

# essay Rules of the GAME

As legacy institutions scramble to signal that they're hip to the changing times, the art world's signature ruse – pretending to be immune to the very market that bankrolls it – grows more ridiculous by the moment. Cutting straight to its molten core, market analyst Magnus Resch might be guilty of cynicism. Or maybe he's just being honest? In the era of the social network's totalising grip, Resch distils its data into a formula for art-stardom.

By  
Victoria Campbell

If there are two kinds of people in the world, those who like art and those who like artists, Magnus Resch “likes artists he can call”. I learn this about the art market analyst after meeting with him to talk about his career, and by extension, everyone else's: “I like to be able to call the artist up and ask them what's going on when I'm looking at something. Like why is that shaped like a door?” Magnus tells me that, during lockdown, he probably bought around twenty works of art, much of it directly off Instagram. It turns out we each purchased pieces through “Pictures for Elmhurst”, a hospital benefit. This isn't the only thing we have in common: we only got to the Holy Land (what Magnus unironically calls the New York City art world) because we happened to party at the right art schools. We've each failed a start-up (maybe twice if we liked it) and we're both alive at the same time. When I say the name “Oto Gillen”, the Düsseldorf-born data-lord makes a note of the epic photographer immediately. We call this networking.

## How to be a Successful Artist – A Guide

At first glance, Resch's research – in the form of whitepapers, industry reports, trade non-fiction – warrants no more critical concern than anything else that would keep the garden variety arts professional lying awake at night. If it did, he'd be a proper intellectual. This man is, by contrast, a figure of what sociologist Alvin Gouldner would classify as *intelligentsia pura*. Magnus is cool and sleek like cultural commerce, the kind of guy who could translate anything regardless of what's been effaced. He is eager to talk about his latest book, *How to Become a Successful Artist* (2021). In it, he breaks down the 63.4-billion-dollar art economy into the smooth severabilities of the contemporary art racket: pie charts, infographics, case studies, contracts. The book targets the emerging artist crowd and asks those burning questions that no graduate department will: How do I secure gallery representation? How do I compose an artist statement? How should I price my artworks? What's the best Instagram strategy? Capital, power, labour: it's all here, and accessible like never before.

## Quantifying Success and Reputation in Art

The thirtysomething, socialised healthcare hot, and founder of *Magnus* (the *Shazam* of the art world that picks out work titles and prices if you upload a photo in the app) is pure contemporary. He's secularised American Art English with an Instagram feed. Here exists the socioeconomic axis between NASA and Berkeley, Moscow and Shanghai, Chelsea and Silicon Valley: “a technical intelligentsia whose interests are fundamentally technical; and

intellectuals whose interests are critical, hermeneutic, emancipatory, and often practical-political,” Gouldner writes in his “Prologue to a Theory of Revolutionary Intellectuals” (1975). We can imagine that anyone with a ninety-nine thousand follower count and whose Yale faculty page mentions the term “serial entrepreneur”, not once but twice, is a serious contender in the industry-wide civil war that’s come to be known as “the intersection between art and tech”. We’re not in grad school anymore, Dorothy.

Published by Phaidon, Resch’s book draws on the findings of a research study he leads into the social relations that drive participation and reward in an area that economists have long since written off as a “black box” economy: the art market. Resch’s “Quantifying Success and Reputation in Art” was a landmark in network science. It was also something of a coup. The 2018 whitepaper, published in *Science*, makes the claim that art has nothing to do with history, just as value has nothing to do with money. Success in art isn’t even about aesthetics. Art, the paper argues, is but a network effect. Maybe it’s patriarchy, maybe it’s privilege: the paper demonstrates that the value of a work of art is determined entirely by its context, and because art has no use-value, its value is quantifiable only in terms of the market-institutional feedback loops between a small group of major institutions and the slightly less-small pool of artists they trade on. Surplus value, like privilege, is apparently a prerequisite: “Recognition”, the paper claims, is “external from the work itself.”

Resch’s team datamined half a million artists’ career trajectories in order to predict the art world’s survivors and successors, proving once and for all that there are no “good” artists. There are just successful ones. This concept is introduced with a brief case study on *The Man with the Golden Helmet*, an 18th-century painting thought to be a Rembrandt until the mid-1980s: “Once evidence emerged, in the 1980s, that the painting was not by Rembrandt, it lost much of its artistic and economic value, even though the artwork itself had not changed.”

Which I think is to say that he is right: “The market doesn’t decide. The institutions don’t decide”, he tells me. “The network decides.” Resch is real money, the kind of guy I can tell really wants to hold on to his career. He wants to know about me as soon as we sit down. This, before I can even ask him a smart question about his research practice. *He wants to know what my art looks like.* The question is so direct, so unprecedented in its generosity, that it at first strikes me as inappropriate. *Or does he just have great eye contact?*

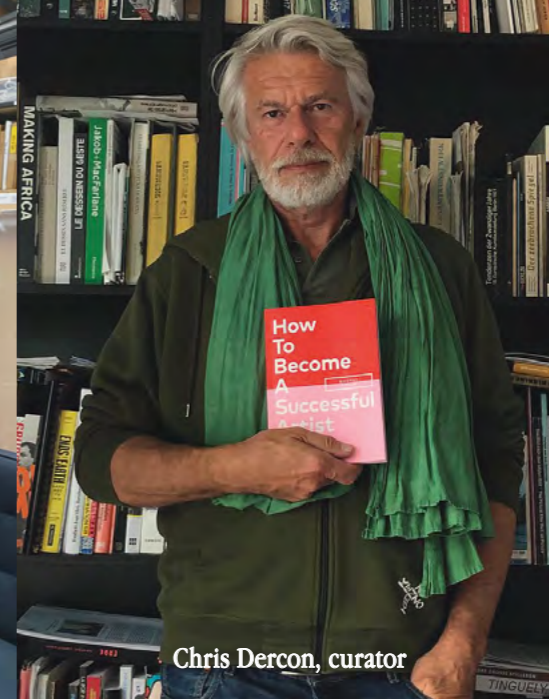
# Making Art Work

Magnus’s definition of a successful artist is this: “A successful artist earns the approval of their reference group while maximising financial profit on the basis of ethical business practices.” At Spring Place – the luxury, bi-coastal co-working enterprise that he has agreed to meet me at, after he sent me a PDF of his book and I agreed to read it – I could not be more conscious of the fact that my body is a liability. The pulse of *female added value* is something between a heartbeat and a hangover. In a post-Covid, post-#MeToo art world, I cannot imagine that meeting a young woman in person is an easy decision to make, especially when the woman in question happens to be a journalist. Magnus’s definition of a successful artist is thorough, wholesome: it sympathetically portrays a successful artist as one who not only makes art, but makes art *work* in the context of a public presence. Yet the private circumscribes the public as its limit.

If networking is passing a business card, then “artworking” is passing a sexually transmitted disease: you have it for life, and it matters who you got it from. (A friend of mine, a dealer, divulges that couples who cultivate art collections rarely divorce.) Should one wish to interrupt these peacocking displays for any reason, including opportunity, *How to Become a Successful Artist* advises hitting up Stefan Simchowitz via Instagram. I have heard rumours that, much like the actual Satan, the so-called “patron Satan” of the art world will respond to DMs should you repeat his name three times backwards and demonstrate some visual *potential*. Obviously, this is not recommended, and you will lose followers if not friends: Sim is a “poacher”, an “outsider”, he’s “Hollywood.” Yet one could argue that his unconventional strategies – like selling work directly out of a studio, “accelerating” younger artists, is the studio art equivalent of a tech incubator, selling with the intent to flip, etc. – disrupt the initiation rites that validate one buyer, or one kind of buying, over another.



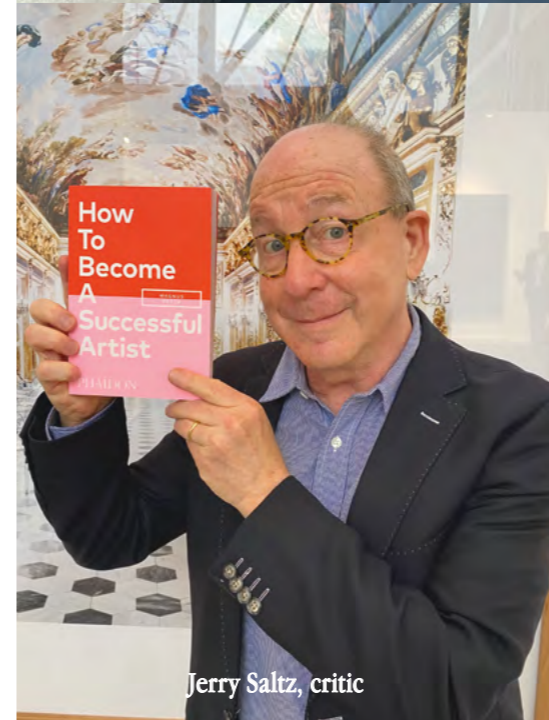
Andrew Kreps, gallerist



Chris Dercon, curator



Zhang Huan, artist



Jerry Saltz, critic



Lisa Schiff, art advisor



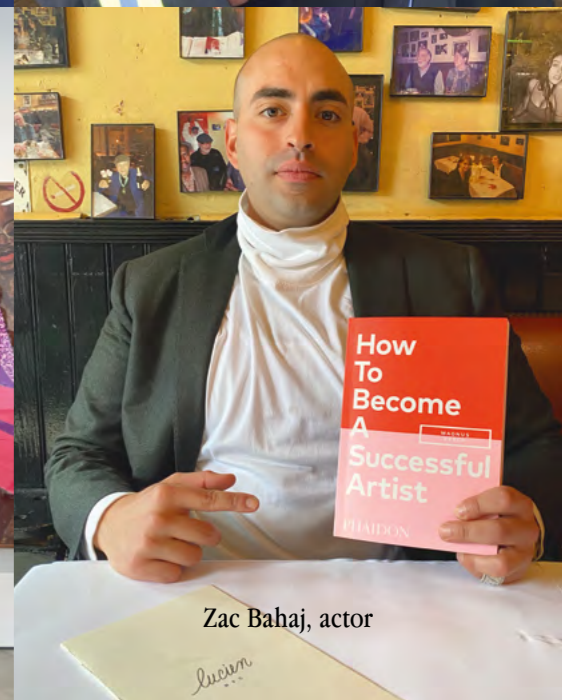
Lucien Smith, artist



Peter Halley, artist



Stefan Simchowitz, dealer



Zac Bahaj, actor

# The Art Market

there is a limited number of buyers. Everybody is trying to figure out how to make art easier to collect, but there's never been a time in history when art has been easier to buy and sell."

On the internet anything is still possible. It occurs to me that if I can give Magnus credit for one thing, it's agreeing to meet me in person for an interview. Any straight man who would like to keep his career does not meet a young female art worker in person to discuss anything that hasn't already been covered by *Hyperallergic*. So, what if Resch has "class enemy" baked into his nearly one-hundred-thousand-follower Instagram presence? Clearly, he has balls.

To argue that a successful artist cannot be female because to do so would be to assume that the playing field is level; that a "universal equivalent" exists, is courageous, to say the least. The conclusion is to essentially propose that sexual difference does not itself imply a different relationship to value. "Advertising, fashion, nightclubs, cafes, even the ground floor of the sad edifice of 'immaterial labour' whose bars and sidewalks are crawling with whores, all operate as female added value. Having become inevitably overconscious of their price, women have become the living currency with which people buy men." (Tiqqun, *Sonogram of a Potential*, 2001/11)

But is this really going to do more damage than the supply-side, winner-take-all model that continues to operate, to the desperation of anyone who isn't in the top-percentile (and even they complain), as if it's the 1920s? The art market is subject to fewer regulations than Wall Street; perhaps this, paradoxically, explains our economic and (unstated) social conservatism. Maybe the very presence of antagonists like Simchowitz and Resch suggest that the old structures of male authority are breaking down – hooray! Will new men, replace the old men? By new men I mean non-gender specific men: will we ever come around to democratising the "S"ubject? Or will we be left in some post-Babylonian state, liberated from historical protagonists, and with it, the anchorage of value? In French philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux's words, "The phallus is the universal equivalent of subjects; just as gold is the universal equivalent of products." Whatever is happening and whatever the pronouns, it appears that efforts preserve the valuation of the market as a whole (and thus, the success of a few) using the economic equivalent of gastric banding; this is at odds with the art world's stated, progressive political agenda: "The art market is undemocratic not because there's not enough space on the wall", Magnus argues, alluding to the infinite wall space of the virtual exhibition room, "but because



## Shopping Around

My art looks bad on Instagram. It happens to look good on invoices. *What do women and art have in common?* Both are status symbols: a reminder of how cool it is to work in this industry. “Don’t worry”, Magnus reassures me, “Most artists get it wrong, they treat Instagram like an exhibition catalogue or something. I don’t care about that. I want to see the process, where it comes from. I want to be close to you.”

Magnus isn’t flirting with me. Rather, he’s roleplaying the direct-to-consumer dynamic he espouses in *How to Become*. His cell phone is the size of a Holy Bible and virtually indistinct from his gestures. The reel of content unfolds beneath his fingertips, impervious to the glare of the sun. His lack of institutional candour makes me nervous. I start to wonder if it isn’t worth taking Instagram as seriously as easel painting. The portable surface was an art historical revolution. It’s arguably as important as one-point perspective.

“Why isn’t anybody posting on social media the prices?!” Resch is so bewildered by this that I’m almost tempted to take the question seriously. I can’t think of anything more inappropriate than listing the price of an artwork on social media,

except for maybe listing my phone number. But then again, I’m an amateur. If the markets are failing, why shouldn’t we? It occurs to me that none of the sex I’ve had in the art world has been particularly regrettable. This could be due to the fact that I assign it no more meaning than a work of art: valuable, but not inherently meaningful. Or vice-versa. For whatever reason, I feel it necessary to demonstrate some propriety, here in the form of lip service to the Holy Land, in front of this nice professional man. Taste, ritual, the role of the dealer in placing an artist’s work, the special care that legacy demands. I pretend that I have no taste for disruption.

“[Leo] Castelli is dead”, Resch proclaims. “Paying rent, having a permanent space, that’s a thing of the past.” He’s right. Mary Boone is still a ward of the state. None of this has been functioning properly since the 70s. What do we need an institution for, anyway? Cohesion? Coordination? Demands for institutional accountability seem to just point to something Dad-like and protective. In the absence of power, a benevolent dictator should just do. As far as Resch is concerned, the only thing a gallery should do is filter. Like a platform.

“Good taste doesn’t sell”, Resch says. “And it really doesn’t scale. Nobody can tell me a single reason not to put up the prices. Why? Because we’ve always done it like that? Because nobody else is doing it?” At this point, the conversation does turn to sex. I can’t help it. “But this is ART,” I go off, “Money MEANS something here, for chrissake! You’d never be able to say this to a woman...”

“No, women can sell art just the same way”, he insists. “Whenever I see a work of art on Instagram, I want to know, where is the price tag?” “A woman would never put a price tag on herself”, I couldn’t help but disclose, careful to add: “... that you could see.” What’s interesting about Magnus as a person is that he goes there, and it’s hard to believe he’s oblivious: in one section of his book, he doesn’t hesitate to compare “shopping for representation” – what he calls “access” to high-prestige institutions improved by an intensive early ‘shopping around’ – to dating. “There are a million potential partners around, but only a handful are a good fit.”

## Network Effects

“The fact that intellectuals attach themselves to various parts of the political spectrum reinforces the view that they are a social stratum shopping for an historical agent”, Gouldner writes, “and thus not irrevocably committed only to one class alliance.” Given that women are behaviourally conditioned to “shop around” for partnership within the same timeframe as they have to “shop for representation” – from around the time an artist graduates to her mid-thirties, before her chances of dropping out increases – it’s understandable that many of us will fold, fuck up our professional image, or find ourselves in uncomfortable positions in the art world’s largely nightlife-driven culture. We will wonder why male friendships, however casual, however short lived, acquire the aura of historical agency. How relationships between men seamlessly evolve into professional opportunity with little effort; even, and especially when, there might be a significant age or status difference between the parties involved. We will have to decide whether or not we want children as the professional pressure increases. This is only one of the barriers to entry into the art world that biological difference presents: a world that would not exist were it not for those barriers, unless it were to exist, indistinguishable, from the larger culture industry that surrounds it.

By demonstrating that the composition of the art world, in all its hegemonic glory, is entirely due to network effects, not only does Magnus prove that there’s no one on top (and therefore, no one to blame); it places power solely in the hands of those who subscribe to it. And follow it. And repost it. But does one really need the meta-discourse of macroeconomics to understand what Alan Kaprow meant in 1966, when he predicted “Art’ may soon become a meaningless word.” In its place, communications programmin would be a more imaginative label, attesting to our new jargon, our technological and managerial fantasies, and to our pervasive electronic contact with one another.” The art world might be a meaningless

place, and Magnus won’t be losing any sleep over it. Magnus doesn’t believe a work of art contains any intrinsic value or any implicit history. It only contains the rules that will govern its legibility. The economist’s wager seems to be this: you can choose the game but you cannot choose the rules. When he discovers that I don’t have a CV listed on my website, I worry I’ve scandalised him.

Art may be meaningless, but if so, let it be meaningless that art is meaningless. This is the opposite of nihilism. It is also anathema to what Jerry Saltz bemoaned following the social austerity policies in play post-Covid: “I wonder how the regular dick-waving rituals of establishing hierarchy and financial clout will be performed if they aren’t performed in public.” There’s something Machiavellian in *How to Become A Successful Artist*, and I don’t mean it in a vulgar sense, i.e., that it’s predisposed to moral relativism. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* (1532) for a mercantile class with whom political agency potentially lay, not for the Medici to whom the book is addressed. It’s in this sense that we can excuse *How to Become* for being neither a manifesto nor a book of manners. The self-help book addressed to the dictator as a means to speak to the demagogue falls within the literary genre referred to as “mirrors for princes”. Books like this only serve to “give the game away” – to popularise what would otherwise be insider knowledge in order to give rise to the “new” from the principles, rather than the practices, of the old. For Machiavelli’s Prince to rule he had to first invent it by bypassing the feudal states and commanding the people. Likewise, one might find it necessary to undermine the existing institutional establishment – fragmented, in crisis, and internally divided – in order to “*andare dritto alla verità effettuale della cosa*” (to go directly to the truth of the matter). If *How to Become A Successful Artist* were written for artists, the “artist” in question would be a bad one. The question that remains is whom it was written for, and who they will become as a term of their ascension.

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