

Dena Yago

Content Industrial Complex

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A Brief History

An image familiar to anyone in the twentieth century: the ear-to-ear grin of a celebrity, white teeth gleaming, providing a raving endorsement for a product. The image recalls a time when power was centralized and authority laid claim to authenticity – a time when opinion was taken as fact if delivered from the top down. Another image from this era: “real people, not actors” testifying to the incredible benefits a product or service has had on their lives. This kind of customer endorsement aimed to reach a potential buyer on their own terms. While the celebrity-image is aspirational, the customer-image builds confidence and trust. Both thrived and succeeded when television and print advertisements were the dominant form of marketing. Today, while stars still lounge in their Calvins on city billboards, an oft-cited maxim in marketing departments is that consumers seek authenticity – albeit crafted, drafted, and filtered by social-media platforms. Consumers trust the recommendation of a friend over a celebrity, and they increasingly consider “influencers” their friends. Which they are, if by being friends we mean the connective monads from which contemporary social media is assembled, piece by aspirational piece.

Many influencers fall under the category of “creators” – paraprofessional creatives who post highly personal, confessional content of the kind that moves easily from “I’m feeling sad about my cat’s herpes,” to “I love this CBD water, I can’t help it,” to “#metoo.” Social-media celebrity is always already pitched somewhere between the inaccessible and the local; it exists in some virtual elsewhere that could stand in for anyone’s hometown or living room. Importantly, many of these videos are recorded within domestic spaces. They also land on a spectrum between specificity and generality, with their main appeal being the increasingly particular moments that make them “so relatable.” This relatability resonates particularly with kids and teens who annually convene by the tens of thousands at conventions such as VidCon to meet their friends and idols, shrieking in droves across the Anaheim Convention Center, whipping innocent bystanders with their plush tails and the tassels of their knitted animal hats, knocking down the occasional Minion mascot – all to capture a selfie with someone named FaZe Rug.

Two events in 2017 shifted the course of this embryonic industry. Influencer marketing took a hit with the Fyre Festival, a weekend of music and partying in the Bahamas organized with the help of rapper Ja Rule, which ended with attendees paying between \$5,000 and \$250,000 to eat Kraft Singles on a slice of Wonder Bread in FEMA-style emergency relief tents. Then, the



A visitor waits outside VidCon, an annual multi-genre online video conference, held in the Anaheim Convention Center, Southern California.

YouTube vlogger and Team 10 member Logan Paul took a misguided trip to Aokigahara, also known as Japan's Suicide Forest, eventually encountering a dead body, laughing it off, and posting a video of the excursion for all of his fifteen million subscribers to see. In response, there has been an industry-wide turn from macro influencers, who have millions of followers and command high fees, to lower-liability micro influencers – especially from the cultural sphere – who have fewer followers but offer higher-quality engagement and content. This tactic aims to expand a brand's audience by relying on an influencer's appeal to authenticity and legitimacy within a particular community – be it fourteen-year-olds, or artists. In the past, art and the artist's identity were largely incongruous with such relatability; but then the contemporary precariat emerged, whose lives and livelihoods are oh-so-relatable to those of “the artist.”

Never entirely innocent, the role of the artist in these negotiations has shifted radically towards complicity. Producing content in the form of artworks and social-media posts, the cultural influencer functions as a highly valued asset for brands. As brands increasingly turn towards the cultural sphere and seek out the validation and collaboration of artists, it is critical to gain an understanding of the way that our artwork and action on social media is being perceived on the other side of the feed. We must recognize how our work – be it the photos we post, the artwork we create that includes the names and images of brands in the work itself, and the network of people, places, and things that are revealed through our social activity – is quantified and instrumentalized. It is only then that we can create alternative models that pay for our labor, content, and engagement, or identify strategies and tactics of resistance.

When an influencer endorses a brand or product, there is often a promised or assumed quantifiable return-on-investment for the brand in the form of increased sales, engagement, and a share of the conversation on social media. There are also more nebulous, unquantifiable metrics, such as brand awareness and cultural relevance. Both qualitatively and quantitatively, artists as influencers – and more generally, artists as users – add value both to brands and to the platforms themselves.

Still largely unregulated, the content produced by these artist-influencers can take many forms – from a single image or tweet to highly produced testimonial videos or even feature-length films and documentaries. “Branded content” is designed to resemble the distinctive editorial voice native to the publication or platform on which it appears. According to the Federal Trade Commission,

branded content should always come with a disclaimer identifying it as an “advertisement,” “ad,” “promoted,” “sponsored,” “sponsored by [brand],” “presented by [brand],” “featured partner,” “in partnership with [brand],” or “suggested post.” Of course, things fall through the cracks. Branded content merges the advertisement with the content itself: that's the point. The brand or product is secondary to the content, though it accrues cultural capital by building associations between product and brand, brand and cultural production.

While twentieth-century mass-cultural celebrity signaled fame, beauty, and success, and social-media stars signify trust and authenticity, endorsements from artists imply that the consumption and use of a product or service is integral to the “secret sauce” of creative inspiration and production. This is not new; there have been commercials featuring Joseph Beuys hawking Japanese whiskey, Marcel Broodthaers hawking Van Laack shirts, and Helen Frankenthaler hawking Rolex watches – no doubt the history of the relationship between artists and luxury-goods advertising warrants its own essay. Still, the traditional separation of advertising and content at least made for a relatively clearly defined exchange: money for the labor of endorsement, such as it is. To state what is already known: the advent and proliferation of social media has irreparably transformed these modes of exchange, resulting in an epidemic of unpaid digital labor. Today we are all Krusty the Clown after his TV show is cancelled: standing by the highway with a sign reading “WILL DROP PANTS FOR FOOD,” only to learn that someone else is already dropping their pants for free.

UGC Hegemony

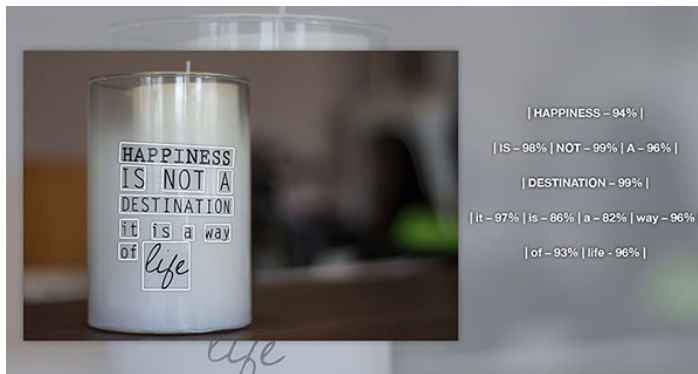
The primary way in which users provide unpaid labor is through the production of “user-generated content,” or UGC. This blanket term refers to images or videos that are posted by users and that feature a product or brand, or that are created at a specific location or event. While UGC is produced en masse and at will, a company's marketing plan may include a UGC campaign that broadcasts a call to action, or “CTA,” designed to provoke an immediate response. In the realm of social media, this response is often the creation of more content – the posting of selfies, photos, and videos. Content then begets content, the snake of social media eating its own tail. Brands will often include UGC in their own advertisements, reposting content from users without permission or compensation. Brands will also look to the volume of UGC produced as a metric for their own success – in which case your UGC is directly



Deidre Behar takes a selfie in a pool of sprinkles at the Museum of Ice Cream, a pop-up art installation in Los Angeles. Photo: Glenn Koenig / Los Angeles Times

generating value for the brand while you walk away empty handed, save for some immaterial likes. Often UGC is aggregated via a dedicated hashtag, though it can also be pulled from geolocational check-ins. UGC can also be gathered by social listening tools like NetBase, which uses natural-language processing; such tools trawl for posts that @-mention a brand or product, or that include the name of a brand or product without the use of an indexible mention or hashtag. Even untagged content can be indexed by deep-learning image-recognition tools like Clarifai, Amazon's Rekognition, and IBM Watson's Visual Recognition. All of these use machine learning and neural networks to recognize objects and images within images.

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As methods for content aggregation, these tools have many uses beyond brand analytics, such as police and military surveillance and facial recognition. The algorithms that drive these tools are only as useful as the data sets they comb through to establish associations and pathways – data which is often supplied willingly by social-media users in the form of posted content. These photos and videos constitute a growing body of content housed in the cloud, which comprises centralized server networks in the American prairies of Ohio, Virginia, and Oregon, as well as in Mumbai, Sao Paulo, Frankfurt, Ireland, and elsewhere. The assumption that you can avoid playing into the hands of corporations by posting a photo but not using a hashtag, or using a hashtag improperly as an attempt to flood the signals with noise à la 1990s culture jamming, is baseless. Any image and any text is indexible, with or without attached language and tags, and can and will be decontextualized to serve another master. The creation of UGC and the varied levels of user engagement rely on just that – the user, in other words, a person who has agency to choose whether or not to engage. Users have the capacity to question the institutions asking for their uploads, as surely as they can question their own predilection to produce and post content in the first place. As a term, “user”

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resonates unambiguously with the language of addiction. Users include those who shudder at any accusation of complicity, as well as those who would trade anything for a shot at complicity with something larger than themselves.

Exhibition as Content Farm

Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* at the Broad Museum in Los Angeles currently has over forty-four thousand hashtagged posts on Instagram under the tag #infinityroom. A more granular tag, #infinitymirroredroom, has over thirteen thousand posts. Kusama's installation dominates even the general #mirrorroom tag, in spite of the noise emanating from the unrelated documentation of everyday mirrored rooms around the world. Beyond the work-specific hashtags, a deeper dig would surely reveal countless other posts bearing the location tag of the Broad Museum, others that include Kusama's name, and others without tags at all. Kusama's installation exemplifies a widespread shift in art towards the exhibition as content farm. Along these lines, successful art is whatever begets the most UGC. Beyond mere likes and engagement, exhibitions encourage gallery- and museumgoers to produce their own unique content, which is then posted to social media. Pipilotti Rist's "Pixel Forest" exhibition at the New Museum in 2016, or Anne Imhof's *Faust* installation at the 2017 Venice Biennale – this art spams our feeds, as if its ability to demand attention not only within the white cube but outside it proves its very status as art. Escaping once and for all their designated playpen within Bourdieu's restricted field of cultural production – where artists produce culture for other professional culture-producers, in contrast to the nonrestricted field of mass culture – these artists seek to compete with and triumph over cat memes, creating viable content for social media at large.

And why not? Today, everyone is a culture-producer, producing culture for every other culture-producer. This breakdown in the cultural division of labor is reflected in the emphasis not on images of artworks themselves, but on images (especially selfies) of *people posing in front of* artworks, proving both the authenticity and presence of the photographed person – think of artworks-as-backdrops such as Random International's *Rain Room* (2012), or anything at all by James Turrell. People pose beneath Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass* (2012) at LACMA as if they're bearing its weight, Leaning-Tower-of-Pisa style. They lock eyes with their infinitely repeating selves in Kusama's *Infinity Room*. These tactics have even made their way onto billboards, as with Calvin Klein's fall 2017



Image from "Introducing the Calvin Klein Campaign: American Classics" In this advertisement is accompanied by the following caption: "Ricard Prince, *I Changed My Name*, 1988. Copyright: Richard Prince Acrylic and screenprint on canvas (142.5cm x 198.7cm) Calvin Klein: Classic Demin Shirt (Calvin Klein Jeans Est. 1978) Photographed at Rubell Family Collection, Miami

campaign featuring models standing in front of large-scale works by Sterling Ruby and Richard Prince.¹ On dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr, photos of people posing against art backdrops form their own subgenre. We can thus thank artists for generating thousands of likes for both institutions and individuals, as well as for getting people laid. But why are large-scale works usually used as backdrops rather than smaller-scale paintings or sculptures by the same artists? Perhaps it's because the large works are spectacular, providing cultural capital and excellent lighting, while wholly removing the subject from any worldly context. One could say that a similar effect is provided by the iPhone's portrait mode, which blocks out any reference to the world.

The transformation of artworks and installations into attractions has increased ticket sales for art institutions, while democratizing access to a certain type of spectacular, installation-based art. The Broad in Los Angeles epitomizes the exhibition as content farm. But while The Broad may democratize access to the private collection of a major real-estate developer, it has arguably de-democratized the surrounding neighborhood by accelerating gentrification. Additionally, corporate and luxury brands have started to open their own "museums" in an effort to counter the decline of brick-and-mortar retail sales; these lavish, often temporary spaces are dedicated more to experiential marketing than moving product. Borrowing from the language of art and curatorial practice, places like the Museum of Broken Relationships (in Zagreb and Los Angeles), 29Rooms (in Brooklyn), and Color Factory (in San Francisco) help brands establish themselves as creatively minded, while appealing to a cultural class that exists at the intersection of marketing, design, and social media. Most of these "museums" charge Whitney-level admission fees and tout month-long wait lists. All leverage the democratization of art and access afforded by social media, while using words like "exhibition," "pop-up," and "experience" interchangeably to describe themselves. Often housed in new real-estate developments or old industrial spaces, these places exist alongside more traditional, less transient art spaces at the frontlines of gentrification. What better way to promote a future co-working space than to temporarily fill it with curated art and eager 1099ers posting selfies taken in high-ceilinged rooms painted in garish pastels? Emulating the social-media strategies of "real" museums, places like Color Factory provide large-scale, dream-like scenery that begs to be used as the backdrop for selfies and Instagram posts. In this way, these pop-up,

limited-time-only spaces extend their lifespan through our social feeds.

Diegetic Advertising

As large-scale, spectacular artworks become backdrops for social-media content production, other contemporary artworks become the physical platforms for brands and thus a form of diegetic advertising. Drawing from the legacy of pop art, appropriation, and situationist *détournement*, among other art historical approaches to consumerist and capitalist critique, artists include the logo or name of a brand in the work itself. This is done as an act of criticism, irony, or post-ironic sincerity, this last of which is often compounded with a sense of indignation along the lines of "So what if I love Doritos and Mountain Dew?" This embrace of mass-produced brands also serves to critique the implicit or explicit classism and racism of those who snobbishly reject them. As with Anne Imhof's use of Pepsi, Marlboro cigarettes, Marshall guitar amps, and Gillette shaving gel in her performance *Angst II* (2016), brands and products are used as shorthand for an attitude or identity that the artist aims to embody or critique. This is an efficient metonymic approach in which the brand or product, with its coherent narrative and identity, bears a lot of the conceptual load for an artist communicating a position to their audience. *Angst II*, a three-part operatic marriage of text, music, dance, performance, technology, and bodies, hinges on the tension between disparate elements coalescing into pure atmosphere and atomizing into irreconcilable fragments. Performers move throughout the piece with blank stares, better to serve as empty canvases for the audience's own projections, or to be filled in with the narrative of the surrounding products and objects: an artist-slash-Balenciaga model, a drone, cans of Pepsi, a razor, cigarettes.

Once an image of such a work is posted to social media and flattened into the content terrain, the artist must acknowledge that their position will be rendered illegible. When seen on the other side of the feed, viewers may not account for the nuances of artistic critique present in a work that includes FedEx boxes, SmartWater, or any other brand name or product as a shorthand for capitalist critique. The work is viewed by social media managers and strategists on the other side of the feed as an homage to the brand, or as genuine "brand love." If the brand reaches out to the artist to encourage further engagement, and the artist refuses, the brand will incorporate the artist's approach in a future campaign anyway. The artist might bring an intellectual property suit against the brand, and might win, but the practice will continue unless

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there is a structural overhaul of intellectual property law that favors artists over corporate interests. While this may not be new, the onus is on artists to understand how their critique can easily be decontextualized and repurposed towards pro-corporate ends. Realizing this is made even more urgent by the speed at which images circulate and are recuperated today.

Post-ironic sincerity and the celebration of brands can also be found in another form of unpaid creative labor: fan fiction. Increasingly, the term “fan fiction” is being adopted by artists, designers, and other creatives as an alternative to appropriation. Emerging from the passionate fan cultures surrounding media franchises such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*, fan fiction allows audiences to use the brand and all of its elements as creative material. It also allows for alternative story outcomes and the challenging of cultural narratives that have historically erased female, minority, POC, and LGBTQI voices. In this sense, fan fiction functions as a participatory tactic for community building and structural change.

The narrative around artistic integrity and selling out has dissolved as young artists negotiate crippling student debt, an art market that favors established work, and the defunding of public cultural institutions. Meanwhile, on social media we are increasingly milked for unpaid time, labor, and cultural capital in exchange for an invitation, an open bar, and exposure. My feed is increasingly filled with posts linking to artists’ Venmo addresses or crowdfunding pages on Patreon and GoFundMe. Unsurprisingly, these artists are primarily female, trans, queer, and/or POC. They are also often artists working primarily in social media through memes, photography, video, and performance. The requests are less about the completion of a specific project than about funding their basic life expenses, and more importantly, their time. This funding strategy keeps an artist independent from corporate or institutional support, but relies on the generosity of a social network that may also be working with similarly limited resources.

When it is a brand instead of peers funding an artist, there are codified ways in which the brand engages with the artist, which go beyond a traditional exchange of cash for content. In these exchanges, the brand takes on one of the following roles: brand as lifestyle bait, which involves a mutual exchange of aspiration between artist and brand; brand as platform, where the brand provides the artist access to a much larger audience; and brand as rainmaker, in which the brand sponsors or commissions works of a scale and production budget that the artist otherwise couldn’t access. This last model

luckily still exists in the form of grants such as the Tiffany Foundation or Pollock Krasner grants, although an alternative for these funds is increasingly provided by brands looking to invest in cultural partnerships.

We’ve all seen brand-as-lifestyle-bait ads before: a curator driving a luxury car along a California hillside (Jens Hoffmann for Lexus #NotSurprised); an artist couple featured in a branded editorial platform for an upscale Scandinavian design-focused subsidiary of H&M. You’ve shouted at your screen: “*What the actual fuck?*” You’ve asked yourself how much they had to get paid to do that. Or were they just *that vain*? You’ve asked yourself who set up the deal. Did they need the cash? Did they get paid in oversized sweaters and button-down shirts? A free Lexus? What were the terms of the agreement? Are they even on Instagram? These “advertorials” – a portmanteau of “advertising” and “editorial” – invite artists to be featured in a brand’s editorial content, whether a video, blog, independent magazine, etc. These advertorials further the notion that it is the brand that facilitates creative production – Lexus as an essential ingredient of the artistic secret sauce.

An advanced version of the lifestyle advertorial is what could be called “snout-to-tail marketing,” wherein a specialized agency serves up a creative influencer who will both act as spokesperson in an advertisement, and also contribute artistically to the brand’s editorial platform. This contribution could take the form of creating a textile design for a home goods brand, for example. This marketing model can be seen in the activities of agencies such as the female-centered talent agency Pool Represents, or Imprint Projects.

The “brand as platform” marketing tactic relies on the artist’s belief in and willingness to be identified with the brand. In the wake of the “We Are Not Surprised” campaign,² Gucci recently produced, in partnership with Artsy, a video series on gender inequality in the arts entitled *Artists for Gender Equality*. The videos feature three generations of artists divided into sections past, present, and future: Lynn Hershman Leeson and Barbara Kruger, Miranda July and Marilyn Minter, and Petra Collins and Narcissister respectively. The question here is less whether these respected artists are compromising their integrity, morality, or authenticity in exchange for cash or personal gain, and more whether they are selling out their cause in exchange for a platform and access to the audience that Artsy and Gucci can provide. This raises the question of why these two organizations, particularly Gucci, are invested in gender inequality in the arts and not, say, in the fashion industry. They insert themselves into an

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existing cultural conversation and gain favor with a target audience they want to reach – if not as customers, then as ambassadors who will share this content on social media.

What is an artist to do? With an understanding of how our content, identities, and influence are valuable to and instrumentalized by brands and marketers, we can find space for resistance and refusal, or we can actively engage with existing models in an effort to ameliorate them. While it might seem like the only options are to ramp up your posting with accelerationist fervor, or delete your account, there are tactics to be learned from internet trolls, the alt-right, and institutional critique that can open space for effective critique and resistance. These tactics can include “shitposting,” the posting of unrelated material that ultimately derails conversations on forums and threads. Or you can make institutional critique in the age of social media more than a court jester by revealing the inner functioning of institutions and broadcasting this to broader audiences, rather than to an audience of those already perpetrating the crimes. Create subversive fan fiction that undermines the intention of a brand. If making work that includes a recognizable product or brand, realize that this work may be viewed and used as UGC. If the work is meant to function as critique, render the work unusable and directly offensive to the brand. Demand payment for digital labor instead of mere exposure, and threaten to sick your followers on brands that don’t comply. Monitor brands to determine if they are illegally using UGC in ad campaigns, including reposts without attribution. Brands that use UGC in paid advertisements should compensate users. Redirect funds from corporate media outlets to community-led platforms. Redirect funds to get your friends paid. Know that whatever you ask for as an artist is probably lower than the “going rate.” Currently, there are no industry standards dictating compensation for social-media content or influencer marketing. And while the amount you can ask for hinges on the size of your social-media following and broader cultural influence, you should be compensated for any content you post on behalf of a brand. While the brand can always go to someone else who doesn’t ask for payment and is satisfied with exposure alone, the more that cultural influencers outline specific terms of engagement, the closer we will get to a fair exchange. You can refuse to work with an agency that is clearly instrumentalizing your community, and you can self-represent instead. Realize that when you provide free digital labor – engaging and posting at will – you undermine anyone else trying to survive in that field. You can make the rules because there

aren’t any, and anyone who says otherwise is lying.

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See
https://cdn.businessoffashion.com/uploads/media/bof_album_image/0002/60/e7513ee22c293f687c14721e90790f8bb10c548e.jpeg.

2

See <http://www.not-surprised.org/home/>.

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