

Influencers or Artists: Instagram's Effects on the Art World

Introduction:

“My main advice would be to confront the business and marketing end of your career as soon as possible and have a good work discipline,” the Mexico City-based artist Natasha Grey told me over email recently when I asked her for advice on how to be successful in the art world. I think about her advice almost every day and that I have yet to take any action doing what she told me.

My Instagram account [daniella.porrras.art](https://www.instagram.com/daniella.porrras.art) has been inactive for three years now. You would think that someone writing a paper on how Instagram affects artists would be posting on Instagram themselves, but that is far from the case. My arts account used to be made up of a myriad of drawings I did, in class and for homework, during my freshman year in our drawing foundations class. At the time, I told myself it was a good idea to share these things and put myself out there. But even though I have made more art since that class, none of it has gone onto my profile. I even archived all twenty-three posts I used to have on my account to have a fresh start. I told myself that part of my fieldwork for this project would be to revive this old account to research how Instagram affected my work.

I devised a plan that I wrote down at the beginning of the summer before my senior year. This plan is as follows:

1. Start posting the edited photos I put in my portfolio
2. Edit other images that are currently unedited
3. Make a point to put it on my main account a lot
4. Figure out reels to film of the process
5. Need to start posting this week to build up content before I start selling my artist books
6. Start researching algorithms

Needless to say, I did not begin posting any content that week. Natasha's words still burn in my mind, which led me to ask, *how do other artists feel when they grapple with a presence on Instagram?* This one question propelled me to interview twelve artists, to see what I would find. The artists I chose to interview are at varying stages in their careers and use a myriad of mediums. I interviewed fellow undergrads who are just starting their journeys into the art world, people with more established accounts consisting of fifty thousand or more followers, and those involved in the gallery world, like artist Tammy Nguyen of Lehmann Maupin and one of their associate marketing directors.

I asked each artist the same set of questions to see how they each interacted with the same portions of the app. These questions related to how their art was being affected by the creation of content on their Instagram, if they followed and used the business portions of the app, were trends important to them, and if they paid attention to the algorithm. The only artist who seemed unfazed by the use of Instagram in relation to her art was Nguyen, the most traditionally established in the art world. Every other artist had Instagram on their minds as an integral part of their practices to support their creation. The main thing that caught my eye at these varying levels of the art world was how we are all seeking for one commodity, a person's attention.

How the Art Market Has Changed - From Gallery to Instagram:

If you look up "how Instagram has changed the art market" you find a slew of articles about the power it has to change the antiquated systems of the art world. I am sure most artists would agree that the art world has changed immensely, favoring the smaller self employed artist. "Starving Artist" means less now that social media can be used to promote and sell your work. Each article agrees that the middleman, the galleries, have now been cut out, meaning art can be sold directly to a consumer.

Usually, if you want to be represented by a gallery space, especially a prominent one, you have to live near a major city where these spaces are actually located. Many people may not know, unless you are versed in the art world, that even if you do get gallery representation, they will take 50% of the earnings on the pieces they sell. The trade-off is usually that the gallery, in turn, promotes the artist's work in other prominent art spaces as well, like at art fairs and such, leaving the art making and marketing to the artist.¹ However, getting representation by a big gallery is not clean-cut in the art world. Many of the top galleries like Gagosian, Lehmann Maupin, and Hauser & Wirth do not have submission processes for artists who are looking for representation.

Tammy Nguyen, my professor, boss, and mentor, is one of the few lucky artists represented by one of these mega galleries, Lehmann Maupin.² She doesn't have to care about how people interact with her account when her gallery gives her the opportunity to have people interact with her work in more traditional spaces like the white wall gallery and museums. She normally doesn't post any process shots of her working; she usually just posts the finished show after everything has been installed and it has opened,

This year, I've posted way less. It just takes me forever to make a single post. You know, yeah, I think the thing that I do most frequently, and I think I can be way

¹ Winklemand and Hindle, "A Brief History of Art Dealing."

The history of Gallery Spaces starts in the early Italian Renaissance where high-end merchants would sell paintings. At some point these dealers turned purely towards art, and started finding new artists and supporting them with a monthly stipend and schedule of solo shows. This is how the art world began to flourish, and new art movements could happen through the financial support from these dealers and spaces.

² Delagrange, "Top 10 of the Biggest Art Galleries in the World."

Delagrange, "The Art Gallery: Everything You Need To Know."

A gallery space is specific and separate from Museums. A gallery is a private commercial based entity that discovers and helps support artists through the marketing and selling of their work, while a museum is a public institution whose goal is education of the public through showing a thorough art repertoire of history and present culture. Galleries are crucial to the support of contemporary artists. There are different types of galleries but the two most important for this essay are commercial art galleries and mega galleries. Commercial art galleries just have one location and a small team who work with a small group of artists. Mega galleries, like Lehmann Maupin, have multiple locations and large teams around the world and are extremely influential in the tastes of the art world.

better at this, but it just takes up too much time, is I just share stories, which is the fastest thing I could do... Well, when I signed with my gallery they did ask me if I had an Instagram and everything and looked it up and they were happy to see that I was active. So yeah, they don't make me post or anything but I think that it's helpful to them. I mean, they have a huge Instagram account with a team that works on it, you know? with all the animations and whatever. So I think they probably need their artists or they prefer their artists on Instagram, so that they can tag them and Connect, you know?

Tammy put me in contact with Ian Simon-Curry, who works on digital marketing for the gallery. One of the significant portions of his job is to run their Instagram account. Almost half of the artists that Lehmann Maupin represents have a functioning arts Instagram account. I define a functioning account as having more than 5,000 followers and also actively posting. This metric is not from anywhere specific but is more to show how their follower count mirrors the audiences they have in a gallery setting versus just a personal friends and family account following.

Galleries like Maupin seem to not care much about whether an artist has an Instagram account. These galleries are currently representing artists who are later in their careers. These people did not have Instagram in their twenties, and how they shared their art was and is still on a much more organic level. Ian told me he thinks it's smart for the artists that they represent to have an Instagram, since most people look up an artist there first than on Google,

Plenty of established artists who have like, you know, are very successful and have recognition in the industry and out of the industry and in museums and culture at large, it doesn't mean that you have social media crap like that... in terms of how you're selling your work, like if you have a gallery, it's different from if you're an independent artist who's maybe selling through their own webstore or something... It's often an entry point or people check Instagram sometimes before they even Google... I feel like it's good to have claim to your space, even if it's not necessarily super active.

While having a gallery position and a successful Instagram account seem to be the goal, acquiring them is not a straightforward process. I have been told by artists that the galleries will

come to you, but you should not go from gallery to gallery with a portfolio of your work and try to get them to represent you; that will seldom work. In an article in *Art Business* on “How to Get Into a Gallery,” the artist William Wegman was interviewed, and he said, “Other artists recommended me to their galleries. I didn’t really go around with my portfolio; that was kind of a sad sack situation and pretty much a dead-end, I think. And if you want to be discouraged, just start doing that.”³ The art world is a place where you need connections if you want to go anywhere, and before Instagram, that kept it pretty small.

Marion Maneker, the publisher of *Art Market Monitor*, said in an article about how Instagram is changing the art market, “The great thing about Instagram is that it seems to have opened up a field for artists who might not have had the connections through the right mentor, the right MFA program, the right dealer, the right collectors to developing a market.”⁴

Sam Sanders, a former reporter for NPR, did a whole segment on how the art world has changed because of Instagram. He describes the role of Instagram nicely, “It has become the gallery, the museum, the workshop. People are using this to leverage corporate sponsorships, book deals. A good Instagram feed can make an artist's career.”⁵

One thing that stood out to me when I started doing my fieldwork is the ease with which I can connect and network with artists and for them to actually respond to me. I got interviews with most of the artists using Instagram’s direct messaging feature. I came up with a short synopsis of what I was researching and sent it to artists I had been following. I used my arts account rather than my personal account to get in contact with these people. I had no posts backing up who I was, and even still, five out of twelve artists I reached out to got back to me

³ Cloutier, “How to Get into a Gallery.”

⁴ Mawajdeh, “How Instagram Is Changing the Art Market.”

⁵ Sanders, “How Instagram is Changing Life for Artists.”

and said they were willing to be interviewed. This bolstered the fact that Instagram is truly a place where the artist is no longer hard to reach, but can directly interact with their audience.

Lindsey Ruth, who runs the account @lindsphoto with two-hundred and two thousand followers, used Instagram to find a large majority of her friends and artist community in LA,

I've always said like, your social network is your actual network if you use it, right, because I moved to LA and like, I'm from California, but I'm from like, way north. So it's basically a different state. I didn't know anyone here. I had pretty much no connections, all of my friends moved to San Francisco, no one I knew moved to LA. So I didn't know anybody here. And within my first week in LA, I was able to meet some of my best best friends that I'm still really close with today. Because, I was really good about reaching out to people through Instagram. If I liked someone and we followed each other, and I was like, oh, I feel like they're a cool person, I would just DM them and be like, I just moved here. I would love to hang out. And it'd be like, Okay. And that's how I've met pretty much everybody I know in LA.

The majority of the artists I have talked to have approached Instagram in this fashion, where they are able to actively network and find artists they connect with and can maintain connections with people they would have never met otherwise. Alice Mawdsley from the account @alicemawdsleyillustrates with seventy-nine thousand followers, uses it as one of her main tools to keep connected even when doing her work is primarily a solo task,

I connect daily with other creatives which is one of the biggest positives of this platform! It is also a great place for finding galleries and future clients and collaborations. As I spend a lot of time in the studio working by myself, it is really nice to be able to have conversations with other creatives, to see what they are doing and to have a larger global art community.

The ease at which these connections and communities are built are one of the main catalysts as to why the art world is now open to more people. One of the first people who responded to me was the painter Joshua Mizusawa, @jmizu, with one-hundred and forty-seven thousand followers, and he showed me how people are more than willing to connect with others through the app. I had been following him on Instagram for a little while before I struck up the

courage to send him a dm. For him, Instagram radically changed his art career in a very short time.

As far as how Instagram affects my life and social media in general, I think if you look at my life a year ago when I had 900 followers, just friends and family and people I have met throughout the years. I would post art every week, just something I'm working on. I don't think it was good in my opinion. But I started taking it seriously about eight months ago, and taking my art seriously and the creation seriously. And it changed my life. I probably skipped five years of just hard work on the traditional artists career path, but the landscape is changing. We don't need galleries anymore. We don't need this traditional representation. We can be our own bosses and market ourselves because no one's going to sell our art better than ourselves. But on the flip side, you have to work extremely hard at balancing your life and balancing your mind because that's the most important asset that artists own.

For Mizusawa, Instagram has been crucial to marketing his art and is something that he embraces and enjoys. Still, he can see how this side of marketing also creates its challenges in maintaining a balanced life as an artist,

So when you look at my life today, I take this life over any other life one thousand times, but some of the downsides of you know, being your own self supporting artist is that I don't have as nearly as much time to create as I did before. I'm trying to get better at protecting that time, automating some things, putting some things in place, hiring people and I'll get to that point. But right now in this early start of my career and just a couple of months of virality, it's difficult. I wake up early. I answer emails, I pack paintings. I ship things. I automate my website and then you know if I have a couple hours that afternoon I'll try to create something new or stick to a painting and then there's a balance. I'm figuring it out. It's not going to be like this all the time, but I think it's a path every artist goes through.

Mawdsley has some of the same queries about using Instagram for art,

Instagram is both an amazing tool and a challenge for creativity. For the positives, being a visual platform, Instagram helps with creative inspiration for projects, connecting with artists, increasing your artwork reach and for gaining work. However, finding the right balance between completing illustration work and maintaining your account to keep it growing can be difficult. Especially as a creative, where it takes time to make art and you can't always share all the projects you are working on at that time, it can make it hard to consistently be posting content that will engage with your audience. I find myself often feeling like I am not doing 'enough' on the platform, or I am not spending enough time

sharing my work. If this happens, I think it is important to remind oneself what your goal is - mine being to focus on developing my illustration career.

Both have found that posting on Instagram is beneficial, but of course, you still need to focus on the most important part, and that is making your work. There is a tension here for artists trying to use Instagram, and that is the choice between making your Instagram persona the main focus of your work and profiting off of that or the physical creation of the work itself and the sale of that commodity being the main source of your creativity. It's a hard balance when Instagram promotes the work of someone's personality, so self-branding is an essential aspect to having a successful Instagram account. But if an artist focuses too much just on this area, as Mawdsley and Misuzawa point out, you have a chance of losing yourself and becoming more of an influencer than an actual artist. Having to strike a balance between these areas seems crucial to running a successful account. This makes Mawdsley feel like her work may not be 'good' enough, as one constantly has to evaluate one's work against a world where one's art turns into your brand and a gateway into new opportunities. This is exactly how I feel about starting my Instagram account.

When I think of putting anything on Instagram, I freeze. For me, there is always something more I should have or should be doing concerning what I make. It also doesn't help that I am quite bad at documenting my work, even if something I made took me hours to complete. I really only started documenting it in the spring of 2023 when I realized if I wanted to work in the artworld, I would need to have a portfolio to show. Especially while going through the process of seeing other artists both starting out like me and more established sharing their work on Instagram, it makes me wonder why I hate putting myself out there.

My main issue is the amount of imposter syndrome I have about being an artist. I never feel like my work is good enough to be shared on Instagram. To be "good enough" can be hard to

clarify and has different meanings to different artists. For me it equates to having art which people are interested in, but also making pieces with meaning and substance that live outside of the social media sphere and are wholly fulfilling to myself as an artist. If I create content of my art pieces I want it to be engaging, but I also don't want to abide by the wills of an unknown audience just to make consumable Instagram content. I use a lot of different mediums to create different projects that aren't necessarily connected in subject matter, just something I felt like making at the time. I am still a student, and just trying to develop my style and not having a set group of work that I love makes it hard for me to share. That being said, it's also a lot of work to maintain a successful Instagram account as an artist, as both Mizusawa and Mawdsley have articulated. You have to constantly be posting something to have some sort of engagement with new accounts that might start following you. I was told by many artists that I interviewed that consistency is key over quality. The more you post, the more your Instagram page can get promoted to new accounts. If you truly want to reach new accounts, then you have to post reels. Reels take on a whole new form from just taking photos of your work and posting them to your feed. You have to follow the algorithm if you want engagement. Which means you need to film your art to go to a specific song, a trend of someone talking about wanting more engagement on their posts or some random sound that people have made work with their art. This all takes a lot of work within itself, and I need to focus more on the creation of the work, instead of the marketing of it right now. Just as Mawdsley advises,

Yes, having a successful Instagram account is very useful, but that does not at the end of the day determine if your work is 'good'. I find it can make you more self-critical about your work. It is good to always question things and try to grow and develop your work, however, if you are focussing on creating art just to be 'successful' on Instagram, I think that is where the issue comes. If your engagement goes down or people don't respond as you had hoped to a post, this can make you question whether your work is good enough - which I believe is very detrimental to one's creative spark and passion. You cannot be motivated by

your engagement and instagram alone. Instead you need to focus on creating work that is true to yourself and continue focussing on developing where your work fits in the overall creative industry and where you would like to go.

Basing your work off of the engagement of an app is one of the biggest downsides that can make all of the positives seem not quite as important. How Instagram promotes your content is never straightforward, and quantity over quality seems always to be the most important. In terms of marketing yourself, you first have to verse yourself in how Instagram feeds your audience the content. At first, I was using the app to figure out how the algorithm worked, especially on reels, but quickly, this took a turn to no longer use it for analytical work.

I found myself turning to the app again in moments of compulsion instead of calculated analysis. Which leads me to my first query or rather all out brawl I have with this little dopamine producing app, and that is the stream of content I seemed tethered to with my life.

Attention Economy and Limbic Capitalism:

It's a competitive market space, right? For attention, really. You're competing for attention. And regular folks are falling behind, or ones that aren't paying attention to how to market themselves. Every artist has to know how to market themselves. If they don't know how to leverage social media for marketing, it only hurts them. Because they're younger, up and coming artists that have mastered that...

Today, with technology and our phones, there are a myriad of ways in which information is constantly bombarding us. Our phones mimic mosquitos; even when we want to be away from them, there is always an insistent buzzing. Companies are targeting consumers' attention and agency on social media by strategically taking information on consumer traits and feeding them back what they desire most. This is what Daniel Pizarro, the owner of his own graphic design company and a graphic design professor at Yale University, states above. You have to win your followers' attention if you want to make a successful account. This phenomenon is best described by Herbet Simon who coined the term attention economy, "...When information is abundant,

human attention becomes a scarce resource and, hence, an object of economizing. Because consumers' ability to parse relevant information is limited, producers invest more resources to capture their attention."⁶

Instagram is specifically crafted to keep a user's attention for as long as possible. The more someone uses the app, the more of a chance Instagram has to make money off of the consumer. The flicking motion of Instagram is attached to how capital is formed through a consumer's body and psyche. David T. Courtwright, a professor of History at the University of North Florida who focuses on the history of addiction predominantly around drugs, has extensively written about how companies have overtaken a person's agency to enforce a compulsive form of consumerism. "...They do so by targeting the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for feeling and quick reaction, as distinct from dispassionate thinking. The limbic system's pathways of networked neurons make possible pleasure, motivation, long-term memory, and other emotionally linked functions crucial for survival."⁷ This mechanism, called limbic capitalism that was originally used for survival is now what companies tap into and use to make a profit off of consumers.⁸

This form of bodily control had a great impact on me when I was trying to use Instagram in a useful and methodical manner. Once I started using reels, my self control fell away, and a creeping and aching pain began surrounding my thumb and radiating up my arm. It's like my hand tells me to put down my phone and stop incessantly flicking away at my screen. I don't even know how much time has passed; all I know is that my mind is numb to everything, and that's exactly what I was looking for. A sweet escape with a fleeting dose of serotonin that absorbs its way into my body through that harsh LED light striking my face.

⁶ Pedersen, Albris and Seaver, "The Political Economy of Attention," 311.

⁷ Courtwright, *The Age of Addiction*, 6.

⁸ Courtwright, *The Age of Addiction*, 6.

It's that automatic motion that brings me comfort. If I am around people I don't know or experiencing the pains of anxiety or grief, I turn to my phone to provide a temporary fixation that isn't the unduly pain of surviving I currently feel. I know that I will see something that will take my mind somewhere else for a second fixation, but then I will move on past that and forget what I saw in the last five minutes. Once, my boyfriend asked me, "Can you remember everything you just watched in your reels?" I didn't want to admit it, but the answer was no. I maybe remembered two or three of the short-form videos that were just tossed at me, but I had been scrolling for thirty minutes, so much content was just thrown away in my mind.

I am not alone in this experience. Since social media was made, people have always talked about how it is just a time suck. For about six months, I deleted Instagram from my phone, and I felt blissfully light and more aware of my surroundings after a while. Initially, I caught myself picking up my phone only to realize that the app was no longer there. I would then absentmindedly scroll through emails instead because my hands were *addicted* to that motion. It's like I was craving to go and smoke my next cigarette, only to find that my pack is empty. It bothered me then, and I wanted to cave and redownload it for a long time.

I redownloaded it mainly to look into how I can use the app to showcase my art. I was using it intentionally at first, only looking at my art account and liking particular videos that would enable me to find the side of Instagram where artists gather. This quickly turned into me just doom scrolling endlessly every day, looking at content that I didn't much care for but could be entertaining.

Most people who use Instagram go through this experience; they eventually become ensnared in a cycle of ritual use. If you are trying to get your work out there as an artist, Instagram creates an environment where very little meaningful connection is actually created.

Simone Doesburg, who owns a ceramic studio and has the account @graceofglaze with one-hundred and thirteen thousand followers, confirmed this tenuous connection between one's followers and their actual engagement with an account. Even with her large number of followers, she says that her content only reaches about 20% of her audience. It doesn't promote her content in the algorithms, so even people who do follow her won't even see it.

This is what Instagram does: keep people entranced not by meaningful content and relationships with the creators they follow, but by what is most entertaining. They even state this on their website, "Reels is designed to entertain you. Much like Explore, the majority of what you see is from accounts you don't follow. So we go through a very similar process where we first source reels we think you might like, and then order them based on how interesting we think they are to you."⁹ This means when you are creating content as an artist, you constantly have to churn out stuff that could be entertaining or trendy and not necessarily showcase your art that gives it justice.

You also have to deal with how you as an artist spend time intaking that content when you have to be on the app so often promoting your work. Misuzawa talks about this issue,

I think Instagram is really good at giving us little dopamine rushes with likes, with content targeted specifically to us with attention and you know, the more you use it as a business marketing tool on a day to day basis, the more you can get addicted to it just like anything else. And I think all this stimulation will kind of numb you in the real world if you're not careful. And so, there is a need to find a balance for me. At some point I got artists block, but it was just me being overstimulated by all social media. So when I sat down at my desk, I couldn't think like I usually do and I need my emotions, my dopamine to come up with great new ideas and if that's all been dumped into social media, it's difficult. And I think a lot of artists kind of fall into that.

⁹ Mosseri, "Shedding More Light on How Instagram Works."

I would say that I am one of those artists, going to work on something and instead ending up scrolling through my phone. This is why it is usually deleted on my phone, but then, how can I learn how to market myself?

Tammy Nguyen likes how Instagram is crafted to feed her content that interests her. It's her gallery that is doing the majority of her marketing. The only times she posts are really on her Instagram stories because it's quick and carefree. Instagram is a way to connect with others and destress. While she agrees it can be a huge waste of time, sometimes she wants to just sit on the couch and mindlessly scroll after working all day.

This is where the tension lies with having Instagram, to use it as a form of production or entertainment. Even if as an artist you choose to use it more as a tool like Misuzawa does, that doesn't mean your audience is using it for the same ends. Most will be like Tammy and I, using it to escape for a little while from a hectic day and falling into the traps of limbic capitalism. So that then means when crafting an account, it has to have a certain level of entertainment to engage the user. That means attempting to guide someone's attention towards your feed, which is never a straightforward process as many of the artists I interviewed explained.

Lindsey Ruth has also found ways in which Instagram tries to addict people not just by consuming content but also the ones creating it by making the promotion of content and the reward of it similar to playing on a slot machine,

What I've noticed with reels in particular, is it happens in spurts and it kind of happens for everybody at once. So like, you'll plateau, your following will stay the same for months and months. And then you'll get like 50,000 followers in a week or two. And then, that is just what will happen over time. My friends and I have noticed when we all kind of tend to have those growth spurts at the same time. So, our theory is that Instagram will push everyone really hard for a while. So you get all addicted and then they kind of back off and let you suffer for a while. But it really is cyclical, it comes in waves. So if it sucks, it will be great later, and when it's great, it's gonna start sucking again soon. But it just always comes back and forward.

Psychologists credit this addiction to the dopamine rush you get from liking a post or being on the receiving end of likes and followers. Because technology is so transportable, we can keep our entire social lives and beyond right in our pocket. There are four main ways that humans receive dopamine, the most important here being from a “successful social interaction.”¹⁰ The dopamine rush we get from gaining followers and getting and receiving likes on Instagram posts keeps us returning to social media apps on our phones. Chamath Palihapitiya, the former Vice President of User Growth at Facebook, responded to a question about how the design of the app has affected consumers, “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works.”¹¹

This is quite a strong claim from the person who invented this system. Still, when looking anthropologically at how people interact with these platforms, there seems to be a direct effect on a person's agency. “Agency, however, is much more distributed and uneven in this assemblage. It resides not just in individual will, channeled through the devices that have become the remote controls of our everyday lives, but in the devices, networks, and spaces themselves.”¹²

Limbic capitalism and the systems that Palihapitiya helped to invent have changed the fabric of how we interact with media and the world. We are all constantly carrying around our cellphones, keeping our agency tethered to them. This technology has “re-territorialized” our bodies and how they receive information.¹³ The phones in our pockets become our gravitational centers, with our attention the source of the constant pull.¹⁴ We now live in states where we do

¹⁰ Haynes, “Dopamine, Smartphones & You.”

¹¹ Haynes, “Dopamine, Smartphone & You.”

¹² Packer, Wiley Crofts, and Wise, “Attention and Assemblage in the Clickable World,” 159.

¹³ Packer, Crofts, Wise, “Attention and Assemblage,” 161.

¹⁴ Packer, Crofts, Wise, “Attention and Assemblage,” 163.

not have full attention on any one thing but constant partial attention on multiple streams of information.¹⁵

As an artist, it turns you into someone seeking to bolster your following by attempting to capture the attention of users and attain their engagement. The creators of Instagram keep you engaged by making it into a “gamified” form of content, where likes, followers, and general engagement keep you coming back wanting more.¹⁶ It makes the app feel like a video game. Each follower count milestone you reach is a celebration, but then it's just onto the next one. The goal is to maintain steady growth and never become stagnant. As Ruth explained, they push your content for a while and make you gain thousands of followers, only to have your content have so little interaction that you feel like they shadow-banned¹⁷ you. This creates a feedback loop to which you can become addicted, making an artist stray from their true craft while attempting to reach a never-fully attained internet fame.

The ceramicist and designer, Simone, told me that she enjoys the process of making content, especially reels, as another form of expression. She also leans into the gamification of creating content, “It's a little bit of a game like how to tackle the algorithm. So although it can be very frustrating too, because sometimes we spend so much time making certain content and it has no effect. I try to see it as a game to sort of see how far I can get at something.” However, Simone is also starting to get rather frustrated with how the algorithm affects her account, with only 50% or less of her audience seeing the content she posts. “I do feel like maybe there's a disappointment in the effects of having that amount of followers that has had an influence on my

¹⁵ Packer, Crofts, and Wise, “Attention and Assemblage,” 163.

¹⁶ Hildebrandt, O'Hara, and Cohen, “The Emergent Limbic Media System,” 67.

¹⁷ Shadow banning means that it will block your account from showing up to others for a variety of reasons. This usually happens unknown to the account holder. The word is used quite often when an account's engagement is less than normal.

business but maybe not as exponential as the amount of followers. So therefore, I'm like, maybe I'm disappointed in Instagram, or what they can do for me.”

This proves that just because you have the followers does not mean you have the engagement you want. When attention is split and commoditized, having someone sit and interpret your art is nearly impossible. The viewer is almost always in a constant state of distraction due to limbic capitalism. In the article *Distraction and Digital Culture*, which came out in 2000 by William Bogard, a former professor of Sociology at Whitman College, distraction was defined as so, “To distract something is to elude its clutches; but also, as a consequence, to now clutch it, secretly and from behind. These qualities of clutching, elusion, of escape and capture, are what make distraction and its related strategies of simulation, disappearance, and removal, games of power. When we speak about the power of the digital media, we see lines of escape and capture everywhere, mass distraction truly is the order of the day.”¹⁸ The ways in which a person will be drawn in by content today depends on how unique that content may be in pulling their focus in and away from what they are already doing, what Bogard calls a “singularity.”¹⁹ The game that Simone is making her social media account to be is what Bogard is describing: a game of power. Bogard talked about media distraction forms as early as 2000, and today it is ever more pronounced. A content creator now has even less power, with only around seven seconds to create a singularity that will draw the users' attention away just enough to ensnare a modicum of their attention. Then, as Simone points out, that gives the viewer little to almost no time to interact with a person's art.

The change in the ways humans' attention manifests has been studied in depth by N. Katherine Hayles, a research professor at UCLA who studies the intersections of “literature,

¹⁸ Bogard, “Distraction and Digital Culture,” 2-3.

¹⁹ Bogard, “Distraction and Digital Culture,” 10.

science and technology in the 20th and 21st century.”²⁰ In her writing, “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” she explains how humans' attention modes have drastically changed over the past century with the inundation of media into people's everyday lives. Today, most people are unable to reach a state of deep attention with activities they are doing and instead are in a constant state of hyper attention, where a person's focus is split between multiple different information streams at once, looking for high amounts of constant stimulation.²¹ For the younger populations of the world today, being able to sit for long periods of time and have their focus on one thing without any distractions from outside stimuli is exceedingly rare with the rise of multiple forms of media.²² What Hayles found when looking into the world of gamers is that “stimulation works best, in other words, when it is associated with feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness...”²³

So, a content creator then has to turn their account into a sort of power game that is targeting how people's hyper attention functions, creating content that can stimulate a person more than what the app is already offering. But even when gamifying your content, the engagement one gets does not necessarily mean they will start following your account or go as far as finding your website on your profile and engaging with it. Simone and Lindsey are both looking and relying on Instagram to be a constant marketing tool for their accounts, but both show why it can be lacking, especially from a business perspective. This on-again-off-again push of accounts and split user attention makes it hard for business owners who rely on the platform for client work and engagement. This is why the algorithm becomes a make-or-break system for

²⁰ University of California LA, “Hayles, N. Katherine.”

²¹ Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention,” 187.

²² Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention,” 188.

²³ Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention,” 195.

creators wanting successful Instagram accounts. These systems manage our limbic systems and cause varying modes of distraction in a person's daily life.

The Algorithm:

The Internet used to be organized around creators. Fans would find a creator's work and congregate in communities around them and that's how the whole internet was organized... But in the last few years especially, there has been a massive shift. Now all the main platforms are algorithmically curating feeds and it is tearing fans away from creators and reorganizing the whole internet around personalization algorithms. This shift is breaking creators apart from their communities and it's not just one platform, it's the whole internet.²⁴

As Jack Conte, CEO of Patreon, emphasizes, the algorithm is playing into the hands of the companies who wish to use it to spin a web and catch people tight, making them never look away from their screens. Attention economy and limbic capitalism have quickly changed the structure of algorithms, becoming evermore a source vying for a user's attention through the means of distraction. Instagram's primary focus is to entertain its users for as long as possible. Ian Simon-Curry, who has been working in social media marketing for a little under ten years, has noticed the significant shift from the beginning of Instagram until now.

I think something that I definitely noticed is that in that 2014 to 2018 kind of time it was easier to build an audience more quickly. I think because people were joining and like, it wasn't as competitive in terms of getting people to see the content that you were posting, getting people to be willing to follow you, like it was just much more. There was like, I feel like more excitement and less fatigue because it was just newer in those first couple years.

When interviewing each artist, almost all of them expressed frustration with how this new form of algorithm impacts their account's engagement and their own art and creativity. Lindsey Ruth explains her experience with it,

In terms of how it affects me creatively, it almost like, hinders it in a way, in actually a lot of ways. I'd say one of the biggest reasons for that being because the algorithms are created to favor quantity over quality. So you feel this pressure to

²⁴ Conte, "There's a Massive Shift Happening on the Internet Right Now."

post as much as you can. And then on the other hand, I only want to post the work I'm really proud of and not every shoot is going to be what I want to post.

Lindsey told me that Meta actually contacted her once to pair her with a representative who could answer any of the questions she has on the app. I asked her why they do this, and she says they actually have a program for creators where they try and support the content creators on the app. They have even paid for some of her photography to be used on facebook. However, when Meta said they would answer any of Lindsey's questions on the algorithm, they basically gave her a whole load of non-answers. She only got two helpful points of data out of the conversation with the representative. The first being that it takes the algorithm a month to learn your patterns, and the second being that the more you post, no matter the quality of your content, the more the app will end up boosting it to other users. This creates a weird space for artists where if you do want recognition, you always need to have content ready in addition to already having to create all the art. This can then cause artists to create a large quantity of fast art which is easily consumable instead of spending their time creating projects of which they are proud of and have more nuance. Having to constantly post is beneficial to boosting an account and marketing, but it can also come at an expense. It is important for an artist to brand themselves well if they want to sell their art primarily through the app. But trying to favor the algorithms can turn an artist away from actually making art, and into an influencer who conforms their art to follow trends and be seen by the most amount of people possible.

The article *You are your brand: Self-branding and the marketization of self* by Jennifer M. Whitmer, a professor in the Department of Sociology, Gerontology and Gender Studies at California State University, brings up how having your own self-brand

can turn into a whole job in and of itself. It has become a fad in the past twenty years for people to develop their own brands to help make them more hireable.²⁵ Self-branding advice thus encourages workers to be continually working at and promoting the self, ensuring the worker is always “on,” leveraging their personality and lifestyle in the pursuit of producing branded value.”²⁶ Influencers are the people that truly profit off of this, by feeding Instagram the content that it wants to keep their users engaged and entertained. But artists need to ask themselves if the reason they are getting involved in this form of labor is because of their art or their want to create and profit off of their presence online. A whole new form of labor is produced to keep the algorithms happy, one that is also not well compensated, “Rather than altering their self-presentation in situ in response to the audience's responses, the individual needs to consider how others in their audience may potentially react. This process is complicated by the fact that in constructing a brand, the individual may have little information as to who comprises their actual audience, and thus may not be fully aware of how best to present themselves to elicit the desired response.”²⁷

For Adri Bollinger, a student at Wesleyan University who also runs her own fiber arts account @sillylittleyarnthings with one hundred and fourteen followers, she has pulled back on posting a lot on her page because she sees how it is creating a new source of labor of which is not beneficial to her and her art,

With Instagram, it's really about like, constant feeding of the algorithm and feeding the app to promote your stuff. And when you're already doing a ton of literally physical manual labor to create a piece, it becomes this huge, kind of like taxing thing to have to also fully maintain a social media presence. And I'll admit,

²⁵ Whitmer, “You Are Your Brand,” 1-2.

²⁶ Whitmer, “You Are Your Brand,” 6.

²⁷ Whitmer, “You Are Your Brand,” 5.

I kind of like I tried it originally. And then I was just sort of like, I'm gonna post when I want to post because it's too much work.

Whitmer's writing supports how Adri feels that such labor surrounding self-branding through social media is actually poorly compensated, "It may prove useful to compare and contrast self-branding with the kind of emotional work performed by lower-income service workers."²⁸ Therefore, maintaining a self-brand usually cannot be used as a main form of a job unless a content creator is getting outside support from brands asking them to promote their content or through selling a product.

Adri straight out refuses to fall into the forms of labor that Instagram expects of their content creators to maintain their account, "I do not Post reels. And that's kind of like a conscious choice on my own. Because I know that the reels are kind of more part of feeding that algorithm and like forcing social media to become excess and intensive labor."

Spencer Klink, another student from Wesleyan University and a printmaker, no longer has a separate art account where he posts his work. He finds that managing two accounts was quite cumbersome and also an excess of labor, and art has such a prominent place in his life that splitting the two seemed unnecessary. Spencer finds posting to be more of a tool for sharing what is going on in his world, instead of letting Instagram become the world he revolves around.

I think where it becomes unproductive is when A, it becomes a time suck in my life, which is super easy or B when my perception of what good art is, is based on what does well on social media, which is ultimately stupid, or which is ultimately not accurate. Because, what does well on Instagram is determined by a number of things that are out of my control.

The "things that are out of my control" is hinting at the manner in which the algorithm promotes one's content. Adri and Spencer would both rather connect with people in the real world, which is in their control, over creating a large following and meeting people through

²⁸ Whitmer, "You Are Your Brand," 7.

Instagram. They both are involved in their local arts communities, and the people that follow them on Instagram are from these in person experiences versus online ones. In the article *Being Real on Fake Instagram: Likes, Images, and Media Ideologies of Value* by Scott Ross, a professor of Anthropology at George Washington University, he explains how becoming intertwined with social media especially Instagram is to “internalize its gaze,” and add more value to likes than the actual creation of the image itself.²⁹ Both Spencer and Adri want to avoid doing this, as what really matters to them is the creation of their art versus the need to promote themselves through versing themselves with the algorithm.

Most people also don't understand the inner workings of the algorithm, and that's just it, it's not one algorithm but a myriad of coinciding ones that control how the user is fed content. The majority of artists I interviewed refer to it as one entity, but there are many more subdivisions and levels of entanglement that I, even after all of my research, have found no direct data on how this really functions. Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, has been writing articles and making content on the app in the past year to “...do a better job of explaining how Instagram works.”³⁰ But all of these articles support what Lindsey Ruth said the Meta representative told her, really just a whole lot of nothing.

The main way the algorithm traps a user's attention is through persuasion, as explained by Nick Seaver, an assistant professor of Anthropology at Tufts University, in *Captivating Algorithms: Recommender Systems as Traps*, “a noncoercive attempt to change attitudes or behaviors,” which leads a user to voluntarily choose to spend more of their time on the app.³¹ Algorithms are created to entrap the viewer into that space for as long as possible. Anyone could stop using these platforms at any moment as people are not being actively forced to use the app.

²⁹ Ross, “Being Real on Fake Instagram,” 365.

³⁰ Mosseri, “Instagram Ranking Explained.”

³¹ Seaver, “Captivating Algorithms,” 424.

However, through the process of making the app as entertaining as possible by feeding people the content they most like, we as users choose to stay trapped in these new media worlds. The stronger the gravitational pull to be constantly entertained the more time we succumb to the app as Seaver explains, “To be caught at this speed is not to be dead, rather it is to be enclosed, known, and subject to manipulation. In other theoretical registers, this is akin to Deleuze’s ‘control’ (1992; Cheney-Lippold, 2011) or Foucault’s ‘governmentality’ (1991): styles of enclosure that are no less sinister for being less than absolute. But to be caught at this speed is also to be hosted – to be provided with conditions for existence that facilitate activity while constraining it (Derrida, 2000; Swancutt, 2012).”³²

As Seaver says, we are actively being hosted by our devices, and it can make the difference between being distracted or being attentive blur. As Susanna Paasonen, a professor of Art History, Musicology and Media Studies at the University of Turku, said in her work *Fickle Focus: Distraction, Affect and the Production of Value in Social Media*, we are constantly modulating between the two states, limbic capitalism and trapping, which are coming into constant play in our daily lives. She also points out that there will always be content that is more engaging to the user than what they are currently observing, and the never ending cycle of finding something more interesting can keep a person trapped.³³

The people behind Instagram have found that the best way to keep our attention is through promoting short-form video content over anything else, “We’re no longer a photo sharing app, or a square photo sharing app. The number one reason people say that they use Instagram in research, is to be entertained.” said Mosseri in an Instagram reel from June of 2021. He goes on to say that Instagram began leaning into the entertainment trend, meaning a heavy

³² Seaver, “Captivating Algorithms,” 432.

³³ Paasonen, “Fickle Focus.”

focus on video, to compete with platforms like Tik Tok and Youtube. In the past two years, the whole structure of Instagram has shifted to mainly be about reels and video content.

According to Instagram's article, *Instagram Ranking Explained*, there are main algorithms that control your feed; posts, reels, stories, explore, and search. While there are many more processes that go into creating this app, they did not specify what these things are. They simply used terms like "algorithms," "classifiers," and "processes." They also explain, "People tend to look for their closest friends in Stories, use Explore to discover new content and creators and be entertained in Reels."³⁴ The ways they rank content in your feeds is using a process called "signals," "there are thousands of them. They include everything from when a post was shared to whether you're using a phone or the web to how often you like videos."³⁵ Again, they vaguely brush over the most obvious signals without going into much detail. These being, "your activity," "information about the post," "information about the person who posted," and "your history of interacting with someone."³⁶

For each main portion of the app, this article lists bullet points of signals they are looking for. All of them start with some form of "your activity" or "viewing history." The rest of the points always just mildly allude to how they follow your engagement with certain accounts and how often you interact with them. "In Feed, the five interactions we look at most closely are how likely you are to spend a few seconds on a post, comment on it, like it, share it, and tap on the profile photo. The more likely you are to take an action, and the more heavily we weigh that action, the higher up in Feed you'll see the post."

³⁴ Mosseri, "Instagram Ranking Explained."

³⁵ Mosseri, "Instagram Ranking Explained."

³⁶ Mosseri, "Instagram Ranking Explained."

Here Instagram is tapping into that attention economy, by investing the majority of their time into collecting data on how to better adapt and control a user's attention. The way the algorithms are laid out makes it quite difficult to actually hold any sort of following anymore, as Jack Conte describes at the beginning of this section. Even if you are making content, it does not mean that your followers will see it. It is promoting content that is “sticky,” a term that was invented by Malcom Gladwell, “which described how messages packaged according to psychological lessons managed to hold audiences’ attention and stick in their minds.”³⁷ It's up to the algorithm to decide in what ways your content becomes relevant and entertaining, by anticipating “implicit” trends through following the data given through the signals above.³⁸ Such data then has the ability to capture users attention and use distraction as a means of gaining focus on what Instagram wants.³⁹ It does not go out of its way to support its content creators. The purpose here is to bolster the app's revenue. This is an unsettling conclusion, especially for Simone,

...I had a reel, one of my recent videos, I think it got half a million views. So I'm like, Oh, wow, that's so many, I must have reached so many of my followers. And it was only 20,000. So less than 20% of my followers saw it. And it was kind of scary with growing, I was like, oh, it's amazing that there are so many people that started following me, but I can never reach them. A really good performing reel and I will only reach, maximum, 50% of my followers.

Though Simone is Dutch and her studio is based in the Netherlands, when posting from that area she is unable to reach the local population,

So most of my followers are in the US and I hardly have any followers in my own country, and also not even that much in Europe. So for me, now I feel a bit challenged, because I think only three and a half percent are Dutch. So it's less than three thousand people. So I'm like, okay, although Americans are great, and in my webshop they order a lot of stuff, I would like to reach more European

³⁷ Seaver, “Captivating Algorithms,” 428.

³⁸ Seaver, “Captivating Algorithms,” 430.

³⁹ Seaver, “Captivating Algorithms,” 430.

based clients. So I am now struggling a little bit like how do I bend this curve towards my country?

Simone told me how her Instagram is meant to be her main source of marketing, so yes having a lot of followers may be nice, but if they are not the people she is actively trying to reach then it turns into a form of marketing that is not as useful to her local business. She finds connecting to the art market harder when most people that follow her end up being other ceramicists who like her style but are not interested in buying her products. She is now wanting to find other ways of marketing her art that is not through Instagram, but more organic means, like through printed magazines in her area.

Lindsey, who does enjoy networking through her account, also wants to eventually find a way out of Instagram being her main form of marketing. Because, as she has stated before, it can be a hit or miss way of promoting work when your general audience is not made clear. The ways she goes about using the different sections of Instagram to promote her art is using video reels and photographic posts to create different types of content that she finds can represent her business more wholly,

The interesting thing about like reels versus your feed is your feed is going to be shown to the people that follow you, but reels are going to be shown to people that don't follow you. So it's a good way to reach new people versus like your feed posts. It's like, I kind of view it almost more as a portfolio from my feed. That's where I post the work I'm doing, the work I'm proud of. And then reels is where I can grow and reach new people. So you can kind of post the same thing 100 times, because it's gonna go to different people every time

But even with using this to an artist's own advantage, how Instagram connects its users with accounts they like is so shrouded in mystery that trying to target a clientele base seems near impossible. It is really up to the way that a user interacts with the site that controls if someone's content is relevant or not. A user can be very attentive to what content they are intaking by

telling Instagram which posts they want to see, but most people do not go that far and succumb to taking in content rather than curating their feeds.

I found most of the artists I interviewed through reels and the algorithm feeding me content that I wanted to see. But it is true, once I started following them, I really did not see a majority of their most recent posts on my feed. I went to Instagram with a clear intention of what communities I wanted to find and I told Instagram what I wanted to see, and Instagram mainly spent its time trying to find me a never ending stream of new people instead of showing me the accounts that I follow. Joshua Misuzawa tries to use his time on Instagram in the the same manner as me,

I tried to train myself not to surf aimlessly on Instagram, consuming content. Whenever I'm going through Instagram, I look specifically at trends and audios of how other artists are marketing themselves. And it's, it's kind of a love hate relationship because us as artists, we love to be unique. You have to have structure on videos, choose the sounds that make us more inspired in the moment, but Instagram doesn't reward that. They reward trending audios, hooks you know, trending reels. You know you have to do a certain thing with a certain sound and it will boost your reach and you have to do that but you're also balancing your own uniqueness and creativity. So there is definitely a trade off.

Because I was using my old arts account that had not been touched in three years, the algorithm had to take its time to learn what I wanted to see. I came to use that account with one clear purpose, to find more artists and see what content they were creating so the algorithm would promote them. My liking of content specifically in relation to artists and how they are interacting with their feeds, made Instagram curate a reels feed that had almost all of the same style of video. This style is artists trying to promote their work using specific sounds on the platform that would boost their content and let more people see it, and accounts telling you how to gain more followers through your arts account.

This content consists of a few categories. The first being reels using a sound imploring you to press copy link on a post, so that even if you are not sharing it, the algorithm is tricked into thinking that it is being shared at a higher rate. Also, there are reels of varying sounds that seem random at points. Here are some examples, “Ok so I totally get it if my art isn’t your thing, but I would absolutely love you for decades if you interact with this post.”⁴⁰ The next is a trend where an artist shows their work in different colors, another being a sound that is part of a song that says “And it goes like this,” and a bunch of fast montage photos of a person's art.⁴¹ Another is “Instagram says I have to keep making reels to grow. So here’s your reel. Ta Daaa.”⁴² Then there are a bunch of posts of artists working with some sort of “how I got my Instagram account to grow, or how I gained 90,000 followers in 90 days, see caption below.”⁴³ Instagram has a group of trends and sounds like this that revolve around people’s feeds for a little over a month or so. When people use these sounds, it is easier for creators to get their accounts promoted, since audiences are engaging with these specific types of content the most.

However, these trends are not specific to promoting art, they are only what the algorithm has considered is sticky enough to get the most amount of attention to the app. So, using these as ways to promote art, can bring up the issue that has been a running theme, making art more for the algorithm than for the act of creating. This is where being represented by a more traditional gallery space can be more beneficial to an artist. These galleries do not need reels to promote their content, as Ian will later comment on. If an artist acquires a gallery, an artist can live more like Tammy where Instagram does not dictate her market. For her, Instagram is more used as a

⁴⁰ Wathen, “A Demonstration of an Illusion.”

⁴¹ Rei, “Holy moly.”

⁴² Hjalmarson, “Me??fed up with the algorithm.Nahh.”

⁴³ Mizusawa, “How I gained 90k+ followers in 3 months. (Artists Edition).”

form of entertainment, and her job is to create art whose content is meant to be experienced in person.

The necessity to make your content sticky and make your art fit into a certain trend is one of the main issues I have found with producing my own content to form a steady stream of engagement. A lot of these sounds do not fit into the aesthetic that an artist might want to convey. Joshua also said that a lot of the content out there on how to grow your account is not always the most accurate for preserving an artist's practice while also handling media,

I just want to add how Instagram affected art in general in my life. I think there's a lot of content out there that says you need to post twice a day, you need to post at these times. Your content needs to have a hook. You need to do this. You need to do that, and all that's true if you want to grow quickly and fast. But soon enough, you have that schedule embedded into your bones. As before you were not even doing that in the first place. And now you just, you turn from an artist into an influencer. So that's a big trap that I think a lot of painters and creatives kind of fall into. You know, they make paintings and make visual art but then they find themselves regurgitating the same content that other content creators make in their own format. And it's like they have no time to make art anymore. They're just kind of doing relatable, artsy content, which is fine if you love doing that. But sometimes it's good to reflect on why you started in the first place and just make sure you stay true to that.

The point of influencer vs artist is repeating itself as one of the main issues for maintaining a successful Instagram account. Does a content creator want to have stickiness or quality? The decision to make your art as a form of distraction or a form of adding meaning in someone's life seems to mold the creation of an artist's account. It forces one to switch between ideologies of creating.⁴⁴ You have to create art and content that is seen and fulfilling for yourself as an artist, but you also have to switch between the ideologies of making and creation when it comes to forming the social media content on the art works that you just made. Most artists that I talked to think deeply about their craft to ensure that their art is not just turning into an influencer

⁴⁴ Ross, "Being Real on Fake Instagram," 361.

account and is actually championing their work. They do this through not really following the trending sounds, since it doesn't align with the type of art and content they want to make. Ian from Lehmann Maupin says that those trending sounds rarely fit in with the gallery's messaging. The only trend that they follow is the push for more video content,

Yeah, like in the broad sense of like, Oh, more video content like yes, but in terms of like, viral kind of participation, it is rare that it aligns with what we have to say. But I don't know, we did a photo dump recently that actually was successful and, kind of was like a fun way to, I don't know, have a more casual or personal perspective.

Simone finds that most of the trends do not fit what she is trying to convey with her ceramic pieces either, so she tries to find sounds that more suit her aesthetic. However, she also says that she can find a lot of joy in creating reels, and it gives her a good template to make something she never would have thought of before.

I like the classical piano music which has a really peaceful vibe. So I will try to stick with those mostly because I think it fits with the aesthetic. And then I've tried, at the beginning, to follow trends. It didn't work at all. And now I don't know I, I sometimes use a sound that's viral. And then yeah, there's a few reels that have brought me so many followers and sales because I could join in on this trend. Because if it's fitting with what I'm doing it is just like, I know, [the trend] the art versus the artists and the artists versus the arts, for example. It was a reel that really performed well. I would never have come up with it myself...And for the algorithm, I do keep it in mind because it feels like if there's total freedom, I can't really create anything, and it's giving me enough, like, practical tools to create a reel. They're saying don't make them 30 seconds long. Just keep them seven seconds. I'm like, okay, great. I'll just try to create something nice for seven seconds.

What Simone finds helpful to guide her creatively, others can find that it limits them to only stick to one form of content, because that is what the algorithm is boosting. As Lindsey Ruth feels,

because of these algorithms and the way that they function, it really tends to pigeonhole people. And it hinders growth and change with people so much of the time, because the algorithm will make you blow up for one thing and one thing only unless you're lucky. And so a lot of the time you feel that you have to stick to this one thing that you're known for, and you feel that it's hard to change and hard

to make growth. Because if you try something new, that's really different for you, and the algorithm recognizes it's different for you, it's not going to push it, so it's very discouraging in that way. So I definitely would say my goal is to one day not have to even use social media. Because I really think it is quite a hindrance on creativity.

While she still creates reels, it tends to be in the same manner every time,

...Everyone kind of has their own little format. If you know, look at big accounts, you'll realize that they kind of stick to one video that they kind of tend to post and they always do well, because the algorithm will push that one thing that goes well for you.

Siena Schofield, an artist who runs her own small arts business in Southern Oregon, tries to stay away from reels, because she finds they really haven't helped her account at all. She also doesn't want to do what Lindsey brings up, pigeon hole herself into an aesthetic that doesn't actually suit the art she is trying to make,

I guess I don't really use popular sounds. But I think my issue is like I don't, it doesn't suit my aesthetic. It doesn't suit who I am as a person. So I think it feels in-genuine to me. And maybe this is my fault as an artist, but it feels in-genuine to a degree to use trending sounds to try and promote my art even if it's a good strategy because it just does not suit who I am as a person or an artist. My art is so connected to like people and inner workings and like the natural world. That to use a trending sound sometimes feels like they're never the right vibe for what I'm trying to show, so yeah. So I think I've used things that have not been popular sounds so that would make sense they aren't getting as much engagement.

For all of us beginning artists, we are not using Instagram as our full time jobs. There is a split between the emerging artists who only work part time on their accounts versus the artists who are using Instagram as their main form of income. If you want to do art full time, and use Instagram as your gallery and promotional tool, then it turns into another full time job on top of doing the work you already need to do to survive. At many points, it feels more beneficial to sell in person and make a clientele that way versus having Instagram users be your clientele. Holly Greene, Tammy Nguyen's main artist assistant and the creator of her own screen printed and

intricately hand painted clothing brand @littlecrushclothes with four hundred and thirty four followers, finds Instagram to feel almost impossible,

It's just so time consuming. And I don't really feel like there's a lot of yield from it. And it's like, it's very circular, you know, like, they want to get you trapped into it, you can't really go viral unless you're spending all the time on the app and like, engaging with other people's posts and using the right functions. And then they'll promote your posts to other people. And it's like, there just simply isn't enough time to create the work, create the advertising about the work, post the work, you know, like they're just there aren't enough hours in the day that reels shit is so tedious. And like, that is the only thing they ever really want to show.

True engagement with your work is not something that is usually fully realized through the platform. Both Holly and Siena, like Spencer and Adri, choose to engage with people in person, by going to artist fairs to sell their work. They enjoy connecting with people face to face over doing so online. The way in which a lot of these artists with large accounts gathered such a mass following is because they at first enjoyed the process of making content for their accounts and ensured they protected themselves in the process, just like Alice Mawdsley,

I don't believe Instagram is the enemy for creativity, but you need to be mindful and question how to use it best to support your creative practice rather than hinder it. I also think it is important to not feel like everything you share has to be 'perfect' or has to be the work you think people will be engaged with, as this can stop you from creating authentically and continue pushing and developing your work. This also refers to the importance of not feeling like you need to share all of your work, there is great value in creating personal work for you without the added layer of worrying about how people will respond to it - this can also often be a great opportunity to try new things.

For Simone, she started making reels with a premise that didn't cause her any real stress but as more of an experiment,

let's just try it out for 10 reels, and see what's happening. And then along the process of setting this boundary for myself, like I'm just gonna do it 10 times, without having too much emotional connection to it, I found some joy in there. And then I grew from there.

Being introspective like Simone about why you are creating your content past just engaging with the algorithms, seems to be a running trend among large artists accounts on

Instagram who have had some success. But to each and every one of these artists, no matter their success levels, Instagram will always be an unknown and unstable way of promoting art. The algorithms are essentially creating a jackpot system, where if you keep posting, maybe you will win something, causing you to come back for more. Even with these successful Instagram accounts, and enjoying the process of making reels, at the end of the day it is a gamble of what the different algorithms will pick up on. This creates a world in which art commoditization is at the whim of online randomness. Until Instagram gives disclosure of how their algorithms work in full, the art market will continue to be in a constant state of flux at the whim of these companies, putting both an artist's creative practice and marketing at jeopardy.

However, I will say I am still confused by the algorithm and don't believe it determines whether your art is good. The issue comes in saying your artwork is only successful if your engagement is high - which is certainly not the case and I believe can be very detrimental for creativity and make artists less likely to push boundaries.

An Ongoing Battle for Attention:

This vying for attention through forms of distraction is not a new phenomenon among artists. It has been around for decades and discussed before. The same conversations surrounding attention and distraction were discussed with the invention of radio, television and photography as William Bogard discusses in *Distraction and Digital Culture*. Television was initially one of the leading issues among scholars, equating using the TV to having it “subtract” you from your environment.⁴⁵ Now with the invention of smartphones and having mini TVs in our pockets, the game of power is ever stronger in being able to capture people and subtract them from their surroundings by constantly reminding people that they need to be checking their phones.

⁴⁵ Bogard, “Distraction and Digital Culture,” 3.

But even before this proliferation of digital media, Walter Benjamin wrote about distraction in an age of mechanics in the 1930s, in *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Distraction in the 1930's was not as prevalent as it is today, and had more to do with the bustling of one's surroundings, rather than the prevalent and concise attacks of modern marketing. Distraction and vying for people's attention has grown to such a scale that you can't even get away from it at the beach. I was lying on the beach in Miami during sunset when a giant barge with a billboard sized screen on it lit up the water with different neon colored ads. Being able to really sit and contemplate in any space is being diminished the more technology becomes involved.

Once photography and more prolific forms of media became available, the artist had to compete among the masses. Benjamin equated contemplation to experiencing the true "aura" of an object. This can be defined as the phenomenon of distance from that art object and how it is experienced.⁴⁶ The most pure form being through cult worship of an object in a person's direct space, through some sort of religion or spiritual and ritual practices.⁴⁷ Distraction on the other hand he equated to being in a city, "the type of flitting and barely conscious peripheral-vision perception unleashed with great vigor by modern life at the crossroads of a city, the capitalist market, and modern technology."⁴⁸ Benjamin brings up how with new mechanical techniques of the time and the invention of photography, it made an environment where it was easier for the general masses to experience art. But Benjamin makes the point that the experiencing of a piece of art

⁴⁶ Watson, Barnes, Bunning, and Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 228.

⁴⁷ Watson, Barnes, Bunning, and Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 230

⁴⁸ Taussig, "Tactility and Distraction," 148.

through a photograph instead of in person removes and alters the aura of that object, changing the ways that the art is perceived.⁴⁹

Even in the 1930's, Benjamin notes, art was already under a process of becoming simpler in order for it to be enjoyed by the masses, "The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion."⁵⁰ The detachment from being able to experience art in person can take away from the artist's meaning and intent behind a piece, and it becomes a new form of experience. Benjamin's points align and feed into the literature on media and distraction today, like in Scott Ross's *Being Real on Fake Instagram*, "The life of an image extends beyond the moment of its creation and is 'marked through successive moments of consumption across space and time' (Edwards 2012, 222)."⁵¹ An artist is already removing their work from its general aura when posting it on Instagram, but then it takes on a whole new form once people start interacting and liking an image, shaping "its social biography."⁵²

Even though a user is crafting the way an art piece is seen through interaction on social media, being able to really engage with someone's art is usually only possible in person, and seeing a piece of work today and being able to observe it in detail for a long period of time is a gift. When art is seen in a mere matter of seconds as it flits by, it has even less of an impact on a viewer. The intricacies and nuances in a piece become lost. Contemplation becomes the flick of a finger, the only real effect a piece has on the app is

⁴⁹ Watson, Barnes, Bunning, and Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 228

⁵⁰ Watson, Barnes, Bunning, and Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 245

⁵¹ Watson, Barnes, Bunning, and Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 362

⁵² Watson, Barnes, Bunning, and Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 362

if it is eye catching to a viewer. Now the word “trendy” is becoming heavily tied with artists' work, which can lead art to become a form of glorified commoditization rather than a means of connecting. Such shifts in presentation of art impacts how artists approach their own creation, having to shape their art around these new principles if they want to be successful online.

Finding a balance between a supportive online community with a tangible offline form of making and selling your art, will allow artists to maintain more stability. Because while Instagram can broaden horizons, it can also shrink them down to the size of a phone screen taking away from what can really matter to you. The same problem in the 1930's of the simplification of art for enjoyment is still ever prevalent today. An artist needs to keep their own integrity when figuring how much to lean into the art making process versus the influencer process. Instagram is a useful tool, but making it into your whole world can be a dangerous game.

Do I Finally Start Posting?

For me, my art is not here to be sold at this very moment. I am just trying to learn how to make and produce something I am happy with. To then think about posting artwork that I am not satisfied with on social media does not sit well with me. I never feel like my art is ready enough to actually be shared with people, so to have to make an account that is supposed to show off and essentially prize my work makes me uncomfortable. I think I have two issues, the first being that I am in a state of learning, and second being not wanting to waste my time filming and editing content to try and get people to look at me online. I think I need to start taking another approach with how I am going to use my Instagram account if I actually want to start posting on it again.

That being said, to not have an Instagram for my artwork would be foolish. What Natasha Grey told me at the beginning of this writing still holds, I need to confront the marketing of my art sooner rather than later. Lindsey, Simone, Joshua and Ainsley, all of whom have large followings, have had opportunities open up to them that they would not have gotten through the more traditional art world. To not leave these paths of networking open, would be to sabotage my own art career. But I also know that I don't want to use Instagram as my main form of communication in the art world, because of all the negative effects in relation to my time and also how it will impact the art that I create. I want my art to be contemplated on more than a surface level, and to do that I have to engage with more traditional white cube spaces to give people the opportunity to also see my art in person. I want to spread out where people can see my art because at the end of the day Instagram is a form of entertainment and distraction for most people, and while it can let you as an artist become known to more people than it would otherwise, all of your success can change at the opaque whim of one company.

Bibliography

- Bogard, William. "Distraction and Digital Culture." *Critical Digital Studies*, 2013, 465–84.
<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442666702-031>.
- Cloutier, Crista. "How to Get into a Gallery." *Art Business News*, November 6, 2019.
<https://artbusinessnews.com/2017/01/how-to-get-into-a-gallery/>.
- Conte, Jack (@jackconte). "Jack Conte on Instagram: 'There's a Massive Shift Happening on the Internet Right Now, and I Want Patreon to Be on the Right Side of History.'" Instagram, June 21, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CtwiCqyq1KF/>.
- Courtwright, David T. "Introduction." Introduction. In *The Age of Addiction How Bad Habits Became Big Business*, 1–10. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021.
- Delagrange, Julien. "The Art Gallery: Everything You Need To Know ." *Contemporary Art Issue - Platform, Publisher & Gallery on Contemporary Art*, September 23, 2023.
<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/the-art-gallery-everything-you-need-to-know>.
- Delagrange, Julien. "Top 10 of the Biggest Art Galleries in the World ." *Contemporary Art Issue - Platform, Publisher & Gallery on Contemporary Art*, July 31, 2023.
<https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/top-10-of-the-biggest-art-galleries-in-the-world/>.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes." *Profession* 2007, no. 1 (2007): 187–99.
<https://doi.org/10.1632/prof.2007.2007.1.187>.
- Haynes, Trevor. "Dopamine, Smartphones & You: A Battle for Your Time." *Science in the News*, February 4, 2021.
<https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2018/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time/>.
- Hildebrandt, Mireille, Kieron O'Hara, and Julie E. Cohen. "The Emergent Limbic Media System." Essay. In *Life and the Law in the Era of Data-Driven Agency*, 60–79. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021.
- Hjalmarsson, Agnes (@Agneshjalart). "Me??fed up with the algorithm.Nahh." *Instagram Video*. September 8, 2023. Accessed September, 2023.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cw7oDjtK8i7/?hl=en>
- Mawajdeh, Haley. "How Instagram Is Changing the Art Market." *Art&Seek*, November 8, 2016.
<https://artandseek.org/2016/08/31/how-instagram-is-changing-the-art-market/>.
- Mizusawa, Joshua (@jmizu). "How I gained 90k+ followers in 3 months. (Artists Edition)." *Instagram Video*. July 10, 2023. Accessed July, 2023.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CuhDHIIAo7r/?hl=en>

- Mosseri, Adam. "Instagram Ranking Explained." Instagram Blog, May 31, 2023. <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/instagram-ranking-explained/>.
- Mosseri, Adam. "Shedding More Light on How Instagram Works." About Instagram, June 8, 2021. <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/shedding-more-light-on-how-instagram-works>.
- Paasonen, Susanna. "Fickle Focus: Distraction, Affect and the Production of Value in Social Media." *First Monday*, 3 October 2016, 21, no. 10 (September 6, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i10.6949>.
- Packer, Jeremy, Wiley Stephen B Crofts, and J. Macgregor Wise. "Attention and Assemblage in the Clickable World." Essay. In *Communication Matters: Materialist Approaches to Media, Mobility, and Networks*, 159–72. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Pedersen, Morten Axel, Kristoffer Albris, and Nick Seaver. "The Political Economy of Attention." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 50, no. 1 (2021): 309–25. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110356>.
- Rei (@Fullyonfire). "Holy moly." *Instagram Video*. September 6, 2023. Accessed September, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cw2qUppRk2v/?hl=en>
- Ross, Scott. "Being Real on Fake Instagram: Likes, Images, and Media Ideologies of Value." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2019): 359–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12224>.
- Sanders, Sam. "How Instagram Is Changing Life for Artists." NPR, May 7, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/07/720929968/how-instagram-is-changing-life-for-artists>.
- Seaver, Nick. "Captivating Algorithms: Recommender Systems as Traps." *Journal of Material Culture* 24, no. 4 (2018): 421–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183518820366>.
- Taussig, Michael. "Tactility and Distraction." *Rereading Cultural Anthropology*, 1992, 8–14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv123x7b7.5>.
- Wathen, Jess (@_jesswathen). "A Demonstration of an Illusion..." *Instagram Video*. June 23, 2023. Accessed June, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ct14k6kgXAE/?hl=en>
- Watson, Sheila, Amy Barnes, Katy Bunning, and Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Essay. In *A Museum Studies Approach to Heritage*, 226–43. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019.
- Whitmer, Jennifer M. "You Are Your Brand: Self-branding and the Marketization of Self." *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 3 (2019): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12662>.

Winkelman, Edward, and Patton Hindle. "A Brief History of Art Dealing ." Artsy, December 27, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-history-art-dealing>.

University of California LA. "Hayles, N. Katherine - Department of English UCLA." UCLA English, October 28, 2022.<https://english.ucla.edu/people-faculty/hayles-katherine-n/>.