The music, film, television, and print industries have been overturned by Web 2.0, yet the art world remains in transition, negotiating a complicated and relatively new relationship with social media. Nowhere is this relationship more evident than the online profiles of young artists who use social media to disseminate their work. The seemingly paradoxical dispositions of these artists are reflective of their effort to simultaneously navigate the art world and social media in tandem. On one hand, there exists a utopian vision for art on the Internet based on sharing: a world where intellectual property is part of a commons, where authorship is synonymous with viewership, and where distinctions between art and everyday life are fluid. On the other hand, the competitive art market, where an unprecedented number of artists use marketing and business strategies like mini-corporate brands to develop their online-specific personas and their output (both personal and artistic) for maximum attention and successful careers. This is a world where, arguably, today’s 17-year-old has a more intuitive handle on the techniques of advertising to direct traffic to her Tumblr than our presidential candidates had 70 years ago. As such, art after social media both divorces art from its traditional relationship to the market while also becoming the hypercharged embodiment of the market itself.

The utopian disposition of art after social media is premised on challenging three historical norms:

1. Authorship must be attributed to a work of art. The last time in history authorship was unimportant was prior to the printing press. Art’s history is now a series of aesthetic accomplishments abbreviated to first and last names. As Marshall McLuhan said: The invention of printing did away with anonymity, fostering ideas of literary fame and the habit of considering intellectual effort as private property. The rising consumer-oriented culture became concerned with labels of authenticity and protection against piracy. It was at this time the idea of copyright was born.¹

2. Art is a form of property. Whether owned and promoted as an investment, a civilizing tool for the middle class, a demonstration of aristocratic power, or a visual guide for religious narrative, art has always had an owner, ever since it ceased being used for mystical purposes.

3. Art must be placed in a context that declares it to be art. Art exists for discourse and people who recognize it as such. To this day, museums and galleries still cling dearly to the sanctity of all that appears inside those buildings as being art and all that occurs outside them as being part of everyday life. Even artwork not found within institutions carries with it the formal and conceptual codes created by those institutions.

¹OPPOSITE: Artie Vierkant, Cairns III, IV, 2011, 288 discarded Blockbuster DVD cases [courtesy of the artist]
These three mutually reinforcing conventions are what keep art tethered to its status as a commodity. Everything that has an author is automatically considered part of that author’s intellectual property. Property must be recognized through a legal context, and context is informed by the time, date, place, and all other characteristics attributable to authorship. Each convention uses the other as a support.

Another way to conceptualize property and context for art online is through David Joselit’s concepts for “image fundamentalism” and “image neoliberalism,” terms he adapts from political analysis to describe competing visions of where art must be located for its meaning to be authentically embodied. For the image fundamentalist, art’s meaning is inseparably tied to its place of origin through historic or religious significance; to remove this art from its home is to sever its ties with the context that grants the work its aura. For the image neoliberal, art is a universal cultural product that should be free to travel wherever the market or museums take it; meaning is created through a work’s ability to reach the widest audience and not through any particular location at which it’s viewed. So when the Acropolis Museum in Athens demands the Elgin Marbles be returned from the British Museum in London, proponents of image fundamentalism (Acropolis Museum) confront those of image neoliberalism (British Museum).

Image fundamentalists see the rights to property as being granted at birth through cultural or geographic specificity, while for neoliberals, art’s status as property is ensured through a work’s ability to be sold, traded, or gifted like any other owned thing in a market economy. The online audience’s attitude toward what it sees is deeply predicated on the neoliberal vision of cultural migration, but that audience’s willingness to strip images of their status as property is so aggressive as to deserve a term of its own: image anarchism. Whereas image fundamentalists and image neoliberals disagree over how art becomes property, image anarchists behave as though intellectual property is not property at all. While the image neoliberal still believes in the owner as the steward of globally migratory artworks, the image anarchist reflects a generational indifference toward intellectual property, regarding it as a bureaucratically regulated construct. This indifference stems from file sharing and extends to de-authored, decontextualized Tumblr posts. Image anarchism is the path that leads art to exist outside the traditional context of art.

Since the advent of photography, more people view images of physical artworks in magazines, books, and videos than in person. Viewership of art’s mediated representation quickly surpassed that of its physical form. Similarly, in the wake of social media, the majority of views an artist’s work gets online is often not through her own website, but through the accumulated network of reblogs, links, and digital reproductions that follow it through social media. One can think of this as the long tail of art’s viewership, where no single reblog constitutes a wider viewing audience than the artist’s own accumulated audience on her website, but all of those tiny reblogs added together (and the number of viewers they attracted) constitute a larger statistical whole. Unlike the previous mode of authorship, where the artist or institution defined context, the divide between artist and viewer becomes negligible when users of social media are able to more powerfully define the context (and thus the meaning) of an artwork.

Postmodern theorists have long advocated an understanding of reality in which there is no uniform vantage point, but instead a multiplicity of coexisting perspectives. This theory has real applicability when nearly all undergraduate art school students have blogs to insert themselves into a historical discourse with online displays of their own artwork next to that of significant artworks from the past. Sometimes these blogs’ audiences and their perceptions overlap, though sometimes understandings of an artist or artwork remain fragmented, with different
audiences claiming wildly different perceptions of the same artwork based on where they might have seen it. Today, online, there is no home base, no building or context that contains and describes art in a way that uniformly attributes meaning for all.

With Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter’s emphasis on sharing and the ease and speed of reblogging, images of artworks can travel as far and fast as an audience commands. Throughout this process contextual information is divorced from the artwork. The name, title, and date are often the first data to get lost. Like a wheel’s tire, the image gets stripped of its own form through its continued use. This creates a peculiar, inverse reaction: the more famous an art image becomes, the less its author will be attributed. Such contextual information is occasionally omitted on purpose as a way for the savvy Tumblr’s owner to wink at a historically informed audience, whose members are quickly able to identify the work without description. On other occasions, contextual information is omitted from art images because it was never included in the source, or because the image is being used for a purpose entirely unrelated to the artist’s intentions. In this case, art is appropriated by nonartists as entertainment, office humor, a visual backdrop, or pornography. Murphy’s Law dominates: images of art will be used for whatever purpose possible when placed online. Whether “shared” or “reblogged,” all content on the Internet exists to be moved from one place to the next. Through social media, art is reintroduced into everyday life, creating a loop between the two contexts.

The utopian disposition for art online most idealistically views the near-infinite world of digital images as a kind of commons, a place where the value of art is not located in its ability to be sold or critically praised but in its ability to continue to be remade or reblogged for whatever purposes its network of viewer-authors find significant. Such a disposition emphasizes art not as a commodity so much as a recyclable material. Without the traditional conception of property, authorship, or context in place, artists are using social media to strategically manage perceptions of their work—transforming it from a series of isolated projects to a streaming feed that transforms the artist’s identity into a recognizable brand. Using tagged images and text to highlight themselves through humor, intellectualism, or camaraderie, artists swap the external commodity for the commodification of themselves through online social networks. The need to socially orient oneself has now been reversed from its normal position: artists on the Internet need an audience to create art, as opposed to the traditional recipe that artists make art to have an audience. Posting work with no followers on the Internet is synonymous with the riddle “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” For these artists the answer is “no”—their work will easily go unnoticed, making their participation in social media a necessity to contextualizing what they do as art. Anton Vidokle suggested we are entering a period of “Art Without Artists”; I suggest instead that we are living in a moment of “Artists Without Art.”

For an artist using social media, it is accepted knowledge that once images of her artworks are posted online they can be taken and used by anyone using the Internet in whatever way possible. To contain the conversation around one’s own personality is the preferred strategy for recognition. Content always floats away, but if the source of that content is unique, people will continue to come back. This marketing is done on the artist’s own Facebook wall, Twitter feed, and YouTube comments. “Follow me,” “Friend me,” “Subscribe and Comment”—the endless pleas made by a generation of artists struggling to gain the greatest amount of attention. While digital images make for a lousy form of private property, the attention an artist can accrue through social media branding can be leveraged into a more traditional notion of market success as
seen through gallery exhibitions, magazine features, books, and speaking engagements and thus functions like a form of capital.

The shrinking difference between social networking for the betterment of your art career and social networking as an art project unto itself may be part of a greater trend in our contemporary understanding of celebrity. Prior to reality television, the distinction between a celebrity’s private and public life was tenuously kept but widely believed. Gossip magazines served to satisfy our lust for celebrities beyond the brief screen time we were able to spend with them. Although the narrative arcs created by gossip magazines intentionally resemble the plot lines of movies and television shows, the sensationalizing nature of these publications—disparagingly referred to as “rags”—maintained an air of uncertainty over whether the private information revealed was actually true.

Reality television effectively banished the borders between public and private by presenting a constant stream of people behaving for the viewing of the public as they otherwise would only in private. The reality television star is famous not because of her professional craft but rather due to an ability to remain visible, maximizing attention through the often banal and repetitive performances of herself. The purportedly objective, documentary-style filming of people in everyday situations made the grainy, decontextualized still images of gossip magazines into second-rate material. The lure of real embarrassment, secrets, sex, violence, and all else quickly eclipsed the fictional characters portrayed by celebrities on sitcoms and other fictions, establishing a new dominance in entertainment. Actors once devoted to their craft and to the performance of characters separate from themselves are choosing to have the camera follow them in their day-to-day lives to maintain fame in an ever-changing media landscape. For them, there is never an “off” moment. Similarly, many artists now spend as much time publicly exemplifying their lifestyles as they do making physical work.

Like the strategy of the reality star, this approach is employed by artists to gain maximum attention and provide a relevant context for themselves and their work. The equal but opposite attention strategy is to become an Aesthlete, an overproducer who believes that artistic progression will come more surely from the stress of strenuous making than from contemplative reverie. Artists, poets, and musicians produce and release content online for free and at a rate faster than ever before. There is an athleticism to these aesthetic outpourings, a manner in which individuals and projects like Lil B, Steve Roggenbuck, Jogging, or Paint FX are strategically taking on the creative act as a way of exercising some other muscle—be it a personal brand or mythology, a concept, or a formal vocabulary. Images, music, and words now become drops in a pool of derivative sweat created by working out their central themes and displaying them publicly online for all to view. The long-derided notion of the masterpiece has reached its logical antithesis, as immediacy and speed have come to trump craft and long-term contemplation for these creators.

Modes of production employed by artists are often a reflection of the larger cultural zeitgeist. For example, Duchamp’s readymade came at a time of transition when consumers were first buying mass-produced goods. During Duchamp’s era the word “readymade” referred to the objects in one’s home that were not handmade. And for the generation of artists coming of age today, it is the high-volume, fast-paced endeavor of social media’s attention economy that mimics the digital economy of stock trading, a market increasingly dominated by computer-automated algorithmic trades. For these artists, art is no longer merely traded like a stock, it’s created like one, too.
For over-producers like Lil B, the idealization of their output comes from the rate at which their content interacts with and elicits the attention of a viewing audience. By holding the constant broadcast as an idealized vision of production, editing oneself becomes a waste of resources. Time spent on anything is time worth being redeemed in attention. For the audience, what is lost in production value is gained in openness and personal connection with the creator. Every image, poem, song, video, or status update is a chance for interaction and identification. The momentary glimpse of the artist at her opening or the chance to see the rock star live on stage is leveled and spread across dozens of daily opportunities to comment, like, and reblog in your favorite artists’ Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter accounts.

Art after social media is paradoxically the rejection and reflection of the market. In practice and theory these two seemingly divergent developments are reconcilable because each contains parts of the other. For all that is communal about a decentralized network of artistic peers sharing and re-creating each other’s work, the dispersion of this work takes the shape of free market populism, of the free exchange of information sorting itself out among those willing to produce and consume it. Without a bureaucratic establishment imbuing art with value, art is free to be valued in any way possible. This setup is not unlike that of the secondary art auction market, where art critics’ opinions of the works for sale mean little to nothing, and the bidding power of a room of collectors takes precedence.

In contrast, one can look at the highly individualized pursuit of brand recognition among artists employing social media as a constant communal effort. Unlike the reality television star, young artists employing social media are not connected to a behemoth like Viacom or NBC and so must generate their popularity at a grassroots level. Brands are more often than not defined in relation to each other and imply the ongoing support of a devoted audience that is, as described in this case, oversaturated with social interaction or the presentation of artworks. There is no successful artist brand built on an island; each requires a level of collaboration with viewers willing to share, follow, friend, and comment on the object of their interest. In other words what is communal about the commons is run by an every-man-for-himself free market ideology, and what is individual about personal branding is bolstered by a need for community. It’s very fitting that the Silicon Valley–based forefathers of social media, namely the Californian Ideology technologists who juggled utopianism and capitalism in each hand, are the ones responsible for a generation of media-obsessed artists now doing the very same thing.

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