

# Art

## A perspective on Cellout.me by Peter van der Graaf, Head of Department, Post-War and Contemporary Art at Christie's Amsterdam.

What is the value of a person's DNA? Or more specifically, what is the value of Jeroen van Loon's DNA?

If we want information about a person, we can find a great deal in his past: physical traits, antecedents and medical records can provide insight. However, when it comes to the 'appraisal' of the DNA, virtually every field involved focuses on the information that it may contain about the future of its 'owner'. The added value, then, is in its ability to predict. For instance, the genetic information can indicate a predisposition for certain diseases, or possible benefits of talents that are apparently innate, but have not yet been tapped.

An art appraiser, on the other hand, almost always works from a historical perspective. While the media tell us that 'past results are no guarantee for the future', it is precisely these past results that determine the value of a work of art. This does not mean that financial value cannot be attributed to works of art that have yet to prove their quality. It is known that Rembrandt used to sell shares in paintings that he had yet to paint. A commissioner that pays for a work of art in advance is effectively taking an option on the future.

The way a work of art is received is different for every person, and so appreciating the work of art is a subjective process. However, our environment definitely creates a collective sense of taste. It is the appraiser's job to recognize this collective sense of taste and to express it in a financial value. A good expert always asks himself questions: what do I see? Who has made the thing that I see? When was this work of art made? How can I place it in the artist's body of work? What is the artist's track record? How does this work relate to the time period in which it was made? How does it relate to the current time period? What is the work's history (provenance, references in literature and/or exhibition history)? Does this history add value? Who will buy the work and what will he or she pay for it?

As far as the *Cellout.me* project is concerned, I am forced to conclude that almost all of these questions are difficult to answer. Appraising conceptual art has proven to be a challenge before. When an artist no longer sees the eventual physical appearance of his work of art as the end goal, but rather as a means to represent his idea, this makes appraising the work difficult, because the thing that is eventually purchased is not necessarily the final product. In some cases, the

final product is not tangible, or the work of art is nothing more than a moment in the past, as is the case with performance art. But there are solutions to this problem; for example, one can purchase the rights to perform a piece, which have a determined financial value.

*Cellout.me*, however, also goes beyond the criteria that have been placed on appraising conceptual art: the artist does more than just offer a conceptual work of art. Through data analysis, the new owner of Van Loon's DNA may be able to know everything about the artist's creative brain in the future. Collectors often want to get as close to the artist's psyche as possible, in order to try to understand his creative urges and powers. Perhaps, Jeroen van Loon offers the possibility to analyze the artist's mind more thoroughly than ever.

If the value of this work of art is to be determined, the following question arises: in what way is Jeroen van Loon's DNA worth more than that of other people? Is an artist's DNA more valuable than that of an 'average' mortal? In comparison, artist Piero Manzoni decided to investigate the possible added value of being an artist in 1961, by canning his own faeces. He offered this *Merde d'Artiste* for sale, for the same price as gold at the time. By doing this, he wanted to demonstrate that even the faeces of an artist like Manzoni is of immense value. And he turned out to be right: in 2014, at an auction in New York, one of the cans sold for over \$200,000.

If Jeroen van Loon's works turn out to be the ultimate cultural-historical registrations of the developments within the field of genetics, he will be regarded, in a few decades, as a tremendously important part of art history. This may make the *Cellout.me* art project into a very valuable cultural icon.

What is the value of Jeroen van Loon's DNA? As I have said before, past results are no guarantee for the future. But if financial value can be attributed to Manzoni's excrements, at what price will Jeroen van Loon in his entirety sell?