Artist Incorporated: Branding, Sponsorship and Resisting the Urge to Merge.

Steph Kretowicz

For a while now, international consumer brands have been sponsoring and capitalizing on subculture as a relatively low cost means to their own billion dollar ends. Coca Cola, Pepsi, and Mountain Dew do it. Even McDonald's recognizes the need to tap into an apparently more sophisticated youth market by sponsoring the main stage at Austin's SXSW 2015 Indie music festival and advertising to its audience. Now this trend of musicians as content wrapped in a brand is increasingly and troublingly visible in art. There's the ICA Off-Site with Hannah Perry at the Diesel Black Gold Flagship store, PETRA CORTRIGHT X STELLA SPORT collaboration with fashion label Stella McCartney, and the Converse Emerging Artists Award – this year won by Lawrence Lek – just to name a few.

"Never before has the divide between art and commerce been more visibly bridged, and it's tragic."

Before we go any further, it might be helpful to identify exactly what's so tragic about such sponsorships. Wikipedia defines a corporation as "a company or group of people authorized to act as a single entity" that is recognized by the law and "legally a person." 'For profit' corporations – because they're the ones that are of concern to this particular piece – exist to do just that, to turn a profit. This means fuelling consumption while keeping costs low. Outsourced labor, exploitative wages, environmental destruction, creating barriers to free trade; these are some examples of the means and methods used to strengthen a corporation's grip on a particular field or industry – or several, as is increasingly the case. Capitalism requires growth and these corporate bodies continue to grow via acquisitions, expansion of their portfolios, diversification and devouring the competition. This means, for instance, that ten multinational corporations apparently own the majority of all US consumer brands. As another more pertinent example one could point to social media networks that occupy a fair chunk of the data storage set, collected from the unpaid labor of its users, in a Big Data industry worth an estimated $125 billion.

I refer to networked communications specifically because the way in which these companies, and others like them, function shares parallels with marketing strategies used by big brands, which in turn have marked implications for the role of the artist – or, the ‘creative producer’ – in the contemporary market economy. The success of a Silicon Valley startup company rests on its scalable business model, in other words on its ability to increase profits over time by growing revenue while maintaining relatively low overheads. That’s why social media sites and apps are doing so well: by developing a service that utilizes prosumers – persons that both consume and produce information – as their core labor force and as a tool for growing their audiences, they also collect their valuable data in the process. Consumers trade their access to a certain app for the personal information generated from their devices but the benefits – between app user and app administrator – are incongruous. The value of the data collected far outweighs the benefit to the prosumer.

When applying a similar approach to a media sponsorship program – where a brand, instead of investing in a few high profile sponsorships, proliferates via an extensive repertoire of relatively low cost alternatives – you may witness a similar inequality in the overall benefit to the contributing creative producer, as the brand itself.

This is an approach that is especially effective in a social landscape that has become increasingly dispersed and atomized, particularly where networked communication is concerned. With the dawn of the Internet, audiences have become wildly fragmented and an investment in a single artist with a large audience is costly and potentially risky. It appears better to stagger your influence in a way that you cast the widest net in order to access several smaller social networks for its cumulative overall value. Rather than investing in just one thing, a brand like Red Bull, for example, invests in several projects – including the Red Bull School of Art, the Red Bull Music Academy, and Red Bull Studios. Often (but not always) the artists and writers involved are paid better than they might by an independent organization; but are they getting paid their worth?

In a conversation with Steven Warwick (aka Heatsick) at Portugal's Semibreve festival, Frances Morgan, a contributing editor to The Wire, spoke about branded events programs and their neoliberal ideologies of self-actualization in relation to how they hijack and fragment communities by focusing on the individual: It doesn't encourage you as a musician to think about your context. It doesn't encourage you to think about your peers, or your friends, or people you don't like. It doesn't encourage you to think about geographical, literal space." That is, instead of being associated with a certain cultural context or, importantly, a particular community with its own independence and ability to organize in a collective interest outside of the private sector, an individual artist becomes associated with a highly visible, heavily branded, corporate one: “It’s a gentrification narrative.”

And it is not only that. When you consider the dematerialized art object and a diminishing material economy, diversification and finding new markets are key to a corporation’s continued growth. That key market is rooted in the experience economy. That means that these corporate bodies investing in live performance and artist development are not only advertising an existing consumer product to a combined audience (and what better way to maximize that audience than investing in art and music collectives, which are mini-organizations in themselves, with their own accumulated brand power), they’re also diversifying - these artists are their industry.

"They are their product."

This is a point that is even more pertinent when you consider today’s nature of the ‘creative industry’ at large today. In the UK, for example, it’s one that’s now estimated to be worth £76.9 billion per year. The average artist’s wage in London is £10,000. There is a strong argument for the idea of the creative producer, or the ‘professionalized artist.’ Since this is a relatively new concept, it is certainly true that there are probably, or at least maybe, too many of such people to fully sustain it (that is, if you adhere to some kind of arbitrary hierarchy of value – where production is at the bottom and its distribution at the top – with people being paid accordingly). But it's also true that the creative industry is a key sector in the UK government's long-term economic plan. It's the fastest growing industry in the country. At the same time, public arts funding is being cut and public-private partnerships – both institutionally and individually – are being encouraged while artists incomes remain the same. When you consider this in terms of keeping revenue up and labor costs down, the creative industry is a startup.

Another thing to think about in terms of the accelerated economy of the startup model is that they're also backed by venture capital – an early stage, high risk private investment that strikes while a company is still 'emerging' and exits at a high return. Many such startup investments fail, but there are many more to invest in. The same goes for the creative industries because while the assumption is that there's not enough money to sustain a surplus of professionalized artists that already live in a place like London, there are enough cultural workers, particularly emergent ones, to take the risk and promote their success, or to move on if there isn't any. And if there is success, to exit from any obligation for their continued support in an industry that has no real value relation in terms of artistic labor or production.

"The corporate goal here is not establishing the continued patronage or career longevity for an individual artist or collective, but in a cumulative gain, in terms of exposure and sales, for the corporate brand itself."

Then there's also the false value of 'exposure'. A major selling point for many brands with venture capital to risk on showcasing art, artists and, musicians (often at a low rate, sometimes for free) is their procuring the artist an audience, which grows exponentially by virtue of the number of artists they support. But what are the actual monetary benefits of that exposure for the artists themselves, especially when audiences don't pay, funding doesn't exist, and an artist's cultural capital has been dispersed to a brand via their temporary outsourced labor with no employer accountability?

"In an accelerated, high turnover and high visibility game such as this one, artists hand over their cumulative cultural capital in exchange for a platform to be briefly seen in, much in the

*same way as
an
Instagram
app user
exchanges
their
personal
information
for an
ephemeral
photo
share."*

Dictionary.com defines the word "exploitation" in three ways: 1.) "use or utilization, especially for profit", 2.) "selfish utilization", and 3.) "the combined, often varied, use of public-relations and advertising techniques to promote a person, movie, product, etc.". All of these definitions apply to corporate sponsorship. Endorsements on social media and free clothes; heavily branded festivals and stages; product placement and native advertising: whatever you do, wherever you go, there's a brand in the way and an artist that's associated with it. To consider the implications of taking part in this system is to step into an ethical minefield, an impenetrable web of profit and exploitation, artistic (see: economic) freedom and social responsibility. The reality of survival in creative production solely as a capitalist enterprise is not only one that's unsustainable with regard to resources but it's also conducive to a widening wealth gap fed by scalable business models and an accelerated form of capitalist valuation. Acknowledging this means accepting one's own collusion within a culture of consumerism, and a failure in being part of an exploitative new experience economy. But it might not have to be that way entirely.

What if artists, networked online or otherwise, could organize and wield their own brand power, independent of the corporations that co-opt it? Perhaps, creating self-started institutions that exist outside of a capital goal, and that further support and foster communities of artists and producers with a shared political impetus, can offer an alternative. Grassroots organizations certainly won't provide for sustainability in terms of a livelihood for any individual. Yet what it will do is present another platform for exposure via a brand that exists outside of a corporate enterprise. An organization populated by artists, administrators, and audiences who stand to gain nothing in terms of profit could achieve everything in terms of disrupting the intensifying stronghold of the corporatization and gentrification of creative labor itself. As the so-called 'free market' collapses under the pressure of corporate monopoly, independent organizations represent a competition that goes beyond their limited capacity to monetize their own work.

"And in the a distinction

between money and music (or art) is the place where the only hope lies. The privatization of experience is the cold reality of contemporary capitalism, but also, to all artists: know your enemy."

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