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Authentically Digital? Considering Art Knowledge in a Technological Age

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Connoisseurship, it must be said, is not a term that surfaces often in contemporary discussions of digital culture. The concept possesses connotations of aesthetic elitism and brings to mind an unfashionably Kantian "judgement of taste." Digital initiatives in the arts generally position themselves on the side of democratizing both taste and access and thus, implicitly or explicitly, against the idea of the connoisseur. Reconsidering terms or concepts that have become unfashionable, however, can be a very productive and revealing exercise and I was intrigued by Elizabeth's provocation to revisit the notion of connoisseurship in the digital age. As the current director of the Vasari Research Centre for Art and Technology – a Birkbeck University research centre that has, since the late 1980s, pioneered the use of digital technologies within the study and production of the arts – this panel provides an opportunity to reflect upon some of the perhaps unquestioned assumptions of our research.

I suggest that connoisseurship is a term that has lost currency in the digital age, yet the idea that digital technologies, and the internet in particular, have brought about a crisis in the production of "expert knowledge" is actually extremely prevalent. In the field of journalism, for example, this situation is often characterized as an editorial crisis, in which a proliferation of often unpaid, "amateur," "freelance" or "open source" reporting has led to an abundance of journalistic content, while resources devoted to editing, contextualization and quality control have been greatly diminished. Digital technologies have the general tendency of disrupting hierarchies of knowledge in both productive and problematic ways – more voices have the opportunity to be heard, but this democratization of communication sometimes comes at the expense of the editorial assurances of the expert. Viewed in this light, a decline in connoisseurship could be the art world's version of a more general crisis of "expert knowledge" being experienced in the digital age.

But before we move too quickly to conclusions, we should pause to acknowledge the fact that the impact of the digital on the contemporary art world is actually not a single phenomenon, but rather many distinct, yet interrelated processes. I suggest that there at least four separate ways that digital technologies are changing the study, curation and reception of art within the museum context, each of which should be considered individually in relation to the question of connoisseurship. Let me name all four, before considering each in turn through a number of examples and projects, some of which have involved the Vasari Centre directly.

1. The process of extending the reach of the museum through digital access

2. The process of augmenting the museum experience through digital technologies

3. The process of using digital technologies as tools within art historical studies

4. The process of acknowledging the emergence of digital art itself

1. The process of extending the reach of the museum through digital access

The digitization of public archives and museum collections has been one of the largest collective cultural projects of the past two decades and has a key priority for a variety of organisations and funding bodies, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, the European Commission and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Public access initiatives have become almost synonymous with digitization and the quantity of cultural material available online has grown exponentially during the last ten years in particular. The Vasari Centre has certainly played a role in this wider process of digitization and open access. It participated, for example, in the National Inventory Research Project, an initiative led by Professor Francis Ames Lewis from 2005 to 2008 that involved researching, documenting and digitally databasing pre-1900 European paintings in UK public collections. The Art UK online database of 212,000 works of art in UK public collections evolved out of this earlier venture. This autumn, the Vasari will host a symposium on the theme of Open Cultural Data, which we hope will be an opportunity to step back and reflect upon the

rationale, successes and challenges of the last two decades of large scale investment in digitization projects.

While these digitization initiatives are often justified via the rhetoric of public access and democratization of the arts, this does not mean that they necessarily stand opposed to connoisseurship or expert knowledge. Indeed, the increased availability of digitized information often benefits the dedicated art researcher as much as the member of the general public. If we take the example of Tate, an institution that has been particularly committed recently to digitizing its archives and collections (to the extent that the institution's website is sometimes referred to as the Fifth Tate), we see that the improved quantity and quality of online information provides a resource to both the casual viewer and the serious academic or connoisseur. While certainly providing access to the collection for an audience that may not be able to visit the physical galleries, the Fifth Tate also has the objective of being the definitive source of information on specific works in the collection – the description of works are intended to be a resource for external researchers and Tate curators, as well as the general public. Connoisseurship and democratization, at least in this case, do not appear to be contradictory forces.

2. The process of augmenting the museum experience through digital technologies

The digital experience of art clearly not only takes place in a parallel online environment, distinguished from the physical environment of the museum. Digital technologies are ever more present within the space of the museum or gallery itself, in the form of digital consoles and terminals, handheld digital guides and mobile device apps. The physical museum space is overlayed with other forms of digital information. It is part of a wider phenomenon media theorist Lev Manovich refers to as "augmented space." Within this new, information rich museum experience, the auratic art object becomes part of a network of knowledge that forms around it. The object of study or contemplation becomes one element, a particularly important one, within a wider web of

experience in which digital objects interact with physical ones. We look at the painting while selecting our preferred audio track in our headset, while clicking on a link in our mobile app that brings us to a biography of the artist. How this "augmented" informational space of the gallery is impacting the experience of art viewing is something that certainly bears consideration. Perhaps something is lost by more things being added to the encounter between art work and viewer. But in some ways, this has always been the case for the expert art historian or connoisseur, who comes to the art object, already equipped with an abundance of information. Now some of this available knowledge, previously confined to the realm of the expert, is brought into the space of the gallery itself and made available to all. Whether this process expands the sphere of connoisseurship or puts it at risk is subject to debate.

3. The process of using digital technologies as tools within art historical studies

When we mention the digitization of art, it may call to mind the mass circulation of low resolution images across the web, intended for public consumption. This image, a perceived threat to the integrity and authenticity of the art object, risks occluding the many ways in which digital technologies have been utilized within the museum context, not as a means of mass distribution, but precisely as a tool for art historical scholarship and the development of accurate, expert knowledge. The name of the Vasari Research Centre actually derives from one of the pioneering UK projects in the area of technology enhanced art research. The Vasari project – an acronym for Visual Art System for Archiving and Retrieval of Images – was a collaboration between Birkbeck (led by Professor William Vaughn) and the National Gallery, initiated in 1989. At a time when digital cameras had yet to reach the consumer market, the Vasari project developed a system for high resolution image capture directly from paintings. The system employed a "colourimetric" lens and sensor that captured seven colour bands, rather than the usual three colour RGB format. The result was a very precise and colour accurate high resolution image that captured elements like cracks and

brushstrokes. The system had huge implications for art preservation and conservation as it produced a precise record of a paintings condition and colour and allowed small changes to be monitored over time. The later addition to the system of infra-red lenses and other technologies permitted the detection of painting elements that were otherwise invisible to the eye. The original Vasari project is but one example of digital technologies used within the context of the art museum, precisely to add to the development of expert knowledge and thus assumedly enhance the sphere of connoisseurship.

4. The process of acknowledging the emergence of digital art itself

While we have thus far discussed the implications of the digitization of traditional art objects, it should also be acknowledged that a growing number of the art works housed in museum collections are in fact digital from the outset. While digital art has until recently operated mostly in parallel with the mainstream gallery and art auction environment – through its own separate institutions, festivals, publications, etc. – these two worlds are increasingly coming together. During the last few months in London alone, there have been three significant digitally-themed art exhibitions in what could be called mainstream art contexts: The Electronic Superhighway exhibition at the Whitechapel, the Big Bang Data exhibition at Somerset House, and the Emotional Supply Chains exhibition at the Zabludowicz Collection. As interactive, web or software based artworks become increasingly prominent elements of contemporary art collections, this introduces entirely new conservation, storage and display challenges. In addition to asking, "what impact digital technologies are having on connoisseurship," we may also need to ask the question, "what does it mean to be a connoisseur of digital art?" Through the work of past directors such as Professor Charlie Gere and Dr. Nick Lambert, the Vasari Centre has been heavily involved in the preservation and collection of the UK's digital and computer art history. The AHRC funded CACHe Project (Computer Arts, Contexts, Histories etc) which ran from 2002-2006, was a collaboration between Birkbeck and the

Victoria and Albert museum, which resulted in the V&A becoming the main repository of digital art in this country.

Conclusion:

The impact of digital technologies on the study, curation and reception of art is both varied and pronounced. I think if the four processes I've tried to highlight in this short contribution tell us anything it is that the emergence of the digital need not place the democratization of art access and the expert knowledge of connoisseurship in an oppositional position. The institutional projects that are promoting the digitization of art and the expansion of digital information about art often have productive effects on both sides of this apparent divide between the public and the professional, or the amateur and the expert.