateurs the new experts in the digital art world? What then 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 paper, through a historical investigation of experts and expertise in the art world, helps to critically re-examine the amateur-expert debate with 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) and does not necessarily result in a more equitable 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. 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 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 more appropriate avenues of investigation when examining virtual art spaces and its knowledge productions.

The remainder of this paper 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 assess understandings on intermediaries in the art market, before going into the historical surveying of the major trends in art connoisseurship and expertise since the Renaissance, with an emphasis 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 on expertise in the virtual art world, facilitating more grounded and appropriate avenues of investigation.

## **I**

### **Social media and the democratization of 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 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.

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 valorisation 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 small minority 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 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 Met, Guggenheim and the Tate Modern and the launching of Arttube, a digital arts video forum by Boijmans Museum. Also, 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 visuals, historical context, and relevancy, all potentially deeply political. Thereby, this opens 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 the documenting and preserving of their histories and cultures online.

Such digital platforms of Web 2.0 characterized by its "participatory culture"

(Jenkins, 2006) also allow 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. Ebay for instance, is looked upon as a potentially 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). While there are such spaces now online that allow the public to comment on the art, and engage in discussions with curators and art critics, 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?

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, 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, 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 the art world might in fact increase. Nevertheless, the crowd, once reviled as 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 centred 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.

## **II**

### **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, behavioral 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. Being recognized by one's peers identifies the true art expert in an arena in which objective quality assessments are virtually unattainable (Podolny, 2005). 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 and assess the style, elucidate the (hidden) 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 highly ranked university or the appraiser from an international auction house instill 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 no weight as they mistakenly ascribed authenticity to a copy or failed to identify early imitators.

The result is that 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**

### *a. Art experts in early modern times*

During the Renaissance, artistic quality was largely determined by art theorists. For instance, following the enlightened example of Georgio 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, coloring 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 era. 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 other) pointing to his superior manner of applying color. 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.

*b. Commercial expertise: art dealers, auctioneers and gallerists*

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century 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 centered on the process of valorization in a market context (price setting among other). International art dealing firms which operated already in the second half of the seventeenth century from Antwerp, made use of a network of agents in foreign markets such as Paris, Vienna or Madrid to gauge demand for Flemish paintings (Vermeulen, 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 re-distributing 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 (Vermeulen & 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, 2006b).

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* [provide translation] that particularly during the preceding thirty 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 colors. 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).

*c. 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, Degas, 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 number of visitors and media attention. A number of these counter-exhibitions would follow in subsequent years and provided 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: p26). The growing cohort of Parisian art critics produced and disseminated information on the new art trends favored 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.

### **III**

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

Based on the select examples and discussion in Section II, some insight is gained 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.

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

The notion of equity and its relationship to the art world is itself interesting. The idea of the Net as a levelling 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 art 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 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 the art. Similarly, with the rise of the new middle class in the French art scene of the 1800s, there was more opportunity to etch 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 clusterings 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 allows for a larger group of expert actors, in this case, museums from emerging markets per se, to come together and construct knowledge collectively.

Further, 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 per se as well as a special segment of the masses who are rising within this realm of discussion. For instance, curators of

the Met 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 an underlying membership criteria 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, ethnicity etc but that in the world of expertise, 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 cooperation and re-negotiation on 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.

*(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 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 armchair art critic for the *New York Times* or an art historian working at a university. However, this normative linkage needs to be questioned, as participation and art valuation is a complex relationship. 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. Further, 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 seen as not quality art. On the other hand, as we have seen through the numerous historical examples in Section II on 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 prices 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 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 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 into 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. Further, 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.

*(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 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 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 to attract visitors and attention.

This phenomena as we see from section II is not new. 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 has been extrapolated 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 and the institutions and actors it is affiliated with.

### **Final remarks**

Traditional art experts – ranging from the Renaissance theorist to the contemporary art critic – have played a crucial role in the art markets past and present, as they do today. 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 behavior 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 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 Internet – 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 Net. 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.

Interestingly, there are indications [reference? Example?] that in this increasingly chaotic environment art consumers though 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 appears to be key. Status derived from training, experience and institutional

linkages instills 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 equality in participation is necessarily 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 issues are worthy of discussion.

**Word Count (including references): 7856**

## **Notes**

1. Terms such as intermediaries, and gatekeepers and experts are used

interchangeably in the literature and it is not always clear what is meant by them precisely. In this essay, we will primarily talk of experts whereby we discuss 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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**Word Count:** 7828

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