TASTE-MAKING MECHANISMS IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD

By

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2017

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Abstract

This Honors Thesis explores the taste-making roles of various institutions within the art world. A “taste-maker” is a person or institution which is capable of growing an artist’s reputation and increasing his/her visibility within the purview of the public. This paper identifies Museums, Commercial Galleries, Biennials, Art Fairs, and Art Critics as key taste-makers and argues that the validation which each of them offers to an artist is critical to their rise to notoriety and fame. These institutions also act as “gate-keepers” between the artists and the public, oftentimes deciding which artists’ work will meet with exposure to larger audiences. The workings of each of the groups identified above is assessed in detail as is the web of validation created by these groups interaction.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

An art lover finds himself or herself in some art museum accompanied by a friend or family member who is not so interested in art but has been generous enough to volunteer to tag along to the museum. The two make a turn, go through an arch, and find themselves in the midst of the Modern Art wing of the museum and are surrounded by everything from Picasso to Jeff Koons. For someone who is not familiar with art, this can be a bizarre place where they understand little of the artwork around them. The non-art familiar friend, at this point, often casts about until they find a piece of art that they take a dislike to (for whatever reason). They point at it and ask: “Why is this here?” Most of the time, this question leads to a discussion about the nature of art, pushing the boundaries of taste, etc.

But if, for the sake of argument, an object can be considered “art,” how does it get into the museum? Why did the piece in question rise above other art to be declared a thing of cultural value? A critical piece of this discussion rests on the answer to yet another question: who decides what art comes into contact with a wide audience? Herein lies the central question around which this thesis will revolve.
Taste And The Art World

*Who decides what art comes into contact with a wide audience?* This is where the many “taste-makers” of the art world come into play. For the purposes of this paper, a “Taste-maker” is a person or institution that contributes to the reputation of an artist or artwork by validating the quality of their work. As will be discussed throughout this thesis, this validation is crucial in the decision making processes of the art world’s various taste-makers, the ones who decide what art winds up being displayed to large audiences.

This thesis will examine taste-making in places where audiences come into contact with art; specifically, museums, commercial galleries, art fairs, and biennials. Each of these places is a venue where people interact with art, and each of them plays a role in validating the work of artists. Furthermore, this thesis will examine the taste-making effects of art critics as people who help to guide audiences toward and through these four places. No single entity within the art world bears sole taste-making responsibility; rather, artists receive validation from multiple sources which other art world entities in turn use as part of their own taste-making process. This leaves a complicated, web-like system of validation and reputation building which helps artists gain access to more prestigious venues in which to display their work.
Chapter 2: Museums

Museums, as public venues for art exhibition, play an integral
taste-making role in the art world. To begin, the term “museum” bears defining
for the purposes of this paper. According to the Institute of Museums and Library
Services, the federal mechanism for managing museums, the definition of a
museum is as follows:

an organized and permanent nonprofit institution, essentially
educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which
owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits
them to the public on some regular schedule.¹

However, Eugene Dillenburg, a professor of Museum Studies at Michigan State
University, contests this rather rigid definition of museums. He argues that a
museum is really any space that exhibits objects for educational purposes and
that all of the other qualifiers are too inconsequential to be considered as
necessary criteria for being a museum.² Dillenburg offers instead this definition:
“an institution whose core function includes the presentation of public exhibits for
the public good.”³ This alternative definition focuses much more on the
relationship between a museum and the public, framing a museum as a place

¹ United States of America. Smithsonian Institution. Office of Policy and Analysis. Art Museums
³ ibid.
that interacts with and informs society rather than as a simple repository for objects. With respect to taste-making, this is a critical aspect since it underscores the impact that museums aim to have on visitors. Furthermore, it moves to the forefront the importance of exhibitions in affirming the identity of a museum. While it may be true that select members of society (i.e.: scholars and historians) may have access to the stored collections of great museums and thereby be informed by them, the vast majority of the public is informed only by those objects which a museum shows in a curated exhibition. As such, exhibitions are the primary taste-making feature of a museum; though, this taste-making via exhibit manifests itself on several levels.

First and foremost, museum exhibitions, both permanent and rotating, serve as a place for people to see art and be exposed to it in a way that is not commercial in nature. There are actually relatively few settings in which a person can see and experience *artem gratia artis*, rather than as a commodity for purchase or decoration. Millions of people a year experience art in this capacity.

Museum exhibitions offer pure and direct exposure of artists to museum-goers. The Renwick Gallery in Washington D.C. is a division of the Smithsonian Institution featuring contemporary art. It hosted roughly 750,000 visitors in 2016. An artist who is privileged enough to have their work collected by this museum, such as Katheryn Clark, a textiles artist whose work is on permanent display at the gallery, is guaranteed exposure to hundreds of

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thousands of viewers over the course of several months. She also enjoys an affiliation with a highly-respected museum.\(^5\) Her cv, found on her personal website, lists this exhibition which strengthens her reputation.\(^6\)

This museum affiliation is very important for any artist. According to Martin Irvine, a professor at Georgetown University, “Museum shows of artists' works in private collections, or shows of newly purchased work, validates the works by the same artist.”\(^7\) This validation stems from an understanding on the part of the public that the objects museums collect and display are objects that have a particular cultural or historical value. This understanding is reflected in the mission statements of art museums around the world. An excerpt from the mission statement of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City reads, “The Metropolitan Museum of Art collects, studies, conserves, and presents significant works of art across all times and cultures in order to connect people to creativity, knowledge, and ideas.”\(^8\) The National Gallery in London states as one of its objectives is to “Acquire great pictures across the whole range of Western European painting and its tradition to maintain and enhance the collection now and for future generations.”\(^9\) From these statements, and many others like them,

it can be seen that top museums collect with the intention of acquiring and exhibiting objects of significance. Therefore, when museums, especially prestigious ones, collect and exhibit artwork, they are putting their stamp of approval on it, authenticating and validating it as something of value (be it historical, cultural, intellectual, etc.)

Besides in validating art in the course of collection, museums act as taste-makers when their curators choose objects to go on display as part of public exhibitions. In 2001, the Smithsonian Institution prepared a report titled *Art Museums and the Public*, the aim of which is to help define the role of Art museums with respect to those whom they serve.\(^\text{10}\) Within the document, museum exhibitions are called “the principal public programs of museums” because “they reach far more people than any other types of public programming, such as school group tours, workshops, film presentations, lectures, or symposia.”\(^\text{11}\) The document acknowledges the profound impact of exhibitions on the public and then suggests that the very intention of exhibitions is taste-making: “Exhibitions are usually produced with a sense of some intention, an aim that the planners wish to achieve. Most frequently this goal is increased awareness and appreciation of some type or aspect of art.”\(^\text{12}\) To “increase appreciation” is to taste-make, even if in an academic way.


\(^{11}\) ibid

\(^{12}\) ibid
The influence that an exhibit has upon public opinion, varies depending both upon the subject matter of an exhibition and the prestige of the museum that is hosting it. This is for several reasons. To begin with, some artists already have been chosen and added to the canon of successful artists. An exhibition of da Vinci’s work might remind people that he exists or renew interest in him, but it will neither make nor break his legacy since his work is already found in the most prestigious of collections imaginable. On the other hand, exhibitions at prestigious museums are often key in the rise of up-and-coming artists since they offer exposure and notoriety to artists seeking recognition in a very competitive world.

One example of this may be found in the MoMA PS1 “Greater New York” show which ran October 11, 2015 – March 7, 2016. The purpose of the “Greater New York” show, which runs every five years is, according to the exhibition’s press release, to showcase the work of emerging artists within the New York City art community alongside the art of already established artists. In 2015 exhibitions at MoMA regularly received visitors by the hundreds of thousands. Sara Cwynar, a young Canadian artist, exhibited her work Gold - NYT April 22, 1979 (Alphabet Stickers), (2013) at the 2015-2016 Greater New

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14 ibid.
York show.\textsuperscript{16} Thousands of people saw her piece situated in one of the most respected museums in the country, curated as the work of an artist who is sure to have a bright future. Being chosen by the Greater New York show’s curators Peter Eleey and Mia Locks to be included in this exhibition is an act of taste-making.\textsuperscript{17} By being selected and having her work exhibited, Cwynar gained direct exposure to a mass audience. Furthermore, Cwynar forever will be able to write on her curriculum vitae that she exhibited in the MoMA PS1 which bolsters her reputation and can help her land a spot with a more prestigious gallery.\textsuperscript{18}

Each museum exhibition becomes part of an artist’s curriculum vitae which adds to that artist’s fame and renown. Later, when art critics or curators are casting about to decide which artists are noteworthy or deserving of some accolade or exhibition, they take into account the number and quality of an artist’s exhibitions. For example, in December of 2015, Artsy released an article titled “The Top 15 Emerging Artists of 2015” which named several of the new, hot artists who had made major strides in the course of the year. The article lists a number of artists and goes on to explain why the individuals are noteworthy by offering a few paragraphs of biographical information along with recent highlights of the artist’s career.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{18} This will be explored in more depth in Chapter 3 \\
\end{flushright}
Cwynar is named one of the top 15 emerging artists of 2015, and the article discusses several of the exhibitions in which she has been included. The article mentions a show at Fondazione Prada in Milan, an exhibit titled “Under Construction” at MoMA PS1 and, “Greater New York” at MoMA PS1. The mention of these exhibitions serves to provide, at least in part, a basis upon which Cwynar may be justified as a leading emerging artist. They are a pedigree or a provenance of sorts which validate Cwynar as a notable person. It is also worth mentioning that every single artist within the “Top 15 Emerging Artists of 2015” article has a similar listing of museum exhibitions and shows, showing that this particular form of validation is not reserved solely for Cwynar.

Equally important to the validation gained from affiliation with a museum and the public exposure that an exhibition offers is the media coverage that stems directly from an exhibit, this will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

It can be seen that museum exhibitions play an important taste-making function within the art world. This means then, that curators, the people in charge of selecting art and artists for exhibition, have a great deal of taste-making power.

The Role of the Curator

Most of the executive power within a museum typically resides with the museum Director (though there are exceptions to this); however, much of the

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20 ibid.
21 ibid.
22 Obviously there are many types of museums in the world, almost all of them employing curators; but his paper will focus largely on art museums, especially those dealing with contemporary art.
ultimate decision-making powers concerning which objects are collected and/or displayed, and in what manner, lies with the museum curator. Typically, ideas for new exhibitions are pitched and discussed within committees before being given the blessing of the museum Director. If the Director gives his or her blessing to the idea, then the responsibility for planning and execution of the new exhibit passes to the curator and curatorial staff.

Kate Fowle, the Chief Curator of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, writes that curators are people charged with “reseaching, acquiring, documenting, and publicly displaying art.” This is a good definition for the term since it explains how multifaceted the curatorial profession is. Museum curators are employed by museums to plan and execute exhibitions that are consistent with their institution’s goals. Once an idea for an exhibition has been set, curators are in charge of planning them and bringing them into being. This means that curators must select pieces to be displayed, write labels and tags for them, create text to explain the context of the chosen objects within the grander scheme of the exhibition, and design the layout of the galleries where the exhibits will be displayed. Curators must be knowledgeable in their area of expertise, “a connoisseur as much as an administrator;” and therefore must be able to recognize those objects which have cultural and

24 ibid.
historical significance. Generally, the curatorial process involves intensive research into the subject of the exhibition so as to achieve a broad understanding of the field before selecting individual pieces to be exhibited. In contemporary art exhibitions, it is often the case that curators invite artists to submit--or even create--a work for the show.

Following her characterization of curation, Fowle writes, “the curator becomes the propagator of taste and knowledge for the public ‘good.’” In doing so, she explains the importance of the curatorial role as a taste-maker by deciding what art will be exhibited to the public and which artists’ work will receive the taste-making benefits of exhibition. In the words of Francesco Bonami, a prominent Italian curator, members of his profession “validate some kind of intellectual content that even the most callous dealer seems to need in order to maintain some kind of credibility.” This is a bold statement captures the power which curators have over artists and the galleries which represent them.

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26 ibid
Chapter 3: Commercial Galleries

Lisa Tickner, an art historian, writes, “a gallery is several things at once: an architectural space, a curatorial project, a business enterprise, a set of social relations.” In so many ways, galleries are like museum spaces, except that a person strolling through and looking at art in an art gallery must ask themselves whether or not the piece they are examining would look nice hanging over a sofa or near to a window. The primary function of an art gallery is to make money by selling art to art collectors, effectively connecting artists to buyers.

Galleries range in size from small “mom n' pop” galleries specializing in local works and artists (like Treehouse Gallery in Oxford, MS) to the gigantic, multinational, so-called mega-galleries like Gagosian or Pace—and galleries of every size in between. Smaller galleries may sell works for prices in the hundreds or low-thousands of dollars, Mega-galleries sell works for thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of dollars. In fact, Gagosian, with sixteen locations worldwide, reportedly cleared approximately one-billion dollars in sales in 2015.

The amount of taste-making power that a gallery has depends upon its connections, size, and the socio-economic profile of its clientele. Well-connected galleries that sell to extremely wealthy people and have an established brand are more likely to represent “celebrity” artists. It is no accident that artistic giants


such as Jeff Koons, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Cy Twombly are closely affiliated with a mega-gallery like Gagosian.\(^\text{32}\)

The gallery-centric business model of the art world, which still holds sway in 2017, finds its roots in Europe in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in the galleries of Paul Durand-Ruel, Ambroise Vollard, and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, who represented the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and Cubists, respectively.\(^\text{33}\) These men were exceptionally gifted at finding people to purchase the work of the artists whom they represented. This model spread quickly, finally coming to America around the mid-twentieth century when it was introduced by Leo Castelli who represented Neo-Dada and Pop masters such as Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Robert Rauschenberg.\(^\text{34}\) Today, most commercial galleries still use this model.

Oftentimes, galleries develop long-term relationships with art collectors which help them to sell art more quickly--and at a much higher price--than an artist could realize on his or her own. Furthermore, art purchased from a well-respected gallery is guaranteed some level of value and validation that is absent should a person buy from a lesser-known artist directly.

Gallery sales accounted for slightly more than half of art-market sales by value in 2015, so they play a major role in the art world both as means of securing income for artists and as places where taste-making is actualized in the

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\(^{34}\) ibid.
form of sales. Their first taste-making contribution lies, much like with museums, in choosing artists. Commercial galleries pick which artists they represent. They sift through the seemingly endless and ever-growing number of artists and select those which they think are the best. This, in and of itself, is an act of taste-making. Upon choosing artists, it becomes a gallery’s utmost priority to sell their work; so it follows that they have an interest in validating and furthering the reputation of their artists.

Perhaps the simplest way of doing this is by exhibiting the artist within the gallery’s exhibition space. In terms of taste-making, commercial gallery exhibitions are much like museum exhibitions since the goal of both is to raise the public awareness of a particular artist’s work. The difference, of course, lies in motive. Museums exhibit artists for the sake of culture and art. Commercial galleries exhibit artists for the sake of making money. Both types of exhibition gives the public an opportunity to interact with the art and experience it for themselves. Similarly, art critics frequent gallery exhibitions, reviewing them and publishing articles.

Bortolami Gallery of New York City, chose the artist Ivan Morely to exhibit in their space from January 12 through February 18, 2017. Morely, whose work might be described as the love-child of Pop and Abstract-Expressionism, exhibited fourteen paintings; and his exhibit at Bortolami received good media

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In addition to curating the works of an artist for the purpose of selling them, galleries help artists to curate their own self-images by reaping the benefits of the various other taste-making mechanisms within the art world, such as exhibition reviews. If each article, exhibition, or accolade that an artist achieves is a small stone or piece of glass, galleries assemble them into meaningful mosaics in the hopes of attracting customers.

These galleries are helping to maximize the effect of the positive feedback which artists have received so as to guide potential collectors to their work. For example, Bortolami Gallery has constructed a personal web page for Morely, attached to the gallery’s main website. It offers a virtual catalogue of all of Morely’s artistic achievements. Listed are the eight different exhibitions that he has done with galleries in New York City, Los Angeles, Dusseldorf, and Berlin since 2007; and twelve articles published in major media outlets including: The New York Times, Art in America, and The Paris Review since 2002. It is interesting to note too that the Kimmerich Gallery, with whom Morely worked before his recent exhibitions with Bortolami, still hosts a biographical pages for him. These websites also serve as a record and repository for the taste-making benefits which an artist achieves.

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Chapter 4: Art Fairs

Art fairs are events at which many galleries come together to host small shows in a single space, inviting potential customers to peruse, inspect, and (ideally) purchase art. In recent years, art fairs have become a vital means of generating business for art galleries around the world.42 Christian Morgner, whose main area of research concerns market communications, argues that art fairs are essentially complicated networks that serve a variety of market functions.

“1) the art fair is a network as it links up art dealers, professionals and collectors from distant regions, creating a small-world network, 2) it is a network of mutual observation and 3) it is a network as its results, for instance, related sales or presentation of new talents, sets out criteria for other players in the market, which are thereby drawn into its network and aims to activate the weak ties in the market.”43

In other words, art fairs facilitate the sale of art to a wider audience, allow gallerists to observe the trends and products of other galleries, and allow for an exchange of information between the various parties within the art world (such as museum curators, art critics, gallerists, etc).

43 Ibid. p. 319
Collectors from around the world flock to big-name art fairs like Art Basel (which actually does three annual shows around the world), SOFA-Chicago, and London’s Frieze, bringing with them their checkbooks. Art fairs also draw a large number of non-collectors, people who are interested in the art and the hype. Art Basel Hong Kong 2017 ran for three days, March 23-25. According to the fair’s final show report press release, 242 “premier” galleries from 34 countries were represented (such as David Zwirner of New York and White Cube of London).

“Private collectors as well as directors, curators, trustees and patrons from more than 78 leading international museums and institutions across 18 countries attended the show,” says the press release before listing a number of major institutions around the world such as: MoMA PS1, Tate of London, the Long Museum of Shanghai, National Gallery Singapore, and the Guggenheim of New York. This global reach suggests that success at this art fair brings potential success on the world stage. Art Basel Hong Kong 2017 is the reported 80,000 attendees that the show saw. This represents a gigantic amount of direct exposure between artists and members of the public.

Art Basel Hong Kong 2017 also drew a remarkable amount of international media attention. A quick Google search of “Art Basel Hong Kong 2017” yielded dozens articles about the fair from periodicals and newspaper such as The New

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45 ibid.
46 ibid.
York Times, The Guardian, Bloomberg, Artsy, and, Artnet.\textsuperscript{47} The role of art critics at art fairs will be further explored in Chapter 6 section 2 of this paper, titled “Art Critics and Art Fairs.”

So how do art fairs work? According to Henri Neuendorf, an assistant editor for the art-media outlet Artnet News, in his article “Art Demystified: How Do Art Fairs Choose Participants?” the process is relatively simple, if rather long and arduous. Galleries apply to participate in an art fair, and fair organizers appoint a committee of gallery owners whose job it is to review these applications and decide which of them make the cut.\textsuperscript{48} To illustrate this, he uses Art Basel 2016 (Switzerland) as an example. More than 900 galleries applied for booths at the fair, and the selections committee chose only 287.\textsuperscript{49} Members of the selections committee had to set aside 20 days out of the year to be in Basel, Switzerland to meet, discuss, and make decisions.\textsuperscript{50} Within this article, Neuendorf quotes an interview with Claes Nordenhake, a member of Art Basel’s six person committee, in which Nordenhake describes the decision making process:

“There is no set criteria’ he said. ‘Rather, it’s a general feeling that this gallery, or the the artists represented by this gallery are very interesting. The galleries have to come from different parts of the


\textsuperscript{49} ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} ibid.
world and they have to be exhibiting galleries, not just art dealers.

The criteria is a feeling that it represents something of interest, and four of the six committee members have to agree.\textsuperscript{51}

This, of course, puts a dramatic amount of power (based on arbitrary factors) into the hands of very few people.

With all of this being said, what is the taste-making role of art fairs? Art fairs have a couple different levels of taste-making. The primary taste-making effect of art fairs is actually significantly different from the taste-making effect of museums or simple commercial galleries. Whereas museums and galleries pick art to curate and exhibit, art fairs operate at a higher level and pick actual commercial galleries to curate and exhibit at the art fair. Art fairs are “taste-makers” of “taste-makers.” It is true, at least according to the above quote from Nordenhake, that committees give consideration to the artists that galleries intend to represent at an art fair; however, they give them consideration only insofar as to determine how “interesting” the gallery’s total holdings might be.

In the same way that it benefits an artist to exhibit with a prestigious gallery, it benefits a gallery to exhibit with a prestigious art fair. Participating in a major art fair validates a gallery, and this in turn validates the artists whom the galleries represent. Just as it benefits an up-and-coming artist to exhibit work in the same space as a well-established artist, it benefits up-and-coming galleries to exhibit in the same space as well-established galleries.

\textsuperscript{51} ibid.
The secondary level of taste-making is much more like that seen with museums and normal commercial gallery exhibitions, though perhaps on a grander level. Art fairs attract tens of thousands of visitors over a three-to-five-day span. Among them are museum curators and art critics. Museum curators may be introduced to new artists whom they may later invite to participate in exhibitions or shows, and art critics find much fodder for sifting through and writing about.
Chapter 5: Biennials

The Art Biennial has come to be a vitally important facet of the art world. Biennials are large art events, much like large-scale temporary museum exhibitions, that showcase a wide variety of curated contemporary art.\footnote{Neuendorf, Henri. "Art Demystified: What Defines a Biennial?" Artnet News. June 03, 2016. Accessed April 2017. https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/art-demystified-biennials-506903.} These events take place in hundreds of cities around the world.\footnote{ibid.} In the words of Klaus Biesenbach, a cofounder of the Berlin Biennale, biennials are “occasions for which new relevant work is produced and seen in relation to and at the same time with other relevant art work.”\footnote{ibid.} Part of the value of biennials is that they, especially the larger and more prestigious ones, offer a snapshot of contemporary art from around the globe. The Venice Biennale, the oldest and perhaps most prestigious art biennial in the world, boasted participation from 85 different countries in its 2017 exhibition which ran from May 13 to November 26.\footnote{“Introducing the 57th International Art Exhibition." La Biennale di Venezia. 2017. Accessed April 2017. http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/news/06-02.html?back=true.}

whopping 905,000 visitors. Artists chosen to exhibit at these events reap the benefits of massive exposure to a wide audience.

The inner workings of biennials are opaque and esoteric. Most of the large ones have curators, but there is very little information about how these curators go about planning their biennials and choosing artists to exhibit. In terms of taste-making, biennials function in a similar fashion to museums. To begin with, there is a similar understanding on the part of the public that biennials, especially the prestigious ones, like museums, intend to exhibit work of cultural relevance and significance, with an added understanding that this work is cutting-edge or ground-breaking. This understanding is reflected on the websites of many major biennial organizations. The website of the Venice Biennale reads, “La Biennale, who stands at the forefront of research and promotion of new contemporary art trends, organizes exhibitions and research in all its specific sectors.” documenta’s website boasts a similar claim, referring to itself as a “place where innovative and standards-setting exhibition concepts are trialed.” The Whitney Biennial, a respected biennial which focuses on trends specifically within the American art community, states that it has a “history of exhibiting the

57 ibid.
58 There is very little information available about how biennial curators go about selecting artists to exhibit; nevertheless, it is possible to discuss, at least in part, the tastemaking effects of these events—even without knowing exactly how the decision-making process behind them works.
most promising and influential artists and provoking lively debate." As mentioned above, each of these biennials receive hundreds of thousands of visitors during their span of weeks which suggests an implicit affirmation on the part of audiences that these events are culturally relevant. Biennials present the artists whom they represent to these audiences as, not only culturally relevant, but also “cutting edge” or “most promising” or even “influential.” This is one of the ways that biennials function as taste-makers of artists.

Biennials, much like museums, also serve as a source of validation which is utilized by galleries. Many galleries list biennial appearances as part of their artist’s cvs. For instance, Saatchi Gallery’s page dedicated to Tala Madani, whose work deals largely with Middle-Eastern cultural and social identity, lists her appearances at the Tirana Art Biennial in Albania (2009), Liverpool Biennial, UK (2010), Venice Biennale (2011), and Singapore Biennial (2011) in a prominent part of her Bio.63

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Chapter 6: The Role of Art Critics

Whose job is it to go to all of the exhibitions and gallery openings and art fairs in the world decide which venues and artists are the most successful are worth spending time visiting? Who decides which up-and-coming artists will receive notice today, and, as a result, will find their work to be valued by deep-pocketed collectors? Art critics do. They view the art and then write about it for a publication that reaches a range of readers. They build reputation and visibility for artists by contributing to the body of positive feedback surrounding them.


Art writers for *The New York Times* visit the myriad museum exhibitions, gallery shows, pop-up shows, and art fairs that take place in New York City, as well as around the United States of America, to review them. Most critics write about new exhibitions that are opening in prestigious art museums throughout the country, such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the “Met”), the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the J. Paul Getty Museum. Occasionally, they will travel farther afield to review major art world events such as the Art Basel or Frieze art fairs. These articles may explain
the context of the exhibitions, inform the reader about the artist or artists whose work is involved in the shows, and they comment on the artwork’s successes and shortcomings.

One of the most well-known art critics at *The New York Times* is Roberta Smith. In addition to writing reviews of museum exhibitions, she contributes to a weekly column titled “What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week.” These articles are similar in form to the aforementioned museum reviews in terms of content; though, they are somewhat abbreviated in comparison. Despite the apparent similarities in terms of subject, content, and form, there is a major difference between the museum reviews and gallery reviews with respect to function.

**Art Critics and Museums**

Many news outlets, especially those centering around art, send critics to review museum exhibitions and to write about them. Using the example of the Greater New York show at the MoMA PS1, *Artsy*, a leading online news outlet for art, sent Tess Thackara to write an editorial covering the exhibition. The resulting article is titled “MoMA PS1’s Multi-Generational “Greater New York” Is as Flawed as It Is Successful.” The article (despite its title) is a largely a

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positive one, praising the work and vision of the curators and picking out highlights from within the exhibition.\textsuperscript{65}

One such highlight is, in fact, \textit{Gold - NYT April 22, 1979 (Alphabet Stickers)}, (2013) by Sara Cwynar. Thackara writes of Cwynar's piece and a piece piece by Nancy Shaver (title not mentioned) with which it was paired for the exhibition, "Nancy Shaver and Sara Cwynar work well side-by-side, with Shaver's poetic assemblages of reused objects channeling perfectly into Cwynar's glitchy renderings of retro imagery."\textsuperscript{66} Thackara also chose to include a photograph of Cwynar's piece, one of seven in the entire article.\textsuperscript{67} Artgoers who read this article before attending the Greater New York show are certain to look out for \textit{NYT April 22, 1979 (Alphabet Stickers)}, hoping to judge for themselves the success of the work and its relationship to Shaver's piece. In writing specifically about Cwynar, Thackara has raised her public awareness a little bit, choosing her as one of the most notable out of a group of already notable artists.

\textbf{Art Critics and Galleries}

Museums are, for the most part, non-profit entities that exist (at least according a brief survey of mission statements) for the education of the public, and as a means of documenting trends within the art world for posterity.\textsuperscript{68} Galleries sell artwork for profit on behalf of the artist, allowing the gallery to keep

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{65} \textit{ibid.}
  \item \textsuperscript{66} \textit{ibid.}
  \item \textsuperscript{67} \textit{ibid.}
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Charter of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, State of New York, Laws of 1870, Chapter 197, Passed April 13, 1870, and Amended L.1898, ch. 34; L. 1908: 219.
\end{itemize}
a negotiated percentage of the profit. As such, it is interesting to note that whereas the former group furthers the public education for the sake of public education, where the latter is concerned, there is an undeniable element of commercialization. As far as taste-making mechanisms go, however, both sorts are positive feedback for artists which add to their reputation and public visibility.

Smith’s contribution to the “What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week” from February 25, 2017, provides a typical sample of what to expect from this column on a weekly basis. She wrote about an exhibition of the work of Lois Dodd (b. 1927), who worked in both Post-Impressionism and Abstract-Expressionism and whose work often depicts landscapes and nudes. At the top of the article is the name of the artist whose exhibition Smith is recommending in that particular week, and underneath it is the name and address of the gallery where the exhibit may be seen: Alexandre Gallery on Fifth Avenue in New York City.

Within the article, Smith explains that Dodd is an octogenarian whose work only recently began to enjoy fame. Smith explains that the particular works of art in this exhibition were created in the late 1950s and early 1960s. She then places Dodd within the historical contexts of Jackson Pollock (Abstract Expressionism) and Alex Katz (Pop). By associating Dodd with these two giants, Smith subtly suggests that Dodd’s work is of a similar artistic caliber. It is also worth noting that the Alexandre Gallery website prominently displays a link to this

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article, as well as many others like it, alongside their biography of Dodd. In this way, the gallery ensures that potential buyers can see that Smith, a renowned art critic, has given her stamp of approval to Dodd’s work.\(^{70}\) This is one of the ways in which galleries incorporate validation received from other places within the art world. Galleries use the positive feedback of art critics to bolster the reputation of their artists. In turn, art critics gain a little bit more visibility by having their articles linked to the websites of major galleries.

Articles similar to “What to See in New York This Week” can be found in publications around the world. The French newspaper *Le Monde* posts an article to their website every Friday that highlights various exhibitions and shows which the art critics of *Le Monde* found to be particularly stimulating. In the February 24, 2017, edition of the column, Emmanuelle Jardonnet, an Art Critic for the paper, calls attention to an auction lot at the Parisian auction house ArtCurial.\(^{71}\) Jardonnet writes that the lot is comprised of works by graffiti artists. Using a similar method to Smith’s, Jardonnet associates a number of lesser-known artists such as Barry McGee, Ryan MacGinness, with the likes of the well-known British street artist Banksy, by mentioning them all practically within the same breath.

In reviewing gallery exhibitions, Art critics accomplish two important things in terms of taste-making. They sift through the massive number of exhibitions and tell audiences where to focus their time and attention. When there are so


many on going exhibitions in so many cities around the world, it is important for people to know which are worth seeing. Critics are paid to go to all of the bad exhibitions as well as all of the good ones to save everyone else’s time. This gives them an amount of power over where art-goers direct their attentions as well as credibility and trustworthiness. The second major function of critics as taste-makers is to define current dialogues in contemporary art and place current artwork within its historical trajectory. This further validates artists and contributes to their visibility among art audiences and gallery-goers who read art criticism within the media.

**Art Critics and Art Fairs**

Art Fairs are massive, sometimes hectic, affairs in which dozens--or even hundreds - of artists and gallery representatives show art simultaneously, on--and off-site, usually at a large convention center. With so much going on, it can be difficult for attendees to know where to focus their attentions. Art critics, it would seem, are perfectly willing to sift through these many artworks and to direct their readers to the highlights of the Art Fairs.

This is an example of taste-making in action. In October of 2015, Adrian Searle, a veteran art critic for *The Guardian*, visited the Frieze Art Show, which occurs annually in London. Searle’s resulting article paints a hectic and exciting picture (excuse the punny metaphor) of the fair.\(^{72}\) He describes a myriad of

different booths and stages, such as that of the Anthony Reynolds gallery - which houses the photographs by Richard Billingham. Searle describes these photos as “candid,” “intimate,” and “wonderful.” Searle goes on to describe the booth of Betty Tompkins, a feminist artist who is notable for her work such as her *Cunt Painting* series (ongoing), which addresses the female body in hyper-realism.

Not all of Searle’s attention, however, is positive. After giving beneficent reviews of Billingham’s and Tompkins’s work, he proceeds to tear into the ceramic work of Edmund de Waal, displayed by Gagosian Gallery. Searle bitingly suggests that seeing it “only once” is “once too often.”

From these two examples it can be seen that art critics aim to sift through many booths, helping to impart some sort of direction and sense to their readers to help them navigate the overwhelming affairs. The same relationship between art critic and art fair also appears in a review written by Smith and published in *The New York Times* about the Outsider Art Fair in January of 2017, “Outsider Art 2017: A Top Ten.” In it, Smith makes no attempt to describe the experience of the fair itself, but focuses on the work of ten separate artists. Much like the structure of her gallery or museum reviews, Smith’s essay briefly describes what she perceives to be the theme or intention behind a set of works, in an effort to place them within a context. She then writes generally favorable things about the artist and his or her work. One such artist in the Outsider Art Fair is James

73 ibid.
74 ibid.
Castle, whose work was “another strong showing.” Smith quickly provides a formal analysis of his art before going on to say that his work “indicates an attention to mass culture that parallels, if not precedes, Pop Art.” Here again, Smith suggests that Castle has achieved a level of greatness by comparing him to an extremely well-known, historically established, (and valuable) art movement. In this review, Smith does not attempt to knock anyone off of their pedestal in quite the manner that Searle did in his review of Frieze, preferring instead to pick her favorite ten artists and champion them to the best of her ability.

The taste-making work by art critics at art fairs is much the same as the taste-making effect of art critics with respect to galleries: they aim to save their readers time by directing them the best of the best at the art fair. When they pick particularly successful artists at a fair, they are bolstering that person’s reputation as an artist, giving them positive feedback by elevating them over their peers within the same setting.

**Art Critics and Biennials**

Art critics are sent to review all major events in the art world, and biennials are no exception to this. In many ways, the process of viewing and reviewing biennial exhibitions does not seem to differ from the process of viewing and reviewing museum exhibitions. As an example of this, Christian Viveros-Fauné,  

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76 ibid.
77 ibid.
an art critic for the media source *Artnet*, attended and reviewed the 2017 Whitney Biennial.\(^7\) He begins his article by explaining the themes and contexts surrounding this exhibition, framing it within the charged socio-political mess that has been 2016-2017 before going on to discuss the actual content of the biennial.\(^7\) Viveros-Fauné names a number of artists whose work is featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, focusing mainly on the painters involved.\(^8\) As has been discussed elsewhere in this thesis, each one of the artists whom he names receives validation, which is an act of taste-making.

One such artist that Viveros-Fauné names is Shara Hughes whose work evokes memories of Fauvist landscapes. He writes of Hughes: "[she] shake[s] off the copycat vacuity the art market greedily embraced just a few years ago. Hughes, for one, makes lusciously colored, brightly patterned landscape paintings."\(^8\) The Rachel Uffner Gallery of New York City, which represents Hughes, hosts a link to this article on its page devoted to Hughes’s biography.\(^8\) This is, once again, a reflection of the ways that taste-making mechanisms rely on one another for validation.

**Visual Art Magazines and Webzines**

\(^7\) ibid.
\(^8\) ibid.
\(^8\) ibid.
The internet has become an intrinsic part of daily life. Most publications that began in print have transitioned—at least in part—to less-costly digital “distribution.” Other publications devoted entirely to art and art culture have been created only for electronic circulation only. Sites such as *Artforum* and *Artsy* are among many that serve as media platforms for articles about contemporary art, art history, art news, and exhibition reviews. This transition means that positive feedback is more available to collectors than ever before. If one wishes to know what affiliations an artist has, what awards they have won, or what art critics have to say about them, they need only to do a Google search and all of this positive feedback is suddenly within reach.

*Artforum* is an example of a traditional visual-art magazine covering contemporary art that successfully transitioned to hosting web-based content. Accessing the magazine’s most in depth and up-to-date content requires purchasing a subscription, but a wealth of articles and information are available for free.

To begin with, the website hosts a “news” tab that aims to keep readers up to date on happenings in the art world. This “news” section plays an active role in taste-making by highlighting significant gallery openings, significant deaths within the art community, various issues of artistic contention, artist achievements, and featuring up-and-coming artists. *Artforum* is a prestigious media outlet, read by gallerists, curators, art historians, theorists, and collectors around the world. Articles such as those found in the “news” tab of the website
play a role in shifting the attention of the magazine’s readership toward the work of certain artists, and suggesting historical connections.

The magazine does not speculate as to the potential value of an artist’s work, or advocate that collectors everywhere should buy that artist’s work. Instead, these articles contribute to an artist’s press profile and help to put them in the art community’s consciousness. For instance, in the article “Jennie C. Jones Wins Rose Art Museum’s 2017 Perlmutter Artist-in-Residence Award,” published March 16, 2017, the director of the Rose Museum, Kristin Parker, is quoted as saying: “The Perlmutter Award allows the Rose to promote and explore the work of artists poised to have a lasting impact on their field. Jones’s residency will create a unique opportunity for creative intersections across multiple disciplines of our university community.” By including this quote without negating it in any way, Artforum implicitly suggests that there is a truth to the assertion that the artist in question, Jennie Jones, is “poised to have a lasting impact on her field.” Any of the magazine’s regular readers who were not familiar with Jones before reading this article may start to follow her career. Jones thus has become more visible to the art community which, in turn, increases her chances of becoming a famous artist.

The taste-making effect of Artforum’s “news” tab is subtle in comparison to other locations within the magazine’s website. For instance, the website hosts another tab labeled “picks.” This tab consists of articles by the magazine’s art

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84 ibid.
critic featuring their favorite exhibitions in 39 cities around the world. These cities include New York, Los Angeles, London, Krakow, Amsterdam, Istanbul, and Cape Town, among dozens of others. This wide array of cities around the world underscores the idea that the art world is rapidly expanding to places outside of the traditional Euro-American-centric art market.

The articles themselves, again much like the “picks” by the New York Times, describe the exhibitions, give them an artistic context, and offer a short explication of the artworks. These articles are an example of taste-making in action, because critics and editors are choosing artworks they consider to be the “best” from the large group of exhibiting artists in any given city, based on promotional materials they have received in advance. Many artists may attach these articles and entries to the “press”-coverage section of their own websites, and use them as a means of cementing their reputations and public profiles.

For example, Jennie Jones, who has previously been mentioned in this paper, was named an Artforum critic’s pick in the city of Houston for the exhibition of her series “Acoustic Paintings” in February of 2016. Andy Campbell, the critic who featured Jones’s work, writes that it is “sparkling.” A link to this article can be found on Jones’s website, displayed among a compilation of similar positive feedback reviews and articles.

Through its global “picks,” Artforum essentially curates the “best” work from exhibitions at the largest art hubs in the world. The magazine’s art editors

86 ibid
and critics sift through promotional materials received from the thousands of shows that take place yearly, and decide which ones the public should see. On a week with more openings, competition for a featured spot may be fierce, whereas slower weeks (usually in the summer) offer lesser-known artists more of a chance to enjoy the limelight.

*Artforum* is an example of a print magazine that has transitioned to the digital world. However, other art websites have grown up entirely on the internet. One such example is *Artsy.net*, which first went public in October of 2012, and boasts of its bold mission: “to make all the world’s art accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. [Artsy is] a resource for art collecting and education.”

*Artsy*’s goal was to help people to discover new art or artists based upon their pre-existing tastes, by using a similar sort of taste-tracking software as employed by *Pandora Internet Radio*. To accomplish this, *Artsy* has allied itself with thousands of galleries and museums across the world. Over the years, the website has grown in both scope and scale, adding a variety of new features. Today, *Artsy* is massive. It is an art database, marketplace, magazine, and calendar of major events within the art world.

As a database, *Artsy* allows its users to browse artworks in a variety of different ways. Users can see the collected works of individual artists; or else they can see the works available at particular galleries, art fairs, or museums.

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90 Ryzik
According to Artsy, which also has a blatant commercial function, “300,000” pieces of this art are for sale, at prices ranging from “$100 to over 1,000,000.” Artsy acts as a go-between for potential buyers and galleries, but it does not receive any sort of commission. Users are able to place bids on artworks online via Artsy, to some of the largest art auctions in the world, including those held by giants such as Christie’s and Phillips.

Artsy also keeps track of temporary exhibitions and art fairs around the world, and allows a viewer to see digitized versions of the works on display. In this way, a viewer anywhere in the world is able to virtually visit some of the hottest exhibitions of the year and see for themselves which artists and galleries are showing important work that perhaps might drive the market. Artsy then allows users to contact the galleries directly in order to make inquiries about purchases.

So how does Artsy function as a taste-maker? Artsy, in its role as a magazine, publishes articles about artists, very similar with respect to content and tone to The New York Times or Artforum. As such, these articles serve a very similar role in terms of tastemaking. Every time the magazine writes about an artist, it increases that artist’s visibility within the art community and marketplace.

92 ibid
More unique than the taste-making that is inherent in its role as magazine is the taste-making that is found in the market function of the website. The first tab on Artsy’s website is labeled “artists.” Clicking on this link allows a user to browse the website’s database of artists. The page that one is immediately brought to is a directory which can help a user search for artists based upon alphabet or movement. Artists are listed by name along with the gallery which represents them. Also present are the number of works for sale from that gallery. Clicking on an artist’s name brings one to a biographical page devoted to the 0-artist in question. This page has a biography, a CV, a list of articles published about the artist, and even the artist’s auction results (including the prices that his or her pieces have sold for). Present here too is a list of the artist’s works for sale and contact information for the artist’s gallery. In this way, Artsy is acting as an encyclopedia but also as a market reference and a facilitator for purchase.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

At the end of the day, the taste-making structure of the art world resembles something like a spider’s web of validation. Galleries and museums rely on validation in the form of positive feedback from art critics and private collections to draw attention to artists. Admittedly, it is a difficult system to break into. As an artist’s reputation gains attention, the artists has the ability to be represented by more prestigious museums and galleries, which puts them more within the purview of a higher tier of art discourse and the potential to be written into art history.

No single party or element of the art world bears sole taste-making responsibility. Instead, success for an artist depends upon their ability to receive validation offered by these several arenas of the art world. As they find success with various institutions, they are validated and their reputation grows.
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