

Branding in the art world: the contemporary visual artist

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Abstract. *Although the association of the term “branding” with the world of art may still generate negative reactions, reluctant attitudes and rejection, the present article investigates the branding phenomenon within the art system, with a direct reference to the contemporary artist. Two theoretical directions – the theory of the art worlds and the institutional theory of art – constitute the background for this research and provide the tools for the use of the brand term in connection with the status of the contemporary artist. The investigation will point out its particularities, starting from the idea that the “brand” contemporary artist is the creation of the art system and thus the well spread network will contribute essentially to the celebrity of that artist: branding is a strategic tool used for the cultural establishment of the artist while the value of the art work signed by a certain artist is related to the scale of the artist’s promotion and branding. The branding phenomenon is associated with the celebrity status / celebrity persona that is generally acquired and internalized by contemporary visual artists, and more especially by those who consume their art, be those collectors or general public.*

Keywords: *the art world; the art system; the celebrity persona; the brand artist.*

Introduction

In the world of mass consumption, art itself has become a commodity. The history of contemporary art is now written depending on art's integration in the art market while its relation to its audience gets to be highly influenced by this market. We are now facing a new type of reception of the contemporary art that is becoming more and more popular, while the success associated with the art world gets to be similar (on a reduced scale, though) to that associated with other cultural industries. Artists have become celebrities; the art world itself is extremely spectacular, while both insiders and outsiders are strongly fascinated by its aura. For example, Damien Hirst's retrospective exhibition held in Tate Modern London in 2012 has been the most popular solo show in the history of the institution, attracting record-breaking visitor numbers, as well as Jeff Koons' retrospective at Whitney Museum of American Art in 2014, which was the most visited exhibition in 83 years of museum existence, or that of the same artist held at Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2014-2015 which reached 112000 visitors in its first 17 days. In this context, numerous press clips, magazine articles, TV documentaries and academic research try to investigate a series of issues related to this subject, by pointing out the spectacular character, the relation between contemporary art and market economy, particularities of the art world and the value of the art work, PR and marketing strategies and other more. Our interest in this context is related to the "branding" phenomenon that is associated with contemporary art, more precisely to the figure of the contemporary artist. Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Takashi Murakami are only some of the names that have been referred to as brands. In the same time, Larry Gagosian, Jay Jopling are called branded dealers, Charles Saatchi, Francois Pinault, Bernard Arnault are seen as branded collectors, while Tate Modern, Guggenheim or MoMa are branded museums. Still, while the mentioned institutions have invested a lot in an institutional branding process, the artists' branding is a consequence of the strategies that are marketing individual personalities as products and of the particular functioning of the art system. Consequently, the present article will question the celebrity status of contemporary artists, the branding mechanisms integrated in the art system, the relationship between the celebrity status and that of a brand and the values associated with the contemporary artists' brands. Two theoretical directions – the theory of the art worlds (Danto, 1964), (Bourdieu, 1998), (Dickie, 1975) (Becker, 2010), the institutional theory of art (De Duve, 1989), (Dickie G., 1984) – constitute the background for this research and provide the tools for the use of the brand term in connection with the figure of the contemporary artist.

The art world – a systemic network

We consider that the world of art presents itself as a vast socio-economic systemic network. A.C. Danto is the first to give a definition to the philosophical notion of “the art world” that includes the communities of interpreters – critics, art curators, artists and collectors – within galleries and museums to suggest that it is impossible to understand conceptual art without the help of this art world. G. Dickie’s theory (Dickie G., 1975) states that a work of art becomes art only if it gets the status of potential candidate to the appreciation of the social institution called “the art world”. Therefore, any artifact may become art as long as “the art world” decides to call it art: “The work of art, in its classifying meaning, is (1) an artifact, (2) a set of aspects which were given the status of candidate to appreciation by a person or persons acting in the name of a certain social institution (the art world). Returning several years later to the problem of the status of a work of art, Dickie (Dickie G., 1984, p. 34) gives the following solution: a work of art is an artifact created to be presented to a public belonging to the art world and the art works are art as a result of the positioning or place occupied within this world which is functioning as a system. Howard S. Becker describes the art world as an ensemble of networks cooperating in order to confer aesthetic value to the works of art and examining the careers, activities and achievements of the producers of the art works leading to the analysis of the artists’ personal reputation as a social process: “The theory states that reputation is founded on the art works. But in reality, the reputation of artists and of their art works derives from the collective activity of the art worlds.” (Becker, 2010). Nowadays, aestheticians, theoreticians, dealers, collectors, the public and other professionals of the art world cooperate in order to construct the artists’ reputation.

Raymonde Moulin discusses the theory of the art system, concentrating her analysis on the specificity of the actual artistic configuration which resides in the interdependence between the art market, where economic transactions are made (responsible for the financial reputation of the art works and of the artists) and the cultural field, where we operate with the homologation and hierachization of the artistic value. Her study, *L’artiste, l’institution et le marché*, „proposes a sociologic analysis of the construction of artistic values, studies the different categories of actors operating in the construction of the artistic values and establishes the sociologic portrait of the artist, the central character of the art world.” (Moulin, 2009, p. 45). The economic and social mechanism of the construction of values within contemporary art is based on the articulation of the network of international art galleries with the network of international cultural institutions; the internationalization of the contemporary art market cannot be dissociated from its cultural promotion. This way, Moulin’s research concentrates on the two main

pillars of the artistic system: the art market and its actors – gallerists, collectors, art dealers – on the one hand and the museum as the main cultural actor, on the other.

The gallery is the key institution within the contemporary art system, the first level that holds the „monopole“ over the artist’s works. As Moulin says, the art galleries can choose two versions in maximizing their profits: they can store the relatively low price purchased works and wait to sell them to selected clients, or, they can create a temporary favorable situation by rapidly selling a big number of works and quickly raising their prices. The second strategy has been dominating the contemporary art market (for approximately 30 years now). Therefore, the very conception of the art market brings the necessity of a short term strategy and of a permanent renewal of the market. This shortening of the valorisation time generates the extension of the action space, a social and geographic extension (the international recognition of the art work and the artist’s value) that compensates the temporal dimension.

Within this system, the “leader” galleries are those which direct a dominant tendency: „Disposing of the monopole of a certain tendency, the leader gallery establishes a promotion strategy. In order to create the request in the favor of a new artistic movement, the commercial marketing and the advertisement techniques are combined with the ones of the cultural diffusion. The possibility of success of a promotion strategy, within a limited period of time, depends on the gallery’s financial support and cultural reputation. The financial means and the cultural reputation are interdependent.” (Moulin, 2009, p. 47) This way the leader galleries are the ones owning the necessary means to launch and promote an artist or an entire artistic movement, being able (from an economic point of view) to mobilize, on an international level, an important network of galleries operating on different private markets. Today, a “continuous innovative swirl” is the principle standing at the basis of the art market’s functioning, says Moulin, this standing as a cause for the leader galleries to be in a permanent state of renewal of their offer or of searching for new artists to be promoted. After the 2nd World War, Leo Castelli is the archetype prototype of the leader art dealer. The American and international art markets have been profoundly influenced by the choices Leo Castelli has made and by the establishment of some important artistic movements: Pop Art, minimal art, conceptual art.

Next to the galleries, collectors act both as economic agents and as cultural actors in order to impose certain contemporary artists on the international art market: “The great collectors collaborate with gallerists who ensure the artists’ promotion. They are the first buyers. They purchase early, at relatively reduced prices, a large number of pieces belonging to each of the representative artists within the artistic movements they are interested in. The massive insertion of a new tendency in a reference collection contributes, before joining a museum

collection, to the establishment of an artistic movement. The great collector, often a member in a museum Board, facilitates the institutional recognition of the artists he / she supports". (Moulin, 2009, p. 52). The collectors present their collection to the public either by organizing exhibitions or by opening private museums (such as Guggenheim Museum in New York, Bilbao, Venice, Ludwig Museum in Köln, Budapest or Vienna, the François Pinault Foundation, Palazzo Grassi and Punta Della Dogana Venice, Charles Saatchi Gallery London). In this way collectors are assuming the roles of all the actors that belong to the art world and market, except that of the artist: they can take on the role of the dealer – they are buying and selling works, they can organize exhibitions adopting the role of a curator, they are opening contemporary art museums – managing the role of a cultural agent: "at the crossroads of the economic and the cultural space, collectors contribute to the institutional recognition of the artists and to the hierarchization of the aesthetic value. As they arbitrate, they have a decisive influence on selected artists and on the development of their careers". (Moulin, 2009, p. 56). Hence, "the art world is subject to the impulses and strategies of some persons owning enormous financial capital, capable of making judgments regarding museums' orientations and, implicitly, regarding the art market on an international scale. Among the most powerful and influential collectors stand the advertising man, Charles Saatchi, the German manufacturer, Peter Ludwig and the company owners François Pinault and Bernard Arnault. They all have created their own important collections exerting a determinant power over the art market, owning auction houses, museums and foundations, magazines and, eventually, TV channels" (Chalumeau, 2002, p. 124).

Due to the accelerated circulation of the art works, a secondary art market has been established at international level. Through art fairs and auction houses, it essentially contributes to the rise in prices and to the multiplication of sales. The great public sales constitute the most covered pole of the market. The auction houses and the contemporary art fairs are always accompanied by large promotional actions and marketing activities which contribute to the increase of visibility and to the media coverage of the contemporary art. Following New York's Armory Show model, the big art fairs were launched at the beginning of the 70's – Art Cologne in 1969, Art Basel in 1970; today we face an extremely large expansion of these institutions – within a vast international perimeter (Art Miami, SH Contemporary Shanghai, Frieze London, FIAC Paris, ARCO Madrid, Istanbul Contemporary, jus to give a few examples). Art fairs are places for orientation, confrontation and exchange, essential for the art dealers who discover here the market trends and test their own orientations. Within these fairs, the artists already benefiting from cultural recognition present their works in different galleries, the transactions made in such ways to increase artists' quotation on the market.

Also, the sale through auction houses multiply year after year adding extremely high financial value to the candidates seeking artistic professionalization. As Olav Velthuis mentions, "Social scientists have called auctions "tournaments of value" or "status contests". At stake in such tournaments is not only an economic transaction but also the establishment of the artists' rank and the status and fame of the collectors who can afford to buy their work" (Velthuis, 2007, p. 123). Hence, collectors are buying values as much as they are buying art and there are at least two reasons for their acquisitions. They either purchase a piece of art because they are strongly connected to that work intellectually or affectionately, they love it, they dialogue with it, they feel represented by it, or because they consider it an investment, and more than that, a status marker. The social recognition and the self-expression benefit provided by owning a work of art signed by a famous artist will endorse the collector's status. Therefore, art fairs and auction houses contribute essentially to the artists' status and its transformation to a celebrity.

Within this network, artistic events such as the international biennials (the Venice Biennale with a history starting from 1895 or Documenta Kassel inaugurated in 1955, to give just two examples) constitute, on one hand, moments of artistic sociability and privileged places for communication within the art sphere and on the other hand, they have an important validation function: "they participate in establishing a hierarchy of aesthetic values and constitute the mandatory stages of an artistic career, both from the point of view of the author's reputation and of the prices of the art work." (Moulin, 2009, p. 61) The international art magazines belong to this network, too; the international distribution of critical texts written by professional journalists or of certain advertising announcements inserted by the galleries in their pages create the proper conditions for art's standardization and for its actors' cosmopolitanism. Still, the most powerful institution within the cultural network is considered to be the contemporary art museum; it is complementary to the gallery on the art market and fundamentally contributes to the recognition and confirmation of the artists' status.

The artist as a brand

We have emphasized the systemic existence and functioning of the art market, in order to justify the maximal insertion and the use of strategic mechanisms of marketing and advertising, as well as the use of the brand as a signifier of the social status, artistic recognition and celebrity.

Nowadays the artist's figure is built on a cultural stereotype, a product of the dominant representations, subject to ideological, political and economic determinations (Athanasopoulos, 2009, pp. 99-106). The increasing impact of mass-media starting with the 50's-60's had as a result, at the end of the 70's, the appearance of a new type of artist: the young, mobile and entrepreneur

artist, an essentially liberal figure aware of the market conditions that center on the celebration of individualism and of the cult of private personality. The diverse figures of the contemporary artist transform the cultural challenge into a springboard for public recognition and notoriety: instead of making visible the contradictions within the cultural industry, the artist makes her / himself visible by using them: "The artists of the new vanguard belonging to the Reagan years are described as successful people in terms of gross financial value. On the one hand, the mediated "celebrity persona" of the artist will progressively move the interest from the work of art to the artist's lifestyle. On the other hand, the personal mythology is exalted to even becoming a fetish, as a series of painters, such as Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, and Keith Haring attained a celebrity that crossed the borders of the art world. This environment will determine the artists to create not only their work of art, but also a specific personality as a tool for presenting their art, as a signifier for their art that could compete with the biggest celebrities worldwide" (Athanasopoulos, 2009, p. 101). The "celebrity persona" reveals this transformation of the artist as an individual, as a total living work of art, delivered to the voyeurism of the consumption society.

From a historical point of view, to a certain extent, the modern image of the artist had already contained the strategic development of the artist's profile. Duchamp was the first to introduce the concept of the artistic activity as a strategy instead of that of pure creation. During the 40's-50's, artists were not yet preoccupied by their public image but once the gallery became an institution of promotion (such as *Art of This Century*, New York) art immediately started to be mediatized and to gain more and more popularity. Pollock's celebrity, due to *Life* magazine and Hans Namuth's photography have been the extrinsic effect of the artistic process itself. For New York artists of this time, the building-up of their own image seemed unreasonable and this explains their disregard of Salvador Dali who had always been so careful in delivering an extremely provocative public image, who was constantly present as a personality, as an acting individual and as a discursive figure. Then, Beuys, builds his own image on the model of "the prophet who addresses his disciples", placing in the center of his creations a real personal mythology which will become an integrating part in the understanding of his work, by investing it with a particular aura: "between minimalism, ironic deconstruction and the invention of a personal symbolism, he gains the role of a leader, more by the way he lived a certain artistic character, by the way he enforced himself at the institution's frontiers as a prophet of the art and as a visual artist, than by his works of art" (Heinich, 2005). The first artist though who, during the 60's-70's directly integrates the culture of promotion and self-promotion into his work, is Andy Warhol. From him on, celebrity becomes an integrant part of the artistic vocabulary and decisively interferes with the process of production,

presentation and reception of the work of art and implicitly of the artist: "I am flashed, therefore I am." Once with Andy Warhol the opportunity is given to transcend the so-called anonymity of the work of art by the artist's spectacular transformation into a celebrity. Dissolved in a universe of mass consumption, his artistic personality returns, as the ultimate artifact of *The Factory*, to establish the artificial rarefact of the trivial and confirm the art's status as a luxury merchandise: Warhol's "brand image was to rise from that of a fashionable product to that of a product with a celebrity status and Warhol's art was obviously seen as part of the celebrity culture that could be tapped in order to achieve this goal.(Gibbons, 2005, p. 143)"

After Warhol, the artist's figure becomes more and more abstract, more and more immaterial and, under the effect of the increasing collision with the performing arts industries, it becomes merchandise destined to speculation. It is considered an artistic material and product quasi-independent of the savoir-faire notions and of the concrete aesthetic practice. Therefore, raised to the rank of art, it simultaneously poses as ultimate subject and object of the art work. This is why the artist feels the vital necessity to maintain and develop the capital of image, his / her brand, by appropriating the new techniques of the performances culture and integrating the media mechanisms of the celebrity status. Hence, the exchange value of the work of art – identified with the artist's image – becomes merchandise and the artist - brand. Jeff Koons or Takashi Murakami's activities are strategically built on the Warhol model: „Koons seems to agree with a general perception of himself as a second-generation Warhol, an ultra-cool celebrity artist who either makes icons out of ready-made banal products of popular culture, such as vacuum cleaners, or makes representations of ready-made icons of popular culture such as the Pink Panther or Michael Jackson. Like Warhol, Koons acquired a celebrity persona in several ways, through the shock of the banal, through the representation of celebrities and through the construction of a distinctive personality and image". Koons supported the idea of marketing himself as much as his work, attracting media attention and creating a persona that has often been described as "well spoken, good-looking, sex symbol, media superstar" (Gibbons, 2005, p. 147).

Within this context, of an excessive media culture and of an expansive art market, branding becomes a functional strategy in the artists' emergence on the market, in their establishment and in the creation of the contemporary artist's status of celebrity. The same branding process is nowadays inserted in the functioning of the contemporary art institutions. A very interesting study written by Don Thompson(Thompson, 2008), discusses the branding phenomenon within the contemporary art. He envisages branded galleries, branded auction houses, brand collectors, brand artists, brand museums, all functioning in a world of art governed by economical reasons where the value of art is dependent on the

brand's efficiency and spreading: "The value of art has more to do with artist, dealer or auction house branding and with collectors ego than it does with art. The value of one work of art compared to another is no way related to the time or skill that went into producing it, or even whether anyone else considers it to be great art. The market is driven by high status auctions and art fairs that become events in their own right, entertainment and public display for the ultra rich".(Thompson, 2008, p. 246). Similar to the branding used in advertising, the branding used in contemporary art (applied to the figure of the contemporary artist) produces commercial value and brings on the consumer level (mainly art collectors) the necessity to acquire and to own the particular artist's work of art as a supreme guarantee of the lifestyle the person aims to reach. In the same time, the permanent renewal of the artistic scene, the continuous turmoil which brings to the forefront of attention new works of art and artists requires the use of branding as a mechanism to consolidate the value of the art work on the market: "Of the thousands artists who had serious gallery shows in New York and London during the 80's, no more than 20 were offered in evening auctions at Christie's or Sotheby's in 2007. Eight of ten works purchased directly from an artist and half the works purchased at auction will never again resell at their purchase price. [...] High prices are created by branded dealers promoting particular artists, by a few artists successfully promoting themselves, and by brilliant marketing on the part of branded auction houses." (Thompson, 2008, p. 27)

Promotion and branding are part of the contemporary artist's identity and the success on the art market can only be the result of a deliberate strategy involving a new type of attitude towards "the conventional thinking over the work of art and over the artist" and of a different relationship with the art world and most of all with mass-media and the public. As R. Moulin says, the strategy of the newcomers involves a collaboration with one (or more) leader gallery (brand gallery – Gagosian, Gladstone, Haunch of Venison, Yvon Lambert, etc.) which assures their launching and promotion on the market, the acquisition from a great collector (brand collector – Saatchi, Pinault, Arnould, etc.) – which gives them an international passport – then, the diversification of the galleries, dealers and collectors they collaborate with. An important aspect in the building up of their celebrity persona and their brand is the use of advertising and marketing strategies and a lot of media exposure in articles and professional magazines (*Art Press, Frieze, Flash Art, Artforum, New York Magazine*, etc.), pages in catalogues (*Art Now, 100 Contemporary Artists*, etc.) and tabloids. The receiving of an important award (Turner Prize, Prix Marcel Duchamp), the participation in major branded cultural events (the Venice Biennial), the insertion of their works and important major exhibitions in brand museums (Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, MoMa, Guggenheim, etc.) follow. The more the artist's works are presented in galleries,

the more they are purchased by collectors, his / her market share will increase and the rhythm of selling as well: "If the artist can create enough work to show simultaneously at several galleries and art fairs, the greater buzz produces higher prices. Each show, each fair, each mention in an art magazine, each critical appraisal produces more talk, more visitors and more jumping on the bandwagon. As critic Robert Hughes says of New York collectors: Most of the times they buy what other people buy. They move in great schools, like bluefish, all identical. There is safety in numbers. If one wants Schnabel, they all want Schnabel, if one buys Keith Haring, two hundred Keith Harings will be sold." (Thompson, 2008, p. 42) And the supreme attribute of branding and of the sign of the artist's celebrity and recognition will be, within this context, the necessity to buy Keith Haring, Damien Hirst, or Jeff Koons, and so the denomination of the work of art and the positioning of the artist's figure on the first place. The artistic success involves the strategic construction of the celebrity persona and the promotion as a brand simultaneously with the integration within the frame of the international circuit of the valorization of the work of art.

Conclusions

Although the use of branding strategies within the art world is often applied to contemporary artists (but also to art dealers or collectors, galleries, auction houses or museums), it has been constantly criticized and considered speculative, artificial and inconsistent (Hughes, 1992) (Lewis, 2009). The world of commerce has gained a monopoly on the art world, and a small group of powerful dealers, massively rich collectors and celebrity artists control both the art market, but also the future history of contemporary art, by enforcing the brand names as the ultimate values within the art system. Due to the systemic functioning network within the art world, the art market has become in the 21st century a cultural phenomenon in itself; therefore it cannot be anything but considered. The art world is extremely dynamic and highly globalized, thus in constant change. There is no other international recognition for contemporary artists than the one supported by the art market / the art system. The multiplication of instances and financial players that build up the system, bring both value and permanence to the works of contemporary artists, acting and re-acting within this socio-economic network. The branding process is thus instrumental and used for building up the credibility and trust needed within the system and in its relation with both the art world and the contemporary society.

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