

I N S Δ M

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



Fighting for Souls

Kim Diaz Holm

INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology

No. 9, December 2022, pp. 9–14.

Kim Diaz Holm

Norway

FIGHTING FOR SOULS



Nothing comes free.

Social media can be seen as a liberating force for artists, allowing us to get an equal footing with megacorporations and super franchises in the fight for attention.

I certainly felt that impact. For a while.

It started with Covid.

On the 12th of March 2020 the Norwegian government announced schools and workplaces would be shut down for two weeks due to Covid.

On the 15th of March I got a message from an old friend on Facebook, Tarjei A. Heggernes, a strategy professor at a local business school.

For my whole career I have released my art for free use and argued for copyright reform. Back in the early 2000s most of my colleagues looked at me like I was crazy, and some got real angry. Copyright was viewed as the only protection between us and the sea of piracy.

“You wouldn’t steal a car” the anti-piracy commercials said before every video or DVD you rented.

When Myspace came along it gave me a small platform to share my art, and to talk about the problems with copyright. And Tarjei was one the very few that actually listened with interest and engaged with my ideas. Often challenging them, occasionally agreeing.

I think I got a couple of thousand followers on Myspace. Then came Facebook and Instagram, and Tarjei was always one of my first followers. Over the years I reached 5,000 followers. Then 10,000. Then 20,000. These numbers are nothing on social media, but they are huge numbers if you actually think about them. Drawing for magazines had been my main income, but as magazines started becoming less and less relevant, more of my income started coming from social media.

So in the Spring of 2020 I was trying to get a foothold in the dark art gallery space, connecting with galleries around the world through social media. But I was also keeping an eye on the spread of Covid. When the government shut Norway down, I knew it wouldn’t be for just two weeks. I knew it might change my plans for a long time. Months even.

So when Tarjei messaged me, I was open-minded. I knew I had to change my plans.

“Have you looked into TikTok?” he asked.

I had barely heard the word.

“People are doing art timelapses there. I think you can get a lot of fans.”

“Ok, I’ll try to post a timelapse there later today.”

Tarjei was my first follower on TikTok, and one of very few people who saw my first video. With more videos, my account grew to 10,000 followers. Then to 100,000. And now it’s finally settled on 1.3 million. I have a few handful videos that have reached many million people, and one that reached 18 million. The hashtag #dailyinkmonsters, which I created and am virtually the sole user of, has

been seen over 90 million times. That is literally insane for a weird bipolar dark artist from Norway.

It isn't that hard to fathom why TikTok took off the way it did. The 15 second video format, and later the 60 second format, allowed people to show a tiny window into parts of their life. And as the world shut down, it became the place for a lot of us to be social. It felt more honest and direct than Instagram. What started as a miming and dancing app, became a way to communicate in a world where many couldn't even leave their apartment.

TikTok allowed me to get new perspectives. I got introduced to the term "neurodivergent", finally given a name to ideas I've had about my own struggles with bipolar disorder. I became mutuals with great people talking about politics, neurodivergency, transgender identity, indigenous activism, and I got to both spread my ideas and help share other causes. I was asked to do a video on the Canadian residential school horrors, where thousands of indigenous children have been found hidden in unmarked graves, and it reached millions and the art was adopted by survivors of the schools. I started getting contacted by more and more people thanking me, for my art, for my views, for my openness about mental health, for me. Having your voice matter feels intoxicating.

Not only that, but I started realizing that my plan for making a living by making copyright-free art was finally starting to work. By channeling people from my TikTok over to my Patreon, where people can support with as little as 1 dollar a month, I got closer to financial security than I had ever come through traditional freelance art.

In 2001, when I decided to dedicate my work to abolishing copyright and advocating for a new, more free system, none of the tools that I use today existed. I wouldn't learn about Creative Commons for years. Crowdfunding and Patreon didn't exist. And there wasn't any way to spread a message as effectively as TikTok.

I'm not ashamed to admit I got swept away by the algorithm. We all were.

And then, TikTok changed their algorithm. Artists, intellectuals, weirdos, and freaks like me who were used to getting hundreds of thousands of views, all dropped down to merely hundreds of views per video.

The only ones that seemed to stay relevant to the algorithm were the ones heavily invested in doing sponsored content. Covert advertising.

This all happened at the same time TikTok launched their new plans for how to link creators with advertisers, which can be summed up as the most dystopian version of a talent-show, where creators can make free videos with a company's

product, and the company can then pick and choose which ones they will pay to help go viral. It's really a stunningly idiotic scheme.

But it's a stunningly idiotic scheme we all knew was coming, because we had seen it before. It was the same thing Instagram and Facebook did and many others have tried, only marginally more stupid.

If you started an art account early on Instagram, and had any degree of talent, you were almost destined to blow up. Artists, innovators, and creators made Instagram into a space everyone had to be on. And then as soon as a critical mass of audience was reached Instagram would experiment with advertising and paid models, and abandon the accounts that actually attracted the audience.

To understand why this happens, we have to look at what we're selling.

Art used to be a skill. After the printing press had changed how we reproduced art, the establishment of copyright law was a paradigmatic shift in how we view art. No longer were artists primarily paid for their skill and time, but the artwork itself became a non-corporeal entity that was infused with value, hereby called the Intellectual Property, or IP.

This IP can be sold from the creator to a third party up to 70 years after the creator's death. The owner can then hire other artists to work on the IP, infusing their labor into it and increasing its value.

So the mechanics of copyright is to take the labor of artists and infuse it into an IP, and then use the value of that IP to attract new generations of artists to infuse their labor into the IP. In this way the IP makes the artists disposable.

This explains many things in the arts and entertainment industries, from the reckless indifference the music and film industries have to their greatest artists often dying young from substance abuse, to the way the film and video game industries swallow generations of young artists and burn them out at a rate not seen elsewhere. When IP is king, artists are disposable.

A few artists manage to break through this system, and make themselves equally important as the IP they make, at least for a time. Which isn't really a problem for the copyright industries, since they will have 70 years after the artist's death to exploit the work as they please.

Because of this minimal chance of becoming an artist as important as your IP, artists have been in the frontlines of defending copyright law, even when copyright law has always largely been used to exploit and abuse artists.

Social media seemed to present an alternative way to become equally important as your IP, without going through the traditional publishing channels. Social media companies do not demand any exclusive rights from their creators. They do not directly interfere with the creative process. On social media, you have control over how you present yourself and your art. In that sense, social media can seem like freedom.

The reason for this is that the social media corporations are not in the business of selling your IP, but rather a completely different kind of IP. They are selling user data. User data isn't traditionally considered IP and should not be copyrightable, and the legalities behind it are too complex for my poor artist mind, but by using a combination of contractual rights and licenses, software patents, and finally copyright for the user-data databases (instead of the user data itself), user data is effectively used and protected just like any other IP.

We can look at the presidency of Donald Trump to understand some of how it works. It started with the revelation that the Trump campaign had, through Cambridge Analytica, used the user data from Facebook to advertise directly to individual social media users in an unprecedented way. This was rightly seen as a scandal, although it's naive to think his campaign was the only one to use these methods. Still, it's not an understatement to claim user data was a huge part of Trump's winning strategy.

As president, Trump soon went after TikTok, claiming that it was a Chinese surveillance app. While he is known for lying, we should have no problem accepting this claim. We have known for years, through the information leaked by whistleblowers like Edward Snowden, that the US government themselves have been using the user data from American corporations like Google and Facebook to spy on their own citizens and the rest of the world. It's naive to think that the Chinese government would not do the same through Chinese companies.

Trump liked to make statements through his Twitter account. Until Twitter finally blocked him. An action that has been scrutinized far too little. The US president used to be called the "Most powerful man in the world". Yet a private company could simply block a US president. Which, regardless of whether or not you agree with their decision, they could and would not have done unless they considered what they own, their IP, their user data, more valuable than his account.

But how is this related to artists?

The user data a social media owns is worthless unless it reaches a critical mass. In order to reach that critical mass, they need something to attract users. For a

lot of social media, one of the most important things used to attract new users has always been art. And once the critical mass has been reached, artists become less important unless they are able to pay the same way any other advertiser does.

So when I joined TikTok I wasn't just getting free exposure for my art. I was also a tiny part of making TikTok more attractive for users, collecting the user data of a locked-down world population for my corporate overlords. User data that I know will be sold to anyone interested, whether it be private individuals, corporations, or regimes, and which, due to how it's spread, is also bound to be leaked and used by phishers and scammers trying to rip off anyone who falls for their scams. My art helps lay the foundation for future Trumps, government surveillance, and theft.

The myth of the artist selling their soul used to describe artists who achieved great skill at the cost of their own eternal soul. Then, with the advent of copyright, it became a metaphor for selling out, in a sense for letting the IP become more important than the art. Now, we're no longer in the business of selling our own souls. We're selling the souls of our fans. And we're getting paid in exposure.

There is very little that we as individual artists can do to combat this. For many of us, social media will remain a crucial part of both how we survive and how we get our message out there. The problem is at its heart systemic and legal.

The only way to stop it is through a complete reform of how we legally view information. We must abolish copyright, patents, and any other forms of IP or information laws. Everything protected by these laws today needs to have its unlimited distribution protected under freedom of speech, since there is no way to distinguish or draw the line for when information is just data, facts, art, or speech.

Like today there can be exceptions, for such things as libel and dangerous speech. But most importantly there must be put in place stronger protections for personal information, identity, and personhood. The only information that should be protected like we protect copyright or patents today is the information pertaining to your person, which should by law only be available to you and to select others under specific circumstances, like for instance your doctor having access to your medical information.

Unless we abolish copyright and criminalize the hoarding of user data, we will continue creating a dystopian hellscape where artists like me have to continue saying:

Please subscribe to my YouTube. It don't cost a dime, it only costs your soul.