

Do 'prestigious' journals make academics lazy? An unlikely parallel with the art world

by Blog Admin

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In the art world, the dealer's brand often becomes a substitute for aesthetic judgement.

Mark Carrigan wonders if it the same could be said of academia; does inclusion in a prestigious journal become a substitute for, and act as a reinforcement of, intellectual judgement?

In a [recent book](#) economist Don Thompson explores the crucial role that branding has in the contemporary art market. With the market skewed by an influx of the ultra-rich seeking something to do with their money, a strange dynamic emerges. As the author was told by a former specialist at Sotheby's auction house, you should;



“never underestimate how insecure buyers are about contemporary art, and how much they always need reassurance”.

This widely recognised, though little discussed, characteristic of the contemporary art world massively expands the power of brand name auction house, galleries and collectors. The obscenely wealthy but time-poor rely on such brands to guarantee the virtues of the art they invest in, assuaging the insecurities about their purchases which are only sustained because “they are not willing to spend the time required to educate themselves to the point of overcoming insecurity”.

For instance, as the author observes, “[Larry Gagosian's](#) clients can simply substitute his judgement or that of his gallery for their own, and purchase whatever is being shown”.

How different is this from the prestige conferred upon an academic publication by its inclusion within a well-respected journal? Simply denigrating the lack of taste shown by ultra-wealthy art collectors misses the point. Unless one wishes to descend into facile subjectivism (or conversely argue that his corporate operation indelibly corrupts his aesthetic judgements) it stands to reason that Gagosian's judgements do function, as well as pretty much anyone's could, as a cypher for distinction. It's perfectly possible some complete crap occasionally finds its way into his galleries but, in terms of the unavoidably intersubjective normative standards which prevail at a given point in time (and which everyone must engage with even if they reject them) his judgements will tend to point to high quality work. Similarly, rigorous blind peer-review, conducted by a pool of top academics, within the traditions of a long-standing and well respected journal will tend to identify high quality papers. In both cases the additional competition which prestige generates, as many try to occupy a space which can only hold a few, entrenches this capacity to bestow a perceived distinction.

In both cases the task of filtering, sorting a range of cultural products in terms of their quality, takes place through bureaucratic processes. Particular institutions become able to invest cultural products with the feel of quality, a process which sits elusively between genuine normativity and contingent power, tending towards success in its aims but also shaping the wider social context within which such 'success' can be judged. Within the art world “the dealer brand often becomes a substitute for, and certainly is a reinforcement of, aesthetic judgement”.

Is it the case that within the academic world, inclusion in a prestigious journal becomes a substitute for, and certainly is a reinforcement of, intellectual judgement? As a thought-experiment: how would academic life differ if these status hierarchies weren't available to help us navigate the knowledge system? How would we respond? I suspect that activities which are already everyday features of the academic world (particularly dialogue and debate within communities of practice) would take on a newfound importance. What else would be different? Answers on the back of a postcard please.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

This blog was originally posted on Mark Carrigan's personal blog, [Sociological Imagination](#). Readers can now find the first part of this discussion on the [Sociology @Warwick blog](#).

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