



IT'S RAINING ART, HALLELUJAH!

Notes on the online gallery and its possible contribution to the democratisation of the art scene

What is an online gallery? (and what is not)

In order to find one's way through the confusion of the digital art scene, one should first understand what an online gallery is in the first place - and in what respects it differs from the traditional gallery (in the technical jargon: brick&mortar gallery). For it is not, as is often assumed, an offline gallery in digital form, but in some respects operates according to different laws than those of the classical gallery scene.

A b&m gallery that operates its own website is therefore not yet an online gallery. Its website is only one information forum among others. And an association of classical galleries like artnet or artsy, which enables its members to advertise and sell their artists' works digitally, is not an online gallery either. Here, too, the analogue rules of the game apply, while the digital presence only expands the radius of communication.

The online gallery differs from the traditional gallery primarily in that it has no "material" domicile. Of course, the company has to be registered somewhere, but it only exists digitally. In practice, this means no rental costs for exhibition space and storage, no expensive trade fair stands, no elaborate vernissages. The running costs are thus lower than those of a normal gallery, which is reflected in the much lower sales commission of the online gallery. Both artists and collectors benefit from this.

Since the online gallery does not have a real exhibition space, its customers buy the artworks without having seen them physically. This is less risky than it might seem at first glance. The photographic presentation is usually very extensive and of high quality. Some online galleries also offer the service of a virtual insertion of the artwork into the home of the potential collector. For digital artworks and NFT's, the on-screen presentation is crucial anyway. And as a last resort, many online galleries offer a return policy if the painting does not meet the buyer's expectations.

Nevertheless, this indirect presentation influences buying behaviour in the sense that the overwhelming share of artworks sold online is in a lower price segment (< € 10'00). Rarely art buyers risk spending a higher amount for a work they have not seen «in the flesh». (However, this reluctance no longer plays if the collector already owns a work by the same artist).

Another essential difference is the number of artists under contract to the gallery. In primary sales, the classical gallery represents a limited number of about thirty to at most a hundred hand-picked artists who are contractually bound to the gallery. In contrast, even a small online gallery presents at least a thousand artists, while the large portals can exhibit tens of thousands of artists. This means that the choice for the collector is disproportionately much larger than at a b&m gallery.

The online gallery also differs significantly from the regionally based brick&mortar gallery in its geographical reach. Although art fairs have established themselves worldwide, they remain the preserve of a small elite that can afford the exorbitant stand prices and expensive art transport. The online gallery, on the other hand, reaches its audience worldwide without any special financial outlay and thus offers the collector a global selection of art, and the artist a worldwide forum for his work.

In summary, compared to the traditional gallery, the online gallery is more accessible to the collector, offers an incomparably much larger and more international selection, and is on average much less expensive than the prevailing art market prices. Many online gallery owners therefore claim that they are committed to the democratisation of art by enabling a very large number of artists to make their works available to the public, while at the same time reducing threshold anxiety among buyers and reaching a wider clientele than would be possible for a traditional gallery.

What types of online galleries are there?

Basically, one must distinguish between two types of online galleries: the curated online gallery, which functions according to the classic principle of the middleman (gallery owner), and the "direct" online gallery, which places the emphasis on personal contact between artist and collector, whereby the gallery actually only functions as an advertising portal - i.e. a kind of linked-in for artists.

With the curated online gallery, the artist can open an account free of charge and design his or her own artist page according to the technical and aesthetic specifications of the gallery. The copyright of the exhibited works remains with the artist. Sales and shipping of the artworks are handled by the gallery. For each sale, the artist pays the gallery a commission, usually around 30-40%. The payment is made to a blocked account of the gallery, so that the artist is not paid until the collector has received the purchased work in good condition.

The direct online gallery, on the other hand, charges the artists exhibiting on its website a modest "rental fee" for the use of the portal. In return, the operator waives a sales commission. The proceeds of the sold artwork remain 100% with the artist. However, the artist has to take care of all sales modalities and the shipping of the artwork.

Both forms have their advantages and disadvantages, and there are now also a number of hybrid approaches. Both artists and collectors should therefore inform themselves as precisely as possible in advance and also be clear about their own needs before deciding on one of the variants.

How do you judge the quality of an online gallery?

For the curated online gallery, the question can be answered in the classical sense: a conventional gallery is as good as its gallerist - and an online gallery is as good as its curators. If you just want "something nice for over the sofa", you don't need advice. But if you are looking for artworks that will help shape the design and atmosphere of your home, express and/or enhance your attitude to life, touch and stimulate you emotionally and intellectually, and broaden your horizon, then your first step is to go to the "about us" page and there to the curators. The better the curators' training and the greater their experience, the better the advice they will give to collectors on the one hand and artists on the other. Don't be put off by empty chatter about "our international curatorial team" or "our art director" etc.. These exist only in the imagination of the provider. A professional curator is paid for his/her work, takes

responsibility for it and of course wants to reap the deserved recognition. That is why serious online galleries introduce both in-house and guest curators personally: with name, photo and exact professional qualifications. You can safely forget everything else.

The curators are responsible for pre-selecting and classifying the artworks to be sold through the gallery. Even with online galleries, which are in principle open to all artists, there is vigorous pre-sorting behind the scenes. In view of the flood of dilettant, demagogic and pornographic products with which the galleries are overrun, this is inevitable. Works with pornographic content, for example, must not be freely accessible to children - strict categorisation is therefore unavoidable for legal reasons alone.

Client counselling is another important task of the curators. Given the large number of artworks on display, it takes a lot of experience and intuition to bring together the right artists and collectors. Even though most online galleries today have halfway functional filters, the potential art collector is sometimes overwhelmed by the abundance of material. A pre-selection adapted to their personal wishes can be very helpful.

With the direct online gallery, of course, this advice is omitted, and this form is therefore more suitable for experienced collectors who do not need advice, or adventurous spirits who want to make their own experiences and can cope with a possible mistake. The bonus is direct contact with the artist and possibly a lower price due to the omission of the gallery commission.

However, this last advantage can be cancelled out again by the very high shipping costs that can be incurred for individual transport. While the large online galleries have their own shipping departments, which in their position as major customers can massively depress shipping prices, the individual artist of course does not have this option. Since transport is generally paid for by the art buyer, he or she would do well to find out in advance whether the shipping costs are included in the purchase price or whether there are still considerable additional costs to be expected.

The question of transport also arises for the artist. For photographers, draughtsmen, graphic artists, miniature painters or digital artists who ship small-format and lightweight works, it makes perfect sense to rely on direct sales via a corresponding online gallery. There will be no shipping problems for them, and the shipping costs are quite acceptable in relation to the selling price of the artworks.

Not so for sculptors and painters of large-scale works, who have to deal with staggering transport costs and opaque packaging, insurance and customs regulations. This is especially true for transatlantic shipments. For internationally active artists with heavyweight, delicate or bulky works, it can therefore be both financially and nervously advantageous to arrange transport via the gallery.

Further criteria for the assessment of an online gallery are the presentation of the website and the technical functionality of the portal. This applies equally to the curated gallery as to the direct form. A turgid presentation with black background, frames or mourning borders around the photos, veils over the banners and other superfluous bells and whistles should prompt caution at first glance. The artistic quality of the works offered for sale could be appropriate.

Gross technical deficiencies are also a red flag. If images cannot be loaded or deleted properly, filters and internal search engines do not work and texts can only be read in dadaistic translation, you should expect payment transactions and dispatch to be just as chaotic. Try it out and compare - this can save you a lot of trouble later on

Legal aspects and the black cyber sheep

Major scandals, as known from the traditional art scene, are not (yet) known in the digital field. This may be partly because the legal situation in the world wide web is still rather chaotic and dubious practices tend to be tolerated or not even noticed there.

In any case, the collector will do well to protect himself as comprehensively as possible. A Certificate of Authenticity (COA) signed by the artist is therefore an essential part of the art purchase. In addition to the date of sale, the artist's name and signature, it should also contain the title and year of origin of the work of art, the technique used, the dimensions and a photograph of the work. With the advent of the NFT (non fungible token) and blockchain security, the collector has another instrument at his disposal with which the provenance of the work of art can be proven in a forgery-proof manner.

Although the layman may mostly fear difficulties in payment transactions, most online galleries are reasonably organised in this sector in particular. Personally, I have never had any financial problems in fifteen years of working with a whole series of online galleries. Payments are processed correctly and verifiably via blocked accounts. Foreign exchange rates correspond to the bank norm. The amount of the brokerage fee is almost always correct at around 35%. I know of only one online gallery that charges its artists an exorbitant commission of 50%. Some colleagues report dishonesty in the payment, mostly with the goods sales tax being fiddled with. For their part, the galleries complain that some artists try to circumvent the gallery commission by contacting clients directly and suggesting a cheaper deal. Disputes with the insurance company happen when a work of art is damaged in transit. But this kind of friction is the bread and butter of any gallery business and only partly typical of the online system.

This also applies to general ethics and transparency, which are already conspicuously absent in the analogue art market. No improvement is to be expected in the digital sector in the short term. As long as the financial audit for sponsorships is not introduced, the art scene, analogue as well as digital, will continue to be financed to a large extent with toxic money, and the growing interest in cryptocurrencies is likely to make the situation even more opaque. But this is a general problem of the libertarian financial market and not specific to the online gallery.

In contrast, the aforementioned pretence of false facts in the curatorial field is almost a standard annoyance in the online art scene. If the operator of a platform makes it clear that he assumes no curatorial responsibility whatsoever, but on the contrary gives collectors and artists full negotiating leeway, that is absolutely legitimate. But if an online gallery explicitly claims that it only sells curated, i.e. professionally approved art, although it is run by a team with an exclusively technical or commercial background that does not have the professional competence to curate anything at all, then that is rather questionable.

The artistic quality suffers accordingly. What is propagated by these galleries is mostly supermarket art, i.e. the serial production of the same popular subject, which is produced by the artist in great quantity and speed. Popular subjects are, for example, maritime scenes, pretty girls or sugary abstracts.

Pictures «in the style of» also belong in this category. Bestsellers are second-hand Picassos, or works à la Lichtenstein (comic figures blown up to large format), Opalka (nicely coloured numbers or letters), and Hockney (swimming pools). Of course, this practice is legal. They are not forgeries or copies, and the artists correctly sign their own names. Nevertheless, it should be clear to the buyer that this imitation art will never increase in value because it lacks the most important criterion for artistic quality: originality.

Probably the most common «trivial» offence of online galleries is the manipulation of search engines in the battle for digital visibility. In the early days of the internet, this still had a humorous component, because the algorithms were mainly programmed for sexually tinged terms. I don't know how many times my morally strictly inoffensive abstract works were tagged with words like «sexy» or «Viagra». In the meantime, the methods have become less crude, but not necessarily more harmless. For example, an online gallery had been posing for months as my «official» gallery that would sell my works «exclusively» - which was a brazen lie. As a result, potential buyers who typed my name into google were directed straight to this gallery, which got me into trouble with my other galleries and agencies, who – and rightly so - considered this unfair competition.

The same gallery also ran an aesthetic equalisation programme in which the photos of its artists were reworked by a «designer» who, for example, copied all the shadows out of photos of sculpture. One can imagine the result. Such violations of copyright often occur. It is not necessarily bad will, but mostly incompetence. The emergence of NFTs will intensify the dispute over copyright until the situation is regulated by law.

Finally, a few words about the so-called "vanity gallery". This is not an online gallery, but since this kind of company recruits exclusively (and very aggressively) online, I would like to mention it briefly here. Vanity gallery is a gallery that does not earn its money by selling art, but by having artists pay them for «services» (for example exhibitions, art fairs, newsletters to art collectors, etc.). The artist often has to pay upfront fees of a thousand euros or more, pay for transport for exhibitions himself, and often the gallery also charges a commission. All this without any guarantee of a sale or any other advantage for the unfortunate artist. A great deal for the gallery - but certainly not for the artist!

The future of the online gallery in the global art scene and its possible role in the democratisation process

At a time when democracy is under attack from many sides, we have more reason than ever to think about the importance of culture for our democratic world order. But this also means that we must finally begin to denounce and fight the corruption of democratic processes within our own ranks.

Anyone who wants to talk about the future and the necessity of democratising the art scene must therefore first think about the role of sphagistics in art history. As the inclined reader will know, sphagistics (from the Greek "sphage", slaughter) is the imaginary science of losers, founded by the equally imaginary Dr. Korbinian Irlböck, who in turn owes his existence to the (to my knowledge quite real) writer Carl Amery. The guiding principle of sphagistics is that history is written by the winners and that it would read differently if the losers also had their say. Nowhere is this truer than in art history.

Compared to general historiography, the importance of sphagistics in art is disproportionately high. Until deep into the twentieth century, 50% of all artists fell victim to it from the outset - namely all women. We will never know how many masterpieces have been lost to humanity because of the institutional macho maxim that women should limit their creativity to childbearing. The women artists are dead and the works destroyed - if they were ever created at all in view of the hopeless situation.

But even male colleagues are not immune to sphagistics. If it had been up to the ruling cultural popes, the works of Vincent van Gogh, for example, would hardly have survived. The line of losers is endless, and we only know the tip of the iceberg, namely the artists who were

posthumously rediscovered. All the others have been swallowed up for good by the black hole of sphagistics.

That has not changed much in our days. That the state of the art in our capitalist system, which is sliding inexorably into implosion, is taking on correspondingly decadent features, is not exactly groundbreaking news. The dependence of the art market on toxic money, the elitist marketing of art as a status symbol for well-off educated citizens on the one hand and education-resistant oligarchs on the other, obscene auction prices for artistically worthless junk, highly subsidised (and lucrative) blockbuster events à la Disneyland, the supremacy of the big mainstream galleries and patrons and the resulting financial emergency of independent artists are only a few aspects of this unpleasant development.

For an artist who is not willing to submit to the prevailing art market, the chance of ending up as a «loser» is above average. The quality of his work hardly plays a role. On the contrary: the more expressive, original, independent and visionary the artist, the greater the danger of his work being marginalised by the art establishment.

The lack of competence and integrity of art officials is largely responsible for the aggressive rejection of contemporary art by a large section of the population. It is based on centuries of corruption, racism, sexism, nepotism and abuse of power by the ruling functionaries - at the expense of artists, culture and society. In our latitudes, only churches and banks can come up with a comparable criminal history. The call for a fair, democratic approach to art and artists is therefore more than justified - and long overdue.

There is broad agreement on the important points of what such a democratic cultural scene should look like. It should geopolitically guarantee more justice for artists and culture, give up its elitist ghetto, be made accessible to a larger audience and specifically integrated into everyday civic life, offer the artist more independence from conservative cultural institutions and a solid basic income, and be disconnected from toxic sponsors and money laundering. So much for the theory.

Opinions differ on how this should be implemented in practice. Many pilot projects are already in circulation. The Documenta 15, curated by the collective ruangrupa, certainly caused the greatest stir, as it failed, absurdly enough, because of racist prejudices - exactly the same, well-known behavioural pattern that Kassel actually wanted to denounce.

Attempts to "popularise" art or turn it into a tourist attraction - Bosch as an animated film, Van Gogh as a kaleidoscope, pleasing Son-et-Lumière performances and similar antics - are likely to serve the cause only to a limited extent. It is true that this brings large crowds to the museums in the short term, but they are just as quickly gone again as soon as things get a bit more sophisticated. The lowest common denominator is never a good starting point - and certainly not in art.

That digital art as such will make the scene better is probably also wishful thinking. What is currently being sold in NFTs is dilettant photoshop tinkering and has at best a financial speculative value, not to mention the kitschy AI art. But of course, the great artists of the metaverse are already among us, and at the moment probably in the process of demolishing their first computer. With the advancement of the 3D printer, it will soon be possible to "print" a physical exhibition in Australia with a file created in Europe, without the need for expensive and environmentally damaging transport. This will also give blockchain security its real meaning. But whatever the future of digital art holds for us, it does not change the fundamental tension between producer (artist), distributor (museums, galleries) and consumer (museum visitors and collectors).

It is within this framework, then, that the phenomenon of the online gallery and its possible future should be seen. Indeed, it fulfils many democratic demands: It offers access to the art market to a very large number of artists of all nationalities and is at the same time directly accessible to a global audience. In terms of price, it is (still) far below the traditional market. Above all, it focuses on openness - for all nationalities, ideologies and gender orientations. The direct form of the online gallery goes one step further and wants to bypass our ailing cultural system by dispensing with middlemen and curators altogether and relying on the subjectivity of art.

However, it is questionable whether the art business can manage without experts. The radical decline in artistic quality in the online business is already a real problem today, and the argument that the quality of a work of art is simply a matter of opinion and cannot be objectively assessed is in itself a sign of ignorance. In no field is the already dubious calendar saying «quality always prevails» less true than in the art trade. What always prevails is pornography, kitsch and shallow decoration. Sophisticated, unwieldy, substantial art needs the backing of experts so that interested but uncertain laypeople can reliably inform themselves - as they would reasonably do in any other field. Democratic art means: art for all, and not: junk for all. We should stick to that.

Nevertheless, in my eyes, the direct online gallery is the most promising variant of art mediation for the future, because it is the only one that fundamentally questions the power structures of the current art scene. If it manages to ally itself with a new generation of experts who do not want to parasitically enrich themselves or make a name for themselves at the expense of the artists, but rather put their knowledge at the service of culture and society, then we could finally begin to talk seriously about democratic art/

Even if the future belongs to the online gallery, we will not want to do without the physical presentation of art. It can therefore be assumed that hybrid forms of art trade will develop in the medium term, in which case one can only optimistically hope that the best of both worlds will prevail. Even if it is often forgotten: Art and culture are not speculative commodities for the super-rich, but an organic component of our democratic society. It is high time that it is finally perceived as such.

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