

David Zwirner

JiaJia Fei: I'm JiaJia Fei. I'm a digital strategist for the art world.

Christian Luiten: I'm Christian Luiten from the Netherlands, and I've an art platform online on Instagram, and I work with artists on doing collaborations. I'm an online influencer.

Lucas Zwirner: From David Zwirner, this is *Dialogues*, a podcast about artists and the way they think.

This episode's pairing: Christian Luiten and JiaJia Fei. This episode of the podcast is a little bit more unconventional because we brought Christian and JiaJia together to talk about an artist, Yayoi Kusama, who has an incredible online audience and whose audience is really affecting how people experience her art.

Christian and JiaJia, thank you so much for being here today and part in this broad ranging conversation, hopefully about Instagram and art, and the way people are making things.

CL: Yeah, it's a pleasure being here.

JF: Thanks for having us.

CL: I thought that maybe we start... You mentioned in passing, in the introduction before we were recording, that you guys had met before in a kind of Instagram slash...

JF: In Moscow of all places.

CL: Yeah. It was a show of Takashi Murakami at the Garage Museum, two years ago?

JF: Yeah, and I think it's a very perfect example of how the real world and the online world clash in this digital economy, wherein, you know, two people from various parts of the world get flown into Moscow to take pictures of an exhibition.

CL: The exhibition itself was really focused on the art, but everything around there was focused on Instagram. So if you go to the bathroom, no, the restroom, there were all kind of mirrors with Murakami artworks—but not like the original artwork for in the show, but like a mirror, where you take a photo and post it on Instagram.

JF: Yeah. And he's the master of an immersive experience, where everything, all of his merchandise is at the shop. And every single interaction with him was like some type of moment to photograph or take videos of.

CL: And I think when the Garage Museum did a show of Murakami, they wanted to go all in, and that's why they flew us in.

LZ: And how... but how do you feel when you come to a show and it feels like it's being gamified, for instance, meaning there's a mirror room. There are things that might not have to do with the art, but you know immediately what you're supposed to do as someone who's engaging with the medium. I mean, is that a turnoff?

JF: I think as people who work in the art world, we're... we have the benefit of knowing what's what. But I think the modern museum experience—and I use the word "museum" lightly because, as you know, there are other museums that have popped up that are not museums—the experience of going to a museum now is more about the performance of going to a museum, no longer really thinking about the purpose of how museums were originally established as educational institutions, where you go to learn about objects and people and civilizations. Now it's purely to get this one deliverable, which is getting the photograph, and that kind of spurs this entire engagement around going somewhere to perform this life that people think that you have.

CL: Yeah, I think it's really like... if it's in the museum, it's... if it's in the exhibition itself, it's definitely a turnoff. I think especially for the art lovers and the people who are really into art. But I think it's also like... I think with the Murakami exhibition, it was like the show was really focused on his artwork, and didn't really focus on Instagram. But everything around there was focused on Instagram. And then I think it's also, it's a smart way to promote your exhibitions. And I think when people go for the mirror bathroom selfie, they're going to see the show, and they're going to learn about Murakami as an artist. They're going to read about his background and stuff.

LZ: That's kind of what I wanted to ask. You know, the way you said it sounds sort of so pessimistic, JiaJia, you know that, or I read it that way. I'm sort of inherently, I guess, optimistic in the sense that, you know, I think the medium can be as eyebrow or as useful or as interesting as people make it out to be. And so I'm just curious about if you really feel that pessimistic, or if in fact that's just one side of what you see, you know, Instagram doing? And of course, now you work at... You have worked at museums, now at the Jewish Museum, previously the Guggenheim, to do this kind of work.

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JF: Yeah, and I've always felt conflicted. I'm someone who sits on both sides of the table, right? So I am someone who is thinking about how to translate our content and the mission of our institutions into a digital space, but then someone who's actively participating and personally sharing. And I think there's yet... there's the opportunity of this optimism that comes with the goal of reaching an unlimited audience online. That's kind of what everyone's been talking about when they think about accessibility and the internet, but then you have very limited tools. So it becomes this very reductive experience of just the image, just the whatever you're posting.

But then the, you know, phenomenon of these non-museums, like the Museum of Ice Cream, which is opening a permanent space in New York City, co-opting that language and all of the surface values that surround the experience of going to a museum and conflating that as the same thing. And I think the audience doesn't know any better. And it's our job as museums, as people who work in the space, to clarify. But it's definitely a machine that has become far beyond our control.

LZ: In your case, Christian, it feels like your art education began alongside your digital. You're of course, very young. And I feel like it's an interesting example because you've become really deeply involved in certain artists' career, but very much the access point was, you know, Instagram.

CL: Yeah. Exactly. And I think also, if I'm going back to your point, I think it's, of course, I think everyone agrees it's bad if the artist compromise his work to get more Instagram likes, or to be more shown, or be more posted on Instagram. But I think also, even in the case we were in Moscow, and I think how many kids can go to Moscow? How many...

Like I come from a place close to Amsterdam, but not Amsterdam, so I was never in the art world in New York. I didn't have the opportunity to go there. So to see all those artists' exposed in those kinds of big museums, like the Guggenheim or like the Garage Museum, the internet and Instagram was only way I could see it, basically.

Of course, I think on the artist's side, if you compromise on making art, or want to put a mirror in there so more people are going to post about it, I don't think it's a good thing, of course. But I think as a museum, and I think just as the art world, we have a job to reach more people, and not only the people who live in New York or in London.

LZ: The question for me about the medium is, how you... and I wonder if you actively think about this, JiaJia, and you, Christian, how you fight the surface values, you know what I mean? How do you participate in a way that's compelling? Meaning, make images that people gravitate towards without kind of inevitably dumbing down, or sort of lowering, the level of conversation.

JF: Yeah, I mean that's what I attempt to do every day. And I think also my practice is not only just thinking about Instagram, even though it's extremely powerful when it comes to visual art, but thinking about the entire digital ecosystem. So all of the other mediums you've noted, it's getting that person from just a post on Instagram into someone who clicks through to your website and goes deeper. It's really the gateway drug, hopefully, for more content.

CL: No, I think it's really interesting what you say about the gateway drug. I think that's what I always try to do with the curation I'm doing on my own page. Because I don't come from the art world, so I know how it is to be outside of the art world. So I know what kind of images were appealing to me, and I'm trying to now starting to learn more about art and getting into and being in the art world, I start to try to mix that with each other.

And I think even there are some artists that are considered very art-world art world, even like a Zwirner artist like Jordan Wolfson. When I posted a video of, I think it was at the Stedelijk Museum, when he was doing the robot stripper performance-art piece, it went viral. And I saw it everywhere. I saw it on Reddit. I saw it on all the Instagram accounts. It got more than, I think, more than a million plays and views on my own Instagram account. And I think that's because of the combination of people that maybe don't come from the art world were looking like, "What is this?" and sending it to friends and commenting on their older posts, like, "Is this art?" Like kind of the whole discussion is coming, and the only reason why this is happening, why it's going viral, is because I also posted a lot of stuff that's maybe, in the art world, considered like easy, easy.

LZ: Right. Not not highbrow in the same way.

CL: Exactly. Yeah.

LZ: Right.

CL: So I think that the combination between the high and low art is really important in curation, in getting a big group excited for it.

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LZ: I would really... Something that we're thinking about, something I would really love to hear about, is how you imagined kind of digital exhibition making? Initial mistake, I think, is to re-create the digital space in the image of the physical space. And the way you experience something in the physical space is very different from the way you experience it in a digital space. And so we've been thinking a lot about digital exhibition making at the gallery, and how narrative gets woven into something that you see online. A richness, context, archive, get built in. So it's not just you in front of an artwork, but it's you with all the other things available to you when you see something digitally.

JF: Yeah, I think there's been a lot of experimentation in this realm in the last several years, none of which have been extremely successful.

CL: I think no one cracked the code.

JF: And I think the actual question to be asking is, Do people want to experience art online? So I find the phenomenon of the art world thriving right now, in the way that people are continuing to go to museums more than ever before. People are continuing, in record numbers, to fly across the world to go to art fairs, biennials. It's still about this in-person experience, because unlike any other creative industry—where music, or publishing has really disappeared because of Spotify and e-books—art museums and galleries continue to thrive because people want to have experiences in person.

CL: Yeah. But I think also people want to share that experience.

JF: Right. But... and also, it doesn't replace the experience, unlike the activity of watching a movie on Netflix. You don't have to go to the movie theater. There's nothing that's going to replace... Art takes on so many forms. You cannot replace the experience of standing in the middle of a four-channel video installation or looking up very closely at the surface of the painting. I think people still want to have that social, in-real-life experience.

CL: Yeah, one hundred percent. But I think also is that, I think Instagram is one of the channels where a lot of people watch art, see art, everything. But also I think Instagram is much more than that. It's also people checking what their friends are doing, what kind of fashion, or food, or where everything basically nowadays. So I think if Instagram only was made for art, it wouldn't work.

LZ: Right. I mean, one of the things that I would be concerned about, and you mentioned it a little bit earlier, JiaJia, is that there is a reductive quality, obviously, to the platform, that it's presenting things in a very specific way. And I think we all agree that certain things look better on Instagram than other things, and that certainly doesn't mean they are less attractive or more attractive in person. So it's this kind of... And I guess the question is, has that ability to sort of predict what works on Instagram, which I think is, you know, high-contrast colors. Very muted things seem not to be that attractive, at least when I look at them on a screen. Like a Ryman painting is not going to pop on Instagram, you know what I mean? But an *Infinity Room* is, or a Josh Smith painting most likely will. There's that kind of intense color palette. Do you see that being a factor in the way people are making things?

JF: Yeah. Well, it's a classic marketing question: What's your goal? So for the artist, if it's sales, it's... does this actually generate money? Or are they more just interested in visibility? And I think there just hasn't been enough of a paradigm shift yet in... There's still transactions taking place, and I think we shouldn't ignore the fact that this entire system is based on the transaction between data that's being collected from its users and the people who are on the other side. But I don't think it's affected artists to the extent of changing how they work. It might be... it's really just another dimension of presentation.

CL: Yes. For artists that want to get a lot of reach, it really, really matters. I think artists... Like I sell a lot of works through Instagram, and most of the time the works that get the most likes are not the most works that sell the easiest.

LZ: That's interesting.

CL: And a lot of artists also know that. It's completely different liking a picture than buying a painting.

LZ: Will you talk a little more about that? What—if you can think of examples, not that you have need to name names—but what is the difference between a likable picture, and one that someone actually ends up transacting on?

CL: I think one is like, yeah, liking a picture is something you think is cool, but not something you necessarily want to put in your home.

But I think the big kind of difference is the audience. So, what an audience likes, who are buying a lot of artworks, who are real collectors, is something different than people who are just on their couch

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and liking a picture. It is a different kind of taste of those people. So I think, yeah, getting a lot of likes, or getting a lot of followers...

LZ: Might mean you're appealing to the wrong audience. You're not appealing to the qualified audience. You're appealing to, let's say, a less qualified audience, who is actually not a buying audience. "Qualified" is maybe not the right word, but you understand what I'm getting at.

CL: Of course, in terms of market.

LZ: Yeah. Or art historically inclined, or whatever it is.

CL: But I think it's definitely, it's changing. Because I think a lot of those qualified people who can buy art are all definitely looking at the numbers and who is really popular right now.

CL: And I think if we talk about a KAWS, who is now a market phenomenal, he got a lot of Instagram followers. He got a lot of people posting about him. If you do the #KAWS, you see so many people posting about it. And that means that a lot of young people are into KAWS. They are fighting for Uniqlo tees, and everything. And at a certain time, that's going to also really... A few billionaires are going to be also interested, because, "Whoa, this guy is so big right now. Maybe I should buy an original painting of him."

The artist, who in a way from the beginning, has been able to do, operate in, both spheres is Kusama. And this sort of intense mainstream, even pre-Instagram kind of mainstream, fanaticism around her work, and experience her work, which is now made much more intense by Instagram, has existed alongside an extremely robust market.

LZ: And I would love to hear, maybe starting with you JiaJia, why, how that happens, if that's something that happens organically, if it's about the myth or the narrative?

JF: Right place, right time. Is Yayoi Kusama even on Instagram? This was absolutely not by design.

LZ: No, no, not at all.

JF: And I think it's the confluence of so many things. Yes, she's been very successful her whole career. But I think the internet has opened up this new audience that has really exploded and proliferated this very unique visual aesthetic. She's very lucky in capturing the audience that's been generated around her, but I think so much of it is kind of by accident.

CL: It's also super authentic.

JF: Yeah.

CL: She was all doing this in the '60s.

JF: Way before... exactly... the internet even existed.

CL: Yeah, it's insane. And that's, I think, why is she's appealing to both sides, of course, is because the real audience, or the real collectors, they know the story. They know she didn't make it for Instagram. They know.

So, yeah, and I saw a quote, I think it was for *The New York Times*, was like she's the most important artist of the 1960s, I think. I think that that's even wrong. She's like the most important artist of now. Her art is about infinity, like the *Infinity Rooms*. And what Instagram did was... All her exhibitions are like in the universe, kind of like a new universe created for her artworks, and it's going on. It's an infinity.

LZ: But then when you say that, "Of course, it's accidental," in the sense that there is nothing plotted about, like you say Kusama is not...

JF: It was not a marketing campaign. The Fyre Festival of the art world.

LZ: Right. But exactly, but that's sort of what's amazing, is that by not being at all deliberate or calculated, it has somehow been the most effective, that world, of anything. And so I guess what I wanted to hear more about, is it that the aesthetic sort of aligned, or she was prescient in the sense that that aesthetic is exactly the kind of aesthetic that was being cooked up online by people participating in this? It happened to be that things like polka dots, colors, a kind of palette that's a little bit... that's sort of broader, or appeals to a wider audience.

JIAJIA FEI: (19:15)

Yeah, I think the key is accessibility. So artists that are very successful online—James Turrell, Yayoi Kusama—these are experiences that can be appealing to anyone, people with absolutely no art background, appreciation, or understanding of art. And I think that's critical, because even though we do have new tools at our disposal, art is still very difficult to access. It's for a very limited part of the world. Arts education has been depleted. I guess my concern is that because you now have this kind of hyper-promoted aesthetic online, how does this affect long-term digital art history? When you look at the record of

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what people used to look at. If you have like a million KAWS and Kusama tags, was that the era we were living in? Who else?

LZ: Were those the most important artists, basically?

JF: Yeah, exactly.

LZ: More than anyone else.

JF: This new quantitative measurement of success. She is just kind of operating in a very universal perspective too. Who doesn't love polka dots and sparkly things?

LZ: In this case, there is a visual aesthetic which has aligned with a story that, to me, is extremely meaningful and compelling, right? You have an artist who came to New York, was a total outsider, an Asian woman in a totally macho world. A world that didn't want anything really to do with her, that would have never met...

JF: In an era of abstract expressionism.

LZ: Abstract expressionism, with men dominating...

JF: Very male.

LZ: ...dominating the field.

JF: White male.

LZ: Yeah, and if you watch the documentary that came out recently about her, literally, she needed patrons. She was turned down from lots of museums. And something about underdog, return to success, an appeal to a broad group, and the sort of quite pure utopian messaging, I feel, has made her this sensation. So, it's operating on two levels. There's the immediate visual level, but it's also tapped into what I would say is the best side of something like Instagram, which is the ability to feel a powerful message that in this case is authentic and is not corporate—in the sense that some brand is telling you to have good values in order to buy the product—but is actually genuine.

JF: She's almost this alien creature. And I think again, by design, Instagram really favors this idea of icon worship, where you've seen fake influencers, people who are made in CGI, kind of engineered to have a certain number of traits. And because her life is so strange and almost otherworldly, I think people gravitate to this character. And though she is very much a real person.

CL: But would you, as a gallerist, would you recommend an artist to be on Instagram?

LZ: I would say if it's a natural extension of how you enjoy looking at things and doing things, then absolutely yes.

LZ: But same question to you, before we end, the way you see things unfolding, Christian.

CL: I think Instagram, and I think more in general, it's having more fans and being more liked by the big public, is going to be more and more important. I think we are seeing the tip of the iceberg with Kusama, with a KAWS. And I think it's definitely driving up prices but also driving up... Museums want to show... museums need to have some blockbuster shows to get people into the museums and see the collections and stuff. So I think being popular is definitely going to be a bigger and bigger thing for artists. And I think the way to become more popular is online, because that's where you can reach a lot of people. I really believe that the combination between offline and online is going to be...

LZ: The crucial thing.

CL: Yeah, the crucial thing. And that's why I think also for artists... I would advise an artist to be on Instagram, or to be online, because if you're going to do an offline show, you want people to see your work, to tell your followers, or your fans, is a really big thing.

And I think also artists are going to get much more power.

LZ: Absolutely. And I think that one thing's for sure, that galleries need to get sophisticated about using those to promote artists. Because like Kusama, if she's not on Instagram, then it is definitely the gallery's responsibility to make sure that some of that great promotional marketing stuff is happening for her, you know?

LZ: JiaJia and Christian, thank you so much for doing this today.

CL: Thank you.

JF: Thank you.

LZ: This is great to have the conversation.

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heard, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. It really does help other people discover the show. I'm Lucas Zwirner. Thanks so much for listening, and I hope you join us again next time.