

Negotiating the sharing economy

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Online sharing has created new rules of exchange for artists who must find ways of converting followers who like their work into paying customers.



There is no doubt that for the arts economy the internet has been the big game changer. People are no longer forced to pay to access art, and artists are freer than ever before to share their work. The dynamic between artist and audience has changed forever.

Inevitably, artists and art associations are adapting to this new culture of sharing. Their aim is to ditch the gatekeepers and the industry standards based solely on profit. Instead they let the arts serve the community and be supported by it. In this way artists are enhancing the human aspect of sharing and receiving, all the while experimenting with new models with which make a living.

In a system where money is no longer at the centre of the equation, some other problems arise. For starters, how do you quantify the value of art, which is by its own nature imponderable and subjective? The second thing – often overlooked in the era of free downloads - is that art is made by people. And these people need to make a living. If the artist is in a panic over money, he certainly won't have the time and the willingness to make art.

That's why, even if this free access culture doesn't have an organized exchange system, it still has some general key concepts artists need to know.

Community support

Back in the day, it was pretty straightforward: you gave gifts to your tribe and did commerce with strangers. Today the boundaries are much less defined, and the community is a global community. These two circles still exist: the first comprising friend, family and neighbours; the second where the commerce happens. With the internet, however, a new class is arising: the followers. This last circle is precious for artists, because it gives them leverage.

Internet followers may have, in different capacities, free access to the art. On the other hand the artist will turn to them when looking for support. Crowdfunding platforms are a great example of this.

American musician Amanda Palmer is one of the fiercest promoters of this new approach to sharing. In doing so, she raised \$1.2 million via Kickstarter to support her new album and tour. She sees Kickstarter as a tool for doing giant pre-orders for content that needs to pre-exist: "Artists need to have credibility to get support and audiences. But it's not much different than in the old days, where you'd get out there, see what the demand was and head off to the plant and print what you needed."

In order to obtain that kind of credibility and support, artists must set aside some time to cultivate their following. They must maintain a social media presence and an ever-expanding mailing list. It basically means committing to a full-time relationship with their fans.

Trust and education

Though it may sound scary for an artist who has to pay rent at the end of the month, another important element in the culture of sharing is trust. By making your work freely available, you trust that those who find value in it will support it accordingly. This is not a given, though; especially considering that a quick and obligation-free access might mislead people to accord little value to what they are getting.

This concept holds particularly true for the new generation, born into the idea that art shouldn't be paid for and magically appears into the world. This is why educating the audience becomes necessary.

"There is not enough discussion about where the art is coming from, the artist who is making it and how he should support himself" notes Amanda Palmer.

Sense of belonging

Insightful cultural websites like Brain Pickings survive solely on donations from their readers. When asked why people pay for what they can get for free, Brain Pickings' founder Maria Popova replies that part of it is an emotional relationship with the site. "Readers experience a sense of belonging and take pride in being able to support something they enjoy. The question of altruism is probably the oldest debate in the history of philosophy – whether we do something because it makes us feel good, or because we want to genuinely and selflessly contribute to something." She thinks it's always a combination of the two.

The relationship between asking and giving

As internet guru Seth Godin explains in his book *Linchpin*, in order to sustain your artist career with this model, you have to carefully choose your recipient. Artists and art organisations must be aware where they are welcome and where they are not. For the sharing system to function, all sides have to contribute, both giving and getting.

One thing is for sure: you have to put yourself and your art out there in order to earn respect and attention, consequentially building an appreciative community. Even if the recipient is aware of his role in the sustenance of the artist, it's the artist's job to ask for help when needed.

Many artists might be resistant to crowdfunding their way into a new project, thinking that they should rely solely on the aforementioned second circle. According to the culture of sharing however, the internet followers and fan base are way more relevant than the occasional collector or investor.

Maria Popova confesses her enormous aversion to asking for money. "The whole notion of making a living based on other people's contributions is still very uncomfortable for me." At the same time, when she finally started highlighting recurring subscriptions, she got "heartening" results. "The newsletter subscribers are by far the most generous donors – perhaps something to do with email being such an intimate means of engagement."

Keep in mind - when asking for help, artists must take rejection, failure and indifference into account. They need to develop a thick skin and not let themselves be destroyed by it.

Case to case evaluation and letting go of expectations

Amanda Palmer believes that we all value different things and experiences in different ways. "Let adults make their own rules, their own exchanges, their own decisions." While this concept is certainly true, it might set people up for a fall if there are expectations involved. Every artist is in some capacity self-delusional, since they are embarking on an uncertain career.

Artists definitely shouldn't obliterate the emotional component of their personality. But when it comes to the business around their art and related opportunities, they should be practical and let go of expectations.

Find one's own balance

In many different circumstances, artists have found the balance between the joy of sharing and the necessity of making a living. Of course, their role in society and the system that sustained them has changed over time. The role of art today is turning back towards the community. Because of this, artists and art associations have the opportunity to tailor their business model to their personality and needs.

Inevitably the lack of a unitary model or a structural system will expose artists to moral dilemmas and critiques. Plus, it will force artists to be creative not just in their art, but also in the business side of their work. Artists will finally be in charge of their own careers. It will take resilience but there are good signs that this connection-enhancer and humanistic system will benefit the arts at large.