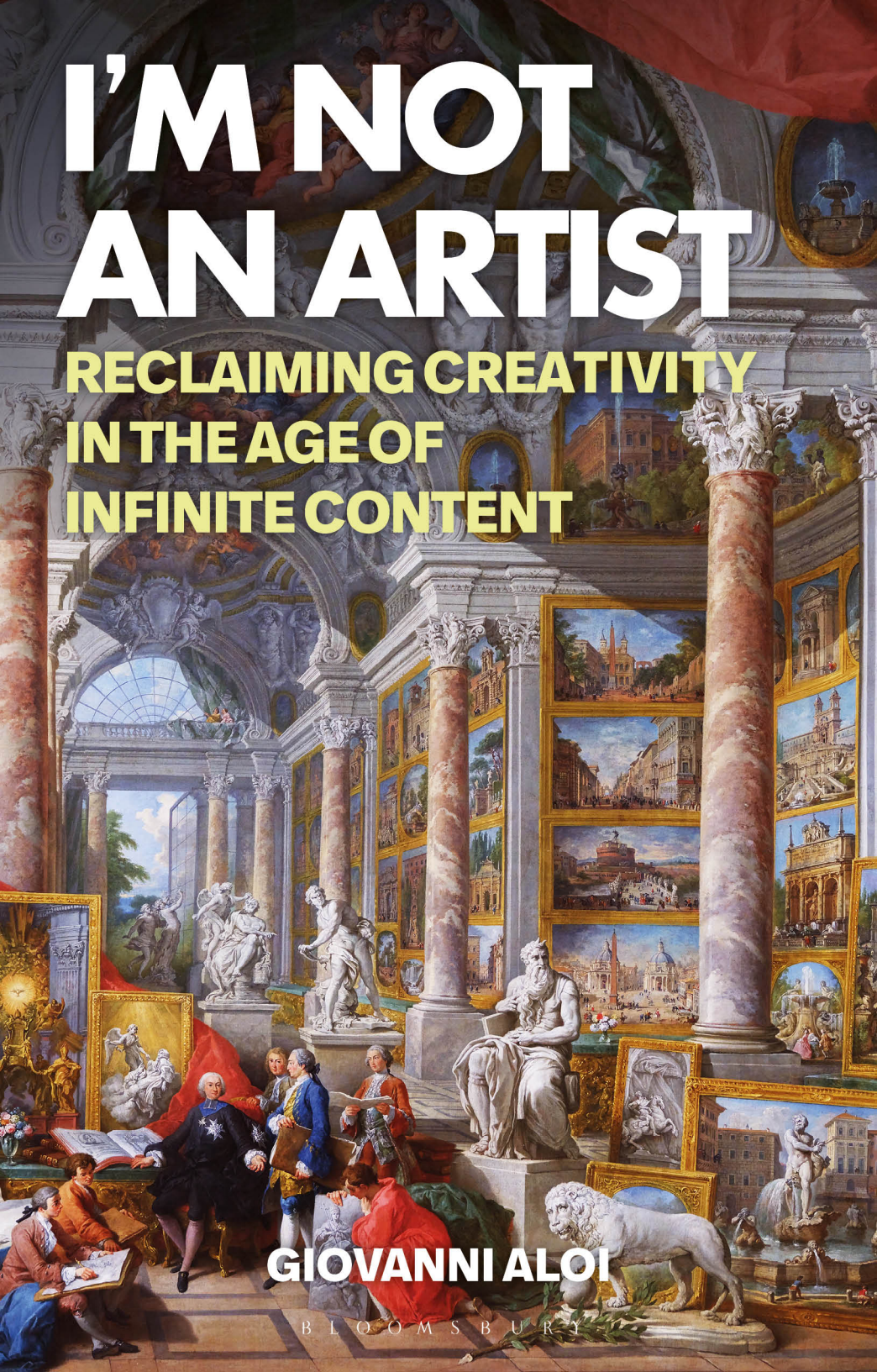
I'M NOT AN ARTIST

RECLAIMING CREATIVITY IN THE AGE OF INFINITE CONTENT



GIOVANNI ALOI

BLOOMSBURY

I'm Not an Artist

I'm Not an Artist

Reclaiming Creativity in the Age of Infinite Content

Giovanni Aloi

BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2025

Cover design:
Cover image:

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Aloi, Giovanni, author.
Title: I'm not an artist : reclaiming creativity in the age of free content / Giovanni Aloi.
Description: London ; New York : Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024020910 (print) | LCCN 2024020911 (ebook) | ISBN 9781350418776 (paperback) | ISBN 9781350417977 (hardback) | ISBN 9781350417946 (pdf) | ISBN 9781350417953 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Art--Economic aspects. | Artists.
Classification: LCC N8600 .A44 2024 (print) | LCC N8600 (ebook) | DDC 700.23--dc23/eng/20240620
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024020910
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024020911

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3504-1797-7
PB: 978-1-3504-1877-6
ePDF: 978-1-3504-1794-6
eBook: 978-1-3504-1795-3

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in India

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

Contents

Note on the Author

Dr. Giovanni Aloi is an author, educator, and curator specializing in the representation of nature and the environment in art. He is the Editor in Chief of Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture. Aloi is the author of Art & Animals (2011), Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene (2018), Why Look at Plants? The Vegetal Emergence in Contemporary Art (2019), Lucian Freud – Herbarium (2019), and the editor of Posthumanism in Art and Science (2020) Vegetal Entwinements in Philosophy and Art (2023) and Estado Vegetal: Performance and Plant Thinking (2023). Aloi has contributed to BBC radio, PBS TV, worked at Whitechapel Art Gallery and Tate Galleries in London, and currently is USA correspondent for Esse Magazine. He has curated exhibitions in the US and Europe and is co-editor of the University of Minnesota Press series Art after Nature.

This work allowed me to channel my anger – not only at the great loss of MLK Jr., but at the lack of representation of Black artists, especially Black women artists. I was an artist, but I still needed a job so I could pay my mortgage and put my girls through college. I worked as a social worker, designed enamelware and jewelry with Curtis Tann, and did some costume designs for the Inner City Cultural Center. I taught and lectured and traveled, but I always still made my art. I've never been an artist for the sake of making art to sell. I just like to do what I want and if it sells, fine.[1]

Betye Saar, 2021

The way I see it, you can either spend your life pretending you're something you're not, in the hope that deception will earn you a spot in bed next to the roses and dahlias and other floral fancypants; or you can sprout right where you are. Take root like you mean it. Laugh and grit your teeth and cast your seed and bloom your bloom because *you* know it's beautiful. That slash of sunlight you worked so hard to reach will be all the sweeter because you earned it. You chocked back the poison sprayed down on you; you dodged the spades and blades bent on turning you under. You grew stronger through it all.[2]

Luke Ruggenberg, 2020


I'M
NOT AN
ARTIST

Introduction

After hours spent tantalizing each other at the dead of night, two leopard slugs (*Limax maximus*) crawl up a tree and curl into a tight hug. Only then, together, they secrete a viscous thread from which they suspend in mid-air. Clutching over the abyss—love-trapezists in the dark—they gently twirl. As they gain speed, white, translucent organs flare out from the sides of their bodies, tightly intertwine, and slowly unfold into the shape of peony petals. Leopard snails are hermaphrodites. Sperm trickles through the mucous membranes. Both snails will carry eggs. At unison, just as quickly as they unfolded, the reproductive organs retract. The whirling slows as the hug unwinds. Strained, they let go and fall to the ground.

* * *

A small mound of blueberries, a cluster of white shells, Coca-Cola bottle caps, a scatter of teal petals, and shards of glass form a constellation surrounding a tall structure intricately woven from twigs. Shimmering in the dappled light that filters down through the eucalyptus canopy, the colors shine amid the earthy tones of the forest floor like an unfinished Byzantine mosaic—vibrant accents arranged to attract attention in a world where chromatic exuberance could spell death. Although little seems to happen at first, the artificer of this architectural marvel returns to tidy things up and add more found objects to his Derek Jarman-esque garden. Dressed in olive-gray and tan plumage, crowned by a fierce, bright orange crest, *Amblyornis subalaris*—also known as the striped gardener bowerbird—begins work on his plot at the earliest signs of spring.

Each bird has a pointedly personal sense of style. Composition and color palettes vary from individual to individual. Like the gardens we tend, those arranged by bowerbirds are a kind of self-portrait—mirrors of personality, character, and inclination. But the bowerbird's garden is not simply a secret retreat. The bird arranges and composes with an audience in mind. Male rivals keep a close eye on each other's creations. They can get jealous, or sometimes even flirty. Theft of ornaments is not uncommon and in extreme cases vandalism occurs, too. Once everything is set, female bowerbirds stop by to appraise the skills and sophistication of prospective partners. If suitably seduced by the arrangement, a female might take a closer look. Encouraged, the male bursts into a frenzied choreography of desire. But female bowerbirds are discerning connoisseurs—more often than not, they glance over, preen their feathers, and fly away.

Image 1 (facing page). Giovanni Aloi, *I'm Not an Artist*, 2019, photo concept Giovanni Aloi, photography Chris Hunter. © Giovanni Aloi

Animals Don't Make Art

"Do animals make art?" This question annoyingly resurfaces with impeccable regularity in popular culture. Western philosophy and art history have never been in doubt: the answer is no. And the odd chimpanzee, elephant, pig, and even dolphin who've painted questionable abstract canvases—admittedly with some commercial success—haven't changed that verdict one bit.[1]

Despite our growing acceptance that humans are animals (as proposed by Darwin in *The Descent of Man*, 1871), many of us still find that idea demeaning.[2] Faced with the truth, we prefer to settle for a more comfortable iteration of the concept: if we humans *are* indeed animals then we certainly are the best of all species, always, at everything—no doubt about it. The idea that animal intelligence can compare, or even exceed, ours poses an enormous threat to our inflated human egos. The "animals don't make art" claim is simply a manifestation of this profound insecurity. What's worse is that, over time, it has been used to sanctify art as an exclusively human, and highly ennobling, activity. The assumption is that other animals don't make art because they lack talent, skills, and self-reflexivity. Their instincts entrap them. We believe that animals are endlessly enslaved by their biological needs. So, where does that leave us, human-animals, and our presumed exceptionalism?

Scientists have debunked these misconceptions for over a century, but they continue to proliferate among art historians. For a telling example, look no further than Laurie Schneider Adams's *The Methodologies of Art* (1996), which, in its introduction, boldly claims: "All the creative arts—including the visual arts—separate the human from the nonhuman."[3]

According to Schneider, spider's webs and bird's nests are the result of some mysterious genetic programming. These stupendous engineering feats are, according to her, made without any real clue, observation, or consideration—animals simply don't know what they are doing. Schneider, who has never studied birds or arachnids, even goes so far as to claim that animals have no understanding of their environments.[4] This could not be further from the truth: spiders measure distances (without tape measures), tie and cut threads (without knives), and fling themselves into the air to secure supporting web-strands to branches and other scaffolds. Their materials are wholly bio-crafted, produced by a special set of glands. What can a human build only with a substance produced from their glands? We idolize the embodied evolutionary genius that has given us opposable thumbs but we dismiss the same process when it has fashioned spider's backs and bird's beaks into incredibly apt weaving instruments.

Without hands or the aid of machinery (created by their ancestors), a bird can build a nest in two days. Thousands of twigs, hair, fibers, grass blades, and artificial materials are carefully sourced, transported, and woven into place. Now, think of the cursing that accompanied the assemblage of that IKEA bookcase . . . Crafting webs or nests requires discernment, not to mention the ability to judge the suitability

of a location and its exposure to the elements, as well as considering safety from predators. Animals don't just build nests anywhere at random, hoping for the best. Of course, sometimes their judgment, like ours, can be off. But that's another story . . .

Art historians have for centuries championed the fictitious notion that the "artistic impulse"—as some like to call it—is innate in the human: a godly quality we call "genius." In animals, the same quality is called "instinct": a "programmed behavior." Seemingly innate creative expression elevates the human, but it reduces the animal to an unreasoning machine. Even if it appears at first peripheral to the subject of this book, I contend that this deeply biased perspective is actually central to the issues that plague the art world today and that predetermine the societal roles artists are confined to play.

Let's strip the picture of its contextual frame: the leopard slugs we encountered a few pages ago, in essence, stage a performance piece complete with suspense, climatic peaks, and a dramatic finale worthy of Martha Graham Dance Company or Shen Wei's conceptual prowess. As Deleuze and Guattari had already remarked in 1991, the bowerbird acts like an artist—we could go as far as claiming—in the style of Elsa Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven, Kurt Schwitters, or Betye Saar who regularly made art with found objects.[5] Or even like experimental film director Derek Jarman, who in the late 1980s constructed a whole garden, around his Dungeness cottage, out of washed-ashore things.[6]

But as much as I disagree with Adams as well as other art historians and philosophers who intentionally devalue the creative intelligence of animals,[7] in the end, I must concede that perhaps animals *don't* make art. At least not in the sense that we now conceive art in the West. Not because they are not intelligent enough or because they lack consciousness—but just because art is a human construct in which animals truly have no interest. Animals don't make art because what we call art today is the material sedimentation of cultural, historical, and economic relations. But perhaps more importantly, because Western art has become an inbred system of fetishization that animals would not know what to do with. The cabinets, the galleries, the museums, the collections—at the core of Western art, as film critic André Bazin argued, lies a "mummy complex":[8] the preservation of beauty and youth, the desperate desire to stop the passing of time. If one thing truly separates human from animal creativity, it is our positioning toward the rest of the natural world. Animal creativity is steeped into the *now* of the seasons' flow. In opposition, our determination to extrapolate ourselves from nature's rhythms, to immortalize, has alienated us and it has greatly reduced our creative potential. It has crafted and perpetuated the figure of the artist genius as a lone, self-obsessed monolith. Both outcomes, I argue in this book, are detrimental to the very core of what bowerbird, snail, spider, and artist have in common: *creativity*.

The exceptionalism that Western thinkers have attributed to art has been implicitly utilized not just to belittle the inventiveness of animals, but also to devalue the art forms of numerous civilizations, from Africa to Asia, Oceania, and South America,

that were previously considered "primitive" and thus less than human (when human only meant white, male, and preferably cisgender).[9] The misogyny and racism that still pervade the art world today are ingrained in this genealogy rooted in colonialist ideologies. Over time, colonialism and capitalism have deliberately mistaken creativity with art and art with creativity. The two are not the same, although there can be no art without creativity. Creativity always comes first. Creativity is the driving force that governs all life on Earth. Only if we can bring ourselves to abandon the supremacy of the myth of art as a mark of anthropocentric distinction, new ways of being an artist will become visible to us. Dismantling the myth of the artist is our first step.

Artist Mythologies, Genealogies, and Responsibilities

I'm Not an Artist is a book about art, artists, art history, and the art market as well as the role that creativity plays in our lives and how our creative potential become limited as we trap ourselves in antiquated power systems and superfluous professional identities. Current discourses on identity politics, diversity and inclusion, multidisciplinary approaches, collaborative practices, and the growing critique of the colonialist foundations that underpin our cultural institutions, have radically changed our conception of art. It is now time for creative individuals to engage in an important and honest process of self-critical reconsideration.

Curator Okwui Enwezor noted that radical questionings of the artistic personality tend to coincide with social and political crises that "force reappraisals of conditions of production, re-evaluation of the nature of artistic work, and reconfiguration of the position of the artist in relation to economic, social and political institutions."[10] The Covid-19 pandemic and the worldwide social unrest that followed George Floyd's murder are without doubt the kind of epochal turning point Enwezor refers to. The devastating cultural earthquakes that have rocked the art world in the wake of the Hamas/Israel war are further demonstration that a deep cultural crisis is still in full swing.[11] It is in the aftermath of the devastation caused by these events that new and old paths might become visible. It is in the trail of destruction that we might redirect our ambitions and envision new futures. But will we seize the opportunity to build the nonelitist, multicultural, and fairer art world we truly need? Will we dare to forsake the virtue signaling of social media posts to finally dismantle the ideologies that, up until now, have defined our life journeys, aspirations, identities, and beliefs? Unfortunately, amid widespread dissent, it seems that institutions are simply keen to return to business as usual. Modernism was haunted by the question, "What is art?" Postmodernism resolutely asked, "What is an institution?" Today, honestly asking ourselves "What is an artist?" might just help us reconfigure art for the twenty-first century along with its institutions.

The word "artist" is the tip of the iceberg. Much more than a label or a title, it is an ideologically, dogmatically, and discursively overloaded archetypal myth. Centuries ago in the West, it simply defined the identity of a white man who painted or sculpted

for the church or the very rich. But what does it mean today? What does one hope to accomplish by becoming "an artist"? When can one legitimately claim to have become one? Is it a full-time job, a vocation, a lifetime pursuit? Who is a failed artist? What is artistic success? Is it not perplexing that over the past century we have come to accept that a urinal tipped on its side can be art, but we still cannot get our heads out of that paper bag we call "the artist"?

Archetypal myths are primordial—legends that hold enormous power over us. Like clouds, they invite us to look up into the sky but cast dark shadows onto the ground. They conceal reality. As timeless stories, myths anchor our dreams to a past that never truly was, while promising impossible futures. Carl Jung, the psychoanalyst who deeply delved into the intimate relationship between art and religion, argued that myths satisfy the psychological need for contact with the "collective unconscious"—a kind of hive-mind in which our human instincts and ancient core ideas deposit and sediment.[12] Residing within the collective unconscious, Jung identified twelve mythical archetypes that we refer to as models—"universal images that have existed since the remotest times."[13] Alongside the mythical figure of the mother, the wise old man, the caregiver, the outlaw, and others stands that of the "creator/artist." There's truth in Jung's theorization, but ironically the foundations of his theory are not based on firsthand observation. He wrote:

> Analysis of artists consistently shows not only the strength of the creative impulse arising from the unconscious but also its capricious and willful character. The biographies of great artists make it abundantly clear that the creative urge is often so imperious that it battens onto their humanity and yokes everything to the service of the work, even at the cost of ordinary health and human happiness.[14]

Myths only breed myth—Jung's artist myth is crafted out of biographies. As a result, his mythologized artist-model is a terrible cliché: a timeless, mercurial egotist, driven by uncontrollable instincts masterminded by authors and poets. Biographies are nothing more than dramatized fiction with, in the best-case scenario, a backbone or at least a rib or two, of truth. But their real mission is to immortalize and aggrandize. From murkiness to glitzy, they often intentionally omit the grit of the administrative banality that all artists can't escape through their rise to fame. The Romantic myth of the artist as a tortured, misunderstood, and nonconformist genius-rebel who stands outside society is a work of fiction. Art historians, collectors, novelists, and more recently film directors have carved, embroidered, and perpetuated the stereotypical idea of the artist simply because it sells. So why is this myth dangerous? Myths have a tendency to naturalize—their legendary roots reach so deep into our minds that they eventually camouflage as truth. They sediment in our thoughts from a young age and, before we realize it, they have molded the landscapes of our future.

I'm Not an Artist desacralizes the mythical figure of the artist, not as a simple gesture of deliberate spite but because the artists I admire the most have already rejected this title, or at least its myth, and its archetypal aura in the knowledge that it hinders—rather than enhances—their creative potential. I am not the first (and

certainly won't be the last) to take issue with the mythical notion of the artist. "Every man is an artist," Joseph Beuys proudly proclaimed in the 1950s in an attempt to dismantle the persistent conception of exclusivity associated with it. But discontent predates the radicalisms of post-Second World War, revolutionary conceptualists.[15] Left-wing artists John Heartfield and George Grosz were among the very first to wish the term "artist" gone as early as 1920:

> He who wishes his business with the brush to be regarded as a divine mission is a scab. Today the cleaning of a gun by a Red soldier is of greater significance than the entire metaphysical output of all the painters. The concepts of art and artist are an invention of the bourgeoisie and their position in the state can only be on the side of those who rule, i.e. the bourgeois caste. The title "artist" is an insult. The designation "art" is an annulment of human equality. The deification of the artist is equivalent to self-deification.[16]

These words ring true today as global economies struggle to recover from the pandemic, as social justice finally gains impetus, wars threaten global stability, and cultural institutions worldwide crumble. In this context, appraising the power of the word "artist" is part of a broader process of decolonization. Decolonizing knowledge, institutions, and practices entails a thorough and often complex deconstructive approach aimed at identifying the concealed legacy of colonialist ideologies that we still carry with us: sexism, racism, discrimination, patriarchy, hetero-/cis-normativity, and settler-mentalities among others.[17]

Archetypal labels embody all this and therefore, today, they have become uncomfortable. This was clearly expressed by the director of the 18th Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2023, Lesley Lokko. In the press release, Lokko said:

> We have deliberately chosen to frame participants as 'practitioners', not 'architects' and/or 'urbanists', 'designers', 'landscape architects', 'engineers' or 'academics' because it is our contention that the rich, complex conditions of both Africa and a rapidly hybridising world call for a different and broader understanding of the term 'architect'.[18]

Let's then imagine a world without artists! Identity-related labels define who we are and limit what we can do. Some might claim that the "artist" title, like a magic cloak, gives them license to do what others can't. This might be true in some environments. But the word still entraps just as much as it might free. Artistic expressions are the fiber of our lives. They help us rethink, reenvision, and articulate problematic legacies in new and constructive ways. However, artistic expressions have, like almost everything else in our lives, been packaged, commodified, and branded. If we acknowledge that criticality has become a core value in contemporary art, then we cannot afford to ignore the colonialist and capitalist systems ingrained in the myth of the artist that still permeates the minds and identities of so many of us.

Although it wasn't necessarily born in the West, the myth of the artist was institutionalized and commodified there in ways that today globally define museums, schools, books, music, films, adverts, fashion, as well as the art that younger generations

can and want to make. The boldness of Michelangenlo, Leonardo's genius, Caravaggio's mercuriality, Monet's obsessiveness, Munch's alienation, Van Gogh's torturdness, Kahlo's vulnerability, and Basquiat's anger—the artist myth is a deadly cocktail. How can we truly position ourselves in a critical way if we remain unaware of the cultural genealogies that we implicitly perpetuate? To blindly endorse the artist model means to subscribe to its values, its histories, its exclusionary and discriminatory approaches.

Institutional critique has run its course and yielded comparatively little of concrete usefulness.[19] In the 1960s, artists fiercely accused museums, galleries, and the market of "cultural confinement," but an intricate game of self-interest never allowed them to completely break free. The same is still true today. The top-tier museums, blue-chip commercial galleries, and art schools have also entrapped creativity into a game of toxic and narcissistic dependencies. The financial crisis and mass layoffs early in the pandemic revealed the extent to which crucial issues have been allowed to fester since the 1990s. Not only, since then, have museums and universities failed to sufficiently diversify staff, programs, and collections and adequately represent diversity, but their directors enjoy the benefits of corporate pay scales while educators, curators, and the vast majority of artists—who actually create content—scrape the bottom of the barrel.

Today, the mainstream art world is defined by deeply unjust, inequitable, and exploitative neoliberal ideals and logics. Insiders know all too well that, despite its efforts to portray itself as a compassionate and benevolent environment, beneath the surface the art world is dominated by reckless and greedy institutions and investors that act like corporations. How did we get here? Why do fierce criticism and accusations only result in very slow, rather than momentous and radical, change? At least in part, artists, curators, and art historians are to blame. Enough of accusing institutions as if they were untamable monsters. We must also hold ourselves accountable. It is time to recognize that, as a creative force, we have actively contributed to the politics of exploitation, extraction, and exclusion that have shaped the art world. We must be the change we want to see.

From Myth to Ecologies

I'm Not an Artist emerges from my experience as an LGBTQIA+ educator, curator, editor, and maker who has studied and worked in higher education as well as some of the most influential museums in the United Kingdom and the United States for over twenty years. I am an immigrant, first-generation college student of working-class background who, out of necessity, has always worked full-time to support his studies. Much of the knowledge I share in this book was developed through firsthand engagement in the mainstream art world and learning the workings of the art market directly from industry specialists. I've seen artists rising to stardom, but I've also watched students and colleagues damage their lives (and the lives of others) in pursuit of unachievable or antiquated career models as they blindly followed the myth of the artist. Hand on heart, much of this unnecessary disappointment is caused by art schools. My colleague James Elkins has written extensively on how art schools fail art

students. His polemical *Why Art Cannot be Taught* (2001), which I highly recommend, takes to task the shortcomings of institutional art teaching, particularly focusing on the structure and function of evaluation processes that end up hindering creativity.[20]

While Elkins's book looks inward at the flawed pedagogical approaches of art schools, *I'm Not an Artist* looks outward at how art schools fail to adequately prepare and guide artists, art historians, and curators to understand who they can be in the contemporary art world. Students are never taught how the market truly works, what successful artists do to lead rewarding, long-lasting, and financially sustainable careers, how being a professional artist entails substantial amounts of administrative pragmatism and diplomatic maneuvering, how networking really works . . .

A coincidence? Over the past ten years, many art schools around the world have closed, drastically downsized, or merged. Enrolment figures are down. Art schools are in crisis.[21] The issues I address in this book have emerged, in part, from conversations with colleagues and class discussions with students. It is from them that I have learned how uncomfortable they feel with an outdated artist label they are now paying exorbitant fees to acquire. As nobiliary title and badge of honor, the title "artist" today conjures up self-indulgent and aggrandizing stereotypes that often reflect onto terribly arrogant attitudes—purity, rarity, and preciousness—ideas that crumble in a world stifled by glaring and no longer ignorable social injustice. Nowadays, the widely held belief that an artist is freer (whatever that means) or more authentic than other creative people seem steeped in narcissism. That the artist is implicitly a nonconformist rebel sensitive to things others remain pathologically blind to reeks of pompous delusion. Why do we continue to implicitly fetishize the romantic myth of the artist in popular culture, allowing its clichés to determine our creative potential, since it belongs to the obsolete category of colonial heroes?

I'm Not an Artist is written for anyone who might be considering a career in the arts—aspiring artist first and foremost, but also art historian, curator, or art critic—or who already has a career that's not yet working out as they hoped. Or for current students who feel confused about their art school experience; for parents who are thinking about remortgaging their homes to send their late teens to art school; and for anyone wishing to support them in an informed and realistic way. If none of the above applies to you (yet) this book is also written as an alternative, accessible, and irreverent introduction to the art world. My hope is that it might empower and help readers to understand and engage with art beyond the trite clichés of mainstream culture. Most importantly, this book explains what the myth of the artist is, how it developed, how it can harm people's lives, and how to avoid it.

In 1973, Joseph Beuys clarified what he meant when he said, "Every man is an artist":

> Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. This most modern art discipline – Social Sculpture/Social Architecture – will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism.[22]

Beuys's conception of the social organism implied an important perspective that aimed to desacralize the idea of the artist as a romantic hero in favor of a new social model of collaboration and interconnection. Unfortunately, the art world has been eager to commodify, rather than assimilate Beuys's ideas. This is why this book explains the art market and the art world as an "ecosystem." This approach is derived from my research and publications on the subject of nature and ecology in art,[23] as well as from the work of prominent contemporary thinkers like Donna Haraway, Bell Hooks, Amitav Gosh, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Anna Tsing, Vandana Shiva, Timothy Morton, and others who have over the past couple of decades decentralized the fictitious certainties we have inherited from colonialism to make room for new models of being in this world.[24]

Already in 1992, French philosopher Félix Guattari had clearly evidenced the all-important links that tie environmental, social, and mental ecologies. In *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, Guattari exhorts:

> How do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity—if it ever had it—a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species such as music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love and compassion for others, the feeling of fusion at the heart of the Cosmos?[25]

So much is at stake in this essential and desperately needed process of reconfiguration. Thinking ecologically means to prioritize conceptions of collaboration, interdependency, and reciprocity. It means to acknowledge that, in ecosystems, all "participants" play equally important and indispensable roles. Ecosystemic conceptions help us reshape notions of relativity, scale, and time. Ecosystems are not perfect. They are not stable. We have to relinquish all ideals of purity and perfection—notions dear to the Western classical canon—in order to conceive an ecosystemic art world in which we can all fully and meaningfully exist. Ecosystems are by nature unbalanced, and survival entails struggle, awareness, and adaptation—they are not utopias. Like bacteria, fungi, plants, and animals that dwell in ever-evolving and overlapping worlds, creative individuals must develop a detailed understanding of their environments in order to thrive, especially when circumstances become adverse. Furthermore, ecosystemic notions encourage us to be present and form symbiotic connections with others, rather than conforming to institutional hierarchies. As Timothy Morton puts it, "the ecological thought is the thinking of interconnectedness"[26]: it is a process and a becoming; a frame of mind that can allow artists to reposition themselves, their practices, and, in the process, tilt the axis of the art world.

The artist myth, at its core, is anti-ecological; it is thoroughly anthropocentric—it positions the exceptionalism of human genius at the center of the world, alone, and above everything else. It will be impossible to survive in today's ecosystemic art world with the artist myth firmly planted in one's minds. Many artists learn this to their own

cost. Understanding the art market is essential to avoid becoming its next victim. Whichever kind of artist one wishes to be, whatever kind of art one makes, there are many ways to have a fulfilling and sustainable creative life. Art school teaches students how to make art but not how to be artists.

Overview

This book is organized in two parts. You can begin reading from either one. Start from the first to develop your knowledge about the myth of the artist through time and learn what art history books often omit. Canonical art history celebrates artists on the grounds of their influence and artistic innovation. Instead, this book focuses on their ingenuity, industriousness, and the behind-the-scenes strategizing that helped them lead fulfilling careers. In this section, I unashamedly follow the "power and money trail" to deconstruct the myth of the Western artist genius. Aspiring and up-and-coming artists must understand the power of this mold in order to break it and make clear and informed choices about the directions of their careers. I thus map power networks between dealers, collectors, art historians, institutions, and artists to reveal the economic and social structures that have perpetuated the artist's myth. Who crafted the business models others followed and why? Who mythologized who and how? Who reinvented the role of the artist during the last century and to what end? What can less advantaged creative individuals learn from the strategies that made other artists famous?[27]

The second part of the book focuses on the contemporary art world and the contradictions, hypocrisy, and paradoxes that characterize the relationship between artists, the education system, the art market, and money in the age of free infinite content. Often, books on the art market quickly become too technical and undecipherable to the nonexpert.

Toward the end of the book, I discuss the personal challenges and conundrums that creative individuals face today. I break down the capitalist-hierarchical structure that defines the art world in order to reclaim creativity from a system that no longer values it in a genuine sense.

I'm Not an Artist concludes with a series of short conversations with contemporary practitioners of all kinds who discuss the myth of the artist and their personal approaches to creativity. In the context of this book, their voices are as important as mine. These conversations were led after this book was written. I wanted their voices to complement or contradict mine, to expand the scope of my argument. Although I boldly pronounce the word "artist" redundant in this book, I purposely refrain from proposing a substitute because I believe that it would be both arrogant and wrong of me to attempt to replace an outmoded paradigm with a new one. Every creative individual, collective, and community is now in charge of crafting new, ever-evolving, and fluid models. I hope that this book will give its readers, especially the younger ones, the confidence to try their hands at creating their own unique models, together. In the end, that's all that counts.

And just to avoid any misunderstanding, this book is not an attempt to tell a global art history. Its predominantly Western focus is intentional and necessary to dismantle the artist's myth. At a time in which emphasis on alternative and neglected histories of art is predominant, this book might seem out of sync with contemporary discourse. However, the opposite is true—the Western myth of the artist haunts artists of all colors, nationalities, and genders around the world. We certainly no longer need to focus on the Western tradition to celebrate its presumed superiority and greatness, but we should not forget it quite as quickly either. Leaving it behind us in a rush will allow it to haunt us for eternity. More deconstruction of its power tropes is needed before we can break free from the myths that still rule the system. In a provocative way, this book is a contribution to that essential and often painful process.

Finally, this book is not against the arts, art schools, or the humanities. The opposite is true: my arguments are born out of the love I have for all the creative individuals I work and collaborate with every day. It is not my intention to dissuade anyone from pursuing a creative career in the arts—I have so far had a highly rewarding one myself. Those who claim that there's no money or future in it are likely ill-informed. But they are right about one thing: there's little payback in the romantic artist model that might lead people to consider this field in the first place. We just need to steer clear of the "A-word." It is toxic. This book is an invitation to reinvent entirely what being an artist means and pursue that, whatever form it might take, with utter conviction. My aim is not to discourage dreaming, but rather to give guidance on how to dream better and safer, and with our eyes wide open.

3 Modern Ecologies: Markets, Marketeers, and Alliances

Fearing the Mob: Elitism and Art

Cigarette smoke fills the air—wrapped in a stone-and-sparkles studded leotard a gymnast pirouettes from one side of the hall to the other surrounded by a crowd of drunken punters loudly cheering, heckling, and jeering. People dance, music plays all night. The loud chatter squeezes out even the occasional silence between the notes—the working classes play just as hard as they work. Magicians, mimes, singers, and comedians—a 9-pence ($3 today) entrance fee buys hours of entertainment.

By the 1860s, the figure of the *lion comique* started to dominate the bill, making fun of the dandies and champagne Charlies, mocking the frivolity of those who spent time people-watching instead of working, and the flamboyant fashion items they flaunted.[1] Ridiculing the upper classes exorcised their power. For a brief moment, in the fictional realm of the music hall, workers had the upper hand—booing at the effigies of those who have it easy validated their principles.

The music, the dancers, the drinking, the excitement—every weekend, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the working classes invented modern mass entertainment. By the 1880s, the music hall moved from the suburbs to the heart of cities, courting middle-class audiences—they quickly garnered a pretty terrible reputation. To the upper middle classes, performance after performance, the music hall—the antithesis of the museum—eroded the integrity of the ancient arts. Above it all, looming large was the fear that financial gain took precedence over the purity of expression.

Eventually art landed the entertainment bill. The worst crime the music hall could commit: to blur the boundaries between *tableaux vivants*, classical sculpture, painting, theater, and photography. Art appeared to have been swallowed up into a vortex of hedonistic superficiality that baffled and horrified the upper classes. It had lost its moral compass, dignity, and respectability—they thought . . . and most artists agreed with them, too.

For over two hundred years, academies, professional juries, the state, and the church (for much longer) had prevented art from "going astray." Even Charles Baudelaire, the staunch supporter of "the painter of modern life," dreaded the popularization of art. To him photography was a vulgarizing blight that indulged the "stupidity of the multitude"; its popularity "a disease of imbeciles."[2] While open-mindedly advocating for the need to "discover whether we possess a specific beauty, intrinsic to our new emotions,"[3] he also loathed mechanical reproduction as the new opium of the people. Baudelaire's contradictory stance typified the dandy: the upper-middle-class intellectual who incites the revolution from the comfort of his armchair. Remember Courbet? Baudelaire was acutely aware of the modern condition in which the nonaristocratic intellectual must sell their soul to make a living selling their art. Those who decide to push the envelope and make new, cutting-edge art implicitly entered a kind of Faustian pact; forever freed from the shackles of classicism but endlessly enslaved to an unforgiving market-master.[4] By the end of the nineteenth century, it became apparent that the only social mark of distinction left to the modern

intellectual was taste. With Baudelaire, a new self-styled cultural aristocracy was born—one that in more than one way repackaged older forms of elitism into a multitude of new aesthetic and conceptual propositions that, movement after movement, intentionally made art less and less accessible to the masses. The romantic myth of the artist as misunderstood genius had at this point become a far too real, self-fulfilling prophecy.

Markets, Marketeers, and Selling Out

Both the history of the Netherlands and the history of art were drastically altered by the economic boom that followed the end of the Eighty Years' War with Spain in 1648. Sometimes it was the family members of artists who would seize the favorable opportunity to start an art business. Johannes Vermeer was represented by his relatives who also branched out into selling the work of others. Antiques traders who specialized in maps, books, and furniture became art dealers.[5] Some would commission work for prospective clients, others traveled Europe's estates in search of hidden treasures. But regardless of what they sold and how they did it, the key objectives of the dealer were to instill interest and generate demand. Successful salespeople have always been great storytellers. They know how to fill a picture or an object with a universe of wonder. By the second half of the nineteenth century, they had carved for themselves a special place in the art world that is still just as important today.

A great exponent of this lineage, Ernest Gambart was among the first dealers to open a successful art gallery in London in the late 1850s. At around the same time, in New York, Michael Knoedler established the first free-entry gallery (a 25-cent admission charge was usual), setting a trend that would enable an ever-growing cultural circle to form around a new art market. But exhibiting and selling through a gallery rather than the official institutions proved highly controversial, at least until the end of the century. At times, marginalization leads to trailblazing originality. It was in fact a number of highly ingenious, talented, determined, and often unacknowledged, women who fueled the collecting world of early modern art. In 1901, Berthe Weill opened her Parisian gallery—with the money set aside for her dowry—as "a place for youth." This was the slogan emblazoned on her business cards. Weill launched Picasso's career by placing his drawings in important collections.[6] In the United Kingdom, Lucy Carrington Wertheim promoted the work of Henry Moore, Walter Sickert, and Cedric Morris.[7]

The growing success of commercial galleries raised eyebrows at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and the Parisian Salon. In these upper-class circles exhibiting in a commercial gallery could taint an artist's reputation and permanently thwart careers. In the early days of the art market, enthusiasm and anxiety were key ingredients of a modern cocktail. Artists, art critics, and dealers mapped uncharted territories, negotiating and forging new alliances strong enough to withstand the staunch opposition of ingrained institutional power. Risk-taking was the only way forward and affiliations could make or break careers; a bold marketing maneuver

could bring a financial windfall *but still* destroy an artist's legacy (sometimes temporarily, at other times for good).

John Everett Millais, one of the most revered masters of British art, began his career in the 1850s as a member of the rebellious Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Over thirty years later, he sold a work entitled *Bubbles* to the soap company A. & F. Pears for promotional use. The substantial fee of £2,200 (the equivalent of £305,000 today) included the copyright ownership and the freedom to add a bar of their soap to the original. Millais's commercial "sell-out" was demonized by the press and even ridiculed in a successful novel.[8]

Writing mythologizes. It makes or breaks artists' careers. As Zhang Yanyuan and Giorgio Vasari had amply demonstrated hundreds of years prior, writing anchors the material permanence of art to the bedrock of history. By the end of the nineteenth century, critics and art historians had become powerful players in the new art world. Durand-Ruel's savvy and manipulative use of the printed word as a promotional tool had amply demonstrated its power. The new art history and art criticism were shaped by money and interest just as much as they were by the desire to promote innovation. Rubbing shoulders with dealers and auction houses, critics and art historians became part of a complex and essential validating ecosystem. Yesterday as today, they influence taste. While some helped women artists to emerge from obscurity, the new modern art world was still dominated by male collectors who imposed their taste on mostly male dealers, who in turn worked closely with male art historians, critics, and gallery owners in order to fulfill the collectors' desires. Furthermore, the white supremacist feedback loop that throughout the last century has kept (and in large part still does) male artists at the top has also resulted in a substantial sidelining of BIPOC artists. In the United States as well as in Europe, African American artists were seriously held back by racism and prejudice. Artists determined to make a living through their art had little to no choice but to become part of this system. And to become part of it wasn't easy either.

Through sheer talent and the ability to develop strong networks of supporters and collectors, Robert Seldon Duncanson became famous in his own lifetime as America's finest landscape painter. After many years working as a house painter and decorator, in 1838, Duncanson moved to Cincinnati—then a thriving cultural center known as the "Athens of the West"—to become an artist. Self-taught and struggling to assimilate in a thoroughly white and exclusivist local scene, Duncanson established a close friendship with abolitionist Methodist minister Charles Avery who commissioned work and also introduced him to other like-minded individuals.[9] Inspired by the work of the Hudson River School, Duncanson began to focus on portraying the serene grandness of the Ohio river valley. This new body of work attracted the attention of Nicholas Longworth, one of the richest and best-connected men in the United States. As a result of more prestigious commissions, Duncanson's fame spread to Canada (where he relocated during the Civil War) and across the Atlantic: the prestigious *London Art Journal* declared him a master of landscape painting. He became the first, most successful African American artist in the history of art. His landscapes,

Image 18. John Everett Millais, *Bubbles*, advertisement from Pears' Centenary Edition of *Charles Dickens' Christmas Books*, 1912. Public Domain

although inspired by a long-standing Western tradition, were imbued with an African American sensitivity that also challenged preconceptions on what and how a Black artist should paint.[10]

Johanna van Gogh-Bonger: The First Art Market Guru

Why did Theo Van Gogh, a successful art dealer, find it impossible to sell his brother's paintings? While it is common knowledge that Theo supported his brother Vincent Van Gogh every step of the way—from buying his brushes to paying his rent—it is not well known that, before becoming a painter, Vincent was himself an art dealer. Between 1869 and 1876, he worked for the prestigious print publishing and art dealer firm Goupil & Co. (partly owned by his uncle). Van Gogh's true ambition to become an artist only matured in 1880, years after he left the company. His experience at Goupil, however, shaped his future creative life in ways that are not commonly acknowledged.

Determined to conquer both the French and English markets, he titled his works in both languages. His letters to Theo reveal that his iconic sunflowers series, which has been mythologized by art history as an unbridled moment of pure artistic genius, were masterminded for the British market where he hoped to sell them for the equivalent of 500 francs each.[11] Brightly colored and stylized, his paintings were too ahead of their time —the market for them simply wasn't there yet. It didn't take long for the artist to give up his dreams of market domination and continue to paint for his own enjoyment. So how is it that one of his paintings today can sell for over $80 million?

Van Gogh owes his colossal modern art-genius status to the wit and determination of Theo's widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger—his sister-in-law. Vincent passed away in 1890, leaving behind almost a thousand paintings in less than ten years. Theo died six months later. Finding herself alone at the age of 28, with a one-year-old son, and hundreds of Vincent's paintings in her basement, Jo sought the opportunity to make a living while fulfilling her late husband's wish to make his brother famous. She left Paris—it was too expensive—and strategically relocated to the Dutch town of Bassum, where she opened a guesthouse. There she befriended a circle of artists who connected her to the local art scene. As her knowledge of the scene and confidence grew, she organized exhibitions of Vincent's works in Amsterdam and abroad. Her goal was to do what art dealers do best: generate interest and demand. Fortunately, *Mercure de France* published a laudatory piece on Van Gogh's paintings by renowned art critic Gabriel Albert-Aurier just before the artist's death.[12] Leveraging the article's influence, Johanna tirelessly networked with collectors, artists, and other dealers to build the myth of Van Gogh from scratch.

Sometimes, the admiration of fellow artists can become a true asset to another artist's career. In 1892, Émile Bernard—a personal friend and great admirer of Van Gogh's work—helped her out by organizing a small solo show of Vincent's paintings

Image 19 (facing page). Jo Bonger, 1889. Photograph: Woodbury & Page, Amsterdam. Public Domain

Image 20. Vincent Van Gogh, *Irises*, 1889. Oil on canvas. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

in Paris. Artist/art dealer Julien Tanguy exhibited his Van Gogh paintings with several consigned from Johanna. In April 1894, Durand-Ruel also became involved. Noticeably, Gauguin—once a dear friend and then a fierce rival—stayed out of it.[13]

In 1905, Jo's determination and entrepreneurial flair led paid off. A massive retrospective of 480 canvases was held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The exhibition—the biggest and most prestigious at that point—inflated the paintings' value. However, one piece of her mythologizing puzzle was still missing. But she knew where to find it. Along with many paintings and several hundred drawings, Johanna inherited 820 letters—the intense correspondence between the two brothers. A treasure trove of personal stories, anecdotes, and commentaries along with important biographical notes and detailed sketches, Van Gogh's letters were published as a volume in 1914—an astute marketing move that sealed the artist legendary status. Savvy, self-styled, industrious dealer-cum-editor Johanna van Gogh-Bonger cracked the art market and navigated institutional politics at a time when women were generally given very little credit in this field.[14] Her hard work behind the scenes is still paying off today, while her praise remains mostly unsung.

Art Historians Change the Past. . . If They Want To

From a certain point in their careers, the venerated innovators of early modern art such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Munch pursued their artistic inclinations mostly with deliberate disregard for the art world and its politics. This enabled them to enjoy creative freedom, but they also lived tortured lives steeped with depression and financial trouble. Public recognition only manifested well after their deaths and after a critic or art historian cast new light on their work.

Unlike the Impressionists, who together plotted their artistic revolution in Parisian bars and cafés, the likes of Gauguin, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Seurat owe much of their fame to an art historian called Roger Fry. A specialist in Old Masters with a curatorial stint at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and a number of well-respected essays published in art historical journals under his belt, Fry came upon the artworks of Cézanne, only three years after the artist's death, in the aftermath of substantial retrospectives of his work that had taken place in Paris, most notably at the 1907 Salon d'Automne.[15]

Aware that these artists shared something meaningful through their work, he singlehandedly masterminded the label "Postimpressionism." As he explained, "For purposes of convenience, it was necessary to give these artists a name, and I chose, as being the vaguest and most non-committal, the name of post-impressionism. This merely stated their position in time relatively to the Impressionist movement." The Postimpressionists didn't quite exist as a movement of artists who worked together pursuing a communal aesthetic goal. Rather they were retrospectively crafted—a plan that worked exquisitely well for their legacies, as well as Fry's own career.[16]

But while critics can be powerful champions of artists, they are fallible, and the failure to recognize true originality has at times lent terrible blows to artists' careers. Among the many is Hilma af Klint, a Swedish artist, influenced by the study of spiritualism, who pioneered abstract art. She went four years without touching a paintbrush after being deeply hurt by Rudolf Steiner's negative reception of her work in 1908. Disheartened, af Klint endowed her outstanding body of work to her nephew, Erik af Klint, requesting that it should remain secret for at least twenty years after her death. When the artist passed away in 1944 this clause cost her dearly. By the time the paintings were shown in public, the history of abstraction had been written and published—without the chapter about her work in it.[17]

Inserting deserving artists retrospectively in the narrative of art history has always proved hard. It is as if such an operation might tamper with a presumed integrity of a natural evolution of art. Paradoxically, paleoethology is more likely to revise its planetary chronologies based on the discovery of a new fossil than art history is willing to contemplate the canonization of a newly discovered artist (especially if female or BIPOC).

The misfortune of self-taught photographer Vivian Maier shares similarities with af Klint. Maier, a professional nanny who worked in the Chicago suburbs, took over 150,000 photographs (many still undeveloped) throughout her life. None of them was

shown during her lifetime. It was only in 2007 that real estate agent John Maloof bought a box of undeveloped rolls of film and negatives for $400 from an auction house. He then proceeded to develop, print, and exhibit her work. While the originality and quality of her output is unquestionable—Meier was a modern street photographer with a penchant for the grittiness of real life—her work is edited and sequenced by Maloof and other collectors. Art historians find it difficult to engage with her work in a confident way. Where does the artist begin and the collector end? This aspect in particular has cast a shadow on academic interpretations as well as ethical considerations on the use, often for profit, of her archive. While commercial success has been substantial, Maier's work is constantly embroiled in lawsuits related to copyright ownership and has yet failed to secure a solo exhibition at a major art museum.[18]

The conditions of success that underpin an artist's career have, during the last century, dramatically changed—creative freedom in the modern art world became something artists had to buy. How did some of the biggest artists of the last century—the ones art students often cite as their models—from Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe to Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Jackson Pollock, Michel Basquiat, Andy Warhol, and Yayoi Kusama claim their spot in the artistic limelight? How did they gain the financial stability that allowed them to lead long and productive careers?

Playing the Fame Game

Trained by his father and unsuited to art academy life, Picasso traveled to Paris in 1904. As the art historical official narrative has it, living in abject poverty, he burnt some of his works to keep himself warm at night. In his case, too, as for Van Gogh, it wasn't his sheer talent that lifted him from obscurity. He would have probably died poor and unknown if it hadn't been for pioneer art dealers Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Ambroise Vollard, as well as the patronage of Gertrude and Leo Stein.

It was Kahnweiler who introduced Picasso to George Braque, the artistic accomplice co-responsible for the invention of Cubism, and who actively supported the artists through their experimental journey.[19] Between 1906 and 1910, the crucial years during which Picasso transitioned from his Rose Period to Cubism were defined by the Steins, who at the time were the artist's only collectors.

Picasso was just as good at flirting as he was at professional networking. At one of Stein's exclusive Saturday evening salons he met the collectors Claribel and Etta Cone, who also began to purchase his work as well as that of Matisse. A savvy businessman and talented artist, by the age of 28, Picasso no longer had to worry about money. Ten years later, he could safely consider himself rich. By the age of 65, he became the world's richest living artist. In 1973, upon his passing, Picasso's estimated worth was between $100 and $250 million. That's equal to today's $530 million to $1.3 billion.[20]

Image 21. Pablo Picasso, *Man with a Pipe*, 1915. Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago.

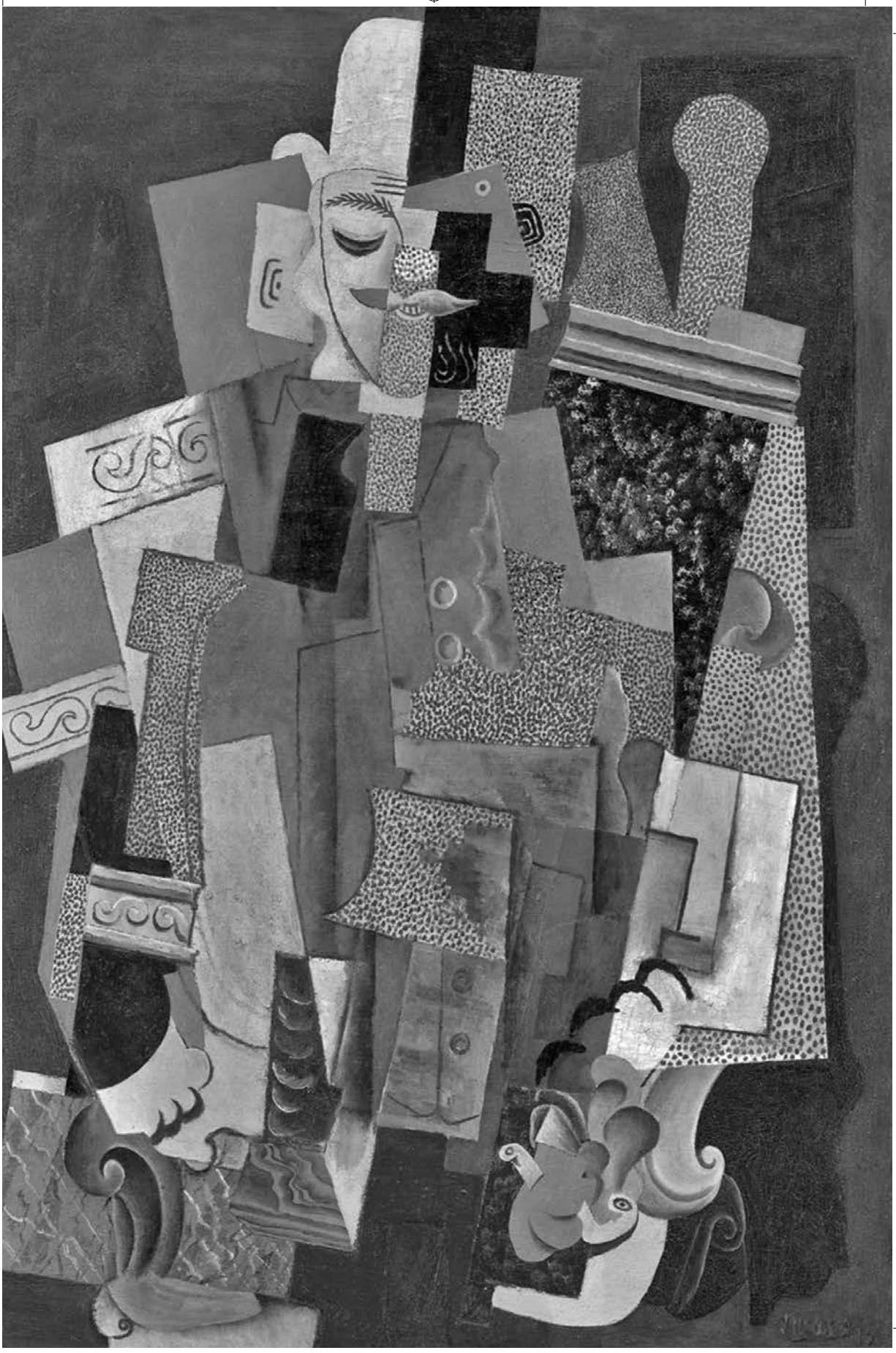


Image 22. Author unknown, undated. Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo meeting with Anson Conger Goodyear, President of the Museum of Modern Art, in New York. Public Domain

But how did Picasso become so well known? What about his art-charmed collectors around the world? The answer once again lies beyond his talent. He was the first artist to be swept up by the new printed and moving image media into a mythologizing frenzy that quickly veered toward parody and yet retained sacrality. The artist genius whose work is truly original, bold, and instantaneous; the insatiable womanizer; the mysterious and capricious child—Picasso was a living stereotype, and the media loved him.

Frida Kahlo's breakthrough happened in 1938, after the leader of Surrealism, André Breton, saw her paintings in Mexico City. Enchanted by the works and recognizing in them a raw and emotional surrealist charge, he wrote to his friend, art dealer Julien Levy, who invited the artist to hold a solo show in New York. Kahlo's haunting paintings bewitched the audience. In 1943, the artist's inclusion in the pioneering exhibition *31 Women*, curated by Peggy Guggenheim, cemented her status as one of the most exciting artists of the last century.[21]

Kahlo met Georgia O'Keeffe and her husband Alfred Stieglitz at the opening of Diego Rivera's (Frida's husband) 1931 exhibition at MoMA. They quickly became close friends. As talented women working in a male-dominated field, both Kahlo and O'Keeffe simultaneously benefited and suffered from being directly associated with successful husbands. Both Stieglitz, an art dealer and the most influential photographer of the early twentieth century, and Rivera, the most famous mural artist

in the world, were extremely well connected. Having nurtured a sense of apathy for the realist tradition she had studied, O'Keeffe had already set the idea of becoming a full-time artist aside, opting for a commercial artist job in Chicago, followed by a spell as a teacher. In 1915, feeling confident about a series of new abstract drawings, O'Keeffe sent a sample to a friend in New York who showed them to Stieglitz. He was so impressed with them that he gave O'Keeffe her first solo show in 1916.[22] However, both O'Keeffe and Kahlo were automatically diminished by the attention their notorious husbands attracted, which often cast a shadow on their talents and accomplishments.

Salvador Dalí deliberately threw his academic career under the bus when, at his final examination, he told the graduation committee that since "none of the professors at the school of San Fernando are competent to judge me, I retire."[23] This was allegedly part of a sophisticated ploy designed to free himself from familial shackles and move to Paris. Dalí knew well that making it as an artist wasn't just a matter of training and gathering qualifications, and that aspiring artists needed to network right at the epicenter of the art world in order to succeed. So, quite appropriately, his first stop in Paris was at Picasso's studio—a unique opportunity orchestrated by other fellow artists. According to art historical mythology, Dalí told Picasso: "I have come to see you before visiting the Louvre."[24] In 1929, fully immersed in his surrealist investigations, Dalí managed to strike a deal with art dealer Camille Goemans for a solo show in Paris that turned out to be a success.

But it was Gala, the artist's wife, who proved instrumental to Dali's financial stability—in the 1930s, she became his promoter and agent. Not only did she pitch his work to galleries and dealers but, in 1933, she persuaded Prince Jean Louis de Faucigny-Lucinge, along with eleven other philanthropists, to form the charmingly named collective called the Zodiac Group. They agreed to pay Dalí 2,500 francs per year in exchange for the right to choose a large painting or a smaller picture and two drawings. This financial support helped Dalí establish his career before fleeing to the United States in 1940 with a ticket purchased for him by Picasso.[25]

Once in the United States, to support himself, Dalí painted high society portraits. By the 1960s, greed—he was nicknamed *Avida Dollars* ("eager for dollars") in some circles, a telling anagram of his name—got him into trouble. Dalí had capitalized on his growing popularity by signing advertising deals with many brands—Wrigley's and Ford among others. At this point, he came to realize that his signature alone, on a blank sheet of paper, was worth roughly $40. Gala thus suggested he should presign a staggering amount of plain paper—some claim 350,000 sheets—which could then be sold to forgers to paint or print at will on his behalf. While this provided the cash flow Dalí needed, the presigned blank sheets destroyed his prints market when a truck loaded with them was stopped by the police in 1974.[26]

Money, Art, and the Aura

Picasso and Dalí reached unprecedented fame in a world where the media rapidly marketed new icons for modern consumption. Jackson Pollock is another outstanding example of this new dynamic. He mostly owed his career to the diplomatic skills and wit of Lee Krasneer, a highly original Abstract Expressionist painter who married the artist and sacrificed her own career in order to launch his. It was through her that Pollock became involved with collector and modern art guru Peggy Guggenheim. Clement Greenberg, the most influential art historian of the last century, and Guggenheim's close collaborator, transformed the movement of Abstract Expressionism from the laughingstock of popular culture to the white-hot artistic sensation of American modern art.

In August 1949, when Pollock's work graced the pages of *Life Magazine* along with a few pictures of him posing as a sexy, rugged, heroic man of action, the artist's canonization was complete. The behind-the-scenes support from the CIA sealed the deal.[27] In the early years of the Cold War, the CIA launched Operation Mockingbird: a large-scale program designed to more or less secretly manipulate news media organizations and cultural creators for propaganda purposes. In the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism—the official artistic style that dominated the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1988—effectively promoted a strong national identity and cultural pride. CIA officials swiftly cast their eyes on Abstract Expressionist artists such as Pollock, Rothko, and De Kooning. Their innovative abstract style stood in direct opposition to the rigid prescriptiveness of Socialist Realism, summoning the supposedly diametrically opposed essence of contemporary American identity. It is known that the CIA never financed Abstract Expressionist artists directly. They instead poured money into the staging and traveling of exhibitions across the world and media promotion, as well as financing the publication of catalogs. Sometimes, the power networks involved in the making of a successful career in the arts reach far deeper and get much darker than we can ever imagine.[28]

Would Abstract Expressionism had become such an influential movement without the support of the CIA? It is hard to say. But in a world where everything started to be mass-produced—a copy of a copy—a painting or a sculpture retained a magical aura of unique distinction. Abstract Expressionism certainly encapsulated a kind of primordial energy that veered toward the magical. Walter Benjamin's classic essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), grappled with this very inescapable condition of experiencing art in the modern world.[29] His concern with the uniqueness of the work of art was linked to the shamanic origin of the artist and the ritual that cast the art object as an original and irreplaceable evidential trace of a supernatural encounter. The attractive power of the work of art as a relic of the past or a unique marker of the present transfers, to some degree, to the owner.

While the rules of the game had changed, the result had not. For all the rebelliousness and desire not to conform, modern artists were still, like their

Image 23 (facing page). Unknown. Salvador Dalí with his pet ocelot, Babou, and cane, 1965. Public Domain

predecessors, producers of the most exclusive kind of luxury goods. It is essential to come to terms with this idea—not to justify the commercialization of art, but to understand that what hangs in museums and that we revere as "the greatest" twentieth-century art essentially is an exclusive commodity designed for the one percent. No other artist was ready to acknowledge this condition, and openly embrace it, as much as Andy Warhol.

Unlike many other Pop Art pioneers, Andy Warhol proudly hailed from the commercial world. He was the incredibly shy, gay son of poor eastern European immigrants who settled in Pittsburgh. Once in New York, Warhol's career quickly skyrocketed from window dresser to designer for *Vogue* and other glossy fashion magazines. But what he really wanted was to become an artist.

He began experimenting with screen-printing and bold imagery appropriated from advertising and newspapers: Coca-Cola bottles, dollar bills, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis, car crashes, and electric chairs. Warhol extracted everyday images from popular culture and elevated them to iconic status: his obsessive repetition of objects and celebrities an emblem of fame and its existential hollowness. He understood that fame is a matter of branding, that branding is essential to the sale of commodities, and that repetition is the soul of fame itself.

Warhol's fixation with fame was the perfect answer to Walter Benjamin's idea that original and unique works of art have a special aura linked to the historical moment and context in which they were made—an attractive quality that reproductions cannot possess. Warhol's screen-printed multiplications replaced the uniqueness of the aura with a manufactured cult of the star as pure image, the superficial icon of the twentieth century. To those who did not personally know her, Marilyn Monroe was simply a commodity, just like a Coca-Cola bottle or a Brillo Box. In what essentially was the first truly successful marriage of painting and photography in the history of Western art, Warhol generated unprecedented financial opportunities for himself by multiplying one idea across many canvases before moving on to the next. In a pre-internet world, the multiplication allowed his Liz Taylor screen-prints to be simultaneously seen at galleries in Tokyo, Milan, London, and New York.

But perhaps even more importantly, Warhol turned networking into an art form. He was openly gay at a time in which artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg led closeted lives and avoided associations with Warhol to protect their careers. In 1962, he opened the Factory, his studio-cum-social club, which swiftly attracted a host of creative outsiders and mainstream celebrities such as Dalí, Mick Jagger, and Bob Dylan. Not only did the creative melting pot known as the Factory turn out to be of paramount importance to Warhol's creative potential, but it mainly generated a network of fans and collaborators that greatly amplified his relevance.[30]

Social networks, especially international ones, have been the recurring motif in the lives of famous artists.[31] A network linking art historians, critics, collectors, philanthropists, patrons, partners, and other fashionable artists became key—this is what art historian Arthur Danto called "the artworld" in 1964. He concluded that the art of the avant-garde needed to be explained as art by theories and discourses that

were shared and understood by a close community of makers, professionals, writers, and institutions: the gatekeepers of modern art.[32] This matter of fact, which undeniably rules the contemporary art market, also shines a spotlight on the exclusionism that still defines the art world today.

Validation is the water of the art world ecosystem: the nourishment an artist's career needs to flourish. It can come in the form of a chapter in an art historian's new book; the review in a prestigious art magazine or on a website; a solo exhibition in a prestigious museum; a grant from a historical foundation; and so on. Validation is a process of confirmation that others in the art world agree your work is worthy of being seen and collected. It is the contemporary equivalent of the seal of approval that artists once received from the clergy, kings, the guilds, the academies, or the salons. Having freed themselves from the control of these institutional powers, artists also had to develop new validation systems, almost from scratch—art historians, patrons, and dealers were among the first in the game. Critics and journalists joined in during the nineteenth century and gained prominence as the glossy art magazine industry grew: *Art Forum*, *Parkett*, *Apollo*, *Art in America* . . . Auction houses, commercial art fairs, biennials and triennials, and curators followed.

By the mid-1970s, the rise of a new bohemian artist model inspired by the British punk revolution had revitalized the streets of the then affordable East Village in New York. Jean-Michel Basquiat's tragic rise to stardom began here while tagging the walls of a gritty Lower Manhattan. In an ever-changing art world, fewer careers capture the "live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse" motto than his.[33] Art history often glosses over the artist's astute networking that helped him gain visibility in a bustling New York art scene of the late 1970s and early 80s, and what's more, critics and art historians rarely talk about how the art world killed him.

One of the most famous graffiti tags he left under the pseudonym SAMO (Same old shit) on the walls of a gritty Lower Manhattan tellingly read: "Playing Art with Daddy's Money."[34] Basquiat, a child prodigy from a disadvantaged Haitian/Puerto Rican home in Brooklyn, never went to art school. A high school drop-out at 17 and homeless, he sold postcards and t-shirts on New York City streets. Resourceful and determined, he hung out with the new generation of creative kids at the Mudd Club and Club 57. He was friends with Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf and soon became involved with Colab, an artists' collective supported by the National Endowment for the Arts founded in 1977. Promoting political art, the collaborative aimed at bypassing the official art world's hegemony by curating its own exhibitions running art programs on cable TV.[35] Its epoch-defining 1980 exhibition known as the *Times Square Show* took place right in the heart of the city. It wasn't long before gallerists Annina Nosei and Larry Gagosian gave Basquiat his first show as well as their gallery basement as a studio. His 1982 solo show sold out on the opening night. Rave reviews followed. With his finger right on the pulse of the phenomenon, critic Rene Ricard penned an article titled "The Radiant Child," in which he noted: "We are no longer collecting art we are buying individuals"—he was spot on.[36] Buying Basquiat was an act of redemption for wealthy collectors living in a world where everything was commodified.

Basquiat was raw, he was real, and his myth was on sale. Critic Jeffrey Deitch aptly summarized how the artist myth of Basquiat was spawned:

> Basquiat is likened to the wild boy raised by wolves, corralled into Annina's basement, and given nice clean canvases to work on instead of anonymous walls. A child of the streets gawked at by the intelligentsia. But Basquiat is hardly a primitive. He's more like a rock star, seemingly savage but completely in control; astonishingly prolific, but scornful of the tough discipline that normally begets such virtuosity. Basquiat reminds me of Lou Reed singing brilliantly about heroin to nice college boys.[37]

His friend, Keith Haring, cunningly identified authenticity as the true engine of Basquiat's artist myth—a symptom of the resilience of the romantic artist myth who suffers for his art, misunderstood by society and yet fetishized for transcending its trivial tribulations:

> Even in those early days he was doing collage drawings and color Xeroxes, his work had a kind of power which was unmistakably "real." The intensity and directness of his vision were intimidating. Jean-Michel was maybe a little bit too real for us. He was uncompromising, disobedient, and rude if the situation required it. Not malicious, but honest . . . When he began exhibiting his paintings, he remained true to his teachings and broke as many rules as possible.[38]

Haring's mythologization elevates Basquiat to messianic status, and hints at the exploitation and speculation that surrounded him. In 1982 alone, Basquiat produced two hundred paintings. He was certainly burnt out by unscrupulous dealers determined to fetishize his blackness and capitalize on it. Cocaine and heroin killed him in 1988. He was 27 years old. He wasn't the first and certainly not the last to artist to perish by the hands of the art world. BIPOC artists are especially vulnerable to whims of a reckless and volatile art market that knows no loyalty.

Yayoi Kusama is today one of the most famous contemporary living artists but her rise to the pinnacle of the art world has been marred by discrimination and unbearable struggle. Dwelling on the periphery of normative experience, Kusama has developed a highly personal and recognizable aesthetic—a set of symbols, colors, and forms that she has used to make sense of an often hostile world. Intimidated by her womanizing father and terrified by her abusive mother—who wanted her to give up art—Kusama left Japan in 1958 and settled in New York. The relocation was suggested to her by none other than Georgia O'Keeffe. Three years earlier Kusama had summoned the courage to write to the living legend asking: "I'm only on the first step on the long and difficult life of being a painter. Will you kindly show me the way?"[39] O'Keeffe, who at the time lived in New Mexico, wrote letters to her contacts recommending Kusama. She started to exhibit work in New York almost immediately, attracting the attention of fellow artists Frank Stella and Donald Judd. During the 1960s, Kusama's work was exhibited alongside that of famous pop artists like Warhol, Oldenburg, Dine, Indiana, Lichtenstein, and Wesselmann. She will later complain that Warhol, Oldenburg, and Lucas Samaras stole her ideas. Exhausted by

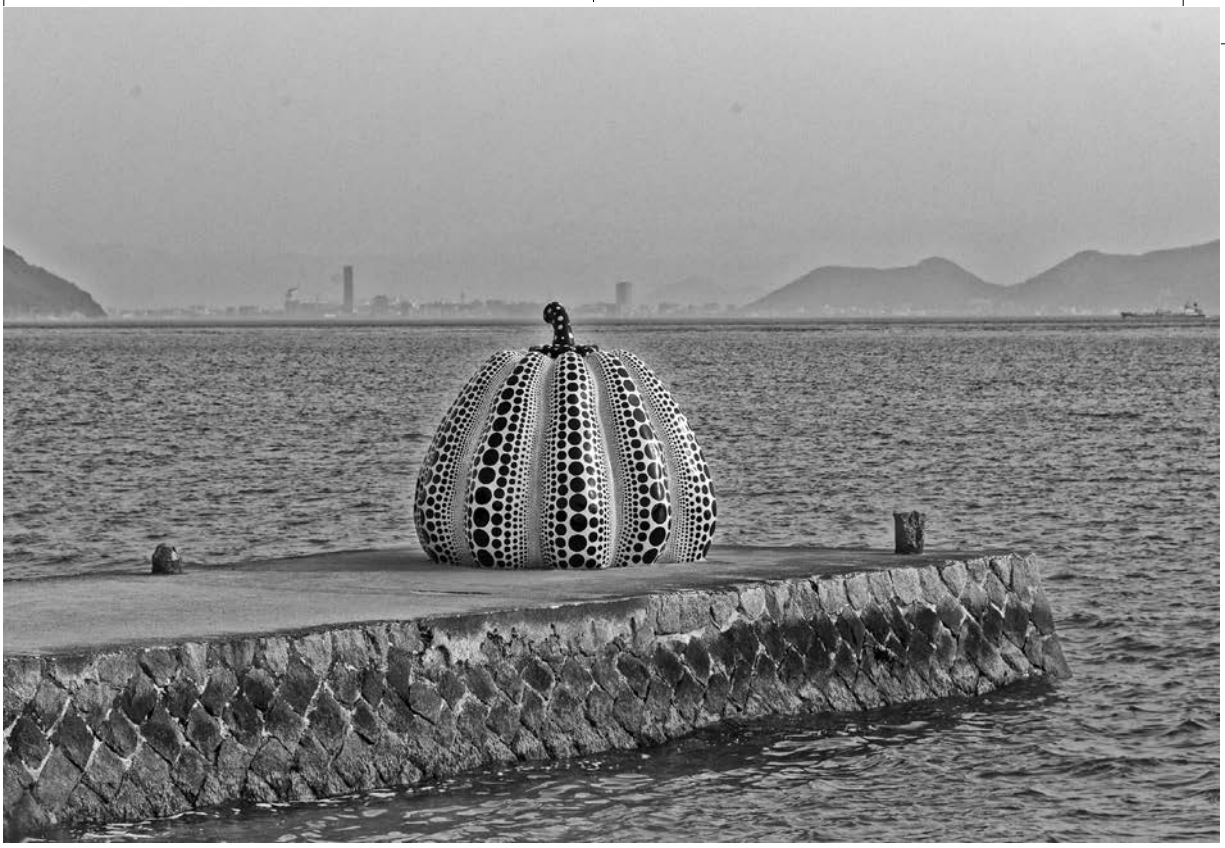


Image 24. Yayoi Kusama, *Yellow Pumpkin*, Naoshima, Kagawa Prefecture, Western Japan, 1994. CC BY 2.0 DEED

the sexism that pervaded the art world, Kusama returned to Japan where, in 1977, she entered a Tokyo sanatorium for treatment of her compulsions—she still lives and makes work there. Kusama went mainstream, breaking record sales and museum attendances in the 1990s as she represented Japan at the Venice Biennale (1993).[40] But this was not the first time the artist had exhibited there. In 1966, Kusama, with the support of artist Lucio Fontana and the permission of the Biennale's committee, installed 1,500 mass-produced plastic silver globes on the lawn near the entrance of the event during the first opening week. The conglomeration of convex reflective surfaces produced a grotesquely distorted multiplication of the surrounding space. The artist positioned two signs at the installation, one bearing the words "Narcissus Garden," the other "Your Narcissus for Sale." She then proceeded to sell the balls to passersby for $2 each. *Narcissus Garden* was a playful critique of the Biennale and the contemporary artist's condition: the artist willingly and knowingly stuck in the paradox of commercialization has to produce multiples and sell them to collectors who can only see themselves reflected in what they buy. The organizers of the Biennale attempted to dismantle it. But Kusama's work had already made headlines.[41]

The artist's myth's insidiousness lies in its art historical backbone. While the struggles these artists incurred is documented, museums and art history books have no interest in dwelling too long over the industriousness of artists, their self-promotion, and savvy steering of their careers. Nobody in art schools explains to students how

these artists rose to fame as if the networking, strategizing, and savvy-steering were not essential skills in the making of artistic careers. The art world's foundations are still today built on the transcendental pretence that sheer genius is the only driving force that propels artists to stardom. It's what gives the artist the authenticity collectors want to buy. And yet, insiders know too well how the system works. When a glimpse of the pretence is caught by the public or critics, the bubble can burst unless, like Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami, and Jeff Koons have done, artists boldly own their commercial strategization as an integral part of their conceptual process. They proudly identify as pop artists, the progeny of Warhol to whom "making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art."[42] The critics hate them. But they are among the wealthiest living artists.[43] Could it be that they are also among the most honest?

Tragically, during the nineteenth century, artists sought to liberate art from the grip of the state and bourgeois taste, only to discover that, a century later, art would be recommodified once more by dealers, collectors, and investors. The only truth: artistic rebellion had spawned a neoliberal art world.

"Urgent and vital reading for anybody interested in questioning what an artist is. Giovanni Aloi carefully dismantles the conception of the artist, equipping the reader with the tools to define their creativity on their own terms."

HAROLD OFFEH, Reader in Performance and Social Arts Practice, Tutor in Contemporary Art Practice, Royal College of Art, UK

"An ambitious and overdue contribution to the much-needed (and much-avoided) project of reconsidering what art is, was, and could be. Bucking an artistic discourse that long ago mastered the dark art of co-opting such challenges into its own image, Aloi strips away the truisms which shield the art world's collective false consciousness from so many dangerous yet necessary questions."

MITCH SPEED, Art Critic and Writer, Berlin, Germany

Romanticized notions of how one becomes an "artist" have long been questioned, so why do we still fetishize them in popular culture, turning a blind eye to the politics of exclusionism that characterize the art world, and trapping our creative potential in well-trodden stereotypes? This timely book critically appraises the role of the artist through time and provides accounts of how successful artists have claimed their place within the annals of art history, from the rise of the Renaissance artist star to the multiplicity of artistic identities we see in the creative landscape today.

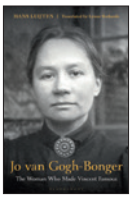
Entertaining and informative, the book is packed with important but lesser-known stories about the art world—among others: how the *Mona Lisa* only became famous outside of art circles after it was stolen in 1911, with the subsequent furore helping to launch the conceptual art movement; or why Abstract Expressionist artists were promoted by the CIA during the Cold War; and how a 19th-century queer woman artist became so famous she had a doll line fashioned after her.

Providing a critical framework for examining what constitutes the term "artist," an alternative art historical account, and a no-holds-barred guide to how the art world really works, this boundary-breaking book invites readers to give up the "artist myth" and critically position themselves in today's art world in clear, ethically grounded, and responsible ways.

GIOVANNI ALOI is an art historian and curator, specializing in the representation of nature and the environment in art. He currently lectures on modern and contemporary art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA.

ART & VISUAL CULTURE

BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS



Cover image: Giovanni Paolo Panini, *Gallery with views of modern Rome*, 1759. Oil on canvas, 230 x 303cm. Louvre Museum, Paris

Also available from Bloomsbury Visual Arts

www.bloomsbury.com

ISBN 978-1-350-41797-7