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The Real Meaning Behind the Merger of ARTnews and Art in America

Ben Davis, Thursday, July 30, 2015

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It is a media cliché that more has changed in the last 10 years in journalism than in the century before that. Yesterday's [big news](#) that *ARTnews* and *Art in America* are merging is our gem-perfect art version of this story.

People were leafing through [ARTnews](#) (founded 1902) and [Art in America](#) (founded 1913) before *radio* was a thing. But the two may not have survived the age of the Internet on their own.

The terms of [the merger](#) are [tooth-achingly complex](#) with newsprint mogul Peter Brant technically selling off his art magazines to *ARTnews*' parent company, but gaining a controlling stake in the resulting conglomerate, which is publicly traded on the Polish stock exchange. The implications are unclear, and the statements put out by editors [Lindsay Pollock](#) (*Art in America*) and [Sarah Douglas](#) (*ARTnews*)—both colleagues whom I greatly respect—give the impression, by their lack of details, that the situation appears unclear because it is actually not clear.

Looks like the print *ARTnews* will now be dedicated to “themed issues,” whatever that means (I'm guessing it means it will be phased out). *Art in America* sticks around, but Brant [says](#) the merged art-mag conglomerate will “focus on digital content and online news reporting across all platforms.” So it's not likely to be the art-historically focused *Art in America* of old.

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You can read this as just a local earthquake caused by the larger tectonic shifts of the publishing industry. But art publishing has its own peculiar dynamics. One of these is that a great, great many art titles are vanity projects, backed by a rich person for the same kinds of reasons that rich people like to buy art in the first place.



Art in America, January 2014 issue.
Photo: Courtesy of *Art in America*.

So what happens in the art mag world doesn't just tell you about the ill health of print, but also about the changing values of particularly wealthy people. Both *Art in America* and *ARTnews* represent their own permutation of this pattern.

From the *Art in America* side, the detail of the story that sticks out to me is this: While Peter Brant is selling off his art magazines, including not just *AiA* but also the *Magazine Antiques* and *Modern*, he is specifically *not* selling off *Interview*, which remains under his private control, despite the fact that it is a money sink just like the rest.

Andy Warhol founded *Interview* and Brant is a famous Warhol fanboy. So it is hard not to read this decision as a statement of the Warholian priority of values: the connection to celebrity and fashion is what is to be prized and shielded; the doughty old project of producing ideas about fine art needs to be rationalized.

Flipping the story around and telling it from the *ARTnews* side, you have a different story of the evolving values of the art industry. The former publisher of the magazine, Milton Esterow, was hardly a flashy guy, having made his name as "reporter and assistant to the cultural news director" at the *New York Times* before getting hold of *ARTnews* in 1972, when it was a languishing part of the *Washington Post* group.

Esterow ran *ARTnews* for four decades with a deliberate style and

journalistic emphasis, before selling it last year to Sergey Skaterschikov, a character mainly known for Skates, a company that focuses on art market analysis. "I love it and have a great strategy for *ARTnews*, stay tuned," Skaterschikov declared at the time.

For months, the word on the street and around the New York art world has been that Skaterschikov was already shopping around *ARTnews*. In short, he was trying to flip it. So, whatever that "great strategy" was, it did not involve any long-term vision. Basically, the whole thing looks now like an attempt to flip the art magazine property, much as people flip artworks, or in this case build an overall company valuation and then flip his share interest.

Whatever happens with the merged magazines, it looks bad. You can read it as another chapter in the sad decline of print. But scrutinizing the tea leaves, you can also see it as another augury that the discourse of art is more and more subordinate to fashion-obsessed celebrity and short-term finance.

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