

When organizing an exhibition surveying an artist's body of work, the convention is to frame it as a story. Usually this story includes the artist's birth ("Born in rural Romania"), a pivotal moment in their career ("She then moved to Paris, where she continued her philosophical pursuits at the Sorbonne"), and a period of striving towards artistic, cultural or political achievements ("these identities have informed his work for more than 30 years"i). These accounts of individual development, despite being factually accurate, are constructed, which is to say generated and maintained, by arts professionals. In an interview about the societal effects of quantitative metrics, sociologist Steffen Mau alludes to this practice, stating that "fictional expectations" for an artist are established "by means of a story, in the style of an auratic success story that will be realized in the future." He continues:

[In] the present-day artistic personality one looks for something that is still quite vague and speculative, but which in the future can determine whether he or she will attain a particular market position [...] It's a matter of the dynamic upward movement of a reputation, a positive vision. As always, telling this story requires the culture of experts, and thus professional critics, art marketers, or art educators and advisors.ii

Mau's assessment echoes the work of sociologist Olav Velthuis, whose book *Talking Prices* is a study of the principles used to set prices for contemporary art. According to Velthuis, narratives of an archetypal nature (e.g. tragedy, success story, Bildungsroman)—as opposed to economic laws such as supply and demand—determine art market prices, the subject of these stories being both individuals and developments occurring in the field as a whole. Like Mau, Velthuis emphasizes that these narratives are collectively told and reiterated by those working with art, while also stressing their imaginary character. He writes: "The issue here is not whether this narrative, or, for that matter, the ones that will follow, is true to historical reality or not. In fact, its truth content is questionable to say the least."iii

Such narratives contribute to the intangible quality of uniqueness and authenticity perceived in both artworks and artistic personalities, or "aura," as literary critic Walter Benjamin termed it. The experience of this phenomenon, abstract and impalpable by definition, is laden with contradiction and ambiguity. For instance, it is commonly accepted, on one hand, that contemporary art is an entirely professionalized field in which the creation of art, as well as a wide scope of related occupational activities, is undertaken for the sake of achieving specific attendant outcomes. On the other, it is equally assumed, though rarely stated outright, that visions of an artist's current or future significance may not yet, or ever be, realized (as indicated by the phrasing "fictional expectations"iv). Likewise, the distinctive qualities of an artist's work and biography are referred to

as the product of only a single individual, while it is seldom acknowledged that they are in fact bestowed upon the object or individual and as such are the collective expression of the shared beliefs, values, and lived experiences of art's discursive community.

i All parenthetical quotations from exhibition descriptions as of March 2019 on the website of MoMA, Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org>

ii Steffen Mau and Uwe Vormbusch, "Likes and Performance / A conversation between Uwe Vormbusch and Steffen Mau on the quantification of the social." *Texte zur Kunst* 110 (June 2018), <https://www.textezurkunst.de/110/likes-and-performance>

iii Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices, Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 145.

iv See also Jens Beckert, *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 93: "The fictionality of literary texts, furthermore, is openly communicated, whereas it is hidden in the case of fictional expectations."

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