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# Artist Power

Will the Web emancipate artists from their bondage to dealers? Probably not, but it will certainly broaden their markets.

BY MISSY SULLIVAN

**P**HOTOGRAPHER FRANK JUMP documents vintage ads on the sides of old New York buildings. He knows that little-known artists like himself need somewhere public to display their wares. They need dealers. Lotsa luck. While there's no hard data, industry experts estimate that only about 5%–10% of artists nationally are represented by galleries. And those that are, regularly surrender 50%—or more—of the sales price.

Jump wasn't exactly chased by dealers. So he took his stuff to the Internet. Log on to Frankjump.com, and you can see his work, e-mail him questions about it and buy it if it interests you.

"The site has acted as my press agent," Jump says. It didn't hurt that it was chosen as a Yahoo site of the week in early 1999. He's now listed on nearly 80 search engines worldwide.

Goodbye dealers? Not yet. Jump admits he hasn't sold much on the Web. And he's kept his day job, managing a dental practice. Still, many art dealers are worried. The Internet is changing so many businesses; it's bound to have an impact on theirs. And it is. But rather than disintermediating dealers, it's moving them online.

There are more than 20,000 sites currently showcasing art online—established galleries, auction houses, Web-only retail sites, artist-run collectives. All, of course, levy a charge on the artist, but they do get the work exposed to a broader audience. With so much art on the Net, where should you go? Herewith, some advice for readers who want to go art hunting on the Web.

If you're looking for a name-brand artist like Andy Warhol or William Wegman, your best bet is at one of the gallery networks like Onview.com and Eartgroup.com, or the auction sites Artnet.com and Sothebys.com. These e-businesses cull inventory from blue-chip galleries, and operate on the traditional middleman model.

can easily consult online price guides.

Can you haggle over price? Sometimes. Onview.com names a price, but then encourages collectors to make a counter-offer. Don't be shy about naming a lower price: there's plenty of room to haggle in a business where you probably have a 50% dealer markup but also a site commission of 5%–10%.

If you're interested in discovering a new talent and your tastes don't necessarily run to the avant-garde, there are many sites—like Guild.com, NextMonet.com, PaintingsDirect.com and the recently launched ArtAdvocate.com—that have experts to do the sifting for you.

Unlike galleries, these sites don't hold inventory. Instead, they rely on



Metalsmith Boris Bally and (inset) some of his wares.

There's this difference: On the Web you don't get that in-your-face snootiness that turns off so many would-be buyers at elite galleries. Web emporia provide information and hand-holding to buyers and browsers alike, plus helpful links to services like appraisal, framing and shipping.

The other big difference: a welcome transparency of pricing. Whereas old-line dealer prices can vary from client to client, online prices are posted right on the screen. And smart Web shoppers

artists to fulfill customer orders directly from their studios. Because they don't hold inventory, this kind of juried site doesn't hit the artist as hard. Guild.com, for example, charges the artist 25%–35% of the sales price.

For metalsmith Boris Bally, who has his own informational Web site and several dozen craft galleries across the country selling his work, juried is the way to go. "I would have been hesitant if Guild didn't jury. I've seen a lot of schlock out there and I want to make sure I'm associated with good stuff."

## Squeezing the Dealers

Art selling on the Web is still in its infancy. Below are sites that let you bypass traditional galleries; a few even offer direct contact with the artists.

Site	Expert Screening	Site's Cut <sup>1</sup>	Contact Artists Directly	Price Range
ArtAdvocate.com	Yes	NA	No	\$280-\$33,330
ArtMecca.com	No	20%	Yes	20-\$80,000
Artnet.com <sup>2</sup>	No	\$1,000/yr	Yes	1,000-\$20,000
Eyestorm.com	Yes	NA	No	300-\$45,000
Guild.com	Yes	25-35	No	up to 1 mil
Itheo.com	No	40	Yes	100-\$1,500
NextMonet.com	Yes	50 avg	No	300-\$100,000
PaintingsDirect.com	Yes	50	No	40-\$20,000

NA not available. <sup>1</sup>As % unless otherwise noted. <sup>2</sup>Artists' Web sites area; flat fee to host.

Since last November Bally has netted nearly \$20,000 from Guild's sales of his furniture and jewelry, crafted from old traffic signs.

Kristina Larson, president of ArtAdvocate.com, has decided to marry what she sees as the best of the traditional gallery with the ease of access and searchability of the Internet. Her site offers the usual illustrations and then offers to let potential buyers view the work in person and, in some cases, meet the artist. This approach ac-

knowledges the limitations of computer screens in conveying the essence of an artwork—and the ultimate importance of experiencing art firsthand.

But what if you have confidence in your own taste and enjoy the thrill of the hunt? Maybe you hope to find an undiscovered artist who will turn out to be the next Picasso.

Akash Agarwal, President of Itheo.com, has fashioned a site just for you. "We feel

You can see Craig Kraft's neon sculptures on his Web site.



the Web is really good at the direct publication model: artists speaking directly to the buyer and the buyers speaking directly to the artist," says Agarwal. "Itheo serves as the facilitator. We're not filtering content. We're letting buyers decide for themselves."

But beware: Lots of artists out there don't have a dealer because their stuff is lousy.

ArtMecca.com operates on a similar model. Artists pay fees to display their work. If it sells, they pay 20% to ArtMecca. Jennifer Wrigley, chief executive of ArtMecca, isn't promising you will find unknown geniuses on her site. She positions her wares more under the home beautification umbrella than the fine art one. It's a good,

strong market. ArtMecca claims 100,000 visitors a month—far more than most galleries or even museums get.

Then there are the solo artist sites like Jump's. He's gotten attention but only a handful of sales. Craig Kraft, a neon sculptor based in Washington, D.C., has had a similar experience.

Kraft pays a service to register his site ([www.craigkraftstudio.com](http://www.craigkraftstudio.com))

with the major search engines. He gets about ten hits a day and the few sales Kraft attributes directly to the Web were made only after the collector visited his studio and viewed the stuff. But that's to be expected since his pieces range between \$3,000 and \$75,000.

The Web has also been the catalyst for nearly a dozen sales to existing collectors who use the site to track his latest output. Recently, a dealer in San Francisco found his site and is brokering a site-specific commission.

"I never really thought that people would 'get' sculpture over the Web," Kraft muses. "But I've been surprised."

He shouldn't have been surprised for that's what the Web is about: Putting people in touch with a broader world than the one circumscribed by physical and geographic limitations. **F**

