

## Art Market | Analysis



Rachel Jones (top) and Peter Doig (right) have left their galleries, while Nick Hornby says he has to explore "atypical scenarios" to realise public sculptures such as *Power over others is Weakness disguised as Strength* (2023, left)

# Why ever more artists are ditching the dealers

From the emerging to the blue-chip, artists are trading gallery representation for agents or outright autonomy. By **Anny Shaw**

It is a sign of the times that the 2020 to 2022 editions of *ArtReview's* annual Power 100 list were topped by an artist collective, NFTs and a social justice movement. Compare this with a decade ago, when mega-gallerists Larry Gagosian and David Zwirner jostled for the lead position, and it clarifies just how much power in the art market has shifted from dealers to artists in recent years. One particularly disruptive outcome of this change in tack has been that an increasing number of artists are eschewing gallery representation in favour of more flexible approaches to the making, marketing and selling of their art.

Rachel Jones, a London-based artist whose oil stick paintings of abstract imagery have been in high demand since she earned her MFA in 2019, quietly left Thaddaeus Ropac gallery last month to investigate alternative working methods. After three years with Ropac, she no longer plans to be represented by any gallery.

In September, Jones debuted her first opera-based work, *Hey, Maudie*, which was commissioned by the London non-profit The Roberts Institute of Art and supported by Ropac. In a statement, Jones says her time with the gallery was "transformative" and expresses "pride" at what they have "accomplished together". She adds: "I'm now exploring different directions in my practice and want to take the time out to reflect and explore this independently." In the meantime, she is also working towards a show at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, due to open in March 2024.

Jones's desire for total autonomy is all the more striking given she is still in the earlier stages of her career. For more established artists, going it alone is arguably a less daunting prospect. In February, Peter Doig, an artist with a significant and longstanding market, announced his exit from Michael Werner gallery after 23 years together. Parinaz Mogadassi, Doig's wife and the owner of Tramps gallery in New York, said at the time that Doig had begun "working independently, is not represented by any gallery and has no plans at present to join another gallery".

Describing the relationship between any artist and dealer as "a delicate balance" of the professional and personal, Mogadassi added: "Ultimately, from an artist's perspective, the best way to be assured transparency in all dealings is to be the one directly leading the conversations surrounding one's work and life. You have to also feel there is a sense of like-mindedness." She confirmed to *The Art Newspaper* in mid-November that her husband is still content to operate without dealer representation.

### Rise of the artist agent

When United Talent Agency (UTA), one of the so-called "big three" US-headquartered talent agencies, launched a fine arts division in 2015, increasing artists' autonomy was at the forefront of its mission. The late lawyer Joshua Roth, who founded UTA Fine Arts, said at the time: "We believe there is room for a serious, professional representation structure in the art world, one that helps artists gain greater control of their careers and opens the doors to new and better opportunities."

Dealers argue that their profession already provides this structure and more – including a nurturing environment, an understanding of art history and long-established links with museums and private collectors. But as the fine art world has bled ever-deeper into luxury retail, fashion, TV, film, music and even sports, partnering with talent agents is becoming increasingly common for studio artists.

UTA Fine Arts quickly signed such vaunted names as Judy Chicago, Isaac Julien and Billy Al Bengston. Rival entertainment agencies WME (part of Frieze's parent company, Endeavor) and Creative Artists Agency (CAA) have built their own burgeoning lists of fine artists. Much of these agencies' mandate involves the commercial licensing of artists' works or their adaptation into film and television projects. But they also broker other, more creative types of deals with corporate clients and brand partners.

A growing number of boutique agencies has also sprung up as an alternative to the conglomerates. The French businesswoman Marine Tanguy

founded MTArt in 2015. Graham Southern (formerly of Blain Southern gallery) co-founded Southern & Partners, described as "an independent artist management consultancy", in September 2023.

Then there are the individual agents. Stefan Simchowicz, a Los Angeles-based collector, spent years advising and making markets for living artists, including Serge Attukwei Clottey (previously represented by Simon Lee gallery, which entered administration earlier this year), before opening his own gallery in 2021. Amir Shariat, a Vienna-based artist manager and collector, has overseen transactions for fast-rising artists Amoako Bofofo, Kennedy Yanko and others. Joe Hage, the founder of Heni Group and a partner at a London law firm, has quietly managed a handful of major talents, including Damien Hirst and the now gallery-free Doig, for many years.

As well as handling the all-important duties of marketing and PR, agents can help artists negotiate with major corporations. One example is the financing of a public sculpture for a new building – a type of deal with which the British sculptor Nick Hornby has extensive experience.

Hornby has gone without gallery representation for much of his career – not to deliberately sidestep the system, he says, but rather to manage the complexities of producing large-scale works more efficiently. This process often demands collaborating with engineers, fabricators, foundries and a slew of other specialists the average art dealer seldom engages with. As Hornby puts it: "We have to explore atypical scenarios to realise projects. This can lead to direct channels with collectors and funders." He says that his three public commissions in London to date all came to him directly.

### Trade-offs and ringfences

Among the benefits of self-representation are "a sense of agency" and the "ability to grow and shrink studio operations", Hornby says, noting that it is also encouraging "knowing my value is set by my own reputation and not that of a gallery". His studio team carries out much of the work typically undertaken by a dealer, including administration, logistics and archiving. The caveat is that Hornby must personally oversee most of his studio's high-level business interactions himself. "I can only be in one place at a time," he says. "It can be exhausting, and at times I find it hard to ringfence time to work purely on ideas, thinking, dreaming."

While Hornby is often approached by architects and interior designers, he says sales are split "fairly evenly" between art consultants, collectors and traditional gallery projects. Commissions have come from a diverse range of organisations including Tate, Glyndebourne, Matches Fashion, British Land and Kensington and Chelsea Council.

Meanwhile social media has amplified artists' exposure to a mass audience and put them in direct contact with buyers and potential partners. Although both data and anecdotes suggest relatively few sales are closed this way, art economist Clare McAndrew points out that Instagram and other social media platforms "can often be used as the initial discovery channel for sourcing and discovering new works and artists, with the actual sale itself then made through a gallery or fair, at auction or sourced directly from the artist".

For digital artists in particular, online channels can be a lifeline. Despite the bottom dropping out of the non-fungible token (NFT) market, Beeple, aka Mike Winkelmann, whose NFT-backed digital collage *Everydays: the First 5000 Days* famously made \$69.3m (with fees) in a 2021 Christie's sale, still appears to be thriving without gallery representation. While Winkelmann's 2.3 million Instagram following has no doubt generated business opportunities, an artist agent has played a role too. Loïc Gouzer, the former Christie's dealmaker, has been advising Winkelmann – at least periodically – since his work entered the fine art world.

Away from headline-grabbing sales, however, artists' greater potential for autonomy also comes at a time of enormous precarity. As Hornby puts it: "This is an extremely unusual time to be an artist. It can feel exhilarating and full of freedom, but also exposing and full of pressure."

Open  
Oct 27 – Dec 29

this  
is  
not a  
doll's  
house

Women Pulling  
At The Threads of  
Social Discourse

791-793 NE 125th St. North Miami, FL  
thecampgallery.com

Fama  
CNP