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for artists in Serbia**

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INSTAGRAM AND ARTISTIC PLATFORMS AS REVENUE STREAMS FOR ARTISTS IN SERBIA

Abstract: Digitalization and development of a digital marketing strategy as a way to attract the (particularly young) audience is a prerequisite for modern artists. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized this need even more, but even without pandemics, it is very hard for an artist to reach its public and to present its work to a wider range of audiences without utilizing digital tools. In this article, the author will present some possibilities available for artists to improve their visibility and promote their work in a new global digital art market. The importance of understanding the digital world, the audience's preferences, and digital marketing are crucial for modern artists. The aim of this paper is to analyze the importance of the digital art market for artists in Serbia. The research was conducted using a questionnaire survey focused on 88 artists actively creating and participating in the art world, mostly from Belgrade, Serbia. After a contextualization of data, it is evident that the majority of artists from fail to generate income in the digital art market.

Keywords: visual artists, digital art marketing, pandemic, social media, Instagram

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Introduction

The digital art market is not a new concept, but in 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, its importance surpassed the importance of the traditional art market. According to the Hiscox Online Art Trade report 2020, more than half (65%) of interviewed online sales platform executives believe that the changes brought about because of the pandemic will be permanent and transform the art market.

One of the most interesting findings is the fact that new and young collectors have become very active during the pandemic, with 86% of them making purchases, and that Instagram is still (from 2017) the most important platform for art-related purposes.

There is a tendency of consciousness about one's living spaces and wanting to purchase art is a part of it. Artworks can also be perceived as part of one's record of wealth (Rani, 2017).

Artists and the Gatekeepers

Probably every artist in the world dreams of global recognition, however the road to this is very demanding and full of obstacles. According to Petrides and Fernandes (2020), the components of a successful visual art career are presented in a pyramidal form. The foundation is the creation of artworks and the desire to exhibit. The next block is to bring their art to the attention of the gatekeepers who are seen as essential in launching, sustaining, and advancing artistic careers – the galleries, curators, critics, cultural institutions, and collectors. Entrepreneurial marketing skills are the next block, enabling artists to create sales to provide financial resources for the further production of art. The final block is creating and managing the artistic brand, viewed as strategic cooperation between artists and gatekeepers, especially galleries (exhibition, art fairs, curated events, auctions). The crucial element connecting all of these building blocks is artistic reputation – a relentless effort involving the artist and art world experts.

However, in the traditional art market, a crucial role of artistic reputation lies in the hands of the gatekeepers, those curators, art dealers, gallery owners and critics. A good example of this is the “artistic chart” of two major artistic centers back in 2008, New York and London. In his research, Thompson estimated that 80,000 artists lived and worked in New York and London (Thompson, 2008). Out of this, less than 0.001% could be considered “superstar artists”, since they earned a seven-figure income; 300 more had a six-figure income; and 5,000 artists who were represented by major galleries but needed to have side jobs to sustain an income. The situation for the majority of artists is probably similar today and the vast majority of artists are constantly searching for a market for their art. For all these artists, the digital art market offers the best chance for success.

In the traditional art market, the evaluation of art is evaluated by experts, gatekeepers who determine artworks' value. They are the ones who decide which art products are going to have a chance to be shown to the public. The gatekeepers can be individuals (curators, art dealers, gallery owners, critics) or networks across different levels (Coslor, Craford & Leyshon, 2019), and they not only separate the artists from the end consumers (Olesiewicz, 2011) but also classify the audience (Coslor, Craford & Leyshon, 2019). Gatekeepers' influence in the digital art market is much more limited and thus more artists have a chance to be seen and to present their work to a wide audience online than through traditional means.

Social media is becoming increasingly important in the art world. One of the consequences of the dominant position of social media is that artists can now communicate directly with their audience, rather than having to deal with the standard gatekeepers as in a traditional art market (Walmsley, 2016). This gives them the chance to promote themselves and to be discovered. Curators have also found their place on social media, using the platforms as visual diaries and promoting art according to their taste. When they have a large following, they can have a powerful impact as in the traditional art market (Fisher, 2016), but can never be that influential, since on social media anybody can distribute and produce information (Potnis & Tahamtan, 2021). On digital art platforms, the situation is a little different, because even though artists can promote their own portfolios, the sheer number of artists participating means the choice of artworks can become overwhelming for potential buyers. This is why curatorial direction guides them, again giving value to the art of their choice (Lee & Lee, 2019).

In this paper, we will try to understand through the engagement of visual artists from Serbia the role the digital art market has had on their careers, and address the specificities of different revenue streams in the digital art world.

Digital Art Platforms and Instagram – Possible Revenue Streams

Each digital platform (Saatchi Art, Society6, Redbubble, and Etsy) has its own set of rules and guidelines. This includes Instagram, the most popular social network in the artworld. It may not be possible for an artist to become successful on all of these different platforms. Insights into the different platforms will be provided in this article, and since the global art market surpasses borders, this can be beneficial for artists from around the world, including artists from the Western Balkans.

Adjusting artworks to meet the required dimensions or connecting with other platforms (for example Etsy) and mastering marketing requirements for each can be a truly time-consuming process. In the next section, we will present each platform and offer an insight into whether an artist should invest their time.

Saatchi Art

Saatchi Art is an online art gallery dedicated to young and emerging artists from all over the world, where more than 94,000 artists have their artworks (Saatchi Art, 2021). This platform is open for anyone to create a profile and upload their works, with an option to sell originals as well as prints (an artist gives consent for artworks to be printed and if sold, Saatchi Art prints and ships it, with the artist receiving a percentage of the price). With more than 1.4 million artworks (Saatchi Art, 2021) searchable through categories and subcategories, there is an overwhelming number of artworks for the buyer to choose from. This is the reason why this platform promotes access to curators, offers curatorial collections with new artworks every week, and proposes collaboration with their art advisors for personal recommendations. Like in a traditional art market, these gatekeepers are the ones constructing the meanings and value of the artworks they select (Lee & Lee, 2019). With a consistent and recognizable body of work, and regular postings to this platform, an artist can be spotted by the Saatchi Art curatorial team, and artists can use this online gallery to present their work and further promote it themselves.

Etsy

Etsy is an e-commerce platform for handcrafted goods. An artist can open a shop and list items for sale. It can include any handmade item, including those designed by an artist and produced by a production partner (Etsy, 2021). This opens up opportunities to connect your Etsy shop with a print-on-demand company, that usually has their production centers located around the world. and the art can be printed onto numerous products from art prints, T-shirts, mugs, laptop sleeves to beach or home accessories. When an item is sold, the nearest print-on-demand company prints and sends it to the buyer, and an artist chooses the desired profit from every item. This can help the artist from a particular region to skip postal services that can slow down shipments, which often leads to negative reviews on the Etsy shop. According to Erank (2021), artists from Serbia are selling Etsy's best-selling category – digital downloads. It may be the fastest way to sell artwork since it requires no shipping, but this is also the most saturated group on Etsy. To be successful on this platform is very time-consuming, since having a shop means fulfilling all of Etsy's rules, and understanding their own particular search engine optimization (SEO). It is possible to pay for ads on this platform, but an artist must have marketing skills and be willing to promote his/her shop.

Society6 and Redbubble

Being part of these two print-on-demand marketplaces requires only basic digital skills. After creating an account, the next step is design upload and to choose among the variety of products where art should be printed on. Similar to the example of Saatchi art, here anybody can create a portfolio, which leads to a saturated market and curatorial guidance for buyers. Again, marketing skills are crucial for artists to have to be successful on these platforms.

Social Media Accounts – The Example of Instagram

Largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world turned to online shopping, including Serbia (Ivanović & Antonijević, 2020). Even a survey from 2017, conducted by the US Trust Insights on Wealth and Worth, showed that millennials are changing the art market because every fourth person collects fine art, and the majority of millennials buy art online, with Instagram noted as the platform where they discover art. (Invaluable, 2017). Hiscox confirmed the crucial importance of Instagram, arguing that it attracts younger buyers (Hiscox, 2020). In the contemporary world, every part of the consumer decision-making process is influenced by social media (Appel et al. 2020).

With this in mind, it is surprising that half of the artists who responded to our survey saw no benefit from this platform.

Every year, more researchers write about Instagram (Purnomo et al., 2020), and in 2019 there were two types of research concerning visual artists on Instagram. Shahzadi concentrated on the strategies artists use to promote and sell their work on Instagram, while Kang, Chen, and Kang explored artwork interactions on social media. The findings from these two articles were almost the same – the most liked artworks were also the most interactive ones, and the ability to tell a story is key to success.

According to these articles, to find and make a meaningful connection with the audience it is important to post daily. What grabs the most attention are posts with works in progress, photographs, and time lapses, as well as tutorials.

The artists should ask questions to their followers and share stories from their personal life, establishing a participatory relationship with them, making them feel like they know the artist and making them believe that their contribution matters (Jenkins, 2009)

Meaningful hashtags are the way for an artwork to be found, and after sharing a post it is beneficial to reply to comments as soon as possible.

In addition, it is noted that artists with strategies on what to post to Instagram based on the number of likes or comments increased their visibility.

Methodology

To understand the role of the digital art market in the careers of artists from Serbia, an online survey was conducted during March 2021.

The questionnaire had both multiple-choice and open-ended questions and contained 16 questions aimed to provide insights as to the presence of artists from Serbia on online art markets and social networks. It also explored whether being part of the digital art market benefits them financially.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts: questions about general data, questions about the online art platforms and questions about social networks.

The criteria for the selection of artists to be part of this research was that they are actively creating and participating in the art world. We received 88 answers, mostly from artists from Belgrade.

Results

The first part of the questionnaire was about general data. We found that artists included in the online survey come from different age groups (most of them between 40 to 50 years old, 39.1% of them, and 24.1% were between 30 to 40 years old), they are mostly painters (62.8%) from Belgrade (79%), being members of The Association of Fine Artists of Serbia (69.9%). More than half of the artists stated that the sale of their artworks are conducted onsite 61.4%, with 16.9% selling both onsite and online and 21.7% online.

The second part of the questionnaire covered the online art platforms. The first question revealed that more than half of the interviewed artists did not have a personal website (62.7%), more than half did not have a profile at the online art platforms (61.6%), and those who did mostly use SaatchiArt (21.8%), Etsy (6.4%), and ArtFinder (6.4%).

When asked which platform they found they had the most financial success, more than 70% answered that they had any success at all. Since this question was in a form of a checkbox with the option to add further explanatory text, 6% of responses perceived personal Facebook and Instagram accounts as an online platform which led to the most financial success. Etsy was seen as the most important for 4%, and other platforms were checked only a couple of times.

Still, when questioned to say how much their income had increased thanks to the online art platforms, 79% said they had no success at all, but 11.1% stated that their income had increased by more than 50%, and 5.6% specified that their income increased by between 20-50%.

The third part of the questionnaire asked questions about the social networks themselves, and artists stated that there are two social networks they are most active

in – Facebook (44%) and Instagram (42.9%). A study by Kang, Chen, and Kang (2019) examined the relationship between the most-liked artworks and interactions on social media. The authors collected data from 706 artists' accounts on Instagram and conducted 35 online surveys. Their findings are somewhat similar to ours, but the majority of artists in their survey stated that Instagram is the most preferred social media (91%). Even though frequent posting is one of the most important activities on social media (Shahzadi, 2019; Kang et al. 2019), our research shows that only 9% of respondents post daily, while 44.7% post rarely. With this in mind, and since only 16.7% of the questioned artists stated that they pay for advertisements on social networks, it comes as no surprise that 33.3% of artists said they saw no impact from using social media on their brand visibility, with approximately half (46%) saw a modest positive effect.

When it comes to financial benefits from social media, more than half of the questioned artists said they did not have any (64.4%). Those who did have economic success stated that their financial income increased by 10% (19.5% of respondents) and only 6.1% of the questioned artists specified that their income increased between 20% and 50%.

Rodner and Kerrigan (2014) advised the need for customer-focus marketing, and for artists to concentrate on artworks that the audience reacts to. However, when asked if the number of likes and comments on social media affected the nature of their posts, more than half of our respondents (63.5%) said it did not affect them, and the majority of the questioned artists (84.1%) denied that the number of likes and comments on social media affected their creative process. In Kang, Chen, and Kang's (2019) survey the amount of artists not influenced by interactions social media was 63%.

The main findings of our research is that the majority of artists from Serbia fail to generate income in the digital art market. There is clearly more than one reason for this, but among them is the fact that mastering social media and digital art platforms requires time, a lot of research, and effort without immediate financial incentives.

Conclusion

The digital art market presents a great opportunity for artists around the world. It enables artists to access a new revenue stream and gives them exposure to a global audience. On top of this, the digital market is still changing, growing and its potential and relevance grows with it. There is a realistic chance that the digital market will surpass traditional art markets in the near future. Finally, one of the biggest advantages of the digital art market is that it enables artists to become globally visible, recognizable and to be able to sell their products while being in their own city, reducing the costs of this exposure and promotion.

For artists from a country like Serbia – economically undeveloped, with very few governmental programs that support artists and a country that is not among leaders at the global art scene – the digital art market might present the only realistic opportunity to achieve global recognition and visibility. However, in this research, it was demonstrated that artists from Serbia still haven't realized the importance of active participation in the digital art market. While separate research can be conducted to gather and analyze all the reasons why this important revenue and these promotional platforms are neglected, some solutions to amend this situation are obvious. On one hand, informing artists about the digital art market is the first step. Informing can be done through interviews with relevant stakeholders, publishing papers, and other awareness-raising campaigns. Once awareness is raised, the second step would be organizing training and lectures for artists on how to access and succeed in the digital art market. Of course, these are only short-term solutions – for long-term success, an elaborate strategy should be developed that will include educating artists not only on the digital art market but also on the skills necessary to compete on digital and any other marketplace, including skills on topics such as management and marketing.

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INSTAGRAM AND ARTISTIC PLATFORMS AS REVENUE STREAMS FOR ARTISTS IN SERBIA (summary)

In this article, the author emphasizes the importance of the digital art market, not only during the Covid-19 pandemic but also for the future. Apart from operating in different worlds (digital and physical), there are a lot of differences between the digital art market and the traditional art market. One of the major differences is the level of influence of the so-called gatekeepers. In the art world, these can be curators, art dealers, gallery owners, critics, collectors, cultural institutions and networks.

In this paper, an online survey was conducted to understand the role of the digital art market in the careers of artists from Serbia. It consisted of questions about general data, digital art platforms and social media. After analyzing the results, it is demonstrated that the potentials of the digital art market are used or even explored by very few Serbian artists.

The various potential reasons are discussed, but this article provides not only questions but also answers and potential solutions. The complexity of the skills necessary to participate in the digital art market is one of the main reasons why artists in Serbia are not active participants.

As a part of the solution, this article offers an analysis of know-how in the main digital art platforms: Etsy, Society6 and Redbubble, Saatchi Art and Instagram.

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