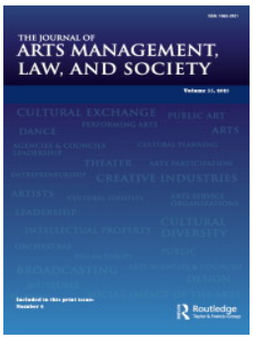

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Artists as Cultural Intermediaries: How Professional Artists Present Their Work on Homepages and Instagram Accounts

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how professional visual artists without gallery representation intermediate their art online. By conceptualizing artists as cultural intermediaries, I studied how their actions affect perceptions of their works in the field of contemporary art. To this end, I conducted media go-along interviews with 18 Finland-based artists and qualitatively analyzed their homepages and Instagram accounts. My findings show that artists shape quality perceptions through, for example, third-party quality signals that reflect their reputations. An important target audience consists of gatekeepers who are vital to artists' careers. The results reveal constraints for creators using the Web to bypass intermediation chains in creative fields.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary art; creative industries; cultural intermediaries; disintermediation; quality signals; reputation; social media

Introduction

In the field of contemporary art, numerous developments are unfolding online. Artists present their very latest artworks on social media or their homepages and experiment with new ways to disseminate art (Abrams 2013; Hartmann 2020). Collectors buy art from dealers' websites or contact artists directly *via* social media (Khaire 2015; Lee and Lee 2023; McAndrew 2023; Piancatelli, Massi, and Harrison 2020). Museums arrange virtual exhibitions or otherwise make their collections accessible to users of smartphones and laptops (Bosello and van den Haak 2022; Komarac and Ozretić Došen 2024; MacDowall and Budge 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic likely accelerated these trends, forcing institutions to adopt practices that do not rely on physical locations (Buchholz, Fine, and Wohl 2020; Fillis et al. 2023).

The digitalization of contemporary art advances on two fronts. On the one hand, established institutions develop online practices that supplement or replace their traditional functions. For example, museums have started to display their collections on their homepages in addition to hosting physical exhibitions. On the other hand, digitalization advances when new web-based initiatives enter the field and challenge older institutions. For example, in the art market, Saatchi Art and other similar Web platforms bypass traditional art galleries by directly selling art online (Khaire 2015; Lee

and Lee 2019, 2023; Piancatelli, Massi, and Harrison 2020). In the same way, artists use social media channels to reach audiences and customers without mediators (Lien 2018). This *disintermediation*—the displacement of traditional intermediaries—is a common phenomenon in many parts of the economy. Airbnb and other so-called platform economy firms are famous examples (see e.g., Acquier, Daudigeos, and Pinkse 2017; Gielens and Steenkamp 2019; Wigand 2020). In cultural fields, examples include musicians choosing to bypass record labels by producing, promoting, and distributing their own work (Kribs 2017; Morris 2014; Walzer 2017) and writers relying on self-publishing instead of working with publishing houses (Waldfogel and Reimers 2015).

In the creative fields, disintermediation also pertains to *cultural intermediaries*—that is, "market actors who construct value by mediating how goods (…) are perceived and engaged with by others" (Maguire and Matthews 2014).[1] Art promoters, critics, curators, and art dealers are examples of cultural intermediaries (Durrer and O'Brien 2014; Heinich 2012; Khaire 2015; Lee and Lee 2016, 2019, 2023). They bring art and audiences together in processes that create meaning and value of art (Becker 1982; Bourdieu and Nice 1980; cf. McFall 2014). The concept of cultural intermediation points toward a major challenge for disintermediation in the field of contemporary art and other cultural fields: meaning and value are partly outcomes of the interaction in the art field, not mere inherent properties of artworks. However, how can traditional cultural intermediaries be bypassed if constructing the value of art depends on them? For example, art collectors are interested in buying legitimate art rather than any available piece. Traditionally, reputable art galleries have provided legitimacy for the art they intermediate. In contrast, new art-selling Web platforms, which lack an established reputation, must develop alternative strategies to confer legitimacy on the artwork they sell (Lee and Lee 2023). Similarly, artists disseminating their own work through personal homepages face this same challenge. They must convince the audience to perceive their art as legitimate and good.

In this article, I examine how professional artists disseminate their work by studying them as cultural intermediaries who use their personal homepages and Instagram accounts to create meaning and value (or what I call "artistic quality") of their own art. My analysis is based on observations of Finland-based artists' homepages and Instagram accounts and on media go-along interviews with the artists. I will show that much of this self-intermediation is based on references to quality signals produced by cultural intermediaries connected to the artist's past work. Under these conditions, disintermediation remain circumscribed: while artists' online representations produce new forms of intermediation, at the same time, they remain connected to old cultural intermediaries, even buttressing them.

This study advances the social scientific understanding of intermediation chains in creative industries in several ways. First, whereas previous research has focused on new online art intermediaries and market platforms administered by third parties involved in art dealing (Khaire 2015; Lee and Lee 2019, 2023; Piancatelli, Massi, and Harrison 2020), I study how artists present their art on their personal homepages and Instagram accounts, controlling all aspects of intermediation and marketing themselves. Second, previous studies have examined visual artists' attitudes toward the Web as a professional tool (Booth and Røyseng 2022; Hansson 2015), while my study delves into how artists manage their online presence in practice. I also propose using the

framework of cultural intermediation (Maguire and Matthews 2014) as a theoretical lens that clarifies how individuals in creative professions self-intermediate their work, constructing its meaning and value.[2] Third, artists' relationships within the art field condition the way they represent their art (Muñiz, Norris, and Alan Fine 2014; Wohl 2019; Yogev 2010). I will show how this happens in online contexts. Fourth, the artists in my study are creative producers working within "restricted production"—a model relatively free from commercial pressures and strongly oriented toward symbolic recognition for artistic merits. In such fields, overt commercialism is viewed with suspicion, and economic interests should be balanced with art-for-art's-sake ideals (Bourdieu 1996). Moreover, with one exception, these artists did not have gallery representation and were therefore obligated to manage their careers and public representations by themselves. Under such circumstances, producers have a unique relationship with their audiences and gatekeepers. I will demonstrate that this has consequences for their self-intermediation practices.

In what follows, I will first introduce the existing literature on cultural intermediation and artistic quality, articulating my key concepts. After presenting my data and methods, I will apply the analytical framework of cultural intermediation to analyze the artists' homepages and Instagram accounts, pointing out various dimensions of this intermediation and its associated practices. I conclude by considering the results in relation to the question of disintermediation in creative fields.

Cultural intermediaries and quality

People can rationally disagree about the quality or even the type of a given artwork, and there are two principal reasons for this. First, the artwork's characteristics are not self-evident but "found" in interpretation. Second, there are no objective evaluation criteria for art. Rather, evaluation is based on personal judgments (see, e.g., Beckert and Aspers 2011; Menger 2014). In other words, understanding an artwork requires interpretation and judgment and depends on knowledge, competence, and taste, which vary from person to person. However, interpretations and judgments need not be isolated or idiosyncratic. On the contrary, the social nature of interpretations and judgments is at the heart of the art field. When actors in the field discuss art, collect it, grant awards, or undertake activities that reveal their interpretations and judgments, their actions are influenced by and respond to those of their peers. This interaction of judgments creates a basis for *intersubjective* conceptions of the meaning and value of art. Although these conceptions may only be partially shared and often contested, they nevertheless provide common ground for the field's actors (Beckert 2019; Bourdieu 1996, pt. II, chap. 2).

Cultural intermediaries play an important role in this collective construction of meaning and value (see Maguire and Matthews 2014). In this article, I will study artists as cultural intermediaries who promote their own art and show that they often achieve this goal through quality signaling. Particularly important are *quality signals* based on the institutional recognition of the artist's work, as they reflect intersubjective conceptions of quality. For example, an artist's reputation is a quality signal that is created when their work is recognized by reputable actors in the field (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1983), such as galleries, museums (Braden 2009, 2021; Fraiberger et al. 2018),

and grant juries (Peters and Roose 2022). Although this reputation is not synonymous with the quality of an artist's work, it can serve as a proxy for it. For this reason, it is valuable capital in the art field. In the art markets, economic value can be built on reputation (Beckert and Rössel 2013; Braden and Teekens 2019; Velthuis 2013). Moreover, grant juries and other panels in the business of evaluating art can refer to the artist's reputation to justify their judgments, as reputation is more measurable and intersubjective than many other notions of artistic quality (Lewandowska and Smolarska 2020; Peters and Roose 2022).

In this section, I connected the concept of cultural intermediaries to the idea of intersubjective quality signals. In what follows, I will show how artists attach quality signals to their work when they intermediate it.[3] Other techniques used to construct the meaning and value of their work will also be discussed.

Data and methods

The empirical analysis is based on 18 interviews with Finland-based visual artists and observations of their homepages and Instagram accounts. Finland is a small European country with a relatively vibrant and internationally integrated art scene. However, as small art markets cannot provide living for all artists, the majority rely on additional sources of income, such as side jobs and grants (Karttunen 2019; Sokka et al. 2023).

I used group characteristics sampling to create "a specific information-rich group that can reveal and illuminate important group patterns" (Patton 2014, chap. module 33). My focus was on professional artists seeking artistic recognition. The sample's selection criteria were as follows: First, the participants either held or were soon to be awarded a degree from an art university. Second, their exhibition histories were linked to reputable art field actors. I determined this based on my knowledge of Finland's art field and acknowledged multiple conceptions of reputability: both established institutions (e.g., museums) and "alternative," grassroots-level actors (e.g., artist-run initiatives) were seen as reputable. Third, the participants operated without gallery representation, overseeing the promotion of their art single-handedly. (As an exception, I interviewed one artist who had recently obtained gallery representation.)

My graduation from an art school and subsequent involvement in artistic projects allowed me to use personal contacts to find participants. The selected artists were born between 1976 and 1993 and worked with different mediums (e.g., painting, video), and their self-reported career lengths ranged from three to sixteen years (see Table 1). All but one lived in the metropolitan area; the exception lived abroad while remaining connected to Finnish art institutions. Fourteen of them had international professional experience (e.g., having featured in exhibitions outside Finland).

Between October 2022 and May 2023, I conducted 18 interviews face-to-face, with the exception of one conducted through a video link.[4] Their duration varied from 55 to 125 min. We spoke in Finnish or English. During the interviews, the participants had access to a laptop or a smartphone, enabling them to share content from the Web and social media if they wished. Thus, these interviews included a media go-along component, in which the participants were observed as they interacted with their media while providing verbalized accounts of their experiences (Jørgensen 2016; Møller

Table 1. Characteristics of Interview Participants: Artistic Medium, Gender, Age, International Experience, and Career Length.

Medium	Gender	Age (rounded)	International experience	Career in years (rounded)
Painting	She	40	No	10
Painting	She	30	No	5
Painting	She	30	Yes	5
Painting	She	40	Yes	15
Painting	He	40	Yes	10
Painting	He	50	Yes	15
Photography/video	She	30	No	10
Photography/video	She	30	Yes	10
Photography/video	He	40	Yes	10
Photography/video	She	40	Yes	10
Sculplting	She	40	Yes	10
Sculplting	She/they	30	No	5
Sculplting	She	30	Yes	10
Sculplting	He	40	Yes	10
Other	He	40	Yes	10
Other	She	40	Yes	10
Other	She	40	Yes	10
Other	She/they	30	Yes	5

and Robards 2019). Besides combining observation and interviewing, another advantage of the method lies in the media guiding the conversation toward topics that might not have emerged otherwise.

These theme interviews focused on how the participants created or used web-based representations of art as part of their artistic practices. I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim (paraphrasing off-topic sections) and inserted the media-go-along field notes. I conducted a thematic analysis by coding the data using Atlas.ti. In the first coding cycle, I categorized data related to presenting art online; in the second cycle, I used my central concepts (e.g., intermediating and quality signaling) to analyze the data.

I collected further data by observing the participants' main channels for online representation: their homepages and Instagram accounts. All participants used both channels, except for two: one without Instagram and one without a homepage. On Instagram, I observed only content that was visible to everyone, not just to followers. I collected data in four steps. First, I observed the homepages and Instagram accounts before the interviews. Second, I continued my observations of these platforms during the media go-along interviews. The last two rounds of observation took place after the interviews (in April and June 2023), taking screenshots and notes. I compiled my observations into a thematically organized matrix, which facilitated the final analysis. The first cycle of inductive coding involved representations of art and artistic practices. Next, I identified sources of quality signals and developed codes for cultural intermediation.[5]

Results

In this section, I show how homepages and Instagram—artists' main channels for showcasing their art online—work in cultural intermediation. I begin with the homepages.

CVs and quality signals

A typical artist homepage contained at least portfolio pictures and CV information. CVs detailed the artists' education and exhibition history and occasionally accolades, such as memberships, grants, residencies, and inclusion of their works in collections. CVs contribute to cultural intermediation by attaching quality signals to artists' work. For example, an exhibition history full of shows given at prestigious galleries reflects the artist's solid reputation (Braden 2009; Fraiberger et al. 2018; Peters and Roose 2022) and position in high-status networks (Dubois and François 2013; Podolny 2005; Yogev 2010). Similarly, an artist's residency history (Soro 2023), important grants (Peters and Roose 2022), and connections with notable collectors (Velthuis 2005) can tell about institutional achievements related to reputation and status.[6] Consequently, they intermediate the artist's work by constructing perceptions of value.[7] Moreover, CV information can shape perceptions of the art's characteristics through cultural intermediation. This happens when the artist becomes associated with galleries or other actors with *certain kinds of* reputations. For example, if the artist's exhibition history contains only shows at very commercial galleries, the artist's work can be associated with a commercial attitude. Art field actors use cultural orientations and style differences for social distinction (e.g., commercialism vs. *l'art pour l'art*) (Bourdieu 1996, chap. II: 2; cf. Gerber 2019).

Portfolios and oeuvres

Typically, homepages contained portfolio sections representing the artist's works through photographs accompanied by text. The focus was on exhibitions, independent artworks being a rarity. The exhibitions were documented meticulously; a single documentation might contain more than 20 photographs. By looking at these visually rich representations, one can learn about the artist's style—with observation being one avenue for experiencing art. The pictures came with texts stating facts about the artworks (e.g., materials) and the exhibition (e.g., location and dates). As in the CVs, facts about the exhibition spaces work as quality signals that advance cultural intermediation.

Both CVs and portfolios contextualize artists' work: first, by revealing institutional connections within the field and second, by framing artworks and exhibitions with the oeuvres to which they belong. Contextualization is cultural intermediation that affects how artistic practices are perceived. Moreover, representation of an oeuvre is intermediation that not only signals quality but also informs and limits justified interpretations (cf. Wohl 2019). For example, a painting must be interpreted differently if it is known to be made by a conceptual artist and not a painter.

Audiences

Artists create homepages for various audiences and purposes. For example, Ainikki, a video artist in her thirties, used her homepage to represent her work for her fellow artists but also for curators and juries:

> I think of other artists a lot, and curators, too. Also, a very concrete situation when I need my homepages is when I make applications – grant applications, exhibition applications… I insert a homepage link into these applications.[8]

Artistic careers depend on gatekeeper evaluations (Menger 2014, chap. 4). Homepages are a form of cultural intermediation that artists use to convince people who manage resources that are important for them, such as funding and exhibition opportunities. Later in the interview, Ainikki pejoratively called this aspect of homepages "selling oneself":

> Honestly, I see the homepage as selling myself. There is a grant foundation, a jury, or something for which I must show that I am attractive and interesting.

Such self-intermediation for careerist purposes troubled some participants (cf. Booth and Røyseng 2022). For example, Lokka, a sculptor in her forties, said that, for her, keeping a homepage is a "necessary evil" to keep her career running. However, the other aspect of homepages—making one's art available to fellow artists—was generally seen in a positive light. For Lokka, it balanced out the careerist aspect of self-intermediation:

> It doesn't feel as bad when one knows that this is not only such cold self-promoting but also something for fellow artists.

Comparing Instagram to homepages

Artists' Instagram accounts have many functions, one being to act as portfolios. Most posts represented exhibitions. They were ordered chronologically, which enables one to see how the artist's oeuvre and career have evolved. Moreover, like their homepage counterparts, documentation pictures came with quality signals derived from exhibition place-related information. Captions may also contain factual descriptions of individual artworks (e.g., names, dates, and materials). On homepages, artworks not connected to an exhibition were rare. Such representations were also rare on Instagram, although some artists had posted occasional photographs of single artworks without any contextual explanations. Moreover, some artists had made artworks to be shown on Instagram only. For example, Ahto, a sculptor in her thirties, had posted documentation of temporary assemblages that would never leave her studio. "I even post pictures of works that I trash right away [after posting]," she explained. In this case, the distribution channel becomes an outright art medium.

Unlike homepages, Instagram was used to represent artistic practices. For example, Ilpotar, a photographer in her thirties, posted photographs on topics such as her residence visits and exhibition-making. In the interview, she explained that on Instagram, she represents artistic practice as a process, not just its outcomes:

> Instagram is a nice thing to have. There, you can represent multidimensionally what your artistic practice is: the whole process and not just the outcome.

Posts representing artistic practices can intermediate art in two ways. First, they affect perceptions through quality signals. For example, Ilpotar's post on a positive grant decision signals institutional recognition (Peters and Roose 2022). Second, by representing their practices, artists reveal their artistic identities. For example, Ilpotar explained that she updates her Instagram so frequently because she wants to give an active impression:

> When I make applications, I often link to both [my homepage and Instagram]. The homepage is more curated. It shows you what, say, a photograph series looks like. Also, it is chronologically ordered. And you can look at exhibition photos one by one. You can easily skim through them and understand what they are. On the other hand, Instagram is different. I update it much more frequently. I think that it is a sign that I am active in the field and that I can produce new things constantly.

Moreover, artists post on their processes for the sake of visibility. For example, Kuura, a sculptor in his forties, did this when he promoted his exhibitions. For him, being "alive" on Instagram was a problematic but also necessary part of keeping his work visible:

> People make quite a lot of posts on their exhibition-making processes. Me too. I give hints of what materials I will use in the next exhibition and what I will do with them. The less pleasant aspect of this is that it makes things a bit commercial. You start to promote yourself. That I must be alive on Instagram to get visibility has caused me distress.

Accordingly, some artists experience mixed feelings when they see their colleagues posting to gain visibility. For example, Sarajas, a painter in his forties, expressed dislike for posts that appear to be aimed solely at satisfying Instagram algorithms:

> I don't know how these [Instagram algorithms] work, but I have noticed that some people post regularly. Often, it's just a picture of an artwork or a studio view. But how interesting is that? I don't find it interesting at all; it seems pointless. When I skim through such posts, I can't help but wonder why I should even look.

Although self-intermediation may feel uncomfortable, as it does on homepages, artists do it anyway because it is beneficial to their careers. For example, Lyylikki, a sculptor in his forties, had closed his Instagram account but later started to regret the decision, which he believed had negatively impacted his career. Now, after a break spanning a few years, he was planning to start posting again:

> I quit because I feel that I am selling myself. But that was not a good move from the point of view of my career. I guess that you should be on Instagram if you want to look like a credible artist. Or anyway, I believe that things would have gone better if I had promoted myself a little more. (…) Maybe I will get a grant or something if I get activated again.

Like homepages, Instagram is a professional tool used by artists to present their work to curators, grant juries, or other such art professionals. For example, some of the participants believed that being present on Instagram helps to gain international contacts. On of them, Otavatar, a painter in her thirties, thought that she had been invited to participate in foreign group shows after curators found her work on Instagram. She believed that it helped that her work was not only available on her personal Instagram account but also that she had submitted documentation of her exhibitions to online art media, which had shared them on Instagram:

> I think that via Instagram, at least the exhibitions in Basel and Berlin [became possible]. The curator had seen my work.

However, attracting foreign art world professionals is one of the points where participants' expectations about the consequences of online presence diverge. For example, Marjatta, an artist working with various media, insisted, echoing the argument of this

article, that it is unlikely that curators would "find" an artist without previous merits from the web. Curators lack incentives to pick up unmerited artists because they need to build their own reputation by working with merited artists. Marjatta explained:

> They [freelance curators] try to act in ways that advance their careers. If the artist can't give them something that would lift their own profile or open doors to other, better artists or funding or something, then I do not… For me, it is difficult to believe that a hyped curator would come and be like, "This lower-profile artist is so ingenious that I must make her a star."

Like homepages, Instagram has many audiences. Besides working as a cultural intermediary to gatekeepers, it is a medium for sharing art with fellow artists. For example, when I asked Kauppi, a painter in her thirties, who the target audience of her Instagram account was, she answered, "for the people in my community. And for those who ask what kind of art I make."

Typical homepages used formal expressions and had professional content only. In contrast, Instagram pages were more mixed. For example, some artists had posted memes with no clear link to their art, and some posts represented nonprofessional events, such as holiday trips. However, it was not common to mix private and professional content. Some participants stated explicitly that, for them, Instagram is a professional tool with no connection to their private lives. Yet others, such as Vellamo, a sculptor in her thirties, preferred a different approach. While she used Instagram deliberately to promote her art, she occasionally made posts about her private life as well. Curators had advised her to remove content not related to her art to make a more professional impression, but she was not going to do that. She explained to me:

> My Instagram has always been a mix (…). Although I have quite a relaxed attitude toward its content, at the same time, it shows you very much about what I am doing in my artistic practice. It contains many funny [private life] pictures too, but this is a conscious choice.

Later, Vellamo explained that nonprofessional content is important because her Instagram is not only for professional audiences:

> Many of my friends are following me, and for sure, they don't want to see only professional content.

On Instagram, cultural intermediation can be intertwined with nonprofessional social media communication with friends. It is not necessarily easy to tell which is which, as the professional and private relationships mix. For example, Mielikki, a video artist in her thirties, explained that, although she sorts her posts to highlight her professional content, her private content is for the people in the art community:

> Basically, they are for the same audience, as almost all my friends are artists or otherwise working with culture.

Concluding discussion

Artists try to affect how their work is perceived and engaged with (Muñiz, Norris, and Alan Fine 2014; Preece and Kerrigan 2015), thereby contributing to cultural intermediation, which helps construct the meaning and value of art (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1996; Heinich 2012; Maguire and Matthews 2014). In this article, I examined how artists accomplished this goal through their homepages and Instagram accounts

and identified several techniques of cultural intermediation. First, the artists used quality signals. They constructed perceptions of artistic quality, which reflected inter-subjective conceptions of their status and reputation and could inform decision-making in the art field (Braden 2009; Fraiberger et al. 2018; Peters and Roose 2022; Podolny 2005; Yogev 2010). Second, artists strengthened cultural intermediation through representations of their artistic practices. For example, on Instagram, the artists in this study aimed to present themselves as being very active professionally. Third, the artists made representations of their oeuvres over a wide timeframe to contribute to cultural intermediation, allowing collectors and other art field actors to evaluate and interpret artworks in relation to the artists' oeuvres and careers (Braden 2009; Wohl 2019).

On the Web and social media, art is intermediated for collectors and the general audience (Khaire 2015; Lee and Lee 2019, 2023; MacDowall and Budge 2022; Piancatelli, Massi, and Harrison 2020). I found that artists used online practices to intermediate their work for art field professionals as well, including grant juries, curators, gallerists, and other intermediaries and gatekeepers upon whose decisions their careers depend. These results reflect those of Bishop (2023), who found that cultural workers using Instagram for self-promotion tried to appeal to both everyday clients and intermediaries. In contrast to these findings, however, very few of my participants seemed to be interested in selling their art online; rather, their main target audiences consisted of art world insiders. Consequently, it is plausible to assume that the artists' online representations were conditioned by their field positions (see Bourdieu 1996; Wohl 2019). These artists were professionals without gallery representation and working within restricted production, where symbolic capital is as highly valued as economic capital. Simply put, to sustain their careers, they sought to present their work in a way that connects it to symbolic capital recognized by the art field insiders. Further, the tension between artistic and economic values, typical of restricted production, was perhaps reflected in the unease that some participants expressed toward the self-serving promotion required to sustain a career (cf. Bishop 2023, Booth and Røyseng 2022). Another interesting finding is that artists used their homepages and Instagram accounts not only as professional tools for outreach to intermediaries and gatekeepers but also for other audiences, such as to connect with fellow artists and to amuse their friends. Had I gone beyond public posts on Instagram, I might have discovered more instances in which private and professional lives intertwine.

An artist's name can become a brand, a sort of quality signal that distinguishes the producer's products from other creators and their artworks. Research on artist brands tends to focus on exceptionally successful artists, such as Andy Warhol, Ai Weiwei, Salvador Dalí, or Picasso (Kerrigan et al. 2011; Muñiz, Norris, and Alan Fine 2014; Preece 2017; Rodner and Kerrigan 2014). In contrast, I have studied ordinary artists—professionals who may be appreciated by their peers but whose names are not particularly well known by the general audience. When intermediating their art online, few seemed to be building a distinct brand. Rather, the artists in this study provided basic information on their art and institutional merits—information which they knew the field's professionals use when evaluating their work. If this was branding, then it was a type restricted by a professional genre.

The Web has brought about disintermediation in the art field. On digital platforms, artists present their art without the help of galleries or museums (Abrams 2013;

Hartmann 2020) and sell it directly to collectors (McAndrew 2023). However, my results show that new modes of self-intermediation do not necessarily bring about disintermediation: when professional artists need to demonstrate their work's value to various audiences, their online representations may remain closely connected to, and even buttress, the more traditional cultural intermediaries—art galleries in particular. This is, of course, related to the fact that art's value and meaning are outcomes of collective action among the art field's actors (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1996). Consequently, artists cannot produce recognition for their art single-handedly. Rather, when they need to prove the quality of their art online, they resort to quality signals created when traditional intermediaries recognize their work. Lee and Lee (2023) have similarly observed this phenomenon in online art markets. They showed that Saatchi Art, the online platform for selling art, needs to provide legitimacy for the art it intermediates through the reputation of its curators. In the end, the alleged power of curators to legitimize art is based on their reputations acquired in the offline art world.

In this connection, an important result is that the artists' online representations focus on offline exhibitions. This points to the central role that exhibition institutions play in the social production of value in the field of contemporary art. Many artists orient their work toward exhibitions rather than toward independent artworks (Zhang 2023). At the same time, exhibitions are a building block of institutional recognition and artistic reputation (Braden 2009; Fraiberger et al. 2018; Peters and Roose 2022). Consequently, an artist who is willing to bypass art galleries and other such intermediaries risks losing institutional recognition. Moreover, without institutional recognition, it may be difficult to have access to other resources that are allocated within established art world institutions, such as money. Running an artistic practice without such resources can be challenging (Becker 1982; Fine 2017; Hartmann 2020). Furthermore, art markets would hardly work without intermediaries who signal the value or legitimacy of artworks (e.g., Beckert and Rössel 2013; Velthuis 2005). In essence, artists seeking institutional recognition by means of exhibitions and the associated resources are relatively tightly bound to the traditional intermediaries of the field, even when the Web is offering them possibilities, or even obligations, to develop new practices of self-intermediation (cf., Bishop 2023).

In this article, I studied how certain kinds of artists—professionals of restricted production and without gallery representation—intermediate their artworks online. Further research might look at whether artists with different field positions, incentives, or ambitions resort to different intermediation strategies. Additionally, artist-run online initiatives that intentionally challenge established art field institutions (e.g., Hartmann 2020) would be a fruitful starting point for further research.[9] Constraints of disintermediation in the cultural fields should also be further explored. Such research could study cultural fields other than visual art (e.g., music, journalism, and science) to understand how their producer- or field-specific conditions of cultural intermediation constrain disintermediation processes.

Notes

1. For a more detailed definition, see Maguire and Matthews (2014).

2. This is not the first study conceptualizing artists as cultural intermediaries. Hadley (2021) investigates a project aimed at making British folk tales relevant to contemporary audiences through artistic remediation. However, our theoretical approaches diverge significantly. While Hadley examines artists intermediating old folk tales for a general audience, I study artists intermediating their own work for art world professionals, focusing on how this self-intermediation depends on and collaborates with the contributions of traditional cultural intermediaries.
3. Artists' attempts to reach audiences and customers, and to otherwise advance their careers, have also been conceptualized as promotion or self-promotion (see, e.g., Bishop 2023; Win 2014). However, in this article, I use the concept of self-intermediation because it better reflects the main idea behind the analysis: when intermediating their work, artists engage in similar meaning and value construction as traditional cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984), even utilizing and consolidating the meanings and values created by these intermediaries.
4. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, which assured the respondents of their voluntary participation and anonymity.
5. The Web texts were mostly in English.
6. Two homepages contained exhibition histories but no other CV information.
7. Some linked to positive exhibition critiques—another source of quality signals (Soro, Stott, and O'Rourke 2021).
8. I present all quotations in English, using standard language and pseudonyms.
9. My data contained two such initiatives.

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