Retweeting Rembrandt:

Why Social Media Has Changed the Art World for the Better

*For a fully multimodal version of this project, please visit https://retweetingrembrandt.atavist.com/multimodal-paper*

**Introduction: Two Worlds**

The year was approximately 1669 when Rembrandt van Rijn completed his *Self Portrait with Two Circles*. Meticulously painting dramatic light and shadow with the skill of an experienced master, he would never be able to fathom the concept of Twitter, let alone that anyone would use it as a platform to critique his body of work. What would Rembrandt make of Twitter user @smallupsetter and his thoughtful criticism: “rembrandt? more like rembuttdt, fuck the 17th century”? Evidently, a lot has changed in 347 years, including how our society accesses and interacts with art.

Social media and fine art are not commonly found in the same dialogue. The former is generally seen as vapid and materialistic, while the latter is often regarded as elitist and old-fashioned. On the rare occasion when they are discussed together, social media is belittled as the downfall of the artistic community. The internet and social media are blamed for declines in museum attendance, decreased creativity, and enabling artistic narcissism. However, this narrow perspective of its impact fails to account for all the ways social media has benefited the arts. Ignoring the benefits platforms like Instagram and Twitter offer the art world would mean continuing to be limited by outdated traditions, rather than embracing the future of what art can be in our rapidly advancing world. In reality, social media connects artists and their audiences
like never before, offering both new ways to educate the public about the arts and new mediums for art to be created within.

Global Scope: Accessibility in the Arts

One of the main benefits of social media is its ability to connect people across the globe. One person can interact with another who is states, countries, or continents away. The same principle holds true for interacting with art. More than ever before, people can find and engage with artwork from anywhere in the world, and on any device. Through the innovations of social media, viewing art becomes a more intimate experience, breaking down barriers of class, conventionality, and location to create a space in which art can be appreciated by anybody with access to the internet.

In increasing numbers, museums are creating online databases and social media accounts to promote the artists in their collections. Many museums across the world, including the Van Gogh Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, have gone a step further by collaborating with Google to create the Google Art Project, which combines fine art with the interactivity of social media. Since launching in 2011, the Google Art Project has spanned globally to provide virtual tours of art museums, allowing users to create “collections” of their favorite works using their Google+ accounts. This ability to directly engage with artwork on an intimate level is an experience that is often lacking in traditional museum settings; velvet rope barriers and bans on photography make galleries feel distant and archaic. Through the innovations of social media, viewing art becomes a much more social activity, and one that can appeal to a wider audience. Google also provides users with images of artwork in hyper-detail, to the point where it is possible to see the individual brush strokes and hairline cracks in famous paintings. Some of
these are not even currently on display in museum collections (as is the case with *Self Portrait* by Van Gogh, 1889). Such a high level of detail gives viewers a far deeper insight into the process of the artist while reminding us that art is tangible and imperfect, no matter how skilled or highly regarded the artist may be. The idea that art selling at auctions for millions of dollars can be made open-source for anyone to view in immaculate detail speaks volumes for the future of how we as a society will be able to interact with art.

While Google is improving the accessibility of museums across the world, other social media platforms are decreasing our reliance on brick-and-mortar museums altogether. What used to be an industry that catered to royal courts and wealthy art connoisseurs has become more and more available to the general public over time, and social media has rapidly accelerated that progression. Popular platforms like Instagram and Tumblr give artists a direct connection to global audiences, eliminating the need for approval from gallery curators or auction houses. In an article about these shifts within the art-dealing industry, Vogue reporter Olivia Fleming writes that “[T]oday artists use Instagram as their own virtual art gallery, playing both dealer and curator while their fans become critics and collectors, witnessing the creative process in real time.” This does not just benefit the public who gets to view these pieces; Fleming writes that “[being] able to sell works themselves, artists are nudging the dealer out of the way while promising to demystify fine art and increase accessibility; challenging what has long been seen as an industry shrouded in pretense and exclusivity.” These platforms become the gallery,
Artist Richard Haines began posting sketches to Instagram in 2008, and now draws for clients ranging from The New York Times to Prada.

It is a common belief among artists and collectors that to truly see a piece of art, it must be viewed in person. Certain artworks have a complexity or depth that is difficult to replicate on a screen, and it could be argued that seeing these pieces on a device rather than a canvas would be an injustice to its creator as well as to the work itself. As with most mediums, something is undeniably lost when translating tangible art into digital images. Just as e-books deprive readers of the physical sensation that accompanies a real-life book, art viewed online can potentially lose its dimensionality, luster, texture, etc. It is true that social media and the internet will never be able to fully replace the traditional gallery. However, the primary advantage of this technology is not to act as a replacement for a museum or gallery. Rather, social media makes it possible for people to see art that they otherwise would not be able see due to financial or geographical limitations. Seeing an influential piece of artwork scaled down on a laptop screen is still better than not having the means to see it at all, and an image of an artwork online may even inspire someone who does have the means to go and view it in-person at a gallery.
A screenshot of the San Francisco Public Art Map by Nancy Milholland

On the opposite end of the spectrum, public art is, by definition, made with an entire community as the audience. When that community becomes larger and larger, however, artwork can become lost within the rapid development of urban life. This was the situation in San Francisco, which has 800,000 citizens and a sprawling artistic community. As a response to the vast amount of public art that went unnoticed or hidden in the city, geospatial developer and analyst Nancy Milholland created the San Francisco Public Art Map. To account for the constantly changing landscape of public art, the application compiles geographic data from Instagram posts to keep an updated list of public art in the city. Taking this data from social media means that the public is directly responsible for the compilation of art in their area. Milholland details the method for collecting data for the application: “The tag ‘sfart’ returned relevant geographically tagged data despite the handicap of not being able to specify a bounding
box as part of the search term” (52). Hashtags are often disregarded as a trivial aspect of shameless self-promotion, but in this case they have meaningful real world applications for making public art more readily available to the community at large. Many consider posting photos of artwork to social media accounts to be irritating and disrespectful to the creators, arguing that a viewer cannot be fully present behind a phone screen. However, by sharing images of public art online, citizens of San Francisco have shared it with their entire community. This collective information distribution is essential to creating a more connected, culturally conscious population.

By improving the public’s access to art, social media gives its users direct interaction with the cultural landscape of today. If viewing art increases creativity, reduces stress, and increases empathy, it is exciting to imagine a world in which art museums are accessible across the globe, available for anyone wishing to engage with and learn about art.

New Ways of Learning: Education Beyond the Classroom

Being able to access art through social media creates the potential to use these platforms as a means for education. At a time when programs for the arts are being cut across the country, social media fulfills a need for learning in the arts, especially in lower-income areas. In 2010, high-poverty schools were 12% less likely to have education in visual arts (National Center for Education Statistics, 28). Learning about the arts is critical to our understanding of the world; a study by university scholars Jay P. Greene, Brian Kisida and Daniel H. Bowen found that students who visit art museums on field trips “have stronger critical-thinking skills, exhibit increased historical empathy, display higher levels of tolerance, and have a greater taste for consuming art and culture” (80). While this study was conducted within the sphere of formal
museum trips, learning about art in any capacity creates more informed, empathetic students. Social media breeds new possibilities for education, and as more children gain access to the Internet, online classes and educational forums are already developing.

With budgets on the decline, social media offers a new, less costly alternative that allows art students to interact and grow with each other in new ways. Juan Carlos Castro, an assistant director of art education at Concordia University, invited students in grades 9-12 to participate in an extracurricular photography class as part of a study on how art education evolves within the format of the social media platform Elgg. Through this platform, students learned the basics of photography while posting assignments and giving feedback on the work of others. As opposed to a traditional classroom environment, this online class allowed for more organic collaboration because it centered on the students independently interacting with art in new ways.

This interaction is evident in the works of student participants Jean Valjean and Haine Walker. Valjean drew direct inspiration from the work of his classmate, deciding to photograph the same subject, a dandelion, in a new way. Collaboration and the sharing of ideas are crucial factors in the creative process and foster a sense of community among students. When asked about the class, Castro noted that “student participant Gaelan Knoll replied that he learned from others, stating: ‘Well, it’s like how I learn from lurking on deviantART, I suppose. Seeing other people’s works, I find myself analyzing what works and what doesn’t’” (160). Gaelan brings up a valuable aspect of online learning: by observing the work of others, we can learn what we value in art and how to strive for those values. In the past, this was limited to viewing masterpieces in galleries, but more and more people have the opportunity to see what their peers create through social media sites like Tumblr and DeviantART. These sites get criticized for being lowbrow and unprofessional, but any space where artists can share their work and interact
During the month of March, more than 23,000 tweets used the hashtag #5womenartists, including this one by user @jolifanta.

with other artists is a breeding ground for learning and improvement. As the study concludes, “the definition of teacher as a singular individual needs to be expanded to include images, objects, events, encounters, and so on” (165).

The importance of education in the arts is not limited to the creation of art, either. Social media also has the ability to boost awareness about art and social issues that surround it. Oftentimes, people turn to social media to inform the public consciousness about topics that they would otherwise not be exposed to. Recently, this has taken the form of so-called “hashtag activism.” There is debate as to whether or not this sort of viral campaigning brings about structural change in societies, but there is no doubt that it raises awareness and visibility for issues. With this in mind, the National Museum of Women in the Arts recently launched the “#5womenartists” campaign for Women’s History Month.

The project reached people across the globe in a way that the museum on its own never could: a digital editorial assistant with the museum reported that “More than 3,300 Instagram posts and more than 23,000 tweets used the hashtag #5womenartists” and that “NMWA’s number of digital followers increased by 140% on Instagram” (Haight). This campaign and many others like it utilize the global audience that social media provides access to. Art, like anything else, does not exist in a bubble, and it is important to be critical of any social institution for ways that it can be improved. By educating the public about topics like the representation of women, the barriers of economic
class within the arts, or our Eurocentric understanding of art history, our society becomes more aware of the ways it can begin to improve and disrupt the patterns of traditional thinking.

Those who are used to established forms of education might object to this type of learning because social media is often seen as more of a distraction than a tool in schools. Much of this distraction, though, is a result of students being uninterested in the material that they are being taught. Teaching art through social media allows people who have an interest in the arts to discover new information organically. The content is presented in a way that is engaging and familiar, and unlike traditional education in the arts, it encourages students who are just beginning to explore the subject.

Part of what makes social media such an effective educational tool is its lack of physical boundaries; it has neither the archaic format nor the exclusivity of a formal class in the arts. All that is necessary to be able to engage with the arts is a curiosity and a willingness to learn. Any interested person can learn through an endless number of formats including podcasts, online classes, and digital art communities. One example of these educational resources is “The Art Assignment,” an art-focused YouTube channel. Hosted by museum curator Sarah Urist Green, The Art Assignment partnered with PBS Digital Studios to create videos ranging from in-depth explanations of famous contemporary artists to creative prompts directly from practicing artists to be completed by the viewer. Specifically, in the video “I Could Do That,” Green breaks down common criticisms that the public has about contemporary art. The video begins with comments from subscribers of the channel, a dialogue in itself that exists thanks to social media. These comments spark a discussion about what makes a piece of art valuable, and who gets to decide that. Anyone who has visited a contemporary art museum or googled Cy Twombly has most likely thought “A child could do this.” Without any opportunity for discussion, people are
inclined to decide that they dislike modern art altogether. Now, online communities like Art Assignment can discuss (in terms the general public can understand) the deeper context of this type of art, encouraging their audience to shift perspectives and understand why they may react the way that they do. This direct engagement with the viewer is neither condescending nor exclusive. Instead, it invites people to think critically and form their own opinions. As is stated on the project’s website, “Seeking to demystify contemporary art for broad audiences, The Art Assignment teaches art history through the lens of the present.”

This mission is not exclusive to The Art Assignment; all social media-based forms of art education are a contemporary means to capture the attention of broad audiences. As technology evolves, so does the method by which our society learns. Fine art often comes with the stigma of being stuffy and outdated, but by utilizing today’s forms of dialogue, the arts can become engaging and relevant to today’s learners.

**The Newest Frontier: Social Media as Art**

The arts have always evolved parallel to the evolution of technology. In the Stone Age, art was cave paintings and crude statues. During the Hellenistic Greek period, new innovations in architecture and proportion led to the creation of elaborately decorated temples. In the Renaissance, the printing press spread new philosophies about humanity that shaped the subject matter in paintings by some of the most well-known artists of all time. Change has been constant within the creation of art, and art will continue to change well into the future. With recent development in the technologies of social media, it was inevitable that this too would become a material with which to create art. Contemporary artists are already finding new and interesting ways to push the boundaries of these formats to create work that reflects the kinds of issues
today’s society is wrestling with.

The content itself that people post onto social media can be material for artists to collect and manipulate. Instagram users upload over 80 million photos per day, and Flickr has 92 million users (Allton). All this new information has the potential to be utilized by artists in ways that the public has never seen before. One artist taking advantage of this is Penelope Umbrico, who compiled hundreds of images that she found upon searching the keyword “sunsets” on the social media site Flickr. Separately, each image is an individual person’s attempt at capturing the fleeting moment of the sun setting. Apart, these seem like unique experiences, but Umbrico highlights our collective consciousness by compiling hundreds of these images together. The images all look relatively similar despite being from locations all across the globe, just as the sun is a universal constant in the lives of every person. Similarly, social media sites like Flickr and Instagram span the Earth, connecting people in much the same way that the sun does. In this way, the utilization of social media is essential to this artwork as a way of commenting on the technology’s ubiquity.
It has been argued that there is not enough clarification as to who owns content that is uploaded onto social media, and some may think that Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* unfairly appropriates the photographs of others without creating anything herself. These concerns are valid, especially in a world where artwork can now be stolen via the internet, like when clothing store Forever 21 printed art from Tumblr on their graphic tees without permission (Alfonso). Artists should be careful when borrowing imagery from any source, be it magazines, classical art, or social media. However, there is a right and a wrong way to appropriate imagery, as is well illustrated by the controversial work of Richard Prince. In 2014, Prince installed a series of large canvases in the Gagosian Gallery. The prints were enlarged versions of posts taken from Prince’s Instagram feed. An article about the story notes that “the photos, mostly of young women in seductive or vulnerable poses, come from several accounts: the pinup community Suicide Girls, sex writer Karley Sciortino, musician Sky Ferreira” (Plaugic).

These pieces sold for upwards of $100,000 each, with no compensation to any of the users whose Instagram posts were used. This understandably angered many people who felt that their work was being stolen from them for a profit. The issue with Prince’s show is that he adds barely anything to the pieces themselves, aside from some snarky comments left by his Instagram account. Putting these images together in a collection creates no greater narrative, and only succeeds in stirring up controversy about copyrights. Conversely, work like Umbrico’s brings images together in such a way that they form a dialogue that would not exist in the individual posts. Her work also depends on social media and the perspectives of others as essential elements; it does not depend on the artwork of a few specific artists but rather on the
works of hundreds of people to highlight their similarities. There is a fine line between the appropriation of existing media and the creation of new media, and it is a line that artists must be constantly aware of in our media-saturated culture. When done respectfully, the utilization of content from social media can create a powerful dialogue about our modern society.

Social media also opens the door for art that is live and interactive from any location. Thanks to a constant stream of live information through Twitter, art projects like Twistori can utilize data-mining from public data API’s (application program interfaces). The site is a data visualization of the emotional landscape of Twitter that can be navigated by viewing tweets that include keywords like “love,” “hate,” and “wish” (Hoy and Fuchs). Like *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, Twistori compiles the vast amount of content available on social media, presenting it in a new way that makes the audience feel insignificant, interconnected, or both. Twistori and projects like it differentiate themselves by taking advantage of the constantly evolving terrain of social media. Artists in the past have tried to convey public thought through traditional mediums, but none have the immediacy and tangibility of these data visualizations.
Within the realm of Twitter, other artists are using tweets themselves as a way of creating 140-character art. The @big_ben_clock account tweets “BONG” every hour, the number of “bongs” corresponding to whatever hour has just struck in London, England. What might be most impressive about this is that the account has tweeted every hour of every day since its creation in 2009. This concept has the same absurdity of the Dadaists of the early 20th century, who used humor to navigate a world that they saw as nonsensical. The average follower may just see it as a joke account, but its core function is one that has been utilized by artists for years. Other artists combine Twitter with live performance, like Man Bartlett’s “#24hourport” performance in 2011. An article covering the event explained that Bartlett occupied “both virtual and physical space, wandering through Port Authority and asking visitors where they were going, at the same time tweeting about the experience and asking Twitter participants about their memories of where they had been” (Chayka). The piece explored the concept of travel as well as the individual stories of the people he met. Bartlett then shared this community of Port Authority with his own community, namely his Twitter followers. In both of these instances, Twitter becomes a portal that can transport the audience to any given location in real time, serving as a reminder of the lives other than our own that exist in places we have never been.

These new territories are still being explored by current multidisciplinary artists. Art like this is by no means conventional, and some may say that it is not art at all. However, consider once more the fact that art is constantly evolving with our society, taking new forms and challenging conventions. In the 1950s, Jackson Pollock was considered a revolutionary artist that challenged the norms of painting. Over time, he has become a widely famous and successful artist as a result of pushing those boundaries. Today’s social media-based art is no different, challenging the conventions of what art can and cannot be. By exploring these new platforms, art
becomes more reflective of our current culture while simultaneously being instantly accessible across the world, once again independent from traditional museum structure.

**In Conclusion: What’s Next?**

Since its popularization, people have worried about social media’s impact on our lives: how it affects our relationships, our attention span, our productivity, and our children. This newfound ability to talk to and instantly share information with anyone in the world undoubtedly has lasting effects on every part of our culture. It may seem at first glance like this rise in technology renders something as old as the art world obsolete, but in reality social media has revitalized fine art for a new generation. In the coming years, social media will only become further ingrained in our daily lives, and younger generations will be increasingly used to accessing unlimited data online. Integrating the arts within these platforms provides future artists with the tools to create, in addition to inspiring the general public to become involved in the arts. Art has and will continue to evolve, and embracing this evolution has lead to increased access to the arts, better education about the arts, and new forms of art that deal with the issues of our contemporary society. When we accept that the dynamics of art are changing along with technology, we gain access to a tool that has the potential to connect and educate people across the globe. So what do you do with this knowledge? Post your latest doodle on Instagram. Follow your favorite artist on Twitter. In the process, you just might make the world a little bit smaller and a lot more beautiful.
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