

Abstract:

In this article we consider if and how the Internet has had an impact on the value of art in contemporary society. A self-imposed rhetoric of democratization does not always seem to match the reality of extensive commercialization. In our literature study we applied multiple approaches by incorporating the various perspectives of communication theory, art theory, and Internet economics into one article. In doing so, we give an overview of how conventional art practices are adapting to the constantly changing environment of the Internet. We argue that the evolution towards a digital display of art has led to new kinds of art consumption as well. Because of a homogenization and saturation of online markets, the economic value of art has nosedived in many cases. After introducing our theoretical framework, we will apply it to three complementary case studies that differ significantly in the selection and display of art. All three cases appear to utilize the Internet in very different ways, providing a good example of how the value of art is highly dependent on its context.

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1: Introduction:

When examining both the Internet and the art sector, they seem to be two opposing worlds. While the Internet is often perceived as being new, vibrant and a major enhancer of change; the institutionalized art world has a reputation of being more static, elitist, and eager to preserve standards that were set in previous eras. Of course this is a huge simplification, as in the art world there are many people trying to free themselves from both the limitations and stigma that materiality brings with it. One can do so by using new technologies to effectuate conceptualizations that were not previously possible. As such, art remains its central objective of expanding our cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2008, pp. 280- 291).

Nonetheless, we have to face the fact that a very substantial part of the art sector still deals with more traditional, material forms of expression. Even though materiality appears to be an anachronism in an era where almost all media consumption is shifting towards bits and bytes, one cannot ignore the fact that both material arts and the Internet have coexisted without many problems for almost two decades by now.

This article will apply multiple methodologies in order to investigate how the Internet has had an impact on the value of art in contemporary society. We will answer this question by discussing a series of sub-questions. Firstly we will consider how the context of art experience and consumption has been changing over the past decade. Secondly we will investigate if this presumed change in context of cultural consumption has also resulted in a change in economic value for the art object. Lastly, we will also consider who has the power to decide what is valuable and what is not. Are the same people in charge nowadays, who were in charge twenty years ago, or have new players emerged?

Theoretical frameworks of communication sciences, art- and economic theory will be discussed and compared, and in doing so we hope to find a unique perspective on the topic. In the first part, an inductive approach will be used to see if and how art and the Internet interact with each other. After the literature study, we will investigate how our findings so far relate to reality. By using in-depth interviews with various experts, combined with three pertinent case studies, we will investigate the legitimacy of our theoretical frame. In doing so we aim to increase the external validity of our research as a whole.

In this article, we will not try to impose our vision of what art is. As recognized by William Sweetlove, as well as by other interviewees, this concept is utterly subjective, and in fact indefinable. To avoid this conceptual problem we will consider everything to be art that is presented by its vender as such. We realize that this is a very broad definition; and yet it is exactly this realization that enables us to work with this highly flexible concept in an undisputable way.

2: Literature review: Comparing the different frameworks:

2.1: Online networks and their consequences for cultural consumption

2.1.1: Internet democracy?

As with many other issues on production of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2008, pp. 280- 291), we can also here contextualize the ambiguous relationship between art and its new operational context of the Internet as being part of a larger democratization versus commercialization debate. Opposing frameworks each push forward one of those concepts as being an inherent quality of the Internet. However, this fault line might be more arbitrary than it seems to be at first. Evrard (1997) suggests that we make a distinction between the concepts of '*democratizing culture*' and '*cultural democracy*' as two possible approaches for thinking in terms of policy towards culture. The divide particularly reveals how flexible the concept of democracy actually is. The term has been used, and sometimes misused, in different ways to serve often-opposing goals. Evrard (1997) argues that too often both democratizing culture and cultural democracy are opposed to one another; while in practice it is better if they balance each other out.

In the case of democratizing culture, the term democracy is used to describe the practice of disseminating what are implied to be major cultural works to an audience that does not have access to them yet. Traditionally older media often apply this top down approach where the amount of cultural content is purposely limited. Here, media can help to democratize culture by distributing a scarce good, like art, towards all. Graves (2005) argues that this leaves us with a rather limited notion of art that self-imposed by a cultural elite who has the resources to do so. This practice is recognized as gatekeeping which broadly refers to the governing and filtering of all sorts of information (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Although this concept was introduced to describe social change during the Second World War; it turned out to be one of the most used concepts in communication theory (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). Hence we will extensively come back on this topic later on in our analysis.

Contrasting to '*democratizing culture*', the term cultural democracy is used by Evrard (1997) to describe the freedom of individual aesthetic choice in what is art. Depending on which of those frames on democracy is used, a different affective judgment towards the societal evolutions described below will arise. Nonetheless, in contemporary society, it looks like we are shifting towards a cultural democracy, enabled by the low barriers of entry of the Internet (Anderson, 2006, pp. 58-84). This also makes Rustema (2007, p. 13-15) believe that the role of the modern cultural institution has changed. Cultural organizations should find their role in emulating cultural diversity, and by that encourage the formation of new and unique identities. The audience needs to be given the possibility to self-segment into groups of interest.

The academic objective is not to favor one of those frames over the other, but rather to investigate the consequences of the aforementioned shifting frames on culture, and in extension art.

2.1.2: The network society

Before one can truly investigate if and how the Internet has an impact on the value and function of art within contemporary society, one must first take a closer look at what Castells (1996, pp. 355-406) calls "the network society". Castells (1996, p. 355) claims that, next to the invention of the alphabet, a second major revolution in communication has taken place

during the past decades. The Internet provides us with the possibility to integrate various modes of communication into one interactive network. Written, oral, and audiovisual texts get incorporated into one hyper- and intertextual overarching structure of human communication.

Although we do realize the enormous significance of this communication Meta-theory, it also needs to be said that the concept of a network society has been revised and tempered by Jan Van Dijck (2006), amongst others. He did so by re-stressing the importance of certain individuals, organizations and other actors for making the network function as a whole; and concluding that the concept of the network society should not be seen as a reached end state, but rather as an ongoing process.

Castells (2004, pp. 138-149), builds on certain aspects of Giddens's (1984) ideas on time-space distanciation (Gotved, 2006, p. 468). He does so by claiming that new media have been changing the social relevance of time and space. He argues that currently, space gets distinguished from place. Consequently, there are no geographical limits anymore to human communication and transaction. Also the relevance of time has changed significantly. Future, past and present get mixed up in hypertexts all the time, which creates a situation of what Castells (2004, pp. 138-149) calls '*timeless time*'. Furthermore, because of this lack of a material basis; production, distribution and consumption of a wide range of cultural products have been changed significantly. Tryon (2009) uses film as an example of these changes, but also music, photography, and other practices of artistic output have evolved enormously. However, more importantly for this article, we investigate whether those changes are also relevant for material art forms. At least we observed a general preconception that the meaning and value of fine arts is something utterly connected with the material world surrounding us. But on mere feeling one cannot write a paper.

2.1.3: The work of art in the age of digital reproduction

It is important to take into consideration Benjamin's classical writings on '*the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction*' (1969). It is widely acknowledged that, after the invention of photography, one could distribute images of unique artifacts all over the globe, by which many people could enjoy them in different places at the same time. However, some kind of indexical relation (Peirce, 1998, pp. 4-10) with an original was still mandatory in order to enable this enjoyment. Further, Benjamin (1969) argued that these new possibilities of mechanical reproduction influenced at least as much the context of reception, as that of production.

He talks about the loss of the aura of a work of art, as the originality and authenticity does not get reproduced with the mere picture. A photograph is an image of an image, while a painting is utterly connected with the painter's hand. Benjamin argues that this results in a new esthetic interpretation different from experiencing the original work of art. Also Van Iersel and Van 't Zelfde (2007, p. 16) argue that it is exactly the ability to experience art wherever, whenever we want that has changed the solid triangular relationship between artist, audience and institution.

But this reproducibility Benjamin was talking about more than 50 years ago has been taken to a whole new level in the emerged digital environment of the 21st century. Images are no longer dependent on any form of materiality, as the hypertextual features of the Internet link together all works of art into one network. We would like to argue that this creates a situation where commercial intrusion within art consumption is arising. It is hard to imagine

a billboard inside the entrance hall of a museum, fueling our enthusiasm for a new brand of washing powder. Online however, there are no museum walls to separate flows of cultural messages from their commercial counterparts. Advertisements are continuously only a few mouse clicks away.

Also the possibility to convey a message with a solid meaning seems to be rather impossible when this message is not embedded anymore in a fixed environment (Stallabras, 2003, p. 44). Recapitulating, we can utilize Castells argument (1996, p. 364) that a mediums message is hugely influenced by the context of experience. Looking at a painting on a website with a virtual price tag underneath it will most probably be valued differently when the same piece of art would have been exposed in an art gallery in a cosmopolitan high street or museum. Internet consumption is more volatile; if only because online, we are encouraged less to focus than we are offline (Stallabras, 2003, p. 14). Furthermore we have already acknowledged that one of the Internets major advantages is the diminishing subjection of information to time. Everything can be consulted anywhere, anytime. But with this feature, our impatience and distraction is rising as well. Online communication and media consumption have completely different features from their offline counterparts.

Indeed, this discussion on how features of a certain medium influence the way we experience its message is clearly rooted in McLuhan's theory (2002). He states that "*The content of any medium is always another medium*" (2002, p. 8). By this he means that the way a message is received is highly dependent on the medium by which it is transmitted. Now let us take a look at how this frame applies to the context of the Internet. Because of digitalization content gets freed from its original carrier, by which it can be incorporated into the infinite World Wide Web. As a result of this, our perception of that content will not be determined anymore by the original medium, but by the distinct features that make the Internet what it is. Stallabras (2003, p. 10) argues that for the Internet, those features are the constant simulation, replication and restructuring of content. It is this context of change and instability that may create friction with the traditional art sector; where, as we will see, originality and authenticity remain very central concepts.

2.1.4: Internet criticism

One can argue that because of the commercial attitude almost all organizations premise online (Carr, 2005, October 05), art has been displayed, promoted and sold increasingly as a mere commodity on the web. Mosco (2009, p. 129) defined commodification as "*the process of transforming use values into exchange values*". This is a concept very central in Marxist theory, where the intrusion of a capitalist logic into all spheres of human existence is heavily criticized. Terranova (2000, p. 33-55) was the first to fully implement this Neo-Marxist discourse into the context new media. In this light, Cohen (2008, p.7) states that web 2.0, and social networking in particular, is not revolutionary at all. He underpins this by stressing that the Internet did not bring sociological, political and/or economic changes. Neither did it evoke an upheaval in the arrangement of class boundaries. Rather, it enhanced capitalist structures and brought them into spheres they could not previously reach. Furthermore, it is not only the art itself that gets sold, and purchased online. As we will see later on it are also the audience, and artists themselves that participate in free labor for overarching capitalist structures (Smythe, 2001). By for example helping to filter and rank valuable information; or

even just by noticing the banners with advertisements that is present on the majority of online selling platforms the audience itself becomes commoditized as well.

Another web 2.0 sceptic that deserves to be mentioned here is Andrew Keen and his “*the cult of the amateur*” (2007). In this book he preaches down the whole Silicon Valley-economy, where he used to be an insider for many years.

He finds that, in theory, participatory culture (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton & Robinson, 2006) is a beautiful thing. Although a world wherein the consumption, production and distribution of culture are in hands of the audience itself does sound attractive, Keen (2007) foresees that this kind of collective consciousness is in most cases very biased, and in turn always unreliable. The anonymity of the Internet gives the opinion of a 5 year old the same value as that of a Harvard university professor who might have been researching a specific topic for over 5 years. Expertise is not important anymore, and phonies take the credibility of qualified people with them into the drain.

Although Keen's arguments may be somewhat one sided, at least one of his central statements does overlap with that of Enders, Hungenberg, Denker and Mauch (2008). They also conclude their article by implying that the credibility of web 2.0 is based on trust.

However, this trust might not always be justified, as people tend to forget that online, we are not the key customers; advertisers are.

2.2: The value and function of art: The paradox that wasn't one

2.2.1: Esthetic versus economic value

Now let us take a brief look at what defines the value of art. After doing so, we will investigate if those rather classical theories are reconcilable with the new context of the Internet.

According to Abbing (2002) there is an apparent disjunction between economic and esthetic value of art. Since its conception, the almost sacred function of art has contested the monetary value as being part of its existence. Yet, trade in art is indispensable for its dispersion. As we live in a capitalist world system, art needs to have a monetary value as well. Furthermore, art has not been the first, nor the most difficult concept that has required valorization. One example is a human life¹. It feels immoral and impossible to put a price tag on a human being. Still it is necessary to do so, because how else could we reimburse relatives of murder victims? Although valorizing art may feel like a ‘*contradictio in terminis*’; modern society demands it. Also Antoon Vandenbraembussche (1996, pp. 31-33) acknowledges that there is a problem with valorizing art. On the one hand art has a value that goes beyond measurement, but on the other hand art projects have become so dependent on sponsoring and subsidies, that discussing art without relation to money is hypocrite. Indeed, denying this relationship means denying the potential threat for the artists’ autonomy as well. Therefore, the best way of dealing with this juxtaposition is by acknowledging that a clear distinction between both value systems exists. We can value, and enjoy a work of art without having the intention to buy it. However, we should bear in mind that indirectly, both value systems are connected, as in most cases an economic reward is required as incentive for artists to fully engage in creating esthetic value.

¹ Most insurance companies use the international standard of 50,000\$ as the value of a human life: <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1808049,00.html>

2.2.2: Internet art versus art on the Internet

But what is it then that constitutes 'Art'? It can be argued that the enduring focus on materiality and originality has been evaporating within the last decades. A lot of artists want to break free from the limitations material art brings with. Manovich (2002, pp. 226-227) argues that the online context is a good environment for at least the formation of conceptual art. Here, the materiality of a concept is not an obstacle anymore for the expression and distribution of ideas. By using the Internet as a medium for expression, and not as a transmission system, the idea itself behind a work of art will take a more central position (Stallabras, 2003, p. 33). This also accords with Greenberg's (2000, pp. 554-560) ideas on what art ought to be. He states that the inherent qualities of a medium will determine the ways an artist can (and even should) express his/her ideas. Stallabras (2003, p. 35) even goes as far as stating that many elements of a new Avant-Gardism are available online. It is the anti art character that is pushing the boundaries of art. Although we find it fruitful to briefly discuss these almost philosophical matters, it is important to note that in this paper we are not talking about the Internet as a medium to express ideas, but rather as a transmission system. When one uses the Internet as a medium for art, we use the concept of Internet-art, or net-art. In this article however, we are discussing art on the Internet.

2.3: Art Economics Online: The battle of quantity versus quality

2.3.1: Art and the Long Tail

Next to communication and art theory, there are certain economic concepts that demand our attention as well. Firstly, we really cannot ignore Anderson's (2006) economic model of the 'Long Tail' when talking about online commerce. Briefly summarized, Anderson argues that in the physical world, there is a limited amount of shelf space, which creates a necessity to find a local audience for one's products. This world is governed by scarcity, which means that retailers will only offer mainstream hits.

"We equate mass market with quality and demand, while in fact it often just represents familiarity, savvy advertising and broad, if somewhat shallow appeal" (Anderson, 2004, October, p. 173).

The Internet however, has no such barriers; which creates a new market model driven by abundance. This is the Long Tail. Because there are no storage costs online, and service delivery is mostly automated, it becomes possible to reduce the price, which can increase the demand for a good even more. It also makes it possible to bypass of some intermediates from the traditional value chain, resulting in a more direct relationship between producer and consumer. When trying to implement the Long Tail, there are three basic rules we need to bear in mind. First, put everything online that is available, second; cut the price, and third, use filters to lead people through the infinite flow of products.

However, there are a few important points to make. Considering the nature of our case we cannot transfer all of Anderson's logic into this new context. Unlike for example music, tangible works of art do need to be stored somewhere. Also physical transportation is still necessary to get a product to the customer. However, images of the product can be transmitted, enabling the customer to shop from a distance by which the logic of abundance remains somehow applicable. A second remark that has to be made is that the concept itself is also not free of criticism. Keen (2007, pp. 29-34) refers a few times to the Long Tail as

being too deterministic about how online commerce will lead us to a cheaper, and thus better world. Stating that “*Artificial intelligence is a poor substitute for taste*”, Keen (2007, p. 32) tries to convince us that online, talent is still a scarce resource. Uncovering this talent can only be done by intermediaries that have the capital (Bourdieu, 2008) and expertise to do so. Another critique, that can be applied on the long tail logic originates from a wrong interpretation of Surowiecki’s ‘wisdom of the crowds’ (2003). Anderson refers to this concept when talking about online filter mechanisms. However, the implementation of the Long Tail in practice misses one important element that prevents the crowd from producing valuable information. This because they are self organizing in groups of interest, and people are conforming their ideas in an online community rather than being actively looking for disjointed voices that will help them discover new products. Hence why the statement that every product will reach an audience is an illusion, especially taking into consideration Surowiecki’s concept of informational cascades (2003, pp. 40-65). Confronted with the anonymous buying behavior of others, people will tend to copy this behavior independently of what their personal predispositions might have been.

A third remark is that we are not stating in this article that all art-selling practices online are subordinated to the Long Tail. For an in-depth analysis on some of the divergent ways art businesses can be organized online, see the second section of this paper.

Although the art sector simply cannot entirely apply the Long Tail logic, this does not mean the Long Tail is completely useless to us; on the contrary. We should take into consideration that the Long Tail does symbolize very well the public’s expectations about the Internet. We want everything to be available, delivered in an instant for the lowest price possible. Preferably even for free (Anderson, 2009).

With the greatest ease, it becomes possible to flip through online catalogs of works of art and have our pick, just like ordering from a menu. This way of exposing consumers to works of art is very easy for both sellers and buyers, and does not require renting out expensive physical galleries.

Furthermore, it is the mere logic of moving down the Long Tail that influences the way we experience art. We are constantly driving down an endless flow of images. Continuously, we are confronted with new, and similar products of interest, distracting and dispersing the attention of the consumer (Van Iersel & Van ‘t Zelfde, 2007, May 30-32, p. 19). In the end, implementing this model into the practice of art retail may create a situation that is somehow contradicts the logic of the traditional art sector which is, more than any other industry, based on scarcity.

2.3.2: Filters and Gatekeepers

The concept of gatekeeping has been touched upon briefly several times before in this article. However, considering its relevance, the topic does demand a more in-depth investigation. Indeed, finding out who the gatekeepers are implies finding out who/what has a significant impact on the value of art in society as well.

Also here, the logic of abundance will be the starting point in uncovering those key players. The chaotic online universe is constructed by an infinite amount of data, that is constantly and invisibly ordered by various filters. Their function is to present us with information that is most relevant for its customers². Both push and pull strategies are implemented to help us

² Remember our argument that also the advertisers are a key customer segment.

find the most useful sets of data. By push mechanisms, we mean that information automatically gets sent to the consumer without one even asking for it (Cybenko & Brewington, 1997). An example here could be the *'people also bought'* application on Amazon. A pull strategy can be found where the consumer actively searches for certain information. Here, Google probably is the best-known example. Furthermore, we should also take into consideration Stallabras's (2003, p. 19) argument that what is visible, certainly is not everything that is out there. For every item that survives the selection process, millions of others don't. What makes the cut and what doesn't is mainly dependent on two things. First of all, algorithms like *'Google PageRank'* (Avrachenkov & Livtak, 2006) are very determinate for the information pushed forward by search engines. In short: these algorithms are trying to measure the relative importance of a web page, by keeping track of the average user activity surrounding a web page. Because of this, information is always ranked according to actions of people in the past.

A second element determining what information is recognized as being more valuable is the amount of money a company may pay for desirable visibility. Indeed, even in the land of abundance the audience's attention is still limited, by which scarcity is still present in the form of visibility.

According to Stallabras (2003, p. 21), this leads in many cases to a homogenization and depluralization of the information that reaches us, while the illusion of an opposite evolution is constructed simultaneously. Maybe we get more information, but it is more of the same thing. And we should not mistake, for gatekeepers are still there. They only have become less visible than before in some cases.

When it comes to trying to present art to the most appropriate audience online, there are two main strategies one can pursue. The first implementable strategy is through the use of the aforementioned *'wisdom of crowds'* (Surowiecki, 2003). This concept describes a situation where different prosumers (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) bring in information about one specific topic (Jenkins, 2006). It is important that all the components bring in their unit of information independent from each other, in order to avoid bias. For example: One hundred people can rate a painting on a scale from one to ten. According to this principle, an average appreciation will arise that is more valid than the judgment of one expert. In practice however, this logic contends with a problem that is dual in its origin. Firstly, the online *'crowd'* is almost never representative for society. It is rather a niche community of like-minded people. Secondly, we argued before that the Long Tail will most likely not be the most beneficial approach for artistic diversity and novelty. The information selected as valuable will always be based on the actions of others in the past. A group of like-minded people, basing their actions on the previous actions of the same group of people may indeed lead to a homogenization of content.

Nonetheless, this gatekeeping mechanism will lead to a platform with very low barriers to entry. Nobody is standing at the gates anymore. Instead, information is controlled by algorithms that make the selection of content invisible.

Second filtering mechanism reserves a central sport for expert knowledge. Here, people who are expected to possess a more than average knowledge on a certain topic, will present a smaller amount of works to an audience. The audience in turn can decide what to acquire. All products are supposed to be of more than average value, as they survived the selection process. This logic can be seen as a traditional form of patronage transferred to the Internet.

In the second section we will see how the prevailing filter mechanism will ultimately have a significant impact on the esthetic and economic value of the artworks selected.

2.4: Synthesis of the three frames:

Communicational theory enriched us with the insight that the distinct features of the Internet ultimately lead to a changing significance of space and time in human communication. Because of the development of information networks, the context of cultural consumption has changed significantly. Our limited amount of attention is dispersed over much more information than it used to be. This ultimately results in a lower level of focus for the units of information separately.

Art theory taught us that art has both an esthetic and economic value. Although distinct, they are still interconnected. The economic value of art is highly dependent on the scarcity and uniqueness of an object.

Internet economics taught us that the two above-mentioned mechanisms do clash in a way. The unique features of the Internet that put all content into one interconnected network enabled an economic logic based on abundance. This is hard to unite with the economics of scarcity the art sector is traditionally based on.

There are two ways of avoiding this conceptual problem. Either the possibilities enabled by the Internet cannot fully be incorporated into art economics, or art economy has to redefine itself. The traditional gatekeepers will logically settle for option one, while option two offers the possibility for new gatekeepers to arise. How exactly the art sector is reorganizing itself in practice will be discussed in the following sections of this article.

3: Methodological approach:

Commencing from our holistic literature study, we investigated what the consequences of the emerged context of the Internet have been for the art markets. We use Fenton's (2007, pp. 18-25) interpretation of the term holism, as we did not only take into consideration the structural shifts in the sector itself, but we also focused on the changing experience for the audience.

In this second section we will employ Popper's (1959) falsification approach. This deductive method is described by Lesthaeghe and Neels (2009, p. 3) as following: "*The researcher always has an a priori vision. One that is unfinished, but still a guiding theory with a certain orientation from which propositions can be made.*" Instead of letting our results come together into one overarching theory, we feel like it is only within our power to mirror our hypothesis against reality. By doing so, we may be able to uncover some new insights, which the literature study did not offer. More important however, is that the frame we developed might help us to better understand the context of our cases. This implies that our research is evaluative in its nature, by which a qualitative approach is at hand when it comes to our interviews (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2009, p. 47). Indeed, we will be using a technique of in-depth interviews with key experts. A varied group of respondents with different backgrounds will hopefully help us to shed a brighter light on our findings so far. The diversity of our respondents did result in a situation where a standardized set of questions was not possible, nor desirable. The respondents have been selected by appropriating a snowball sampling technique (Goodman, 1961) in combination with personal belief in the respondents' competence in relation to the topic. Mainly, we used two different interview

techniques. Wherever we could, we applied face to face in depth interviews (Johnson, 2002), without a standardized set of questions; and if this was not possible, simple email correspondence provided us with the possibility to contact some people who would have otherwise been out of reach. Therefore, we divided our interviewees into three different groups. First of all we interviewed a selection of five academics, which were asked to evaluate a brief outlay of our hypothesis so far. Email correspondence with for example Geert Lovink and Josephine Bosma (March 19, 2012) uncovered that opinions on the verisimilitude of our hypothesis are very multifarious. However, the points of discussion derived from my correspondence with many different people only enabled me to better criticize my own work more efficiently, and adjust it where necessary.

Hereafter, we also interviewed some artists and qualified gallery staff members. Our goal was to get a more up to date insight in how the traditional art sector presently operates. Lastly, there were some people from both of the previously mentioned categories who were able to help us localize some relevant case studies, and give us some inside information on how they operate.

We did use a standardized approach when analyzing our tree case studies. Online observations have the advantage of being possible without creating any bias towards the object of investigation. They take a shape very different from traditional anthropological practices. Indeed, the most effective way of gaining insight into how the platform works is by analyzing them critically. We gave special attention to the way those platforms presented themselves towards their audiences, and tried so see in what ways their mission statements did or did not add up with reality. At the end of this article, some attachments are included with screenshots, further clarifying our working method.

To conclude: we aimed at using multiple but complementary research methods in order to achieve what Jick (1979, pp. 135-149) recognizes as triangulation. The goal of this procedure is to ultimately alter the validity of our research.

4: Cases and discussion:

One thing that the interviews helped uncover is that we did not stress enough the ongoing importance of traditional gatekeepers in the online market as well. We realized that gatekeepers would always be a necessary evil, but we did not foresee that traditional players would monopolize the highest ranks of the art sector even more. In this light we use a dual sector logic for our further analysis. In the first logic, established players are trying to continue the conservative practices of art business online as well. The second logic we utilize, reveals how companies are using the Internet in order to try and break with the established sector. Although reality is never *'black or white'*, this dichotomy can provide us with a clearer insight into the contemporary art scene.

Various experts, who were interviewed independently from each other all suggested that the traditional gallery circuit is still very conservative. Maybe even more than ever as the financial crisis has also affected the art world. Quoting Philip Due Pihl (March 23, 2012), daily manager at Mikael Andersen Gallery: *"Up until 2007 one could sell everything to anybody, by matter of speaking. Everybody wanted new young artists. This trend has been changed dramatically though. Now people want to play safe."* It is hard to enter the networked outlay of established galleries if the main players do not accept you as a successful artist. William Sweetlove, one of the artists I interviewed (March 13, 2012), stressed that, especially in the

highest ranks of the sector, auction houses like Sotheby and Christies are still very dominant in deciding what is considered to be real art. Indeed, the Internet even makes it possible for them to strengthen their position. Online catalogs and auctions make them a very easy global reference for price-and trend setting. However, the Internet does give the customer more power as well. Also they can use these standardized points of reference when investing in art. Therefore all galleries are forced to operate at a higher level of transparency than before. On the other hand we can see that the Internet offers many alternative platforms for people to distribute their creative outbursts. We will be discussing three different cases, all with a differing level of openness of their platform. The first platform we will discuss is rather closed, by which it follows the conservative high culture logic in a new context. The second platform is the most open of all three. Quantity seems to prevail over quality, as they proudly claim to be the biggest art platform in the world. The third case is to be situated somewhere in between the previous two. While still aiming to be a guarantor of quality, they also fully incorporate the logic of online economics. We will try to investigate what the consequence of this hybrid position has been on the works they sell.

At least one thing the three cases have in common is that they, themselves, claim to be dealing with art. Proof of this statement we find in analyzing their mission statements and their domain names. Indeed, 'Kunst' means art in Dutch; and also "*ArtRebels*" and "*Deviant Art*" clearly brand themselves as offering art in a new, less institutionalized way. Both of the latter cases seem to be insinuating that they are using the Internet as a tool to break through the monopoly of the traditional institutions. It is our task to see past the sales talk and explore to what extent they succeed in reaching their self-imposed goals.

4.1: Kunzt.be:

This website was established in 2005 and has a Belgian domain name. Still, the founder (Kris Ghesquiere) operates his business from Uruguay. In the first year, Kunzt had his target market mainly in Belgium. Currently, Belgium only accounts for 20% of his total sales. Kunzt's new markets are located in Asia, the USA and South America. Kunzt.be has no physical gallery, and the works of art offered for sale are dispersed all over the globe. We learned from our email correspondence with the owner (March 29, 2012) that 50% of the sales are made via the website itself. The other 50% are sold by personal communication with the customer by email or telephone conversation. Buying art almost literally becomes possible with the click of a button. Nowadays, kunzt.be is part of the Delmundoo network. Ghesquiere suggests that it is Kunzt's good reputation on the international markets that provides the desired air of trust necessary for an online business. On their website they describe their activities in the art sector as follows:

*"One of the main activities of del mundoo s.a. is contemporary art dealing. We develop collections for discerning clients, source and purchase formidable works of fine art, that consistently **reach investment potential**, and remain a never-ending source of **esthetic pleasure**.*

*Honesty and integrity have supported strong and lasting relationships over our years of dealing. Our international connections allow us to source and **compare the European, Asian and American markets**, in our quest for the "best"."*

(<http://www.delmundoo.com/>; March 27, 2012)

It is remarkable that they mention art as an investment before they talk about the esthetic pleasure derived from it. This seems to indicate that the economic value prevails on the esthetic one. They are clearly aiming at an upscale market, and the focus on art as an investment may also be a strategic consideration due to the economic crisis. The second paragraph seems to suggest that the power of traditional international gatekeepers is indeed still very significant. Also further contact with the owner reconfirmed our hypothesis that online auctions and catalogs have reestablished the oligopoly of certain institutions (March 29, 2012). They set the prices, and decide which works are important enough to circulate in the smaller gallery circuit as well. Important footnote that needs to be made here is that, in this case we are talking about the highest ranks of the art world. As Philippe Van Snick (April 14, 2012), a Belgian contemporary painter argues, we should not forget that the art sector is divided into different, but interconnected layers. One could make the visual comparison with a pyramid, as there is a multitude of galleries that operate with artists that are not present in the top auction circuit as well. However, in many cases the collectors and museums will compare their value (both economic and esthetic) with those of the works that do circulate at the top of the sector.

This is a rather traditional way of selling art, with a high level dependence on the expertise and credibility of the online curator and his network.

When analyzing the works of art that were offered for sale in the “Recent acquisitions” category on March 27, 2012, we found that 63 works of art were offered for sale by fixed price. Many of the artists displayed were internationally known. Pieces from Andy Warhol, Wim Delvoye, Damien Hirst, William Sweetlove and so forth, easily exceeded a selling price of 100 000 EUR. The average amount asked for a work of art was 20 535 EUR. Out of a total of 94, 11 works were already sold, and 20 only had a price on demand. These two last categories did not mention any price and could not be incorporated in our analysis.

4.2: DeviantArt.com:

A second platform we would like to discuss has the complete opposite logic of that of *kunzt.be*. As Marie Freitas (2009, p. 1) argues, the aim of Deviant Art is to be a platform for ANY artist. The only human regulation present happens a posteriori. Deviant art reserves the right to remove information and users that have proven to be inappropriate. Founded in 2000, Deviant Art consisted of over 15 million members by the end of 2011. Indeed, some consider the website as being the biggest art market in the world. We discussed earlier with Benjamin (1939), Castells (1996) and McLuhan (2002) that because of the hypertextual feature of the web, a new mode of display, evaluation and consumption of art emerged. Upon first glance, the website’s manifesto is all about an all-embracing community that enables the democratization of art. However, Deviant Art is not in the business for charity. It’s a highly commercial corporation, which monetizes its members in 3 different ways. First of all by selling the audience through to advertisers. Every web page has a hyperlinked advertisement box, which puts the works of art in a highly fluent and commercial environment. Let me remark here that this only applies to those non-premium accounts. Secondly, they demand a subscription fee from those customers who desire total control over the selling of their own works. For \$29,95 a year, the artist is able to set her/his own price in her/his own personal virtual gallery. You no longer need an art degree anymore to become

an art critic or a curator, but you probably will not become rich from it either. The competition on the portal is so fierce that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish oneself from the other artists. Especially considering that every piece of art is filtered and ordered according to different categories that define the works of art presented within them. Originality becomes a difficult quest in an environment that is organized based on similarity. This mode of presentation also creates very specific expectations by the audience. However more importantly, all works are linked together in an endless flow of similar images that rather encourages us to move along the Long Tail, instead of really focusing on the works of art itself.

Lastly, Deviant Art makes a distinction between registered and subscribed customers. The advantages a subscription to the platform offers are mentioned in the section above. This selling model can be classified as what Anderson called a *Freemium* strategy (Anderson, 2009). Approximately 99% of the customers use the platform for free, while it monetizes on the subscription fees of a minority that enjoy some premium advantages. However, unlike on for example *'Drop Box'*, Deviant Art does monetize on the registered customers as well. One can offer prints for sale without a premium account. But then Deviant Art sets the price and controls the selling process. They also get a substantial higher amount of money, while only selling through other people's creative output. Linking this back to the Neo Marxist frame of Terranova (2000): people are carrying out free labor for the invisible *'big shots'*, who have no marginal costs at all for the content production.

As previously discussed, it is more difficult to guarantee the quality of the product that is sold online, than it is for human-to-human transactions. If something happens to be wrong with the product, responsibility is hard to assign on the anonymous Internet. Hence a system of trust needs to be implemented one way or the other. Unlike in our previous case, here this is based on what we recognized earlier as *'wisdom of the crowds'* (Jenkins, 2006, November 26). Dependent on the amount of page views and the amount of times a certain artist is added to someone's favorites, one can start building a reputation on the platform. Indeed, power structure and gatekeeping are almost completely based on algorithms, which makes the difference between amateur and professional totally irrelevant (Salah, 2010, p. 17). In the literature-section we saw that in practice, the wisdom of crowds is often very biased, as the population is not representative for society as a whole. When looking at in the random sample Freitas (2009, p. 7) used in her research, she found that a significant higher amount of males were actively using Deviant Art than females. Also the age range was relatively young. And although a causal relationship has not been proven, it is a fact that a vast amount of the website's content is characterized by manga-like drawings. I am not arguing that this is not art. However, I am arguing that even if it is, the content on Deviant Art clearly is not representative of what is globally considered to be art.

However, this is not the only reason one can question the relevance of the platform for the art world. At a conference held in honor of Deviant Art's tenth anniversary, Angelo Sotira, co-founder of Deviant Art, gave a speech in which he pushed forward four examples of people who the platform helped to kick-start their career³. The first case managed to reach a high level of photorealistic drawing skills. However, I do not really see a direct causality with utilizing Deviant Art in reaching this objective. More significant are the three following examples, which subsequently managed to make a career in advertising and the children's

³ Video of the conference: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9021RAooUWk>

television industry. If these are the prime examples of what artistic deployment can be reached through the platform, there are probably more effective ways for exhibiting ones works of art.

Now lets take a look at the price range of the works offered for sale. On March 28,2012; 23 works were displayed on the first page of the “traditional art” gallery. However, only four of them were offered for sale. A medium amount of 110,21 EUR was asked for the purchase of a print on a canvas.

4.3: ArtRebels.com:

The final case we will examine in this article is somewhat more difficult to grasp than the previous two. The reason for this is that the platform’s activities and goals are way more diverse than in the previous two cases. They describe themselves as being a business, movement as well as a network. They run a blog, organize a music festival (Trailerpark festival), and manage an online community that tries to stimulate creative entrepreneurship of its contestants. In addition to their central website, they are also active on a variety of social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo and Soundcloud. It is a prime example of an online converged business that tries to incorporate as many activities around one central brand as possible. By using different sub brands and a diverse range of platforms, they are able to pursue somehow opposing goals within the same company. For example: The Art Rebels main page is used mainly as a selling platform for a various range of products, while at the same time Art Rebels is taking up some kind of social responsibility with their ‘*Rebel Academy*’ community⁴.

In the latter, they try to stimulate the creativity of its members, and motivate them to share their creative knowledge with each other within the demarcated borders of the community. By doing so, they can potentially grow their own nursery for talent that fits within the framework of the Art Rebels-style and philosophy.

From this community they can filter out the most promising artists, and decide to represent them on the Art Rebels website.

This is a whole new way of gatekeeping in comparison with what we have seen before as it is based on expert knowledge, without any sort of dependence on traditional art institutions. Very significant for this case, however, is the way the value of the art displayed is degraded by its peculiar presentation. Also here, the idea of the Long Tail is somehow incorporated by presenting the works of art in an endless flow of interlinked products that will easily lead us from the art sphere into the world of commodities.

In their central mission statement they present themselves as *“a global platform that sells selected artwork and products from hundreds of creatives around the world in the ArtRebels Shop and expose culture and sub-cultural scenes from around the world via the ArtRebels Blog. This platform also features our beloved festival TRAILERPARK. ArtRebels work with both commercial, cultural, artistic, and social projects via the ArtRebels Agency. We hope you will enjoy this diverse platform and take part in the exchange of radical expressions!”* (<http://artrebels.com/about/>; April 04, 2012)

⁴ Link: <http://rebelacademy.org/>

This self-proclaimed radicalism of the artistic outcome can be contested however. When looking at the works of art offered it is clear that the variety of different styles presented on the platform is rather limited. A clear vision seems to be available on what is 'Art Rebels art'. This fits Zuurmond's (2005) statement that, online an extreme form of specialization is taking place, in order to enhance the economic efficiency of the company. By making sure the customer already knows what to expect when visiting a website, people will be more inclined to use it. The online Art Rebels shop mainly focuses on prints, and collages. The reason for this can probably be found in the fact that those types of art are easier to present and distribute to the customers. However, as they only ship a limited amount of prints and silkscreens, we can still analyze this case in the light of material art. There still is a huge difference with the market of audiovisual forms of art, where digitalization has made physical transportation of the end product obsolete.

The online Art Rebel shop is divided into seven categories: Music, Fashion, Art, Design, Visuals (promo posters), publications (books) and Care (make up). Although we will focus here on the art section, the mere existence of those neighboring categories will also influence our perception of the art. The same argument can be used here as we used in the Deviant Art case, where the advertising links were used as an example of how the context is very determining for the perception and credibility of art. Indeed, they are clear indicators for art's commodification. The fact that they have a sales section where works of art are presented between books, t-shirts and other commodities does not promote the distinct status art received in the past either.

In the category of recommended art works, 13 pieces were offered for sale for an average amount of 33,48 EUR. The reason for this rather low amount can be found in the fact that most of the artists represented work with multiples. By this they diminish the scarcity of their product, which results in a drop in economic value. Furthermore, the presentation of the works also has been recognized as a major influence, as they are presented as merchandise. Indeed, we acknowledged in the literature study already that a fixed price selling signifies a possible commoditization of works of art. Lastly, it also feels a bit out of place that art books and some posters that are sold under visuals and publications as well have ended up in the art section as well.

As I said previously, we find analyzing Art Rebels more difficult than analyzing the first two cases, because of its diverse activities that go beyond practices of art selling. However, this case is of importance to us exactly because of its hybridity. Expert selection is combined with an extremely commercial exposition logic, by which a clearly defined product of what Art Rebel art arises. Because the pool of merchandise is characterized by its overarching similarity, its authenticity and economic value is diminished. As a result, any artist represented on a platform like Art Rebels remains undesirable for investors and traditional institutions, who are ultimately still in power to transform art into Art.

5: Conclusion:

In this article we have been focusing on the possibilities and threats the Internet has posed for selling material art. Utilizing the Internet has led to forms of efficiency and transparency that were not previously possible on a global scale. The downside, however, is that this has led to a further monopolization of the highest art spheres on the one hand, and an oversupply at the bottom of the market. In many sectors, the Internet has forced both new and old players to (re)-position themselves in the new online markets. In most cases however, it have been the traditional gatekeepers who were able to take advantage of both knowledge and economic capital to colonize the Internet as well.

For new players, their small scale and flexibility offers them the possibility to specialize and take part in a larger network. They are able to be complementary, but at the same time still very dependent on the traditional giants. The abundance of products offered online, caused by the fading of spatial limitations, has also created a Babylonian confusion here. Too many different voices become noise. Due to an information overload, we can no longer distinguish between what is quality and what is not. In circumstances like that, all works of art are conjoined onto one indiscernible virtual pile.

Therefore gatekeepers and filters remain a necessity. But the next question that poses itself is what is in it for those gatekeepers. One thing we can be sure of is that the vast majority is not in it for charity. Following Van Dijck (2009), I would like to argue that all too often a rhetoric of democratization is used by both the traditional and new players. Even though both parties will give a different interpretation of the concept of democracy, their underlying commercial imperatives are in many cases the same. There is nothing wrong with making money through the Internet, and we are not denying the artists right to pursue monetary interests. Everyone has the right to make a living, but one has to be very careful that commercial motives do not suppress the complementary cultural objectives that 'Art' should convey at all times.

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