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Democratisation of the art market: the Artist Support Pledge as a tool for change

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Novel and newsworthy, the Artist Support Pledge (ASP) began as a small grassroots movement with benevolence at its heart, and has expanded rapidly following a much-deserved tsunami of support. In the wake of the pandemic, galleries, exhibitions and auction houses around the world began to close, and the art market began to stagnate. MBE artist Matthew Burrows met this disaster with determination, and with a single idea inadvertently established an entirely new micro-economy within the greater art market.



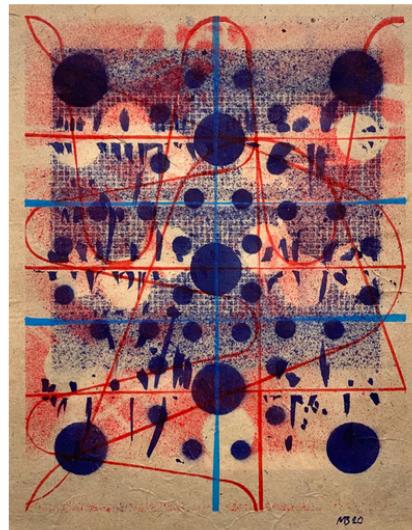
Burrows' vision was simple: "you give generously, you receive gratefully and you give back. That's it." He encouraged artists to sell their art on Instagram, pricing works at no more than £200/\$200/€200 each, with the promise that for every £1000 earned through the sale of those works, the artist would purchase another artwork for £200. From humble beginnings, the ASP is now an established non-profit that has generated an estimated £48million in sales since the pandemic began.



Artist Support Pledge founder Matthew Burrows painting 'Sleepscape', 2019, oil on linen, 182 x 242 cm

It is primarily a commercial enterprise, yet fundamentally benevolent, democratic, and egalitarian - anyone can sell, anyone can buy, all can benefit. The initiative's economic structure operates on a horizontal plane, unlike most vertical economies that proliferate in neoliberal society, the art market included. With the highest price point for artworks fixed at £200, there is no monopoly at the top of the pyramid, the playing field is leveled. As a significant change of pace, a recent art-school graduate can enjoy the same opportunities to support themselves through sales of their work as a Royal Academician would. The topdog and the underdog benefit in equal measure.

Understandably, the initiative was adopted with speed and vigour. With transformative effects on the perception of the artworld - commonly regarded as elitist and impenetrable - the ASP immediately began to stimulate a market that had more or less ground to a halt. In the words of the eminent art dealer David Zwirner, "The art world felt frozen". The affordability of artworks has greatly increased both the perceived and real accessibility of the art market, leading to a wave of new collectors and first-time buyers.



Matthew Burrows 'Gatescape 41', 2020, acrylic on handmade paper, 26 x 21.5 cm

One major consequence of the pandemic has been the acceleration of an already rapid digitisation across all industries, the art world among them. Existing entirely through a single social media platform,

the ASP unavoidably calls into question the role of traditional pillars of the art market, institutions such as galleries and auction houses. Unconstrained by bureaucracy or geography, Instagram provides distinct advantages over these age-old establishments; Immediate interpersonal connection between artist and client, uninhibited international reach, and greater creative freedom.

Generally, galleries avoid displaying artworks priced as low as £200, as their profit margins disappear completely. Additionally, smaller galleries tend to cater to regional rather than international clientele. I recently spoke to artists Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva and Lizbeth Holstein about their experiences of selling artworks through the ASP. They both reported an increase in international sales as a direct result of engagement with the initiative. Previously, Holstein had predominantly sold works to UK buyers, but after she began selling works through the ASP in May of last year, she quickly began selling works to new clients in the US.



(LEFT) Lizbeth Holstein's portrait of Sophia - the first painting that introduced me to the Artist Support Pledge! - (RIGHT) Elpida

Hadzi-Vasileva 'Golden Jaw', rabbit jaw bones and gold leaf, 2012, 20 x 20 x 5cm

Artist Johanna Melvin also experienced significantly greater exposure thanks to the ASP. Discovering it only six weeks ago, her Instagram following has already nearly doubled. In an interview she described the project as "a game-changer" for both selling and buying work. Exemplifying the project's culture of generosity, she has already bought over twenty artworks by other ASP artists. She described to me the experience for ASP artists as being like kids in a sweet shop buying far more than you should, but with absolutely no qualms.

Artists supporting each other in this way by directing a portion of their profits back into the art market is a brilliant mechanism for fostering a benevolent environment, as well as encouraging a consistent cash flow that provides crucial financial aid to struggling artists. It helps them buy materials, pay the rent in between commissions, find time for more ambitious undertakings. Holstein described it as “liberating, you don't have to think on a commercial level, you just create to create”, knowing you will be supported and your work will find an audience.



Johanna Melvin 'Untitled 4', 2020, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 40 cm

Does democracy come at a price? There seems to be a worry among artists that the ASP's success might also be its downfall. As the pool of artists discovering the project grows, the exposure of individual artists is minimised. One artist described the movement as “over-saturated”. Having sold works rapidly when the ASP first began, they have noticed a progressive decrease in sales as more artworks are introduced to the market.

However, as an obstinate optimist I'm inclined to doubt the ASP's Achilles' heel. Presumably, as long as new buyers and collectors discover the ASP at a similar rate, its longevity and efficacy shouldn't be compromised. In either case, the extensive adoption of the ASP globally illustrates its profound success. It is a testament to the ability of artists to respond to society and initiate positive change. Matthew Burrows said it best, “Our artistic values must implicitly embed our environmental ideals. It is not enough to speak of change, art must furnish and colour our imaginations with the means to make change possible.”

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