

Collecting Art in the Age of Access Interview with Rory Blain, Director of Sedition

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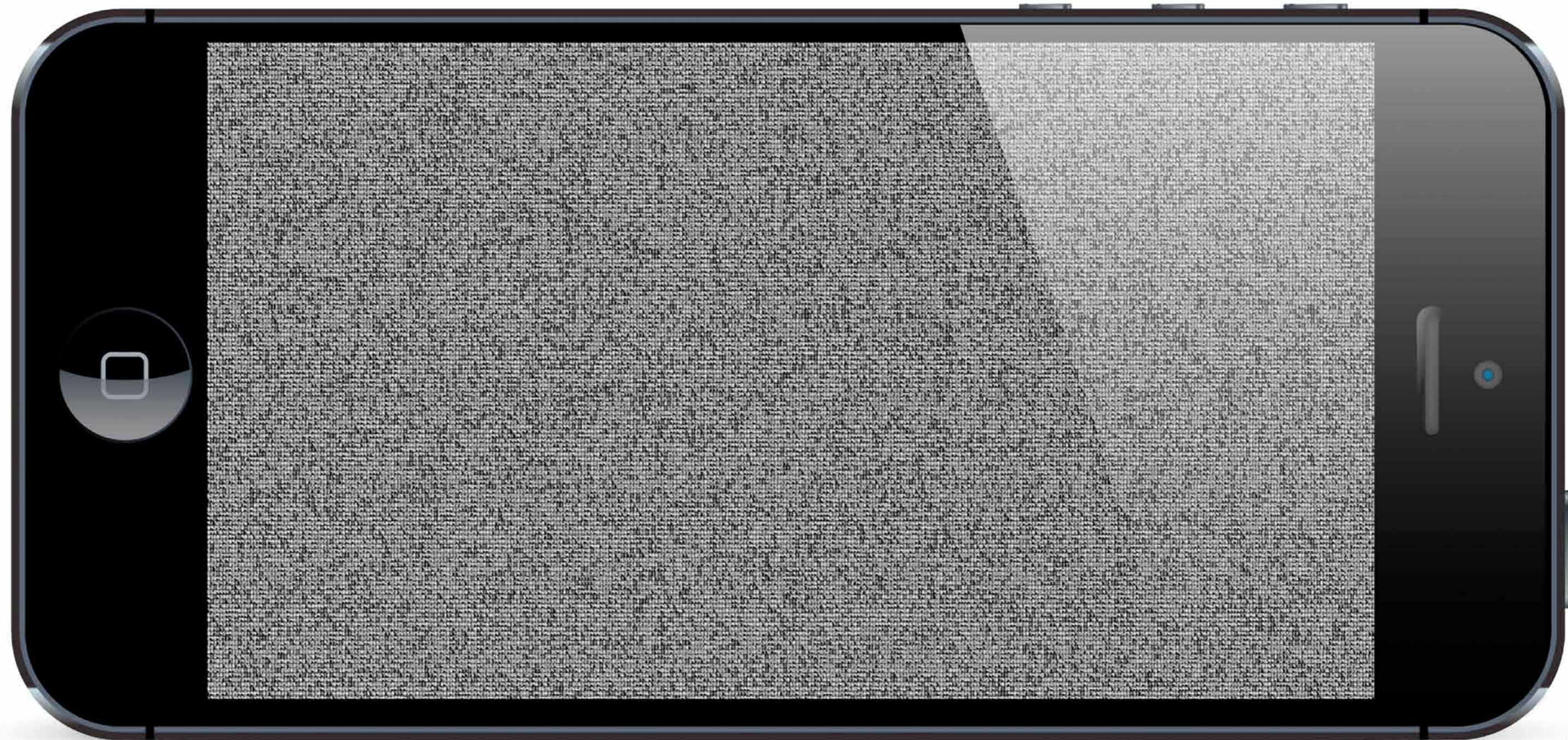
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In November 2011, Harry Blain, art dealer and co-founder of Haunch of Venison, and Robert Norton, chief executive of Saatchi online, launched Sedition, an online platform dedicated to selling digital editions of artworks by famous contemporary artists at very low prices. The title of an article by Lizzie Pook, then published in the

British *Stylist Magazine*, summarizes Sedition's offer with the effectiveness of an advertising campaign: "An Original Tracey Emin: Yours for £50." The platform achieves this unprecedented combination of high art and low prices by selling videos or digital images of artworks in large editions (up to 10 000 copies) for a price

between six and one hundred dollars, although some editions are more expensive. The artworks sold in this format are stored on Sedition's server (the "Vault"), and users are able to access them through a web browser or the Sedition apps for iPad, iPhone, Android, and Smart TV. Besides obtaining unlimited access to the artwork, which

can be viewed on any number of screens, the collector receives a "digital certificate of authenticity" and has the right to resell the artwork on Sedition's "Trade" platform, once the edition has sold out.

Although known for the Hirsts and Emins in its catalogue, Sedition has gradually introduced works by other artists whose art is meant to be experienced on a screen. Whether a video, digital animation, generative composition, or net art piece, the digital editions of these artworks are closer to their originals than a photograph of a painting or a rotating view of a sculpture. By focusing on smaller editions (under 500) of screen-based works by established or emerging artists, Sedition seems to be moving away from the hype to find a potential niche group among

art lovers who understand and appreciate the work of the artists they follow but cannot afford to buy an original, as well as collectors who are interested in digital media. The launch of an "Open Platform" in June 2013, which allows artists to sell their work directly, further expands the website's customer base, while the "Trade" platform, initiated in September, has created a secondary market within Sedition. The online platform is constantly evolving and responding to the challenge of selling digital files under the conditions of exclusivity dictated by the contemporary art market. In the following interview, which took place at the UNPAINTED Media Art Fair in Munich on January 19th, 2014, director Rory Blain explains how Sedition is establishing a new way of selling art.

When Sedition was launched in 2011, it was presented as a platform for selling art by world-famous artists at affordable prices. Is this your main objective? Are you aiming for what could be considered a niche market?

It is more about making the work of the world's greatest, most celebrated artists accessible to be purchased or collected by the everyman, or at least the everyman in the Western world. Our intention has always been to bring art to people who are interested in it and can afford a digital device such as an iPad or iPhone. Lawrence Weiner, one of the artists with whom we work, said in an interview that in order "to participate fully in your culture, it's important that you take some responsibility for the people that bring you your music, your literature, your art..." And one way

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Interview with Rory Blain, Director of Sedition'

to do that is to patronize them, to pay them for it. Obviously, when it comes to the world's most celebrated artists, this has only been available to very rich collectors. Therefore our objective is to take this to a wider context and a broader audience. The artists with whom we work love this model because they can make their work more accessible. At the same time, this model allows the public to engage in discussions on contemporary art in a way that they couldn't before.

Initially, you sold animated images, videos, or JPEGs of works created by famous artists, such as Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin, in other formats (sculpture, installation, painting, etc.). Later on, you began introducing video and new media artworks. How did this transition happen?

Our idea was always to offer video and new media art on the platform. We wanted to make sure that Sedition would be interesting for people, and Hirst and Emin are among the world's most popular artists—many collectors want to own their work. But we also wanted to offer a platform and some infrastructure to the artists who are developing their work in the online world. They don't typically have the infrastructure that would allow their work to become known and that's something we wanted to change. Now that the site has been up and running for a while, we tend to focus more on artworks that are made specifically for the online platform. There will still be the occasional artist who will give us a work that derives from a physical piece, but the shift has been very much towards works that are specifically designed for our online platform.

This year there is a fairly even balance between established, physical media artists and artists who only work online. The reason for this is that we are not solely dedicated to presenting net art or new media art, but ultimately intend to present great contemporary art. Great contemporary art comes from all stripes, and therefore it is necessary to have artists like Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, Mat Collishaw, Yoko Ono, or Bill Viola, alongside other names such as Casey Reas, Aaron Koblin, or Matt Pyke. We are trying to present the best of what's available in contemporary art, not just the best of what's available in new media, or what's available in traditional gallery media.

Still, the work of some of these artists—for instance Rafaël Rozendaal or Angelo Plessas—which is usually interactive, loses that quality in Sedition since the platform does not allow for interaction.

Yes, this is something that we hope to develop down the line. At the moment, Sedition only supports video files and JPEGs, so the artworks that are created through a generative process or an interactive process become a record of the original event in the digital edition. But that is something that is going to change: for instance, one of the things that we're doing with performance art is to offer a private view of the performance

through a URL that will allow the collector to view it live and interact with it, and afterwards obtain a video file which will be the digital limited edition. So we're getting closer to that interactive, real-time world. We are in the process of fully integrating it on the site, although it's an awful lot of programming.

In some cases, an original artwork, which is, for instance, a generative work and which costs several thousand dollars in an art gallery, is visually identical to the digital edition of this same artwork, which costs less than thirty dollars. Does this create a conflict between Sedition and the art galleries?

Not really, because the pieces in Sedition have all been changed slightly for the platform, so it is never the same piece exactly. There was a file, early on, that was exactly the same as its physical counterpart, but we removed it for that very reason. Still, this is not unprecedented. Take, for instance, some of the photographs by Andreas Gursky. The big, full-size framed piece is a physical object that recently sold at auction for \$1.5 million dollars, but you can get that same image online, and put it on your computer as a desktop background or even use it as a screensaver. So it is not unprecedented to be able to get the same basic image. How it is presented, the physical object, the actual artefact itself, that's the difference.

One artist told me that he sees the digital editions of his artworks as sketches. Are you worried that the artworks on Sedition might be considered as lesser works or of a lower value?

It depends... I think that describing these artworks as "lesser" or "lower" is slightly pejorative. What I would say is that they are designed to be more accessible and less expensive by virtue of the fact that they come in multiples. And again, this is not unprecedented. There is a very long history of this kind of artworks in the art world with etchings, woodcuts, prints, and silkscreens. The multiple is something that has been around for thousands of years already; this is just the modern media equivalent.

When a collector buys an artwork in Sedition, he or she owns a copy of a file that stays on the platform's server and receives a digital certificate. In this manner, isn't ownership a fiction?

Yes, it's true, although the ownership of a digital artefact is a slightly bizarre idea. What we do is allow you to download the artwork into the app and obtain the digital number certificate, which tells you which artwork you have. Still, collectors only start to feel a real sense of ownership when they can sell the artwork again, and through the fact that by owning a digital edition they might take a loss or make a profit in the same way that they could in the real world. I don't like the idea of the commodification of art. The art itself is the true purpose of Sedition, but we must admit that the possibility of reselling has been a great

reassurance to a lot of people who are collecting these digital editions. Since we opened the "Trade" section, Ryoji Ikeda has been a star performer on the secondary market with the digital edition of his artwork "A Single Number That Has 124,761,600 Digits," which started out at £5 and is now selling for £70 to £75. This gives a sense of ownership to the collectors who bought it and who can now see how its value has quickly risen. In terms of real ownership, though, it is no different from owning a physical artwork in the sense that the imagery always resides with the artist, no matter who buys it.

I think that, in the end, it is an educational process: people need to get used to the idea of a digital edition, just as they took years to get used to the idea that an arrangement of pigment on canvas has an intrinsic value. It's exactly the same with an arrangement of pixels on the screen: the reason why it has an intrinsic value is because the artist designed it, and what you are paying for is that artist's idea.

I would say that, in Sedition, collectors pay for access to the artwork rather than for owning a physical object.

Yes and that's really the key: collectors pay for access. They have the piece; they can sell it and potentially make money. Therefore, they have ownership of that artefact. But, as has always been the case, the ownership of the idea and the imagery resides with the artist.

The piece by Ryoji Ikeda illustrates a successful example, but I wonder if there will be many other editions going on the secondary market, since most of them come in very large numbers and may not sell out.

Mostly, it is the early editions that are very large, but many are getting close to selling out already. The majority of the newer pieces are in much smaller editions: in the last six months we have released editions of 500 or under, and they are selling out quite quickly. There are about seven or eight artworks on the site now that are within 20 to 50 editions of being sold out. I expect this will happen quite shortly, so there will soon be a whole host of new works appearing on the trading platform.

As a collector, am I allowed to show my digital editions in an exhibition?

No, as a collector and a private individual you can display the artworks in your home or private surroundings on as many devices as you like; there is no limit to that. But if you want to display the artwork publicly, then you have to pay a public display license. This condition ensures that the artist retains control over the public presentation of the artwork. We obviously don't charge museums because it is both in the artist's interest and our own interest to show the artworks there. Another possibility is to have a commissioned artwork: Ian Schrager commissioned *Prosopopoeia*, a new artwork by Mat Collishaw, for the London EDITION Hotel. The artwork was sent as a gift to all the guests at the hotel. This artwork is



Mat Collishaw, *Prosopopeia*.
© Sedition.



Damien Hirst, *Idolatriy*,
displayed on iMac.
© Sedition.

the new focus of his collection, and it is displayed on screens in the hotel rooms. But to do this, the hotel pays a yearly subscription fee.

Do you establish a relation of exclusivity with the artists?

We don't tend to do that. We ask for exclusivity for the work that they give us, so that it is not available everywhere else as well, but it is somewhat complex: some artists come to us with prior relationships; some come from galleries with which we work (in which case we collaborate with the gallery), while others come from museums with which we have shown exhibitions and they have recommended the artist to us. In any case, we don't represent artists; we are not a traditional gallery. Instead, we are simply offering them a platform from which to sell their work, so we are not interested in trying to restrict with whom else they can work.

Sedition's relationship with the artists seems to be clearly differentiated by two main sections: curated and open platform. How did this division into two sections come to be?

The curated section is, if you will, the gallery idea, the white cube concept. We consider that it is helpful to have curators and experts in the field try to guide us towards the body of work that they feel makes sense, the art that is worth looking at. The curated section is the part that we are standing behind and presenting as a selection of what is good in the contemporary landscape. The open platform, on the other hand, is exactly that, a free forum where any artist can sign up

and present their work. The idea is that there are hundreds of people out there of whom we may not have heard, "or whose work we may not have seen", who are creating interesting artworks. We wanted to give them a place where they can present their work, so we provide them with the tools to do it. The open platform is therefore a more self-regulated environment.

Since all the artworks are stored on Sedition's server, what would happen if the company had to close down?

We have been working on this recently. We are making arrangements with Amazon in order to use space on their servers if, for some reason, we had to close ours down. Consider, though, that the artworks can be downloaded into apps, so you do not always depend on a server, and the apps would still work, maybe with some updating after a certain time. In any case, we will make the files accessible on a permanent server somewhere. But at the moment, they are locked in place for about 20 to 25 years.

Can a collector donate his or her collection to another person or institution?

This will be possible in the future. We now have a gifting service that allows users to buy an artwork and give it to someone else. But it is not possible at the moment to gift something that is already in a collector's vault. We will be introducing this option later this year. Basically, it will be possible to transfer an artwork from one's own collection to another collector inside Sedition.

Sedition was launched at a time when several other initiatives (such as VIP Art, Artspace or Paddle8) emerged. It seems that the contemporary art market is increasingly interested in the possibilities of digital media. Do you think that this is a good time to explore new ways of selling art?

The idea for Sedition was actually first developed around 1997-1998, but it was impossible to do it at that time because screen resolution was nowhere good enough. The two drivers that have made Sedition possible are screen resolution and Internet bandwidth: the ability to deliver the artworks on the Internet and the ability to display them the way artists want them to be seen—these are the things that have made it possible for us, as well as the proliferation of smartphones, tablets, and smart TVs.

As for the contemporary art market, I don't think that there is a huge shift of focus towards the online world, but it certainly is "the new thing," and it is getting a lot of attention. Yet it is not going to bury other areas; it just widens the landscape of what is possible. Is it a good time for it? I don't know if it's good or bad; I think it's inevitable. We have reached a point where no one can ignore the online world anymore, so museums, galleries, collectors, and artists are now all aware that the online world exists and that it is necessary to have a presence there or at least be aware of it.

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1 See s[edition] at www.seditionart.com.