

# ‘Quality and Art Worlds’

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## Abstract:

In their instructions for speakers, the Quality Commons organisers stated, ‘*The papers should be written with the goal of engaging the participants in discussions on potential research challenges, rather than focusing on existing results.*’ Following this brief, this paper looks at the issue of quality in the arts, drawing on the influential ideas of the sociologist Howard Becker. His work suggests that art is produced and given value within social networks he calls ‘art worlds’. Becker’s work provides a foundation for asking questions about the social construction of quality across different domains.

## Slide 1



## Talk:

### Slide 2

Quality and Art Worlds

- Howard Becker,  
*Art Worlds* (1982)



- An *art world*  
The network of people involved:
  - people we think of as artists
  - people whose work supports artists
  - people who serve as audiences for the art


In 1982, the sociologist Howard Becker wrote his magnum opus, *Art Worlds*. In this book, Becker changed key questions, by shifting his focus from the finished product – the work of art itself – to the process by which the art work is produced. He studied the network of people involved, which includes people we think of as artists, people whose work supports artists, and people who serve as audiences for the art. Becker calls these networks ‘art worlds’.

### Slide 3

Becker’s work was influential, and also somewhat heretical. He suggested that the work of people who support artists has been undervalued. (Or, more accurately, the work of people who support other people *whom society defines as artists* has been undervalued.) Becker shows how such ‘support personnel’ (in his terms) shape the end product, the art object. In this way, he shows that the role of ‘artist’ is socially constructed, first, to be distinct from the role of support personnel,

Becker’s Heretical View

- Support Personnel
  - People who support artists (other people *whom society defines as artists*)
  - Undervalued
- The *art world* is the creative force

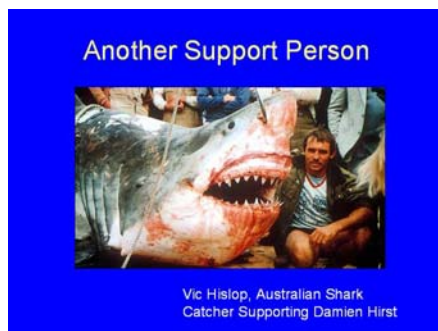


Boccaccio, Apprentice grinds paint while the artist works nearby

and second, to be more valuable than the role of support personnel. Indeed, we tend to forget about support people (so much so that Becker had to make up a name for them). But this Romantic conception of the artist as the sole creator of art is not a true reflection of the creative process. Indeed, Becker suggests that it is the activities of the art world, and not the artist *per se*, that is the creative force behind a work of art.

The image is from a French copy of an illuminated manuscript by Boccaccio,<sup>1</sup> a fourteenth century Italian author, showing an apprentice grinding lapis lazuli, which is a semi-precious stone used to make a vibrant blue paint. The apprentice is supporting the artist, shown here painting a Madonna and Child, and we know that she is the *peintresse* Thamar.

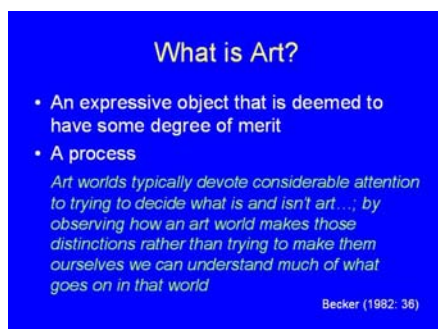
#### Slide 4



Now, I want to show you another support person. [The slide did not initially show the caption at the bottom.] Do you know who this person is, and can you guess the artist? [Caption appears] The photo is of Vic Hislop, an Australian shark catcher. The artist is Damien Hirst, and the work of art is *The Kingdom*, which recently sold for £95million. I found this image through a web search, and this image appeared in the *Sun* newspaper:

‘The Sun tracked down fearless 59-year-old Aussie Vic Hislop at his home in Hervey Bay, Queensland. He said: “I’ve been a shark hunter all my life, so I found it a great honour to have someone like Damien Hirst call and ask me to catch one. It’s brilliant when I see pictures of sharks I’ve supplied splashed over papers around the world – and also to see the incredible prices they fetch. To think what Damien Hirst has done just by putting his name to a shark. Any good specimen, which is caught and killed for meat would sell for about \$200 (£90). Yet as works of art they fetch millions. I take my hat off to Damien for making a simple shark carcass so valuable.”’<sup>2</sup>

#### Slide 5



So, what *is* art? This question is particularly relevant to the issue of quality, because what is a work of art if not an expressive object that is deemed to have some degree of merit? For Becker, a work is art if people say it is. At first, this sounds rather unhelpful, but as Becker tells us, there is no other solution to defining what art is. If you make a list of features to determine what constitutes art, or attempt to provide a formal definition, you will inevitably find that there are exceptions whereby a thing is art, but does not meet some or all of the definition, and there are

things that match the criteria, but which no one considers art. This definitional problem, however, provides us with opportunities for research. Becker writes:

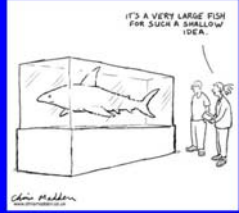
Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art...; by observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what goes on in that world. (p. 36)

## Slide 6

What I suggest is that how people determine whether an object is 'art', especially if it is great art, can tell us a lot about how people determine whether an object (or an idea) is high quality. Becker discusses the process of *consensus building* in the art world, in which a successful consensus establishes the reputation of artists and art works. An art world comes to agree, perhaps imperfectly, about what is great art, what is good art, and what is not art at all.

### Art and Quality

- Determining quality is a process
- Of consensus building
- Within art worlds




## Slide 7

The crucial points from Becker's work are:

### Key points from Becker's work

1. Art (and quality) emerges from a process of social construction.
2. The location of this process is in social networks (art worlds, in Becker's case).
3. The process by which consensus emerges is a research question.



1. Art (and quality) emerges from a *process* of social construction.
2. The location of this process is in social networks (art worlds, in Becker's case).
3. The process by which consensus emerges is a research question.

(Art and quality, that is, are not given once and forever by God.)

## Slide 8

What do we know about art worlds that can allow us to pose questions for social networks determining quality?

We might like to know:

- How broad or narrow are networks with respect to given aspects of quality?
- What is the role of tastemakers?
- What is the role of interested parties?
- Does the consumption of quality act as a status claim?

### Asking Questions



- How broad or narrow are networks with respect to given aspects of quality?
- What is the role of tastemakers?
- What is the role of interested parties?
- Does the consumption of quality act as a status claim?

I will spend the most time on the first of these four questions.

## Slide 9

With respect to the first question on the breadth of art worlds, I would like to consider two artists. Do you recognise either of them? [DaVinci's self-portrait in red chalk, and Damien Hirst's portrait with shark appear first, their names appear with a subsequent click.]

### Broad or Narrow Networks



Leonardo DaVinci

Damien Hirst

## Slide 10

Most people, or at least most westerners, agree that Leonardo DaVinci's paintings are great



art. Not everyone is so sure about the work of Damien Hirst. Members of the public are more likely to subscribe to an aesthetic that excludes Hirst's animals-in-formalin from the category of art. The art world that values DaVinci is much broader than the art world that values Hirst. Similarly, we might expect that some aspects of quality, whatever the field, will be widely valued, whereas other aspects are impressive only to a small social network.

[Illustrations: DaVinci's *Lady with an Ermine*, and a detail of Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.]

## Slide 11

This brings up the importance of aesthetics. Different art worlds apply different aesthetic principles in judging works of art. Indeed, these principles may conflict across art worlds: [Illustrations appear at the appropriate place.]

'In contemporary society, there is no single, established, consensual definition of "art", its functions, or its aesthetics. Should art be intellectual, complex, and challenging? Should it glorify the best in society? Should it be beautiful? And, if so, what is "beautiful"?



[Click appear: Text and illustration, DaVinci's Female Head (La Scapigliata), c.1508.]

'One common view is that art should uplift the viewer who will find pleasure in looking at it. Art might focus on high moral or spiritual sentiments, or in a more pedestrian vein, it might be pretty or cheerful; but in any case, it should be well-executed by someone who has "more skill than a five-year-old."

[Click appear: Text and illustration, Hirst's A Thousand Years, a severed cow's head with flies and maggots.]

'This is not the definition of art held in the avant-garde scene. The cognoscenti of this art world prefer work that is thought-provoking and striking, either visually, intellectually, or emotionally. Being "deeply moved" by a work can mean being enraged, shocked, or repulsed, rather than charmed or awed. Both models of art, the aesthetics of soothing beauty and the aesthetics of disquieting stimulation, are valid ways of looking at art works. But they rest on fundamentally different premises.'<sup>3</sup>

Overall, we may say that most members of the general public hold the belief that art should be soothing and beautiful, and that members of a much smaller art world believe that art should be disquieting and stimulating. The art world's view, in the words of Norman Rosenthal, is that 'Artists must continue the conquest of new territory... We now all love the Impressionists because we have come to know and feel comfortable with them. But the chief

task of new art is to disturb that sense of comfort.’<sup>4</sup> Or as Janet Street-Porter puts it: ‘Great art’s what you want it to be, and I want it to be provocative. No one does it better than Damien.’<sup>5</sup>

## Slide 12

**BUT Philippe de Montebello**

**Sensation Exhibition**

‘What remains terribly disturbing ... is that so many people ... are so cowed by the art establishment that they do not speak out and express their dislike for works they find either repulsive or un-aesthetic’



*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (Refurbished)*

But there is no single ‘Art World’, of course. The visual arts field is made up of smaller art worlds, with varying aesthetic sensibilities. Some members of the art establishment have spoken against recent contemporary work that seems to them to be shallow, repulsive, or aesthetically exhausted.

For instance, the then director of the Metropolitan Museum, Philippe de Montebello, spoke out against the *Sensation* exhibition which sparked controversy when it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999. (The show featured works owned by Charles Saatchi and made by the ‘Young British Artists’. Among these were Damien Hirst’s famous shark and his *A Thousand Years*.) De Montebello stated:

‘[W]hat remains terribly disturbing to me is that so many people, serious and sensitive individuals, are so cowed by the art establishment that they do not speak out and express their dislike for works that they find either repulsive or un-aesthetic or both.’<sup>6</sup>

But I hasten to add that when Hirst’s refurbished work, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, appeared in the Metropolitan Museum, de Montebello carefully supported it:

‘Damien Hirst’s iconic shark will be an arresting sight in the Metropolitan’s modern art galleries... It should be especially revealing and stimulating to confront this work in the context of the entire history of art, an opportunity only this institution can provide.’<sup>7</sup>

(The work needed restoration, by the way, because the original shark had started to rot. It was replaced by a fresh specimen.)


## Slide 13

**AND Robert Hughes**

- Famous for *Shock of the New*
- Not cowed by Damien

‘Hirst is basically a pirate...’

‘His shark [is] a shallow emblem, a still from Jaws. ...’



*Mother and Child, Divided (Turner Prize)*

One might not be particularly surprised that Philippe de Montebello, who started his career as a specialist in European painting, might not find contemporary Britart to his taste. But there are other examples.

Take art critic Robert Hughes, who is well known for the BBC series *The Shock of the New*. Broadcast in 1980, this show covered the history of modern art since the Impressionists, and perhaps could be considered to have avant-garde credentials. Hughes is now also famous for

his critiques of Hirst’s work. He writes:

‘Hirst is basically a pirate, and his skill is shown by the way in which he has managed to bluff so many art-related people, from museum personnel such as Tate’s Nicholas Serota to billionaires in the New York real-estate trade, into giving credence to his originality and the importance of his “ideas”. This skill at manipulation is his real success as an artist...

‘His far-famed shark with its pretentious title, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, is “nature” for those who have no conception of nature, in whose life nature plays no real part except as a shallow emblem, a still from *Jaws*. It might have had a little more point if Hirst had caught it himself. But of course he didn’t and couldn’t; the job was done by a pro fisherman in Australia, and paid for by Charles Saatchi, that untiring patron of the briefly new.’

Hughes sums up: ‘One might as well get excited about seeing a dead halibut on a slab in Harrods food hall.’<sup>8</sup>

[The image on Slide 13 is *Mother and Child Divided*, Hirst’s 1993 work featuring a bisected cow and a bisected calf, which helped him with the Turner Prize in 1995.]

So, we find that the art world that sees Damien Hirst’s work as brilliant is a relatively small and peculiar avant-garde network, which excludes many (but not all) members of the general public, and also many (but not all) members of the art establishment.

#### Slide 14

But there is another complication. Shock art has entered popular culture.



#### Slide 15

Of course, fine art also plays a role in popular culture.



Here is a version of *La Joconde* that you will not find in the Louvre if you stop there before you go home.

And you can have her in Lego, too:

#### Slide 16

[!!]

As popular culture, then, these playful images may have broader appeal than the original art works do. Damien Hirst, especially, seems to be the artist we love to hate.



To reiterate the general point about quality: if we expect that some aspects of quality, whatever the field, to be widely valued, and other aspects to be valued only in a niche area, it will be important to identify the relevant network in which quality is judged. And it will be easier to judge quality if we can identify the exact criteria upon which it is assessed in a given network.

**Tastemakers?**

- Tia DeNora *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius* (1996)
- New Musical Style
- Patrons taught others how to appreciate it



Ludwig von Beethoven

➤ How active are tastemaking leaders?

### Slide 17

Moving to our second question: What is the role of tastemakers?

The sociologist Tia DeNora writes about how Beethoven's patrons worked in Vienna to construct a model of musical genius for which Beethoven was the best exemplar. His patrons taught audiences how to appreciate Beethoven's musical style, which was

different from what went before.

DeNora discusses such issues as the conventions of concert-giving, contemporary critical discourse, and music technology. In terms of the last, the harpsichord, on which all notes sound with equal volume, was joined by the pianoforte (what we call simply the piano), on which notes can be played softly or loudly (hence the original name). Apparently, Beethoven was a mediocre harpsichordist, as the instrument requires very precise playing. The piano, however, was well suited toward his more emotional, expressive temperament. This fit between piano and composer allowed Beethoven to shine and to shift musical style in significant ways. The important point for the moment, however, is that Beethoven's talent would not have become known to wider audiences without the efforts of his patrons.<sup>9</sup>

In general, critics, experts and reviewers (including lay reviewers) provide information to potential audiences who are making decisions on what they like, what they want to consume, view, respect, buy or aspire to own. Sometimes, people who are central to, or at least visible in, networks (e.g. celebrities, popular kids at school) inadvertently provide taste models through their daily actions and consumption patterns. In what ways do people assessing quality look to leaders in the field, or in their social network, when making assessments? How active are these leaders?

### Slide 18

Tastemakers may aggressively and purposively promote a particular aesthetic, or they may influence broader taste unintentionally. Especially in the former case, these tastemakers may have open or hidden interests in promoting the art they favour. The collector Peggy Guggenheim and the art critic Clement Greenberg played important roles in the career of Jackson Pollock.<sup>10</sup> But their roles were not particularly disinterested, as Guggenheim furthered the career of an artist whose paintings she owned, thereby increasing their value, and Greenberg used Pollock as an example of the purely formal type of art that he endorsed as a critic, thereby furthering his own as well as Pollock's career.<sup>11</sup>

The image is of an untitled Jackson Pollock work (*Untitled*, circa 1946) which is in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

**Interested Parties?**

- Tastemakers may be very active
- Hidden or visible interests
- Pecuniary or otherwise



Jackson Pollock  
*Untitled*, c. 1946  
Peggy Guggenheim  
Collection, Venice

**Interested Parties?**





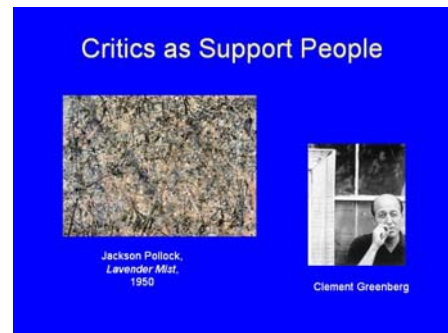
Jackson Pollock  
*Untitled*, c. 1946  
Peggy Guggenheim  
Collection, Venice

### Slide 19

And here is Peggy Guggenheim herself, also in Venice, with her dogs.

## Slide 20

Here is Clement Greenberg, who played a very important, if not entirely disinterested, role in the career of Jackson Pollock. I chose *Lavender Mist* as an illustration here, because the story goes that Pollock was going to call the work *Untitled*, but Greenberg suggested the more colourful, and memorable, title.



## Slide 21

Does the consumption of quality act as a status claim?

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued convincingly that taste is inseparable from status. Although the hierarchies of fine and popular arts have been breaking down, people nevertheless use their taste in art as a way to claim status honour. People who like Damien Hirst use their enjoyment of his work to feel superior to others who do not.

In order to claim status honour, based on the taste for art, people must have access to art. *Access* can mean physical access, as in being able to attend a museum to view an art work – or in a more exclusive sense, access can mean ownership. But in an important sense, access also means knowledge about art. (This brings up the important factor of education and the role it plays in taste, cultural capital and the ability to claim status honour.)

[Slide 21 was shown at first without the caption under the image.] Did you figure out the meaning of the slogan on the t-shirt?

## Slide 22

An important point about claiming status honour: If you do not understand something, you are automatically excluded from any of its status-enhancing qualities. So elites may work to seek quality that the masses cannot access or understand.

But the exclusion cannot be total, or excluded groups will not know they have been excluded. They will be completely unable to recognise status claims made by the insiders and the claim will therefore become worthless. As Paul DiMaggio puts it: 'mastery of the elements of a status culture becomes a source of honor to group members. Particularly in the case of a dominant status group, it is important that their culture be *recognized as legitimate by, yet be only partially available to,* groups that are subordinate to them'.<sup>12</sup>

There is a rich literature in sociology, inspired by Bourdieu's work, on cultural capital and how it is deployed to build boundaries between groups of people (and to build bridges within groups). Quality, however it is defined across domains, may be similarly intertwined with status, with access to quality allowing claims to greater status. This leaves us with an important question:

Is quality defined in such a way to enhance the status of more privileged members of society?

## Slide 23



I do not have a formal conclusion, but I thought it might be interesting to play a little game (which you must do in your head, given the time).

As the images appear, look to see if you can spot the quality skull.

[The images fade-in in this order: **Bottom left:** Philippe de Champagne, *Vanitas*, c. 1671. **Top right:** Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1596. **Top left:** Not quite Leonardo DaVinci, *View of a Skull*, c. 1489. (In DaVinci's sketch, the skull is bisected; the left-hand side of the original shows the sinus cavities while the right-hand side shows the external skull. This version is a contemporary digital hack, which reflects the right hand side onto the left to give the impression of a complete external skull.) **Bottom right:** Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007, with its 8,601 diamonds.]



## Slide 24

One final comment on quality with respect to price.

Some equate the value of a work of art with the price for which it sells.<sup>13</sup> But in art, as in other fields, there are disjunctures between what the market will bear and quality. This is true, by definition, if we recognise that quality can be defined in myriad ways, which differ across social networks.

The Damien Hirst named the auction of his work at Sotheby's in September 2008 *Beautiful inside My Head Forever*. When the hammer fell on the last lot, Hirst was £111 million richer. Many bidders clearly believe that Hirst's work is 'worth it.' However, others disagree. We can come back to Robert Hughes, who wrote: 'If there is anything special about this event, it lies in the extreme disproportion between Hirst's expected prices and his actual talent.'<sup>14</sup>

You have to admire a man who is able to sell a gaudy piece of bling for a reported (but unconfirmed) \$89million. Or do you? What do you think? And has the sociology of art helped us pose questions about quality?

## Slide 25: The End



## Afterword:

After my talk, the most common comment I received was: 'You must really hate Damien Hirst.' This is not true, and moreover, misses the point. Hirst is currently the best known representative of an avant-garde aesthetic. It was my aim to contrast a relatively narrow art world with a challenging aesthetic and a broad one with a widely-shared aesthetic (represented by DaVinci). It is true that there are many other avant-garde artists, who might have made the comparison more valid through being unknown to this audience.

But that would have been less fun!

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### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio. (1360-1374), *De mulieribus claris*. (*Le Livre des Femmes Nobles et Renommees* or *Concerning Famous Women*), early fifteenth century French copy of medieval Italian manuscript, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> The Sun, 2010: online.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander, 2003: 302.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Halle, 2001: 145.

<sup>5</sup> Street-Porter, 2008: online.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Halle, 2001: 162.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in ABC News, 2007: online.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, 2008: online.

<sup>9</sup> Also see White and White (1993) on the role of critics in new art movements, as part of a larger study of the shift in France from academic art to Impressionism.

<sup>10</sup> These facts are widely known, but for a discussion see Mulkay and Chaplin (1982). This article looks at reviews of Pollock's work and shows that art critics were unable to agree on whether Pollock was good or not, and they also were unable to agree which aspects of his work that made him good (or not.)

<sup>11</sup> And we may well ask about the role of Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, after Pollock's death. See Lang and Lang (1990) for an in-depth exploration of the posthumous survival of artistic reputations.

<sup>12</sup> DiMaggio, 1982: 303, emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of this idea and critiques of it see Frey and Pommerehne (1989) and Velthuis (2005).

<sup>14</sup> Hughes, 2008: online.

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