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INVISIBLE HANDS

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY OF DELEGATION IN THE ART WORLD.



**THE FUTURE IS
INVISIBLE**

ARTREPUBLIC

BY NADYA WANG

T

here are established artists, and then there are the megastars of the art world who command astronomical sums for their artworks. Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami are just a few of the artists-turned-brands in contemporary art today. They buck the stereotype of the living, struggling artist, and are masters of their own financial success.

One common thread that runs through these celebrity artists' practices is their employment of teams of assistants to aid them in everything from taking care of business matters to art-making itself – a far cry from the more fluid studio space of working alone that one has traditionally associated with the artist's creative process.

In 2008, Damien Hirst famously bypassed his major dealers to sell 223 new works in the exhibition "Beautiful Inside My Head Forever" with Sotheby's at auction, which generated an unprecedented USD200 million. It was a watershed moment in the evolution of the contemporary art market, and opened the floodgates for admiration and disdain in equal parts for the artist and the production methods behind his prolific output of artworks.

Just as the contemporary art market has propped up Hirst and his contemporaries, there are those in the art world who question the authenticity of artworks that appear wholly or in part to be made by assistants. Fellow contemporary artist David Hockney included on a gallery wall of his 2012 exhibition, "David Hockney: A Bigger Picture" at the Royal Academy of Arts: "All the works here were made by the artist himself, personally." He was not alone in his sentiments that prompted this move.

The term artist assistant has become a catchall phrase that can refer to everyone from administration assistants to production team members – essentially anyone who serves the artist in some capacity in the production of an artwork. Despite the proliferation of artist assistants in the contemporary art world, their standing in the art ecosystem remains unsettled and uneasy. The key question may not be whether artist assistants dilute the authenticity of artworks in the traditional sense of the word, but rather how artworks, artists, and the larger art market and art world have all evolved such that the presence of artist assistants have become indispensable.

ASSISTING THE ARTIST

The employment of artist assistants is not new. Andy Warhol's loft studio in New York, dubbed The Factory, was known as much as for

the iconic Warholian silkscreens it churned out as it was for being a celebrity hangout. John Cale, one half of the American rock band Velvet Underground and Warhol's close friend, said in a 2002 interview with The Guardian: "It wasn't called the Factory for nothing. It was where the assembly line for the silkscreens happened. While one person was making a silkscreen, somebody else would be filming a screen test. Every day it's something new."

Today's best art-production "factories" have come a long way from Warhol's creative space. Takashi Murakami, known for his Superflat works which combine graphic design with anime elements, runs what he calls Hiropon Factory, a cluster of buildings right outside of Tokyo, as well as another studio in Brooklyn. In these spaces, there is no raucous fun that might have been found once upon a time in Warhol's Factory.

Rather, Murakami mobilises a highly professional team of assistants, from administrators and accountants to managers and publicists, to help him run his multi-million dollar art-making corporation.

The sophisticated technologies available for artists to use to express themselves have had a hand in creating the position of the artist assistant. Murakami, for example, sketches his artworks by hand before scanning them and colouring them in on the computer. Once he is satisfied with a final composition, it is printed to be silkscreened and painted in by his team of assistants. It is all about efficiency, where the artist maintains production to meet the high demand for his artworks, or art products. Murakami is as much a shrewd business mind as he is an artist.

Jeff Koons, currently the world's most expensive living artist after his "Balloon Dog (Orange)" sold at Christie's for USD58.4 million in November 2013, is another highly successful artist who employs approximately 130 artist assistants at any one time to work in his studio headquarters in West Chelsea, New York. Admired as an ideas man, he is

fêted for pushing boundaries in the artworks he pioneers, such as his signature mirror-polished stainless steel sculptures with transparent colour coating in pop colours, which are known to use incredibly sophisticated technology. Under his supervision, his team of assistants makes these artworks possible.

Contemporary artist superstar Damien Hirst, named the world's wealthiest artist in October 2013 by Wealth-X – which researches ultra-high net worth individuals – is the consummate contemporary art businessman. He has a 97,000-square-foot factory space in Gloucestershire in England, and is open about his employment of

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Facing page: *Metallic Venus*, 2010–12, Jeff Koons. Courtesy Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte. © Jeff Koons.

assistants to turn his ideas into the highly-coveted artworks he sells. These have included, among other works, Spot paintings, made of neat rows of multi-coloured circles and the "Kaleidoscope" series, featuring coloured iridescent butterfly wings arranged in patterns on painted canvas, with a collection of 150 of these works made in 2008 named after entries in the Book of Psalms.

In an interview with Time Magazine in 2012, Hirst candidly responded that there were approximately 1500 Spot paintings in existence, of which he had personally painted only about 25 in the series' earlier days. In 2012, in a bold display of the commoditisation of contemporary art, the exhibition "Damien Hirst: The Complete Spot Paintings 1986-2011" saw 11 branches of the Gagosian Gallery worldwide filled with more than 300 Spot paintings simultaneously, sold together with mugs and T-shirts bearing the same motif.

Artists like Murakami, Koons and Hirst are trailblazers in the art world who have created their own rules in creating their art empires. They have expanded while streamlining their operations, a feat made possible with the assistants under their employment, and they are giving back to the art world in their own way. Murakami founded Kaikai Kiki, an artist management organisation that runs its own gallery spaces in Tokyo, Taipei and New York, as well as a biannual art fair, Geisai, in Tokyo and Taipei that promotes young artists. Hirst

has, among other ventures, set up the publishing house Other Criteria, which works with artists to create works that are unique or in limited editions as well as art publications for sale.

There are also other artists who may not have sprawling art empires that require dozens of assistants to run, but nonetheless employ a number of them to work in their studio. Contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley is a highly successful artist, whose ongoing series, "The World Stage" sees him travelling the world in search of charismatic faces that he paints into portraits against backgrounds of saturated colours that resemble floral wallpaper. In an interview with New York Magazine in 2012, he was reportedly candid about his employment of assistants in his Beijing-based studio to work on his paintings with him but reluctant to discuss the division of labour.

Wiley's reaction is not unlike many other artists who have the same cautious, ambivalent attitude in addressing the roles their assistants play in the making of their body of work. That these artists have assistants working with them is no secret, but it is not a fact that is usually proudly declared or discussed. There appears to be a general stigma towards, or at least some discomfort with, the employment of assistants to assist in the making of an artwork. It seems the art world may prefer to flatter the artists as lone geniuses, and their artworks as independent achievements.

THE INDISPENSABLE ARTIST ASSISTANT

Artists hire assistants primarily for their technical capabilities, and less for their artistic expression. An artist assistant's job description varies from artist to artist, and their responsibilities are wide-ranging. Some may simply run errands, freeing up time for the artist to focus on his creative process. These could include coordinating exhibitions, fielding media enquiries, handling paperwork and administering archives, among other tasks. Artist assistants may also work directly on the pieces. In both situations, they allow the artist to produce more work in a shorter time.

One difference between the artist and the artist assistant who works directly on pieces could be the difference between art and craft. In this

"THERE APPEARS TO BE A GENERAL STIGMA TOWARDS, OR AT LEAST SOME DISCOMFORT WITH, THE EMPLOYMENT OF ASSISTANTS TO ASSIST IN THE MAKING OF AN ARTWORK."



This page, clockwise from below: Balloon Dog (Yellow), 1994 – 2000, Jeff Koons. © Jeff Koons; Me in Me series (detailed view), 2013, Ming Wong. Courtesy the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou and earlier | gebauer, Berlin.

dichotomy, the artist is responsible for the art, and the assistants have a hand in crafting or fabricating what the artist has conceptualised, with overall creative control remaining firmly in the hands of the artist from start to finish.

A reason why more and more artworks are not completely made by an artist may be the increasing interest that the art world has with object-based art, which tends to require specialised technical skills that only craftsmen specifically trained in them would possess. In these situations, assistants are employed to work on a specific project, or in certain cases, it is simply outsourced. The neon works of artists such as Anselm Kiefer, Mat Collishaw and Tracey Emin, for instance, have been custom-made by neon-sign maker Kerry Ryan, based in London's East End. But there is no mistake that the artwork is a manifestation of the artist's imagination and creativity. Emin's neon signs are, in line with the rest of her body of work, by turns poetic and provocative. Examples of her neon sculptures include "My Heart Is With You / And I Love You / Always Always Always" from 2006 and "Her Soft Lips Touched Mine and Everything Became Hard" from 2008.

Some artworks preclude the artist from creating them alone, for they are necessarily collaborative. Liu Bolin is a Chinese contemporary artist who uses his own body as part of the canvas for his work. Known as the Invisible Man for his seminal "Hiding in the City" series, Liu has his entire body painted so that he disappears into the background in urban locations around the world, exploring the relationships between the individual and the ever-changing city one has to navigate. He has a team of assistants who paint and photograph him. As the subject of his artworks, these are tasks he cannot accomplish on his own.

Berlin-based Singaporean artist Ming Wong is, like Liu, the subject of his works. Wong makes films, and more often than not assumes

every role in them. For his 2005 work, "Four Malay Stories", based on the movies of legendary Malaysian director P. Ramlee, Wong played all 16 male and female characters. At this year's Art Basel's Art Unlimited, he presented "Me in Me", a three-channel video installation that was commissioned by and first shown at Shiseido Gallery in Tokyo in 2013. Wong portrayed three different heroines from the classical, modern and future eras in Japanese cinema. There were not one but two camera crew assisting him: one filmed the scenes, and the other filmed the filming of the scenes to capture inevitable imperfections in the making of a work. There were also assistants who transformed his look for the three different roles with costumes and makeup. For Wong's thought-provoking film works, assistants have been essential in bringing to life his unique artistic vision.

At times, assistants are imperative for the artwork to be realised because of its large size. Indian artist Anish Kapoor is known for, among other works, his enormo-sculptures. One of his most well-known sculptures is "Marsyas", a red PVC membrane stretched across three giant metal rings which filled Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2002 and 2003, stretching 10-storeys in height and 150 metres in length. Another highly acclaimed sculpture from Kapoor is the "Cloud Gate", a 110-tonne sculpture in Millennium Park in Chicago that reflects the city's skyline. To make his giant works, Kapoor has shared in interviews that he works at any one time with approximately 30 assistants in a huge factory space. They each have specific tasks, and he interacts with everyone personally to coordinate the completion of these impressive sculptures.

Then there are special circumstances where assistants are entirely indispensable to the artists. Chinese contemporary artist and activist Ai Weiwei has not been able to leave China since Chinese authorities seized his passport in 2011. However, through close communication with his assistants, who are based in his studio, 258 Fake, in Beijing, he has been able to exhibit new works around the world, such as "Bang", an installation of 886 repurposed chairs at the German Pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale, without ever physically being at any of these venues.

An upcoming exhibition, "@Large: Ai Wei Wei on Alcatraz" in San Francisco Bay, opening in late September this year, is probably his most ambitious in-absentia project yet. Commissioned by FOR-SITE Foundation, he has conceptualised seven site-specific installations



Facing page: Damien Hirst with new body of work, "Schizophrenogenesis" at the Paul Stolper Gallery. Courtesy Paul Stolper Gallery. © Damien Hirst and Other Criteria.



This page, clockwise from below: *H2O (Pink)*, *PD 237* and *VIS KEN 5 (Mint)*, 2014, Damien Hirst. Courtesy Paul Stolper Gallery © Damien Hirst and Other Criteria; *Moon (Light Pink)*, 1995–2000, Jeff Koons. © Jeff Koons.

“THE CELEBRATION OF AN ARTWORK’S CONCEPT AS THE KEY TO ITS SUCCESS HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF THE ARTIST ASSISTANT, WHO APPEAR TO BE ESSENTIAL TO THESE ARTISTS’ ARTISTIC AND COMMERCIAL SUCCESS.”



The controversy shrouding the employment of artist assistants is partly attributable to the perception that artists are exploiting their assistants, who tend to earn a fixed wage, and do not get a cut of the oftentimes sensational prices that these artists command for their works. That said, applicants apply for these jobs, which are usually advertised, with the understanding that they are hired precisely to assist. Artist Julian Opie has called for assistants in the British newspaper *Guardian*, and Koons in *The New York Times*, for example. The New York Foundation for the Arts is one popular platform for the advertisement of artist assistant positions, and artists may also contact art schools directly to invite students to try out for assistant positions.

Artist assistants have slowly but surely become integral to the contemporary art world. On the one hand, in the face of continued high demand for their artworks, most artists have every motivation to be tremendously productive and to produce multiples or variations of their most successful pieces. Artist assistants are key to making this happen, and it is an arrangement that works well not only for these artists, but also for collectors and other art enthusiasts who cannot get enough of these works. And on the other hand, there is parallel demand for constant novelty, and the efforts of artist assistants allow artists the luxury of time to strive for new breakthroughs in contemporary art. 

There are artist assistants whose association with the artists they work for have made them well known. Zhao Zhao, touted to be one of the most promising young Chinese contemporary artists, worked as Ai’s assistant for seven years. Now in his early thirties, Zhao has exhibited in China and abroad. In 2013, he was one of the artists exhibited in the landmark exhibition “ON | OFF: China’s Young Artists in Concept and Practice” at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing. He has also exhibited overseas, thrice at Chambers Fine Art in New York, and this year, at the gallery Platform China for his first solo show in Hong Kong. His association with Ai is often mentioned, and has certainly contributed to the significant attention given to his work.

Yet other artists forge new paths for their careers based on their experience as an artist assistant. Carmella Saraceno, inspired by her work as an assistant for the acclaimed American sculptor Alice Aycock, founded the company, Methods & Materials, Inc. in 1990, which she runs to this day. The company specialises in transporting, installing and deinstalling large-scale artworks for artists, museums, galleries and others.

ARTIST ASSISTANTS IN THE FUTURE OF ART

Of course, just as there are artists who choose to work with assistants, there are those who do not. As an example, in Southeast Asia, the most successful Indonesian contemporary artist, Nyoman Masriadi, who typically produces eight to ten paintings in a year, resolutely works on his paintings alone at his home studio in Yogyakarta.



on the prison island turned national park, despite his continued imprisonment in China. The works, developed in his studio, will explore, aptly, the right to freedom of expression in the context of incarceration. Ai’s oeuvre is highly dependent on the skills and judgement of his assistants, whom he entrusts with the immense task of seeing his vision through.

The celebration of an artwork’s concept as the key to its success has contributed to the growing importance of the artist assistant, who appear to be essential to these artists’ artistic and commercial success. One can quite easily appreciate why artists employ assistants to work for them, but who chooses to become an artist assistant, and why?

ADVANTAGES FOR THE ARTIST ASSISTANT

Applicants for artist assistant positions are attracted by the opportunity to interact with and learn from established artists. The artist assistant position represents entry into the gated community of contemporary art. Artist assistants have the chance to establish valuable contacts in the art world whom they come into contact with through working with the artist, which can translate into career-building possibilities.



This page, clockwise from top: *Red No. 1* (detailed view), 2012, Liu Bolin; *Head Portrait* (detailed view), 2012, Liu Bolin. Both images courtesy Klein Sun Gallery, New York. © Liu Bolin.