

The Haunted House of Art: artist-run projects and the end of the artist

By Mohammad Salemy, February 2020

Reading Jack Segbar's text about the state of contemporary art and the role of RiB as space where "practice" is "performed" reminds me of returning as an adult to an amusement park one used to enjoy as a kid. This, of course, is not the rejection of his eloquent understanding of the issues at hand. However, perhaps, I will be pointing to the arguments' impending expiry date by painting a moving picture of the radical changes in the global workforce of art production. My text might prompt us to reconsider Segbar's points, aiming for a re-articulation of the status of contemporary art and the place of RiB in its production and circulation.

Art, either as in real art, or its sacrificial substitute, will continue to survive or even thrive in the future, but it seems that we are reaching the end of the concept of "artist." And we have nobody to blame for artists' downfall but themselves. This event is not some kind of human cleansing or annihilation of a breed of people by external forces. The end of artists is death by something like the opposite of suicide, a demise caused by mass replication. Artists are disappearing like how zombies eat each other in movies. Or, like how cancerous cells crowd out their healthy brothers and sisters in living tissue. It is like when a particular radio wave runs out of all available signal range to dedicate to a new station. It is when the sound of the radio stations bleed into each other, so much that it is impossible to listen to anything because all one hears is white noise.

What does this scenario mean for spaces which have been explicitly identified with the figure of the artist? I am thinking, for example, of artist-run spaces like RiB? What will happen to these spaces, which played a crucial role during the rise and dominance of contemporary art in generating new methods and languages for making art and addressing it? Responding to this question requires us to keep in mind the colonial and exploitative relationship between more extensive operations like commercial galleries and kunsthalle/museum and artist-run projects. This unequal collaboration often amounted to small artist-run spaces being instrumentalized as recruitment offices for identifying and training global art stars. How does this relationship will have to evolve to respond to the end of the concept of artists? If artists are gone, would there ever be a need for artist-run projects in the larger space galled global contemporary art? We will return to these

questions after completing after diagnosing the terminal illness that will perhaps be wiping artists from the face of the world's cultural map.

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The history of the extinction of artists goes back to the period of art's peak-scarcity in the late 1950s when there were only a handful of professional artists in each community, and everybody knew each other. For example, in Canada, around the time when different Governments began funding the arts in the 1960s, for a brief moment, there were more resources for artists than actual artists. Agencies like the Canada Council would advertise in art papers to let artists know that they can provide every applicant with project funding. Slowly, the social policymakers began also to think that universities and colleges needed more art programs, so art education began growing. However, in the early 1990s, receiving a Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) was not a common phenomenon. Still, by the end of the 1990s, ambitious artists with a bachelor of arts (BFA) knew that studying for an MFA would increase their chance of having a career. The 2000s were all about the natural/technological shortening of the art hype cycle or what it takes for a young artist or a new style to make it from graduation shows to commercial galleries, art fairs, and biennales. These changes, of course, were only mirroring the commercial and financial interests not just in creative endeavors, which now was upgraded as an essential component of technological innovation. The good old art, which after modernism was labeled as contemporary art, was itself started to be prized and elevated as a cultural category. The 2000s also witnessed the sudden growth of Ph.D. practice and curatorial programs at universities. In addition to tenured faculty, these newly expanded art education programs were increasingly staffed by famous or rising, but precarious EasyJetsetter curators and artists flying around the world to give workshops, seminars, and advise departments and graduate students. By this time, career-making in contemporary art had become a group effort. It involved more than being supported by just a gallerist with a hefty Rolodex in Chelsea like Tony Shafrazi or by a single influential curator at Guggenheim like Nancy Shapiro. These figures from the market and the institution were now only nodes in a rhizomatic network of stakeholders that also included art press, art academia, art museums, art residencies, art prizes, art biennales, and art collectors.

Not only to have a career as an artist, one had to have the support of at least half of these people, but also that each node of art power network had its own artists to introduce to the system and promote, together compounding the problem of oversupply. This

bureaucro-capitalist system was fantastic because somehow it had convinced itself that its appearance of consensus granted it an egalitarian identity. Sure, the field was widening and flattening, but the results of this bizarre collective system resembled conspiracies much more than democracies. From artists' point of view in the field, it seemed that they were moving, not by their own will but by powerful albeit invisible forces. However, up above, from the point of view of big players, they were small billiard balls made to be shoved around and shoot into prepositioned success holes. In this system, the real art was the art of making art out of artists themselves, transforming human agents into a medium with which much larger social forces then could make the ultimate creative act. Since there plenty of uninvested cash going around, it was convenient to use the capitalist class' global brutality against the poor in finance, production, politics, and war to give global capitalism a civilized and humane face.

I left out Artist-run spaces in the above configuration because, sadly, even during their heydays, they did not manage to join the elite institutions whose support would contribute significantly to an artist's career. Most of the time, the novel methods by artists in creating new spaces of their own would soon be copied and claimed by vampiric institutions eager to inject cheap and fresh blood into their own old and cumbersome body. In fact, the cooption of artist-run logic by young and savvy curators at kunsthalle and museums itself can be regarded as one of the factors on the left side of capital interests, which has contributed to the artists' downfall.

Nevertheless, for those who diagnose the artists' disappearance as strictly a symptom of capitalism, the death of artists began with the mainstream interest in contemporary art. This change of attitude was marked by an increase in modern and contemporary museum attendance. Professionals from fields other than arts who were bored by their algorithmic life under the spell of the internet, smartphones, and social media began frequenting museums as temples of human subjectivity. They wanted to see that despite their own robotic lives, authentic humanity continues to proliferate in a designated area. To them, the proof of the human exception to automation was, of course, artists and their products. The commercial peak of the rise in interest in contemporary art was the opening of the Art Basel's Miami edition in 2002. Attending Basel and collecting became a new status symbol for wealthy Americans with easy access to cheaply borrowed money. Furthermore, since the dealers knew precisely the ceiling of this class of collectors' budgets, all of a sudden newly graduated artists from you-name-it MFA programs like Yale began making paintings and sculptures around 50,000 dollars. Entire gallery systems were quickly set up around art

fair schedules. Together with publishing, event management and especially new the growing art education industry, they all worked in tandem to feed fresh blood into this infrastructure. If Warhol glamorized the art world by introducing pop singers, celebrities, fashion models and designers to the field, the new art economy completed the circle by providing it with a stable supply of income extracted out of all sorts of places. Just think of African American and minority homeowners who were taking out high yield risky loans to fulfill their suburban American dream of a big family house.

Then came the mortgage crisis and the subsequent economic meltdown. Suddenly, the 20,000-50,000 range market was deserted. Suddenly, "investors" (what a nice way of describing those who buy our governments and control our money and wealth supplies), who had "lost everything" but were about to receive most of it back through the Bush-Obama bailouts, were from now on only interested in blue chip artists as safe investment. One thinks that the economic shockwave of 2008 would cause art education to follow a corrective course like the art market but no way. Art programs continued to grow, maybe even faster after 2008, doubling down on expansion with many universities offering PhD practice and upgrading their MA in curatorial studies to PhDs. Perhaps the rationale for this counterintuitive tendency amongst art education administrators was that when the economy is hit with a recession, unable to find employment, the young tend to return to school. Meanwhile, as artists proliferated professionally, the number of galleries and institutions where their work would exhibit and the number of collectors who would purchase their work kept shrinking. The light at the end of the tunnel got smaller and dimmer by the hour, but educational institutions were busy making the tunnel even longer and perhaps cozier.

Let us not also forget how the increasing capabilities of digital tools, especially mobile phones, coupled with services offered by platforms like Facebook and Instagram, helped the ballooning of the number of artists. At least those who thought that by increasing the number of their followers and likes on social media, they could claim to belong to the category. Interestingly, right around the time when the small and medium-size galleries started to close down one after another, suddenly everybody was an artist. These capabilities were also helping professional artists to double and triple their social participation, inflating their existence in general by adding their virtual to their actual existence. In addition to reading about stars like Cindy Sherman, people could be their friends and have them on their feed, if not in their life.

The last kick that finally pushed artistry into its grave was the mushrooming of information about art through exhibition announcements, biennales, art fairs, conferences, symposiums, workshops, and summer schools. This flood ran wildly in people's e-mail boxes or on their social media walls, compounded by repeated shares and forwarding. People received so many invitations to events that on the actual day of, they could not even find which one they had planned to attend. Art was finally fully industrialized like pop culture while Adorno rolled in his grave. This was the view from the audience side. However, from the artists' own perspective, The end was complete when devotion to career trajectories entirely eclipsed both the art and its imagination as a historical object for the future. Preoccupied with doing what is necessary to stay socially relevant in their field at the moment, struggling to satisfy the ever-changing tastes of curators and the market, artists started to have little time actually to think about the art itself. Valorized as being "at ease" with executing many things at the same time, the artist, like the ideal Turing machine, jumped from one medium to the next while changing topics and subject matter as demanded by the competitive field. The buried corpse of the artist was by then a hollow concept stuffed with the spirit of the latest stage of capitalism.

Of course, some artists are exempt from our model. These exceptions are like glitches in algorithmic processes or software, interrupting the flow and causing the system to crash. Meanwhile, the art world as a multifaceted global system does its best by default to eliminate these glitches and incorporate their corpse into itself. The logic of this operation consists of understanding artists' exceptionalism, while machine learning new ways to forecast their very unpredictability.

In the contemporary global world of art that we have inherited from the modernists who more than a century ago set our path dependencies, any agency left for artists for escaping capture and death involves deeper entanglement with the system rather than less. As a form of re-engagement, this must pass through active and conscious participation in the new art world order. Rather than passively accepting the terms dictated by this giant machine, Rather than efficiently fulfilling their assigned system requirements, artists must act see and show the world in ways that force the system to react to them, and not the other way around. Like a small prey escaping a much larger predator, those artists who have survived the mass extinction must understand that not everything is foreclosed and that the system's own survival depends on the artist's refusal to submit to its requirements fully.

What options would this dark path for artists provide for the future of artist-run projects like RiB, especially once they understand their historical role during the heydays of contemporary art as entry-level career agencies or the junior league for artists? Obviously, nobody expects them to reject the entire system of contemporary art, with or without artists. Nobody can fantasize about a world void of museums and galleries, a utopian space populated instead with cooperative and collaborative art spaces that are known to have been created by artists. Between servicing more prominent players or rejecting them wholeheartedly, spaces like RiB have to chart a trajectory which increases their bargaining power in relation to private/government-funded art spaces. No longer, existing as an inexpensive recruiting service for future talent, artist-run projects need to turn their disadvantages into the opposite.

1- Tell an institution's own story, not only inserting our institutions in the broader art history but claiming to be the most objective voice from whose point of view a true art history can emerge.

2- Keep a detailed archive of events, materials, and those with whom artist-run projects have worked in the past can go a long way towards asserting. We ought to let the world know loud and clear that a significant amount of real talent hails from these spaces, not the guest list of wealthy collectors and dating schedule of trendy curators.

3- Abandon chasing trends emanating from larger metropolitan centers and larger institutions and instead learn to be the forces that set the new trends in art practice and discourse. This also involves more profound engagement with theoretical frames.

4- Refuse to pimp the young artists for the mainstream of contemporary art, artist-run projects must stop their exclusive focus on younger and emerging artists. Part of the energy of artist-run projects should be concentrate on helping significant artists who, for whatever reason, were not able to receive their fair share of attention in their younger days.

Overall, there is one thing that those experiencing the transition from an artist-centered world to a networked and cybernetic art world must keep in mind. If art has stayed alive during both periods of civilization and barbarism throughout human history, it is because what artists do, including artmaking, are essential for the working of political and social systems aiming at guiding different societies. This need, despite its ideological function,

can also benefit those who would like to challenge the dominant culture and replace them with better alternatives.