

- I More and more, current art discourse and especially tendencies of what makes an artist and their work successful, distributed, and known, lean towards a certain type of *professionalism* that exemplifies a rather constitutional representation of the work itself contains or addresses.

In an age of consumerism, art unfortunately falls into this predicament too fast, and we find ourselves with less time for engagement, forming opinions based on a few hazy seconds we've spent on a screen. Often, one gets trapped in the vicious cycle and web of the *attention economy*, a semi-new buzz word for a system that builds upon attention more than on critical examination, creating a rather exclusive coordinate system for value and success that has come to dominate critical discourse. Following down the rabbit hole of Google, YouTube and most of all Instagram, our brain flashes flags for selfies and/or *juicy* content. Suddenly we absorb a bucketful of new information on who is how, who is where and who is where and why with whom. While this could maybe be considered useful insider material, the question remains: Is this fast-food drive-thru of imagery and information contributing to greater awareness or knowledge? Who is orchestrating these algorithms? Are we being fed real information or is it actually all just spam? All of a sudden you find yourself on the page of someone who knows someone you might have met one time in real life. "How did I even get here?" The addictive characteristics of social media are widely known and have been discussed at great length, along with the problems that come with it.¹ Still, what incremental influence it might conduct on our brains, the real neurological consequences, have not yet been fully explored.

How this machinery of social media easily attracts the art world and its thirst for gossip is very obvious—it can be fun and helpful in navigating complicated social networks—but an interesting observation here is the impact that pure attention is having, apart from gossip or any kind of "information production". You hear about news on Instagram first, you see an art show on Instagram first, you hear about a *scandal* on Instagram first. This step from insider knowledge to pure attention is still in fact quite big, though it does seem minor when you think how close we've gotten to our social media tools. Everyone is fighting for your attention at all times.

- II The entanglement of the market and institutional discourses are coming to light² more and more, exposing internal structures of an artistic field that has long been thought of as favoring practices, stories and lives that walk beyond, beneath or alongside the *mainstream* of society. As of 2019, we can observe that what we once considered an inclusive critical field for (sub-)cultural production has turned into a machine unable to factually incorporate and produce different structures for its own institutional power. Seemingly lost in its own dissonances, cultural producers find themselves in a dilemma between participation and professionalization vs. individuality and creativity.

Where the old equation of countercultural content for artistic production has long been fruitful, neoliberalism has found a way to incorporate and commodify exactly those qualities that historically used to stand against a dominant system in society and couldn't be easily subsumed.

Today, any artist has to act as entrepreneur, fulfilling specific qualities and providing quantities, carefully strategizing about career and distribution, to foster the marketing of their own persona into a brand. Artistic practices that stand outside of an easy-to-consume-easy-to-swallow model are less and less able to find their space and therefore legitimation to exist. Rather, a dystopian self-assertiveness and neoliberal affirmative consequence permeates the production logic of the artist and the art worker. And more so, those have been exploited by the fashion and advertisement industry, which has created the figure of the young creative individual that is *progressive, open to the future* and *visionary in changing the world to make it a better place*—while in fact those industries only want to sell their products by tapping hard into the puddle of human desire. It's not about functional usage but rather the lifestyle which is promised.

So what does this mimicry entail for the actual creative field of art? Has the Lower East Side turned itself into some sort of Jordan Peele horror movie, where the mockery of zombies inhabits a perfect image to the outside but is rotten within?

- III In troubling times, our current dominant cultural field seems to follow a rather biblical eye-for-an-eye principle instead of trying to create spaces on a big scale with a wide audience to implement different artistic practices that give way for complicated visual endeavors and aesthetics. Although a lot of institutions make an effort towards more inclusiveness and diversity, still underneath the surface you can observe an underlying tokenism that in the end maybe serves market predicaments more than it actually wants to. Identity politics have driven the discourse far from knowledge, and social media platforms like Instagram have gained an importance where attention is the currency of the moment. Even more, it feels like a hypocritical mimicry that is nurtured by an unnoticed part of privilege—and the toxic moment occurs through the fights for this privilege. The art world unfortunately has lowered its bar to a simple, profane *master and servant* morality, reproducing a system of rigid hierarchies. It is the same problem we've examined with the absorption of the creative class by economy, turning it into another smart stunt by neoliberalism that doesn't offer any way out, but just tightens the web. Attention please!

- IV There are two basic inherent problems for the artist and art worker in our current conditions of 21st century capitalism: How to sustain a living and create work that is valued and monetized in return, and how to keep a *safe* space that is not fully absorbed and exploited through neoliberal orders.

Neoliberalism has acted as a tool that sorts our social reality and rethinks our status as individuals. And the logic of self-fulfillment has been sold to an economy which created an apparatus of constant affirmation that in its banality has become a *market of ideas*. It might look like some public outline, but in truth it's only an extension of already existing opinions and thinking, while the authority of institutions and experts has been replaced by the aggregated logic of Big Data. As Yuval Noah Harari writes, in addition to our smartphones and computers, the government and companies are all in the race to even hack *us* and our operating systems: "[O]nce these algorithms know you better than yourself, they can control and manipulate you, and you won't be able to do much about it."³ So our crucial question

(Gretchenfrage)⁴ is: Do you believe in the market? (Your) Attention please! We've seen that with all these boom-bust cycles, since the 1980s, inequality has increased. The answer might be NO!

V Back to the art world: how are these conditions affecting us when artists and art workers have to act as entrepreneurs while representing the perfect model for self-exploitation? How much can you really resist and withdraw from the feelings of bringing attention to what is important to you (yourself^{<3>})? Complete abstinence from social media doesn't seem like a solution, but of course temporary withdrawals might be effective to bring sanity back to your brain. Still, we are already too deep into the constant streams of the World Wide Web, there's no point of return. What started as entertainment (Instagram), now clogs your feed with constant seemingly *professional news* that may start attempts for someone or something to monetize themselves. Useful sometimes, annoying others.

When the system tries to hack you, why not try to hack it back? Rather than obtaining the perfect surface of your professional selfie, here it might be interesting to turn yourself into a more human creature again. Art has been full of those stories showing *alternative ways*, and while we adore these stories from the past we do tend more and more to annihilate those stories when they're happening around us. The outcome of this can be seen in museums and galleries around New York, London, Paris, Berlin etc... A certain bleakness takes over when nothing really seems to matter and superficiality becomes the only logic. Our ideas of professionalism have become distorted, as it only presents a surface of boxes that are checked to give an easy read. And people love those boxes. So, what to do when everything is swallowed? Turn up your attention, please! It might already be as easy as this: to carefully examine, to think again, and to maybe create structures and spaces from within. When the system is hacking us, the only chance that's left might be to just use it to the fullest and contribute with different purposes than to simply obey fake professional rules. The economy is still the engine of society, but use your attention carefully, please!

1) Many apps offer options to limit or restrict access to chosen websites and content in order to help us to better control our own behavior.
2) Especially in the United States, where state funding is extremely limited, institutions heavily rely on private trustees and patrons to face their economic issues. This goes hand in hand with personal interests of such donors who wish to step more into spotlight, demanding to be publicly present, and who eventually also to follow their own taste in art and collecting.
3) Harrari, Noah Yuval: 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, 2018, p 272.
4) For Goethe it was the question of religion (*Wie hältst du's mit der Religion?*), which Faust posed to Margarete, pointing to the turning point in the play between Faust, Margarete and Mephisto.

