

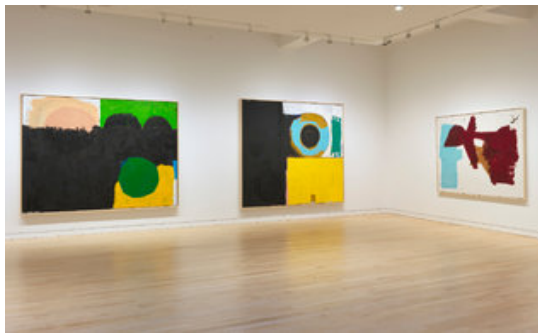
## INTERNATIONAL ARTS

# An App That Pushes Aside the Art World Curtain

By SCOTT REYBURN APRIL 8, 2016

LONDON — The process of buying and selling art, particularly contemporary works, has a reputation for opacity, but a new mobile app that promises to instantly provide price data could contribute to the opening up of the market.

The free app, called Magnus, uses digital-recognition technology similar to that of Shazam, which “hears” music to provide song titles, and Vivino, which reads wine labels and reveals ratings and restaurant markups.



Part of Joe Bradley’s “Krasdale,” his first show at the Gagosian gallery.  
Courtesy of Joe Bradley and Gagosian Gallery, photo by Robert McKeever

The user takes a photo of an artwork with a mobile device. Within seconds, Magnus provides the name of the artist, gallery price, past dealer and auction prices of other works, and the artist’s exhibition history. The image can be shared via text, email, Instagram, Facebook and other social media, and saved in the user’s digital collection.

“A lot of people are left out of the market who have the potential to buy,” said Magnus Resch, a New York entrepreneur who created the app, which was released on Friday for Apple mobile devices after three years of development. “The No. 1 reason for this is the lack of transparency.”

Galleries can be intimidating environments, dealers reluctant to divulge prices except to serious buyers, and even the seeming transparency of auctions can create misleading notions of value through the momentary whims of bidders.

“If you want to buy a product, you need to know the price and make comparisons,” Mr. Resch said. “There is virtually no data on gallery prices, and if you want information on the auction market, you have to pay for it.”

Mr. Resch, 31, is the author of the 2014 book “Management of Art Galleries.” He was formerly based in Berlin and Hong Kong, where he co-founded Larry’s List, an international database of contemporary art collectors, which he no longer manages.

“It isn’t an app built for billionaires, but for everyone interested in art,” Mr. Resch said. “This isn’t a selling platform. Our aim is to provide access to the art market and democratize it and hopefully enlarge it.”

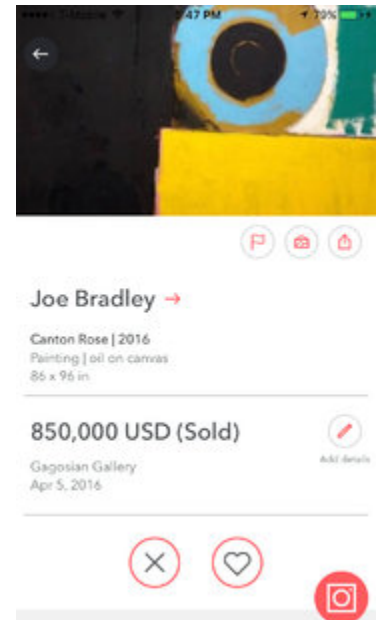
Magnus now has more than eight million gallery and auction prices compiled worldwide since 2013 by more than 200 of the app’s preliminary “trusted users.” Mr. Resch declined to specify how many of these are “primary” market prices — the first time a work has been sold — and how many are “secondary” resales at auction, for which data is available at subscription websites like artnet.com and artprice.com.

Mr. Resch said prices given by a gallery had to be corroborated by other trusted users before being added to the database. The app also includes an interactive map with information on gallery openings and shows, as well as museum exhibitions.

To see whether Magnus works as advertised, Lisa Schiff, a New York art adviser, took a smartphone loaded with the app to the Matthew Marks and Marianne Boesky galleries in Chelsea this week.

Mr. Marks was exhibiting vintage photographs by Ellsworth Kelly, Ms. Boesky new paintings by the Johannesburg artist Serge Alain Nitegeka, neither of which could be regarded as “mainstream” shows. Ms. Schiff said the app recognized and supplied current gallery prices and historic market data for all but one of the works she photographed (people often take photographs of artworks with phones in commercial galleries, and the practice is generally permitted, provided the image is for personal use.)

Ms. Schiff, who has been an adviser for 15 years and who does not know Mr. Resch, described the app as a “game changer,” though she noted she could not find any data on private resales by dealers.



A screen grab from the Magnus app showing the Bradley painting. Credit Magnus Resch

What collectors at every level most want, she said, is to be empowered and to have transparency.

“This app opens up information to the world,” she added. “More people will feel comfortable visiting galleries with this in front of them. It’s also going to affect sales at art fairs. You won’t have to wait around to talk to the dealer.”

Magnus’s potential for opening the curtains of the art trade is illustrated, for example, by its data on Joe Bradley’s first show of new works at Gagosian, “Krasdale,” which opened on April 2. Mr. Bradley, whose ever-evolving practice has referenced both Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism, is one of the most admired artists working in America. In November his 2011 painting, “Tres Hombres,” was auctioned for \$3.1 million at Christie’s.

What about his latest primary market sales? Gagosian, as a rule, does not divulge prices to the media, but the Magnus app tells us that Mr. Bradley’s eight-foot-wide geometric abstract “Canton Rose” sold at the show for \$850,000. Ms. Schiff said she was quoted the same price by Gagosian.

But others are skeptical that this kind of technology will have a positive effect on the art world.

“What concerns me most is that it will mean a lot more people will look at art solely through the lens of value,” said Glenn Scott Wright, a co-director of the Victoria Miro gallery in London. “They’ll take a picture, and within three seconds they’ll think they know the resale price of the work.”

Mr. Scott Wright said that primary market prices could change, even during an exhibition, and that secondary market valuations were “incredibly nuanced,” with much depending on the quality, condition, date and provenance of the work.

“An app isn’t a substitute for human expertise,” he added.

Victoria Milo’s gallery in Mayfair opened a show on Friday of new paintings by the Danish artist John Korner that subtly allude to of-the-moment themes like income inequality and population displacement.

Two days before the opening, Magnus indicated that the show was on its radar, but that gallery prices were not available. Mr. Scott Wright said that paintings would be priced between 10,000 pounds and 35,000 pounds, about \$14,000 to \$49,000.

The consequences, unintended or otherwise, of Magnus could give the art world plenty to think about. A lot depends on whether the app can gather a critical mass of crowd-sourced gallery prices.

If it can — and that remains a crucial “if” — then its business model has the potential to challenge established subscription-based Internet players like artnet.com and the information resource artsy.net. The former’s sale database is based solely on auctions, while the latter charges galleries to list their art and lacks a comprehensive database of prices.

The art market, unlike other industries such as music, fashion and book publishing, has been slow to fully embrace technology, especially online sales. The European Fine Art Foundation’s annual report estimated that online transactions represented just 7 percent of the value of last year’s \$63.8 billion of global sales. The uniqueness and cost of original art demands personal engagement.

Though most transactions are still completed through traditional retail channels, the influence of digital technology on the process has been undeniably transformative. Sales are now routinely predicated on high-resolution images sent by email or text, or shown on an iPad. Artists’ reputations are made on Instagram.

Will Magnus be the art trade’s next leap into the light?