

**CRACKING THE ART MATRIX.
IS INSTAGRAM
A PERMISSIVE ENVIRONMENT
FOR SUBVERSIVE ART?**

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Abstract: Focusing on Instagram artists, intuitive creators developing artwork that is not subscribed to mainstream systems of art production, and their online artistic personas, this paper contributes to the understanding of how social networks shape a new form of artistness and whether this emerging language has the potential to sidestep institutionalised art as well as the consumerism logic of Instagram. Employing qualitative Instagram profile analysis and interviews, 2 Instagram users with subversive art practices are at the core of this study that aims to determine the tactics they are using in order to be identified as social media subversive art makers. Online persona studies are a developing ground and this paper represents, all the more so, a novel investigation into the performance of online artistic personas and its impact on the artistic production of meaning. This paper tries to ultimately understand whether Instagram represents a medium that can be efficiently used for its nature in order to spread complex critical ideas through artistic language.

Keywords: Instagram, online performance, subversive art, online persona, activism.

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Introduction

This paper views Instagram as a digital stage for democratic expression, functioning on basic protocols that formally shape the content created and offering a limited combination of predefined communication tools that can be grouped under: image, video, text, sound, interaction gears. Instagram can be seen as a regulated and dynamic public terrain, where social activity is constructed under a culture of spectatorship and performativity. In this digital environment, clusters of practice and interest are constantly developing, ranging from fun to politics, music to gaming, nature to health. Users expose their realities, opinions, political ethos, bodies, ideals, intimacy, in a performative manner. They create an online persona that gets performed and defined constantly in an unprecedented level to this date.

Instagram emerged as a visual platform that was encouraging its users to publish personal photos and – later on – videos, media that can be edited with filters and organized by hashtags and geographical tagging. Originally launched for iOS in October 2010, Instagram rapidly gained popularity, with one million registered users in two months, 10 million in a year, and 1 billion as of June 2018.

Instagram was originally distinguished by only allowing content to be framed in a square 1:1. The service subsequently added the ability to include multiple images and videos to a single post and a 'stories' feature allowing users to post photos and videos under a sequential feed lasting for 24 hours. Instagram 'stories' feature is used by half billion users daily and, together with its main competitor, Snapchat, generates an unprecedented archive of everyday life that changes the way people sense the private-public balance and their relation with performativity.

But just like any concept built on the logic of profit and consumerism, Instagram became a market. In 2021 it was one of the top digital platforms used by businesses-to-consumer companies, offering advertising options that help companies turn each invested dollar in five times its worth. The art market adhered to Instagram especially for its unique properties that allows visual content to become available to a relatively big ecosphere and, thus, capitalise similarly to other business fields. The online art market has increased substantially from the past five years (by 72% [McAndrew, 2018]), with more than 71% of art collectors having purchased some form of art online last year. Instagram has the highest engagement rates of all the social media platforms, 48% of art buyers using Instagram (Hiscox, 2017). Museums' communication (Capriotti, 2010) has been redefined too, the relationship between museums and the public is changing towards more interactive and collaborative forms. Social media is increasingly being used directly to present or plan art. Digital participation deepens and democratizes artistic exchange with audiences (Walmsley, 2016), it has changed the role of the audience, and blurred boundaries of concepts such as "professional" and "public". The art market adhered to Instagram especially for its unique properties that allow visual content to become available to a relatively big ecosphere and, thus, capitalise similarly to other business fields.

Yet, an ecosystem like Instagram allows and, actually, triggers formulas of creation that are situated outside the capitalisation design of this platform. Instagram can be converted into a critical space, through subversive artefacts, born out of its logic in order to curve its regulatory, unifying, fast-paced, exhibitionistic ethos.

This paper looks at two creators that make artwork that is conceived and delivered only on Instagram, has a strong component of political subversion of any kind, is not recognised by any art institution and does not seek methods to

ultimately be recognised. The relevance of these creators to the artworld comes from their ability to bypass institutionalised systems of art recognition and still gain momentum. Creators that generate artworks modelled especially on the frame allowed by Instagram are starting to emerge and they are not the ones that display their artistic portfolios out of the urge to gain opportunities and visibility, but the ones that use Instagram in a political-poetical manner.

A story that lasts for a few seconds in the middle of a rush of other stories, all fragments of our contemporary globalised lives, has the potential to disturb in the same way in which public art happening in a chaotic market has. It is important to know that Instagram, because it is a magnet for branding and marketing campaigns, is even more provocative for transgressive practitioners.

It is visible that Instagram is staying permeable to new usages that are going against it. This sort of public art doesn't get diluted on Instagram in the same way in which public art does, it does not get diluted when it happens in the physical public space. It remains there, de-institutionalised, addressed to an attentive audience, that follows it especially for its paradoxical nature: it stands out inside this enormous market where brands, identities and profit are trying to stand out. The artistry born on Instagram, for the Instagram audience, appears from versatile creators, that love to play with social norms and tackle the culture of instant rewards, by creating confusion, frustration, consistency and, thus, slow down the addictive rush maintained by Instagram.

Diego Hernandez steals images with posh villas from Instagram and populates them with his own artworks and then reposts the new "pimped" villas back on the metaverse, in *Instopia* (LUX Responsible Culture, 2015), a project started in 2015. *Frankfurter Hauptschule* does a takeover⁴ of Museums Quartier Instapage where they keep on announcing their own (fictional) expulsion from the museum. #freethenipple (Jacobs, 2019) is a movement that encroaches the censorship on Instagram when it comes to female nipples. These are a few examples of disruptive practices on Instagram, that are far from the practice of artists' making art to promote their image and work, but instead employ Instagram as an environment that can be criticised.

⁴ Instagram (8 April 2021) *We are deeply sorry about the recent incidences at Q21 involving members of @frankfurterhauptschule*, Q21 Instagram webpage, accessed 12 January 2022.

This paper studies the tools, language, ethos, audience engagement of some subversive creators in order to draw conclusions of an emerging system of contemporary art production that turns systems of power, authority and legitimacy – critics, museums, theatres, cultural organisations – irrelevant. Whether these institutions will follow or not is a matter of curatorial vision. There are signs that some are looking more and more at other forms of engagement with their audiences and the digital realities of their public. For example, the Brooklyn Museum, inspired by James Surowiecki's book *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2005), staged an exhibition titled 'Click!' (Hart, 2010), based on feedback from museum visitors and online voters that ranked entire artworks.

Theoretical framework

"Instagramism", a term coined by Lev Manovich (2016), is the aesthetic of the new global digital youth classes that emerged in the early 2010s. It defines the quality of images used on Instagram, that combine photography and design and express a particular attitude of the author, recognizable only on Instagram as, by now, Instagram claims its own language and ethos. Not any painting, not any photo, not any video, collage, live monologue, music performance are Instagramisms.

Cracking the Art Matrix is, alternatively to Manovich's study, looking at disruptive artwork that is not easily identifiable as having the qualities of Instagram visual trends and, in return, questions the status-quo of Instagram. Art experience on social media has had a major shift and understanding the ways in which artists can use Instagram, in order to critically engage with contemporaneity, is crucial. While there is a body of work studying Instagram interactivity and engagement, the language used by contemporary artists to create art for Instagram is still a new research area, limited works in this field had been published, especially for assessing visual artworks. I found only two academic works, the first one focusing on marginal artists and the way they aim to gain visibility on Instagram in order to compensate their absence from mainstream legitimate art institutions, and the other one looks at audience engagement of artists employing Instagram.

The first paper, 'Five dimensions of online persona' (Moore, Barbour and Lee, 2017), is written by one of the most conclusive and innovative researchers on this emerging topic, Kim Barbour, and establishes key methodologies and

concepts when designing her research, by looking at the online personas of eight Australian fringe practitioners with artistic expressions situated outside the establishment: tattoo, street art, spoken word and craftivism. "Drawing on sociological and cultural studies approaches to examine identity as performance, I reveal current artists' presentational practices using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis" states Barbour. Her research demonstrates that for those eight artists situated outside of the representative structures of art, the online persona draws on socio-cultural discourses of artistness in order to compensate their lack of support in managing their professional image.

The second study, 'Art in the Age of Social Media: Interaction Behaviour Analysis of Instagram Art Accounts' (Kang, Chen and Kang, 2019), published in 2019, used quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the interaction between artists and followers on Instagram and the features of the most-liked artworks. While engagement and preference are an important matter in the relation between artwork and audience, it is not a relevant indicator on the disruptive potential of art. Nevertheless, this recent study can give insight into the kind of interaction an artwork triggers into its audience and, thus, establish whether it can be seen as a vehicle for critical debate or not. One of the most gripping findings of this study is that not only that Instagram is the most preferred social media platform (91%) and the most used social media for art-related purposes (94%), but that the main motivations of using social media are to share artworks, selling artworks and know more artists.

Making art that does not primarily wish to sell or capitalise in one way or another, can be seen as an outlier within the global community of Instagram artists and this practice is harder to dissect and understand. Studying the dimension and the impact of subversive artists on Instagram needs a wide quantitative research, while this paper aims to find the ethos and tactics of some of those who present this kind of art, aiming to support future research on subversive potential of social media as well as the practice of those creators and curators seeking to produce or to find inspiration in their fellow artists. I will present 2 Instagram accounts holding three different mediums of expression – collage and situationist photography and analyse the specificities and discourse of each of them.

Pleasure activism and feminism from an Outside artist in Ireland

@bleach.temple⁵ is the personal account of an Instagram user not identifying herself necessarily and primarily as artist, that produces content based on contextual daily encounters or situations. She uses these daily events as set-ups for unusual, mind provoking photos that, frequently, have her at the centre, performing an action. She transformed her first shot of anti-Covid vaccine in a fashion shooting in which she designed, created and wore a dress made entirely of Covid face masks⁶. She modelled on the beach, out of sand, three glasses turned upside down, mimicking a famous trick named – in Romanian language – ‘alba-neagra’, and photographed herself as if performing the trick while realistically impossible to remove these sand glasses, a necessary and constant move in the trick⁷. She immersed herself in a bath tub, filled with seemingly hot water and boiled corn (Figure 1), wearing a bra made out of corn leaves and posing erotically and sensually holding two phallic-like corns in her hands⁸. These are only a few examples of @bleach.temple’s Instagram content, a demarche that has a critical take at nationalism, misogyny, nostalgia and consumerism. Intuitively, as I found out during our interview, @bleach.temple combines recognisable symbols of Romanian popular culture with capitalistic symbols and objects or with paradoxical ones. A big part of her Instagram persona is advocating for female sexual pleasure and for achieving this she places pleasure objects in common locations, mostly around domestic space⁹, uses them as festive symbols of celebration¹⁰ (Figure 2) or everyday objects with non-pleasure function.

This amalgam of visual streams can only be understood in the political context of its presence and of the community of followers that they are addressed to. As Instagram seems infinite and bubbles can completely not intersect with each other, any account should be understood inside the frame of its communication. @bleach.temple is communicating her discourse – pleasure activism, anti-

⁵ Instagram (2022) @bleach.temple, bleach.temple Instagram page, accessed on 14 January 2022.

⁶ Instagram (7 June 2021) PostModerna, bleach.temple Instagram page, accessed on 14 January 2022.

⁷ Instagram (12 June 2021) Asta are/ Asta n-are/ Care e câştigătoare/ #shellgame, bleach.temple Instagram page, accessed on 14 January 2022.

⁸ Instagram (4 July 2021) CornHub Live , bleach.temple Instagram page, accessed on 14 January 2022.

⁹ Instagram (20 June 2021) Greens to fill the void, bleach.temple Instagram page, accessed on 14 January 2022.

¹⁰ Instagram (19 April 2020) Adevarat am inviat, bleach.temple Instagram page, accessed on 14 January 2022.

capitalism, ironical take on national symbols and gender stereotypes, feminism – to a cohort that understands the references contained in the posts. Still, the content is not aligned to the stream of information her followers normally see in their daily Instagram feeds, this is why it stands out and gathers, as she told me in the interview, reactions that lead to conversations about the topics she posts-to-shock.



Figure 1 @bleach.temple Instagram post with corn inside the bathtub

The subversive nature and tactics of this account has some key features and can be identified, not limitative, as: ironical and self-ironical takes on serious symbols, be them national, religious, sexual in order to dilute their importance and unidimensional significances, unusual placement of everyday consumerist objects – pizza boxes, shoe boxes, wraps, brands, food – in paradoxical locations where they don't normally belong or would be encountered (such as a Prada bag in a pig farm) and manage to attract more attention on their absurd and limited relevance and utility or unusual placements of pleasure objects in very common spaces, hard to be spotted at first glance.



Figure 2 @bleach.temple Easter post, captioned "I came to life", paraphrasing the usual saying around Easter dinner in Romania

A collection of human unspoken feelings

@geloyconcepcion is the account of a Filipino photographer that has emigrated in the United States, in California more precisely, and on the day he wanted to quit photography, sometime in November 2019, and pursue another, better paid, path, he made – what was in his mind back then – a last attempt. He posted an Instagram call where he wrote an invitation for his followers to send him notes with “things they wanted to say but never did”. After receiving 30 notes, he started a collage using his archive of photos, in which he meticulously erased the face of the person photographed and handwrote the *notes* he has received. In two years, the number of notes he received jumped from 30 to 800 per week. Started in a moment of abandonment and resignation, the nature of the messages remained in this dark note. Remarks about loneliness, addiction, depression, longing, failures are posted weekly on the account in a collage that has the aesthetic nature of a fragile composition in which the intimate, private, socially

condemnable yet very humane thoughts are surrounded by images of an America and of Americans that are anonymous and mundane.



Figure 3 @geloconcepcion, "Things you wanted to say but never did"

His system of collecting notes from his followers consists in a Google Form where anyone can send their secret thought and Geloy, after analysing them carefully, selects 8-10 notes and creates the images where he will insert them, as handwritten text. In our interview he reflected on the striking emotional depth and troubling nature of these anonymous testimonials, as well as on his responsibility regarding the impact of his posts on the Instagram community. Knowing that his content has the potential to both shock and represent a relatable thought, he tries to balance the human nature, the human complicated psychology and existence, and constantly evaluates this impact through the comments and personal messages he receives. His empathic nature may come into conflict with the thought that he cannot intervene in the way people sending him notes may feel, even when these feelings are overwhelming. He doesn't contact them, comfort them nor step inside their lives, be it with a message or a contact for helplines.

His posts started from receiving around 1000 likes to more than 100.000 likes in less than 2 years, making publishing houses interested to edit a photo book with his collection of posts. Geloy refused this tempting proposal, since, as he

puts it, these thoughts are not his and he cannot capitalize from them. His page is entirely outsourced and, recently, he asked for people to contribute with images as he finished his own photo stock. With this step, even more, Gelay capitulated his artistic content and embarked into a community process where he is just curating and giving shape to people's intimate feelings and thoughts.

What makes @gelayconcepcion a subversive account is the depth and private nature of its content, that contrasts with most of Instagram direction of representations of happiness, success, vivacity, shine and glam. The aesthetics of this account is bleak, melancholic and powerfully disturbing. It can affect those watching it, but as he states, "people have the freedom to unfollow me". This account is not only a reflection on mental health and its pervasiveness in our everyday lives, but an articulation of the things us, as humans, refuse to speak out or, even, accept. The effect of his effort is self-reflective and uncomfortable, some of the content can hit home for any Instagram user and disrupt the flow of everyday when confronted with things we, often and even more on social media, try to hide from the world. Publishing an Instagram carousel¹¹ with this kind of testimonials that slide one after another can represent a heavy impact on his followers' sensitivity: "Please don't replace me", "I don't know exactly what I want, but I know for sure that this is not it", "I ruined a lot of things because of my own insecurities", "I'm afraid I've only defined myself based on others' perceptions of me", "Everyone seems to be moving forward but me", "The idea of not growing up to be the person I've created in my head is absolutely horrifying", "Maybe I'm missing what could have been rather than what actually really happened", "I've had body image issues since I was 12. Now, 14 years later I still don't like how I look. I wish I could learn to love the body that gives me life.", "I'm 57 and I live alone. I just realized that whenever I get home from work, I never really get to open my mouth and speak because I don't have anyone to talk to. And to be completely honest, it makes me sad.", "I'm tired, is this fine? Everyone always needs me, but there's no one who can understand me. But I have to understand everyone. Is this fair?"¹².

¹¹ Sehl K., Tien S. (June 4, 2021)' 'How to Create Beautiful Instagram Carousel Posts` defines carousel as posts that allow you to include more than one image or video so you can tell a deeper story or showcase more of your products', *Hootsuite*, accessed on 14 January 2022.

¹² Instagram (8 January 2022) "Things you wanted to say but never did.", gelayconcepcion Instagram page, accessed on 14 January 2022.



Figure 3: @gelayconcepcion, 'I love being a mom but I sometimes miss my old self'

Is Instagram a permissive environment for subversive art?

Looking at these two examples, part of many Instagram art practices, and the tactics and language they use, it is noticeable that it is not difficult to start conceptualising art that aims to disrupt the everyday flow of images, ads and stories that runs in our eyes on social media. Their language is not the language we are used to in museum and galleries, they use the environment they are posted to and are adapted to it in order to fit, but at the same time have a twist that is not instant and fast burner. Instagram is not censoring this art as any subversive art adapts its content so that it doesn't get easily spotted and condemned by the status quo.

Since Instagram seems not to be threatened by this kind of content and has a thriving activity, one questions lies: can these acts of disruption shift some of the Instagram discourse regarding the topics they tackle? Is censorship still an indicator of a threat towards the status quo? Is Instagram an authority when it comes to being challenged or is it a more permissive medium that allows improvement and, even, strong criticism? And eventually, does Instagram fully regulate or does its communities represent the main norm when it comes to what

is and what is not acceptable? Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, 69% of people reported that their Instagram use increased the most compared to other platforms (Gothivarekar, 2020). Some research has examined links between social media use and mental health, especially among young adults and adolescents. Overall, the findings have been mixed, as some studies have found weak or no associations between time spent on social media and multiple health indicators, including depressive symptoms. Other studies have found negative associations between social media use and mental health measures, such that increased social media use was correlated more strongly with depressive symptoms and poor self-esteem, particularly among adolescent girls (Kelly et al., 2018) and young women (Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019). If we presume Instagram negatively impacts the lives of its users, could it be urgent for artists to reverse this trend and post content that offers an alternative to the performative representations of happiness and success Instagram is nurturing its users?

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