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Art in America

EVERYONE'S A CRITIC (OR CURATOR)

Remember Komar & Melamid's "People's Choice" project? Begun in 1994, it surveyed adults in various countries—1,001 in the U.S.—about their preferences in painting. Based on the results, the artists then executed a made-to-order artwork. For all countries, the result was invariably a schmaltzy landscape with lots of blue and, often, a patriotic icon—*America's Most Wanted* with George Washington, for example.



Robert Mapplethorpe,
Flowers, 1986, chosen
by Jon from Kentucky.

The project was a precursor of crowdsourcing, a phenomenon gaining momentum in the art world. Known as "polling" in the political and commercial spheres, it purports to gauge the majority preference but insidiously also shapes opinion. Now not only are bloggers (expert and otherwise) and respondents weighing in on the Internet, but NBA players and Average Joes are being asked to "curate" exhibitions or, as with ArtPrize in Grand Rapids, Mich., vote for the winner of a \$250,000 prize for best artwork.

The Brooklyn Museum's upcoming "community-friendly" programming includes "Split Second: Indian Paintings" [July 13-Dec. 31]. Inspired by Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, it will feature 10 works that generated the most response from an interactive feature posted on the museum's website. And over three million online votes will determine the content of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's show "The Art of Video Games," opening in March 2012. (The winning games will be announced on May 5.)

Now Sean Kelly Gallery has also joined the crowd, so to speak. An exhibition of Mapplethorpe works, "curated" by an Average Joe or Jane from each of the 50 states, will be on view from May 6 to

June 18. Most of the 50 participants do not have art backgrounds; together they represent an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse slice of America. They were recruited for the project through various means—friends of friends and relatives or acquaintances, Facebook, Craigslist and, in North Dakota, cold-calling a bookstore.

Unlike other similar undertakings, the Mapplethorpe show is at least drawn from a vetted body of work by an important artist. The participants made their selections from the artist's archive of 2,000 silver gelatin prints and dye transfer prints. Each photo will be accompanied by a text explaining the reasons for that person's choice. Participants were asked things like, "What does this image mean to you?" and "How, if at all, has participating in this project changed your opinion of Mapplethorpe's work?"

Paul, a 52-year-old fisherman from Homer, Alaska, chose a portrait of Willem de Kooning because "there is a casualness to the photo that appealed to me." He remarks: "I found myself drawn to the portraits more than the still life or form pictures." There are very few erotic or sexually explicit images in the show, with popular preference leaning toward (covertly erotic) flowers and portraits. Jon, a 46-year-old garden designer from Lexington, Ky., recalls that when Mapplethorpe's 1990 exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum "caused such a furor, I immediately went out to buy a book on his work. [His photos] have always been attractive to me, maybe because of my Southern Baptist upbringing."

Is crowdsourcing in the arts a good thing? Will the democratization of taste/opinion kill the art expert? Or will it engage the public in a way that can only benefit the arts in the long run? One thing is certain: the art world is getting crowded.

—Stephanie Cash