

TikTok in Contemporary Arts Market

Subjects: Art

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok attracted many artists, who used the platform to take their practice, and thereby their self-marketing, into their own hands. At the same time, a new generation of collectors use TikTok to discover art under popular hashtag #feministartists. When artists label their work with #feministartists, they insert themselves into the gatekeeping process, and use opportunities and restrictions bounded to that specific hashtag. The study examines this process of professional self-positioning by using interviews with contemporary artists, curators, and observations on TikTok, artist talks, and secondary interviews with artists on online platforms. The findings suggest a variation in how one trades in or trades on “feminist artist”, accessing resources, and gaining exposure. A focus on “feminist artists” is restrictive for consolidating artists’ efforts to pursue specific professional, social, political, and economic agendas through art.

Keywords: TikTok ; feminism ; female artists ; gatekeeper ; contemporary art ; social media ; Millennials ; Gen Z ; art market ; COVID

1. Overview

How do social-media platforms such as TikTok function as a neutralising factor in the gatekeeping process in times of COVID-19 restrictions? How does TikTok change the experience culture in arts, and how does this impact how artists frame their working process alongside *primary gatekeepers*? During the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok attracted many artists, who used the platform to take their practice, and thereby their self-marketing, into their own hands. At the same time, a new generation of collectors use TikTok to discover art under popular hashtag #feministartists. When artists label their work with #feministartists, they insert themselves into the gatekeeping process, and use opportunities and restrictions bounded to that specific hashtag. The study examines this process of professional self-positioning by using interviews with contemporary artists, curators, and observations on TikTok, artist talks, and secondary interviews with artists on online platforms. The findings suggest a variation in how one trades in or trades on “feminist artist”, accessing resources, and gaining exposure. A focus on “feminist artists” is restrictive for consolidating artists’ efforts to pursue specific professional, social, political, and economic agendas through art.

2. TikTok during COVID-19

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, former US President Trump wanted to close TikTok in the United States ([Banjo and Egkolfopoulou 2020](#)). US authorities were concerned that, as TikTok, a video app with more than 800 million users, was produced and is owned by Chinese company Bytedance, it could pass on user data to the Chinese intelligence service. There was also a worry among Republicans that China could use TikTok to manipulate the US presidential election campaign. In June 2020, TikTok was also successfully used by a grassroots movement to call for a boycott of one of Trump’s election campaign events. The resulting executive order banning TikTok emboldened even more users to protest the Trump administration ([Schlitt 2020](#)). The ban never came into effect, and in June 2021, President Joe Biden revoked the executive order by Trump ([BBC 2021](#)).

At the same time, many artists and cultural institutions on TikTok spoke about their worries that they would lose access to the platform. Due to Trump’s executive order against TikTok, artists were afraid that they would lose their digital audiences and sales, especially as they were already under pressure because of the economic recession caused by the pandemic ([Small 2020](#)). Of TikTok’s 800 million users, an increasing number are over 16 (Gens X, Y, and Z), and form audiences for many different cultural institutions and artists ([Tidy and Galer 2020](#)). Some cultural institutions (such as the Uffizi Gallery in Italy or the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands) found that, through their use of TikTok, they were able to attract a younger and broader audience. Still, many museums, galleries, or private persons as curators are not on TikTok, as they lack resources both in terms of personnel and time, or are sceptical ([Small 2021](#); [The Art Gorgeous 2020](#)). Many art institutions, museums, and galleries were equally even forced to lay off their staff during lockdowns ([Gural 2021](#); [Kenney](#)

2020). Overall, it was individual artists and artist groups that were more frightened by the pending shut-down of the platform: artists still studying arts and using the platform to showcase their skills, artists who decided against university because of the financial strain, and those artists who struggled before finding their way into the art market and institutions (Gat 2020). Many artists made their first steps on TikTok even before COVID-19, but the entire art world was forced to go digital with the global pandemic (Graw 2020).

The commercial side of art adapted to its forced digital turn relatively quickly (Sidorova 2019). Pioneers in this, such as the David Zwirner Gallery or König Galerie, relied on digital showrooms such as online viewing rooms even before the COVID-19 pandemic and simply continued this work. Big art fairs such as Frieze Art or Art Basel adapted by relying on digital galleries, and produced elaborate digital exhibitions, with films, close-ups, and descriptive texts of single objects. Artists represented at these digital exhibitions were mainly established, white, male artists. The online viewing rooms presented artworks, reinforcing the notion of the artworks' self-evident value and worth, and inevitably influencing sales negotiations (Graw 2020). Therefore, the artists who most needed visibility and support during the pandemic in the art world—primarily young, female and black artists—were already under-represented before the pandemic, and their work was further marginalised in these digital viewing rooms. These were the artists protesting against the TikTok ban.

Many of these artists addressed feminist topics in their videos of up to 60 s long. The videos used the #feministartist hashtag. The artists have been using this hashtag by themselves or had their videos hashtagged by users via comments. The hypothesis is that artists use TikTok as a *virtual studio visit* to display their artistic practice and talk about related subjects, and not as an exhibition space like Instagram. Complicating matters is the fact that, as soon as an artist talks about female-associated topics, they are categorised and labelled with the #feministartist hashtag even if they do not describe themselves as feminists. COVID-19 threatens careers and lives. The impact of the pandemic on young, less established artists has been devastating, with exhibitions cancelled and nondigital outreach impossible. This research project thus analyses the phenomenon that significantly under-represented female artists used TikTok as their presentation channel and developed an extensive reach.

3. The Art Market in the Age of TikTok

New types of media have repeatedly influenced artistic forms of communication and art itself. Andy Warhol, Edward Ruscha, and Lucy Lippard, for example, experimented with the aesthetics of advertising visuals and media. Books, magazines, newspapers, and advertising brochures became newly discovered playgrounds and sources of inspiration for art. Visual culture is nourished by the flood of images in mass media, which influence art and vice versa. The tension, friction, and mutual influence of visual culture and art have been discussed for a long time. The way in which we consume images, where, and when influence both the creation process of art and its reception.

Now, art has found its way into the digital realm since the advent of the Internet for private and commercial use. Since the late 1990s, this has happened in the form of websites from private persons or cultural institutions, and, since 2010, on social networks such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest. These digital spaces reproduced, perpetuated, or limited physical exhibitions. Digital exhibitions play a decisive role in the rapidly changing, digitalising art market, which has resulted in a shift in distribution channels and all changes associated with accessing the market and the shift in (media) power structures (Gnyp 2015). They, therefore, disrupt established power structures and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, traditionally organised by gallerists or art dealers in their role as gatekeepers in the art market. At the same time, it must always be examined to what extent the transfer of structures of the art market into the digital, including social media, reinforces or consolidates exclusion mechanisms. The digital art market is profiting from the easy and nearly limitless transmission of visual objects, and the effects of mass circulation, a phenomenon linked to contemporary visual culture (Wallerstein 2018). Mass circulation has allowed for the art world to grow beyond the limiting and elitist boundaries of physical venues such as galleries and museums. The art world embraced Instagram in particular as a social-media platform, basically using it as a “white cube” for digital images, something that has enabled many art-market entities to reach a larger global audience. On Instagram, it appears as though anyone can make their curated exhibition in the digital space. The word “curation” is used in the digital culture to describe any form of the selection process compared to the physical space, where curation refers to the bespoke selection process and care for cultural objects and works of art (Wallerstein 2018). Digital curators are the persons who carefully select works, reduce the possible choice, and combine artworks or things in particular ways to bring attention to a specific item or history or describe various topics. Curators gently weave objects and art into a narrative or web of explanations for exhibition visitors. A social content feed on Instagram works similarly, as the owner, one's Instagram profile, can focus on various topics or create a digital exhibition through the “curation” process.

A long-time trend on social-media platforms has been looping-video creation. Instagram or Facebook have integrated looping videos like Snapchat, Vine, and Music.ly have, which later merged to Douyin (China)/TikTok (outside of China) from Bytedance (Anderson 2020). Bresnick's (2019) study on the cinematography of the trending app TikTok describes the app as a virtual playground by pointing out that "TikTok liberates young people to play without adhering to the visual styles, narratives, and online cultures of the past." (ibid, p. 10) According to him, this in particular differentiates the app from other social-media platforms.

TikTok favours playfulness over certain styles and looks; accordingly, the younger generation is no longer trying to build their online personality as a brand, as Millennials do. The short, looping videos appear to be a mirror of Gen Z: "While millennials earnestly tweet about the stress of their student loans and freelance precarity, Gen Z TikToks in joyous nihilism, mocking a society in which self-determination and upward mobility have long since collapsed." (Citarella 2018). If Gen Z, as Citarella (2018) points out, is nihilistic, why do social injustice and hashtags such as #blacklivesmatters or #feminism trend, and why do artists start accounts on TikTok instead of using Instagram with its *curatorial* aesthetic?

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