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Divine Genius, Subversive Hero, or Creative Entrepreneur? Exploring Various Facets of the Artist as a Mythical Figure*

People have always related art to the creation and transmission of myths. While myth as a theme in art has been thoroughly addressed, research about the “mythic” nature of the artist figure is far less common. The 20th and 21st centuries brought challenges to the status of art and artists in society, historically situated archetypes and stereotypes that we associate with the figure of the “artist” still survive to this day (e.g. “genius”, “subversive artists”, “child prodigy”, “eccentric”, etc.). In this paper, we set out to analyze various tropes used persistently to describe artists and explore how relevant the resulting myths are in (self) perceptions of Serbian contemporary artists. Our multidisciplinary approach to this topic combines a historical-theoretical and empirical perspective. Through historical research of the relevant literature, we described and mapped the

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key tropes of the (mythical) artist figure as it developed in Western culture. In the theoretical analysis we address the inseparability of digital culture with everyday life of people today, which we call postdigital. We explore how the transition into contemporaneity affects the determination of the “artist-figure”, i.e., how it impacts the contemporary process of myth-making. Following our historical-theoretical analysis, we conducted five in-depth interviews with contemporary Serbian artists to understand better how relevant the artist-myth tropes are for their self-perception.

Key words: myth, artist identity, history of the artist, postdigital, Serbia

Божански геније, субверзивни херој или креативни предузетник? Истраживање различитих аспеката уметника као митске фигуре

Људи су уметност одувек повезивали са стварањем и преношењем митова. Док је мит као тема у уметности детаљно обрађен, истраживања о „митској“ природи личности уметника су далеко ређа. XX и XXI век донели су изазове статусу уметности и уметника у друштву, а историјски лоцирани архетипови и стереотипи које повезујемо са фигуром „уметника“ и данас опстају (нпр. „генијалност“, „субверзивни уметници“, „чудо од детета“, „ексцентрични“ итд.). У овом раду анализирамо различите тропе који се упорно користе за описивање уметника и истражујемо колико су митови који из тога произилазе релевантни у (само)перцепцији српских савремених уметника. Наш мултидисциплинарни приступ овој теми комбинује историјско-теоријску и емпиријску перспективу. Истражујући релевантну литературу, описали смо и мапирали кључне тропе (митске) личности уметника и њихов развој у западној култури. У теоријској анализи се бавимо неодвојивошћу дигиталне културе од свакодневног живота људи данас, који називамо постдигиталним. Испитујемо како прелазак у савременост утиче на одређивање „фигуре уметника“, односно како утиче на савремени процес стварања митова. Пратећи нашу историјско-теоријску анализу, урадили смо пет дубинских интервјуа са савременим српским уметницима како бисмо боље разумели колико су тропи уметника и мита релевантни за њихову самоперцепцију.

Кључне речи: мит, идентитет уметника, историја уметника, постдигитална култура, Србија

1. INTRODUCTION

“The human urge to create does not find expression in the works of art alone: it also produces religion and mythology and the social institutions corresponding to these”
(Otto Rank 1932: xiii).

Throughout the history of Western culture, the idea of who or what an artist is has changed depending on social, cultural, or political contexts and points of view. Divine genius, Bohemian, creative entrepreneur, professional or amateur artist – there has never been consensus on the main definition or characteristics of the artist. Still, various definitions influence the development of the art field and artists’ identities. However, certain tropes or characteristics that underlie the figure of the artist (re) appear in different contexts inextricably linked with the concept of myth.

In Greek, the word “mythos” means story. Different scientific disciplines, including anthropology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and literature, offer divergent theories, approaches, and definitions of myth. *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (11th edition) gives two main classifications of myth. Myth as a traditional story created to explain certain practices or beliefs. The other as a popular belief or tradition that has grown around something or someone – especially one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society (which can also be a false or unfounded notion). As Robert A. Segal observes, what unites the study of myth across disciplines are the three main questions – of origin, function, and subject matter (Segal 2004, 2). Our study is mainly informed by the question of function, i.e. why and how myths persist. Through his “myth model,” Arthur Asa Berger demonstrates that “myths permeate our culture and play a role in many aspects of our everyday life” (Berger 2013; 2016). We are interested in how myths persist or transform in contemporary society, as well as how they shape people’s perceptions – specifically tropes connected to the figure of the artist.

Our understanding is that tropes are manifestations of the myth of the artist. We believe these tropes determine how the image of an artist is constructed and perceived. We explore how different tropes are reproduced and the mythical figure of the artist transformed through time. In the empirical part of the research, we examine the conceptions contemporary artists have about the notion of an artist and how they correspond to

existing tropes. The study aims to shed light on the relationship between artists' identity and (re)productions of the myth of "being an artist."

Most writings on the history and biography of artists reference the mythical nature of the figure of the artist, still there are almost no studies that closely examine this relation. Also, as Catherine Soussloff stresses, while much attention has been given to demythologizing the institutions of art and "author" (Barthes 1977, 142–148; Foucault 1977, 113–138), no such consideration was given to the figure of the artist (Soussloff 1997, 142). Rather than differentiating the artists by their social and historical types, means of creation,¹ or social category,² we approach the figure of the artist as a singular concept. This figure is supplemented, enacted, and perpetuated by individuals, institutions, and society, with distinctive tropes that constitute the "myth of the artist." We historically explore the mythical figure of the artist as it developed in the Western cultural tradition.

2. THE FIGURE OF THE ARTIST: MYTHS AND TROPES

Otto Kurz and Erns Kris in their psychoanalytically inspired historical study connect the artist figure with myth, postulating that the image of the artist is based on the earliest Greek biographies of artists. It is a literary form that will canonize art history discipline during the Renaissance beginning with Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of Artists (Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori 1550, 1546)*. They write that these borrowings "all stem from the period in which the figure of the artist had only just emerged from the realm of myth; they preserve the conception and many elements of myths and transmit them to posterity" (Kurz & Kris 1979, 22). Paul Barolsky similarly writes that the history of the artist is inseparable from the historical fiction about the artist, stressing that Vasari's *Lives* have deep roots in "poetry, fiction and myth" (Barolsky 2010, xv, x).

Research by Kurz and Kris illustrates how individual artists up until the 20th century "enacted" historical tropes, often with little or no alteration. As Cathrine Soussloff, whose research builds on Kurz and Kris's, writes: "The role of the unconscious in determining the personality of the

¹ While it is true that human creativity and artistic expression is documented from 30.000 years ago and widespread in human cultures, we believe that the figure or the myth of the artist is inseparable from the institution of Western fine art and its historical development.

² Artist as a social category is the dominant framework in empirical social science research and proposes a view of artists as a professional group. This approach mainly deals with questions of social and economic conditions of artists' life and practice with policy-related objectives (see Karttunen 1998).

artist, or of any individual, is comparable to the way that the stereotypical image of the artist, found in the biographies of the artist, determines the individual artist [...] Here the general, the stereotypic – what was termed the mythic by Kris and Kurz – coexists with the particular, the individual” (Soussloff 1997, 117). Rudolf and Margot Wittkower also believe that artists’ identities are formed as “a composite of myth and reality, of conjectures and observations, of make-believe and experience” (Wittkower & Wittkower 1963, 237).

The key point for this study is that the formation of the image of the artist is not a static process. Edmund Feldman notes something that history clearly shows – that characteristics of the artist-figure change over time but do not disappear (Feldman 1982, vii). He sees the modern artist as an incarnation and hybrid of different types of artists – who “consolidate” and “renew” the heritage of artist-image (Ibid, 221–222).³ Kurz and Kris also write that in each phase of the historical development of the artist figure “new social types appear alongside the old without ever entirely displacing them” (Kurz & Kris 1979, 6). Drawing on all these findings, we assume that the figure of the artist is a socio-historical construction based on overlapping tropes accumulating and supplementing through history.

Even though, as these authors stress, the birth of the artist-figure is tied to ancient mythical archetypes, the artist grew into a mythical figure in its own right. Historical tropes constitutive for establishing the legend and myth of the artist have been copied through centuries. They first appeared in the Renaissance and fully matured in the Romantic period. It is only in postmodern and digital culture that the figure of the artist will again go through significant changes, bringing about new constitutive tropes of the “artist myth.”

Based on the extensive review of key literature on the figure of the artist through history, we have identified eight tropes integral to defining the artist as a mythical figure. In this paper, we propose two additional tropes that represent the newest transformation of the artist-figure in contemporary and postdigital cultural contexts. We argue that together with the eight historical tropes, these constitute the contemporary artist-figure and point to the evolution of the myth of the artist: 1. Genius (trope

³ Feldman addresses the question of the definition of the artist through types of artists, often mixing historical and social categories in his definitions of “shaman”, “child artist”, “naive artist” (artist without formal training), “folk artists”, “renaissance artist”, etc. Feldman also included illustrators and industrial designers in his family of artists, a field we today equate with the creative industry, which is in many aspects at odds with traditional Western art institutions.

markers: inspiration, originality, creativity, giftedness, transcendent talent, divine); 2. Individuality (t. m: inner life, eccentricity, mysticism, living on the edge of society); 3. Autonomy (t. m: autonomy of art, individual freedom, creative autochthony); 4. Heroism (t. m: genius-hero, artist vs. state, falling hero, cultural civilizer); 5. Child prodigy (t. m: early giftedness, the discovery of talent, innate genius); 6. Melancholy (t. m: *mal du siècle*, artist separated from the world and rejected by it); 7. Subversiveness (t. m: criticism, defiance of the art establishment, integrity); 8. Fame (t. m: name of the artist, recognition by art institutions and peers, visibility); 9. *Social responsibility* (t. m: social identity issues, the democratization of art, social engagement); 10. *Entrepreneurship* (t. m: artist as an enterprise, professionalism, self-promotion, networking, business tools, and skills).

The proposed taxonomy is by no means an exhaustive list of all characteristics and identity markers employed to describe artists through history. We offer a new classification centered on tropes based on key groups of markers that have proven particularly resistant to social changes and that today influence artist identity formation, art curriculums, and institutional and state practices related to art production.⁴ For the brevity of the study, we will present a mere glimpse of the rich and complex history of artist-tropes and their contemporary counterparts which together characterize the mythical figure of the artist – enacted in contemporary artists' identities through complex processes of social and psychological re-interpretation.

Genius

The first time that society celebrated the artist as a genius with divine qualities, and viewed their work as miraculous, magnificent, grandiose, and sublime was during the Renaissance. Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* was instrumental in formulating this image. He called these individuals "artificers" (lat. *artifex*) as it was believed that the artist came from God – a transcendental talent with "divine inspiration," but also in the sense of the artist as the image of God the Creator – the first and ultimate artist. The idea of the *originality* of artists, together with their profound technical skill, can be tied to the concept of *Deus artifex*.⁵ In the biographical account of Leonardo da Vinci,

⁴ For other attempts at classification of the artist-figure see (Feldman 1982; Serapik 2000; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2008) or sociological studies focusing on the status-of-the-artist problem (Lena & Lindemann 2014; Karttunen 1998; Mitchell & Karttunen 1992).

⁵ For more on the concept of "divine" artist and artist as genius in the Renaissance see Emison 2004, Kemp 1977.

Vasari writes that “each of his actions is so divine that he leaves behind all other men and clearly makes himself known as a genius endowed by God (which he is) rather than created by human artifice” (Vasari 1991, 284). In the Renaissance, the idea of the artist as a genius (*arte et ingenium*) became a phrase that was transmitted without special thought or criticism (Emison 2004, 332). The concept connoted extraordinary creativity, talent, inspiration, focus, and technical prowess, and was canonized in Romanticism. Although the idea of the artist as a divine genius lost much of its power in the 20th century, its remnants lie in terms like “inspiration,” “extraordinary technique,” and “talent”, present to this day.

Individuality

The figure of the shaman in Neolithic times was the first instance when a gifted, artistically skilled individual was set apart from the rest of the community. Feldman designates the shaman as the first artist type, saying that “the group behaved differently toward this child, reinforcing and augmenting his ‘strangeness’” (Feldman 1982, 9). Shaman’s role was to communicate with unseen forces and present inner visions and experiences to the community. The separate and inner life of “the artist”, and his ability to tap into the “collective unconscious”, appears again and again throughout history. In classical Antiquity, we see the emergence of the artisan’s *mystique*, a specific social and psychological aura around craftsmen which allowed them to rise above their low class of manual workers (Feldman 1982, 63). The Renaissance brought us a cult of *individual* artists. Michelangelo, as a paradigm figure, birthed the first stories of eccentricities and vices of artists (Emison 2004, 16), which will become a dominant lived trope with Bohemian artists⁶ whose defiance of convention led to additional isolation from society. This trope persisted well into the 20th century and is today present in stereotypes of otherness and eccentricity of artists as well as in contemporary celebrity culture (Sturgis 2006, 28).

Autonomy

The question of artists’ autonomy should primarily be understood in relation to the autonomy of art, fixed as a concept in the 19th century with the institutionalization of the art field and the birth of Aestheticism.

⁶ It is important to note that up until the 20th century, women artists were excluded from the myth of the artist, something which became especially visible during the 19th century when the figure of Bohemian artist emerged with an eccentric lifestyle that was unattainable for most women in that period (see Sturgis 2006, 8).

Catherine Soussloff believes that the idea of autonomous (absolute) art is what makes the artist absolutely different (Soussloff 1997, 5). But the artist's autonomy is also a question of their (elusive) independence from the economic system, as well as the creative autonomy of the artist from art institutions and their role models/teachers. Modern times would paint the artist as an ideal model of individual freedom. The idea of an artist being singularly devoted to their craft, often to the detriment of their everyday existence, emerged during the Renaissance. This motif grew further in the Romantic period and survives to the present times in the stereotype of the "starving artist," uncompromising in their devotion to art and unprepared for the financial and social realities of the world.

Heroism

The artist-hero trope shares its origin with the concept of artistic genius and is most connected to the Greek mythical origins of the figure of the artist. Kris and Kurz show that it was precisely the heroization of the artist with exaggeration of their moral qualities during the Renaissance which raised the figure to the status of divinity (Kurz & Kris 1979, 13–59). Gaztambide-Fernandez, addressing the historical evolution of this trope, speaks of the 19th century artist as a "cultural civilizer", whose role was to contribute to the civilizing project of modernity (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2008, 239). Sturgis described this as a myth of the artist battling hostile, philistine society and opposing bourgeois culture and values (Sturgis 2006, 7, 20). Balzac's 1837 short story "The Unknown Masterpiece" was, on the other hand, a key influence in the formation of the topos of a *falling hero* pursuing great and often unattainable goals. This narrative goes back to the myths of Orpheus and Prometheus and continues to evolve after Balzac's Frenhofer in the image of Don Quixote and Faust (Barolsky 2010, ix–xv).

Child prodigy

The narrative about a chance discovery of a talented child or youth, usually by a wealthy benefactor, is a story we see repeating over and over again in biographies of artists. This formula appears in many of Vasari's accounts starting with the life of Giotto, but also outside of the European context – for example, in a story about the discovery of the 18th century Japanese painter Maruyama Okyo by a samurai (Kurz & Kris 1979, 13–37). These stories usually present a youth of modest background whose urge to create and vitality of artistic spirit are so strong they cannot be curtailed. Kurz and Kris explain this recurring theme in terms of universal

interest about the childhood of exceptional figures whose uniqueness of talent is manifested and recognized early (Ibid, 13). According to Kurz and Kris, the idea of innate genius with no teacher or training is a crucial element of the heroization of the artist, which persists today through the idea of the importance of early recognition and (undoubtable) genius of artistic talent.

Melancholy

Patricia Emison writes that Michelangelo spoke of himself as abject, weak, and tormented, while topics of exhaustion and anguish were more present in his work than the topic of triumph (Emison 2004, 10). The theme of the artist as a melancholic figure became a model artist self-consciously adopted in the 18th century (Sturgis 2006, 7). During Romanticism, the idea of an artist as a solitary figure was consolidated through the concept of *mal du siècle* – with the focus on the inner life and suffering of the hero-artist rejected and neglected by the world. Sturgis notes that the term “philistine” was coined during this time precisely to describe indifference and hostility towards artists (Ibid, 15). Also, romantic artists were fascinated by the dark and irrational themes, which Sturgis believes led to the creation of the image of the artist on the verge of disintegration, reflected in figures like Van Gogh, Egon Schiele, and Munch (Ibid, 27).

Subversiveness

Rebelliousness and defiance of the convention would become a major archetype in Romanticism. Robert Folkenflik writes that in the 18th century the poet, represented through figures like Shakespeare and Dante, became an opposing voice to the reigning monarchs rather than their spokesman (Folkenflik 1982, 107). Only when artists gained some social and economic independence from their benefactors the subversive artist could appear. Sturgis speaks of Gustave Courbet, imprisoned and exiled for his involvement with the Paris Commune, as the exemplary case of a defiant bohemian artist “confronting the bourgeois with painting which was considered ugly and subversive” (Sturgis 2006, 19–20). The 20th century avant-garde would turn this subversive eye toward the art itself, resisting and opposing institutional norms and the status quo. Edmund Feldman called this type the “Revolutionary artist” who he believed appeared along with the Western fascination with the idea of progress in the early 19th century, a point marking an opening up of the opportunity for artists to take part in the transformation of society (Feldman 1982, 102).

Fame

The artist as an individual figure would have never formed in society's imagination without the appearance of artists' signatures, or the de-anonymization of art production in the early Renaissance period. Vasari's *Lives* were essential in raising individual artists to fame and promoting the idea that great artists were also great persons (Feldman 1982, 84). Also, as Emison writes: "Reputation grew in the sixteenth century in no small part because the reputation of reputation grew" and it became evident that "one's name might outlive one's accomplishments" (Emison 2004, 84). Since then, the value and quality of the artwork has been closely intertwined with the personal success and status of its creator. Seeking fame instead of monetary gain was considered exemplary during the Renaissance (Ibid, 77-79), and it became an important currency for the artist and their benefactor. These models would inform artists' dependence on public visibility and recognition by their peers, art institutions, and audiences, as well as the division between "pure" art production and what we today call the profit-driven creative industries.

3. A MYTH IN THE MAKING? THE ARTIST IN CONTEMPORARY AND POSTDIGITAL SOCIETY

While historical tropes of genius, individuality, autonomy, heroism, child prodigy, melancholy, subversiveness, and fame persist in different forms today, they've been supplemented with tropes that grew out of cultural changes that came with postmodernism and the digital revolution. The emergence and ubiquitous use of new distributed digital technologies have brought profound changes as they have become mediators and constituent parts of everyday life. Interrelated with advances in technology, Steven Félix-Jäger identifies globalization, pluralism, and social consciousness as key factors underlying the shift in understanding and defining our present condition (Félix-Jäger 2020, 35-37). The cultural frame surrounding artists has massively expanded with the overlap of national, transnational, and emerging global narratives (Félix-Jäger 2020, 88). Affected by the postmodern paradigm shift, in which identity is revealed as a social construct and a fluid, hybrid concept (Hall 2000, 15-30; Michael 1996; Bhabha 1994; Stockhammer 2012), artists become cultural subjects deeply embedded in a network of multiple cultures, societies, identities, ideologies, and markets. Artists have taken a *socially responsible* role, which has changed how they create and operate in the world. Socially responsible artists create work that "challenges boundaries,

rules, and expectations and disturbs the social order to promote social transformation and ‘reconstruction’” (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2008, 244). As “border-crossers” (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2008, 245–246) or “cultural nomads” (Bourriaud 2009), artists bring to the fore historically and locationally contextualized issues affecting societies, such as identity politics, marginalized social groups, ecology, and so on. Contemporary artists take on social responsibility as a new key trope characterized by commenting on or engaging in social issues. They strive to produce works that create “relations between individuals and groups, between the artist and the world, and, by way of transitivity, between the beholder and the world” (Bourriaud 1998, 11).

Added to the existing cultural complexity is the technological layer embroidered in the fabric of our contemporary postdigital condition – “a condition in which digital disruption is not transcended as such, but becomes routine or business as usual” (Berry & Dieter 2015, 6). We use the term *postdigital* to mark the disappearing boundaries between physical and digital existence, the subtle social and cultural shifts, and the ways sociality is changed through the increasing use of computational infrastructure.⁷ More specifically, we refer to how distributed digital technologies affect artists, art production, and art institutions. Technologies offer artists opportunities to use digital technologies as artistic media, for self-promotion and visibility on an unprecedented scale, as well as direct reach and interaction with customers. However, artists also meet new or, at least, more complex challenges. Postdigital cultural spaces dominated by the market value require not only digital literacy, but also the acquisition of a much broader set of technical, legal, financial, marketing, and other skills or to rely on other skilled professionals. As Deresiewicz puts it, “[...] now we’re all supposed to be our own boss, our own business: our own agent; our own label; our own marketing, production, and accounting departments” (Deresiewicz 2015). In short, the age of postdigital has given rise to *artist-entrepreneurs*. Apart from being a team or network coordinator with economic and legal responsibilities (Grefe 2016, 26) and maintaining a presence across different media, artists also face the challenge of producerism, hyperproduction, and democratization of creativity as digital creative tools have become available to all. Due to the possibility of everyone being an artist, artists-entrepreneurs must also become a brand to maintain the myth of the artist. Self-branding influences how customers and the media approach and recognize artists

⁷ For more definitions of postdigital see Cramer 2015, 12–26; Savin-Baden 2021.

(Grefe 2016, 169). Branding also applies to art production. Instead of only creating cultural products for their intrinsic value, artists are under pressure to create experiences around those products, including the creator's life, lifestyle, or process (Deresiewicz 2015).

Interplay between these new tropes, defined as *social responsibility* and *entrepreneurship*, and their historical counterparts characterizes the contemporary figure of the artist. The presence and importance of these new tropes point to the contemporary myth-making process, i.e. the further evolution of the myth of the artist we argue took place.

4. (RE)PRODUCTION OF ARTIST TROPES IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN ARTISTS

Drawing from the historical-theoretical analysis presented above, we wanted to explore in what ways contemporary artists in Serbia negotiate, reproduce, and/or challenge the identified tropes in their understandings of what it means to be an artist. To do this, we designed an exploratory qualitative study that relies on semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of contemporary artists ($N = 5$) selected from the researchers' extended networks.

In 1989, Frey and Pommerehne concluded that no universally correct definition of the artist exists (cited in: Karttunen 1998, 8) – creating what Karttunen (1998) calls the “status-of-the-artist study” problem. Researchers differentiate between the questions of “who is an artist” and “what is an artist” – the former being a sociological and the latter being an ontological category (Mitchell & Karttunen 1992, 175). These categories very much influence each other in terms of both artist identity formation and the development of the art world. In this study, we follow a broad definition of the artist in line with UNESCO's 1980 “Recommendation concerning the status of the artist” which defines the artist as “any person who creates or gives creative expression to, or recreates works of art, who considers his artistic creation to be an essential part of his life, who contributes in this way to the development of art and culture and who is or asks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not he is bound by any relations of employment or association” (cf. Karttunen 1998, 7).

Considering the exploratory nature of this inquiry, we opted for a small sample size but we tried to increase its diversity by including participants from different art fields, career stages, professional affiliations, and gender. Ana (37, female) is a new media artist and PhD candidate in digital and new media art with extensive formal education and training in visual arts. She works for a research institute trying to bridge new media art

and science. Bane (52, male) is a multi-instrumentalist, composer, record producer, and head of a music and video production company. Gorica (32, female) is a poet who also works as a journalist, translator, and language teacher. Her poems were published on social media, in magazines, and in poetry books. Vuk (34, male) is a classically trained actor who works for a state theater company. Dunja (37, female) is a painter who also works as an HR manager. She has been actively painting since 2016 and has organized several solo exhibits.

We designed the interview protocol to provide a general but loose interview structure that offers enough flexibility to focus on participants' relevant experiences and perceptions of importance to the overall research aim. The interview protocol reflects the key structural aspects of the identified tropes: (1) characteristics of the artist, (2) the relationship between the artist and society, and (3) universal vs. context-dependent characteristics of a trope. Our interview strategy was to start with open questions without directly referencing any specific tropes in order to allow relevant markers to emerge naturally.⁸ The interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and were held in person, with the exception of one that took place online at the participant's request.

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that the available tropes represent salient reference points in our participants' conceptions of the artist. Consistent with the extant literature (e.g., Feldman 1982; Kurz & Kris 1979), these tropes typically blend, revealing a multifaceted understanding of what it means to be an artist. As such, our findings provide an empirical perspective intended to contribute to the status-of-the-artist debate and further explore the "ontological" question of "what is an artist."

It is important to note that the tropes presented in this article were not equally salient in the interviews. Above all, our respondents described an artist by making references to a persistent desire to create, search for a unique expression reflecting one's inner life, and an uncompromising commitment to art practices. The participants stressed that they understand these characteristics as universal – shared between artists regardless of the medium, time, and place in which they create.

For instance, the echoes of the *genius trope* usually appeared through references to the importance of originality and striving for the uniqueness

⁸ Some examples of the interview questions include: *What was crucial to start considering yourself an artist? What do all artists have in common, regardless of the medium in which they create? What is the artist's role in society? What does it mean to be an artist in present-day Serbia?*

of expression in accounts of the interviewed artists. “For an artist, the medium doesn’t matter,” Ana stated before adding, “you should learn how to use it to make your art unique; no one can do what I do.” As Bora put it, “that’s the beauty of art – to find a new way to play something or to use an instrument in a new way, and if it creates some emotions in people – that’s what art is about.” Interestingly, our participants expressed diverging views on the nature and significance of innate talent. Some participants discussed talent – conceived as a natural artistic ability – as an important characteristic of the artist, although not a defining one. In Gorica’s words, “I know there are people who do not believe in talent, but I do. To create great art, many things need to come together, and one of them has to be talent.” This contrasts with other participants, like Vuk, who said, “I don’t think talent is very important and I don’t know what talent is because without practice talent doesn’t exist.”

The emphasis on inner life emerged as another salient category in the interviews, illustrating the endurance of the *individuality* trope. Dunja described her artistic process as creating spaces “in which you give yourself some permissions” and a space “of exploration of what I’ll do and how I’ll do it [...] where I don’t have to do anything, but I can do whatever I want.” The participants did not discuss the emphasis on inner life as an end in itself but rather as a source of unique expression described above or as an opportunity to connect with audiences. For instance, Ana described art as “projecting oneself into the observed.” Further, Vuk described the artist as “someone who knows how to express themselves in a way that is not ordinary and to present their subjective view of the reality that we all experience in our own ways while managing to connect us somehow.”

Throughout the interviews, the participants recurrently discussed the conflicting dynamics between art and other practices bringing to the fore the significance of the *autonomy* trope. Our analysis revealed that the interviewed artists identified several sources of potential instrumentalization of art. Gorica discussed ideology in this context stating, “there are simply topics that are acceptable and more interesting to foreign and domestic investors [...] and I think that is quite disastrous; there is a lot of ideology in art, which is nothing new and it doesn’t have to be a bad thing in itself, but I don’t think ideology should come before art.” Ana identified the threats of extreme personification of art in the context of the attention economy in the digital environment. She said, “I think art should be a painting or whatever. It should exist on its own – the artist does not have to be present in all that.” Bora discussed his fears

of technology gaining priority over art in music and said, “I adopted all possible forms of new technology, but I never let them lead me; I am in control of them.” Whether it is ideology, new technology, or market logic, our participants maintained that art must come first and resist any attempt at instrumentalization.

The interviewed artists primarily described the role of art(ist) in terms of civilizing society. “Art enriches the soul” was a recurring phrase throughout the interviews. When describing different groups of artists who failed to live up to this role, the participants typically mirrored the negative side of the *heroism* trope. For instance, Dunja described art as the only calling with the aim of “self-discovery” and stressed how incompatible this is with the profit-making logic. Describing an interaction with a successful artist (by market standards), she said that this artist “bartered some parts for an opportunity to live, survive, travel, and create.” Similarly, Gorica used the term *suitable artist* to describe artists who “have an obvious desire to create [...] but their art is subservient to someone; they have a boss, and this boss can be a project, an art competition, or a suitable topic.” Finally, Vuk described a fear of becoming “a stereotypical actor who works at a state theater and stops growing,” and added, “this is why I probably feel the need to work on myself, not to give up, to discover new things, and to keep practicing my art.”

Similar to the genius trope, the *child prodigy* trope often emerged in participants’ anecdotes describing their fascination with art from an early age and recognition of their artistic ability by their teachers, parents, and peers. “I was one of the few in elementary school who could recognize each instrument when they would play a piece of classical music,” Bora recalled. Ana shared a similar story, “every time my drawing was sent for an art competition in elementary school, I would get a prize; it didn’t make me feel like an artist, but I knew I had an advantage.”

Although the *melancholy* trope was not as salient as some others, it was occasionally implied, particularly in connection with participants’ accounts of the importance of the artist being in touch with their inner life. “Due to the nature of their work, artists are introverts,” Ana said while addressing the perceived tension between the artistic process and the existing social media environment that favors hyperproduction and hypervisibility. At the end of our interview, Gorica asked, “is art lonely?” reflecting on the topic she wished we had discussed more. She answered, “I think so, and I think it’s one of the preconditions (for creating great art); a certain kind of isolation is needed, to face that feeling that everyone has, so you can describe it to other people and make them feel less lonely.”

When describing strategies to address the perceived threats to the autonomy of art, the interviewed artists often highlighted the reliance on personal integrity, consistent with the *subversiveness* trope. Bora exemplifies this position by stating, “I think that artists – real artists – are the freest people. They have always been the freest people, because when you are an artist, and you have some inner life – regardless of circumstances – freedom is within you, and the possibility to create is your personal choice.” For Gorica, “being an artist means having a chance to maintain your integrity and make your work only yours,” which, as she added, “truly means a lot.” Providing a personal example, Dunja described her decision to create outside of the art establishment by saying, “I didn’t need anyone to finance me or to win at art competitions; I never felt the need to participate in these races in any way.”

The *fame* trope appeared most frequently when the participants discussed how they believed the public perceives artists and how digital technologies promote hypervisibility and personification of art. In this context, Ana called herself an “unsuccessful artist” because most people would not know who she was if they heard her name. Vuk discussed how actors’ careers often depend on their social media presence by stating, “I heard stories of people losing parts on auditions to others who have more followers on social media.”

When asked about the roles and functions of art in society, our respondents often talked about the transformative potential of art invoking the *social responsibility* trope. “We all want to make life better,” Vuk said before adding, “I think we (artists) can do it by making people think and realize how they can change on a micro level, and by doing so, gradually make society a bit better.” Dunja also described the role of art as universal, as a field in which artists create spaces for “an augmented reality, or a surplus reality, or even some terrible reality to take place in the form that is metaphorized so that it can reach people and make them feel safe.” “I think the role of art is a transformation of certain things so that people can experience them,” she concluded.

Lastly, the *entrepreneur* trope appeared frequently but indicated potential tensions in participants’ conceptions of the artist. On the one hand, the interviewed artists consistently named entrepreneurship as a set of skills that an artist in today’s society must have, because “there is no vacancy for which you apply as an artist, it doesn’t exist, you have to create it as an artist,” as Ana explained. The participants with formal artistic education also discussed the lack of courses teaching entrepreneurial skills as a significant shortcoming of Serbian educational institutions.

“The education system should encourage artists to be more independent in creating the conditions for work. We have been taught that you hit the jackpot if you get a job in the theater. But it means sitting and waiting for someone to give you roles, and no one teaches us how to choose a role and how to arrive at a point where we create an environment for us to work,” Vuk added. In contrast, echoing our discussion on the autonomy of art, the participants were widely critical of the dominance of entrepreneurial logic in the artistic process and burdening artists with activities that derail them from creating art. “I think the worst about it just as I think the worst about capitalism. It treats you only as an individual in this raging market and you have to do everything yourself, including being a brand. Man, how is that possible? It sounds like a recipe for schizophrenia to me [...] It’s like creating your own company that produces screws... only, by chance, you paint, for example. And you are a brand – what a horror. I find it very depressing,” Dunja concluded.

In conclusion, our findings revealed that the available tropes provide a useful frame of reference for the interviewed contemporary artists to address the issues of professional identification and (re)negotiate the status of art in a society undergoing turbulent changes. In this study, the empirical data were used as an additional source to complement our theoretical exploration of the meanings embedded in common tropes of the mythical figure of the artist. For this reason, our empirical investigation was exploratory, and it relied on a small convenience sample of contemporary artists. We believe it still represents an important contribution to the literature, considering that empirical studies analyzing artists’ perceptions and experiences are rare, particularly in the context of Serbia. Yet, the limitations of our empirical analysis should not be overlooked. Above all, the sample size and the sampling technique used in this study do not allow us to generalize our findings beyond the study context. Future studies should strive for larger sample sizes and more representative samples. In addition, future studies should utilize digital ethnography and other less obtrusive research methods to complement the shortcomings of in-depth interviews, like susceptibility to desirability bias when answering questions with strong normative underpinnings.

5. DISCUSSION

Most of the interviewed artists have some degree of understanding of the presence and impact of the myth of the artist and position themselves to it in different ways. Gorica says: “I found poets and romantics interesting, inspiring, as a teenage girl, and it seemed that is it so... but that big

question remains, which at one point was dismissed as a myth – that an artist must be unhappy. But I actually think it's true." Dunja speaks about the weight of expectations artists carry: "The burden of some expectation. That they should be, conditionally speaking – shamans, some people who carry [things], who are pillars... I don't even know. It's a romantic way of looking at it."

While the changing social circumstances deconstruct some myths about the artists, there is a visible need to preserve historical tropes. Most of our interviewees expressed facing significant challenges in resolving contradictions with the image of the artist they hold and the demands of contemporary society. For example, the image of the artist focused on their inner experiences clashes with the extrovert demands of digital communication and promotion. Some artist tropes have become a more aggressive influence on contemporary artists in digital culture because the means for their reproduction have multiplied. Demythologizing art in the 20th and 21st centuries, especially in terms of perceiving it as a form of work and professionalization of the art-sphere, relaxed the reproduction of some tropes. No longer an image to proudly carry as Bohemian artists did, the struggling or "starving" artist is primarily understood as a serious political, social, and professional issue (see Rengers 2002; Towse 2010; Cuenca 2012). We found that whether contemporary artists adopt a particular trope or not, they *always play a significant role in artist identity formation and experience*. Ana said: "They called me Sunčica (Sunshine) – not in a good way. Because I was always smiling. The stereotype of an unhappy artist is how the artist is valued as an artist."

We identified a consistent emphasis on the autonomy of art and integrity of artists throughout the interviews, which likely indicates the *role of the Serbian context in prioritizing specific tropes*. The participants identified various negative trends that could lead to the instrumentalization of art. These trends reflect the existing political, economic, and technological conditions and related transitions that characterize the Serbian context in which the interviewed artists create. For instance, some participants' fears of the precarization of artists and of growing commercialization and commodification of art were connected to the dismantling of previous socialist policies and institutions and Serbia's economic transition. For some participants, this fear was further exacerbated due to the pervasiveness of digital technologies and the corresponding market models that promote hyperproduction and extreme personification. Finally, the participants who recognized the threat of the politicization of art brought it in connection with political instability and polarization characterizing

Serbian society in recent decades. In all these cases, emphasizing the autonomy of art and the artist's integrity emerged as useful strategies to prioritize art and not lose track of its ideals as the economic, political, and technological challenges amount.

The participants recognized the impact and opportunities of digital media technologies in constructing artistic identity as well as in art production and distribution, regardless of whether they embrace digital media technologies (Ana, Bora, Dunja) or are rather reluctant (Vuk, Gorica) towards using them. They all share a critical stance toward the dominance of digital media over art. Speaking about digital presence, Bora said that "the very principle of the digital presentation contains one thing in itself, which is that it does not look at your quality, but at quantity – and quantity, in fact, has nothing to do with quality." Similarly, Ana observes that "in this world, if you don't share your photos on social networks – I am an artist and this is my studio – you don't exist. [...] It is not possible to create a masterpiece every day."

Indifference, reluctance, or even aversion toward digital technologies are present throughout the interviews. Although one might expect that the artists from Serbia, an economically underdeveloped country lacking adequate systemic support for the arts and culture,⁹ would seize the opportunities of digital technologies, the opposite seems to be the case. A 2021 study, based on a survey of online revenue streams conducted on 88 Serbian artists shows, "more than half of the interviewed artists did not have a personal website (62.7%), more than half did not have a profile at the online art platforms (61.6%), and those who did mostly use SaatchiArt (21.8%), Etsy (6.4%), and ArtFinder (6.4%)" (Novaković 2021, 108). According to the participants in our study, the explanation of these statistics can be found in Serbian educational institutions which, as Bora noticed, do not constantly update and keep up with the new times which require digital literacy and non-artistic, entrepreneurial skills. Ana said that "as a society, we have completely made a shift, and the institution has not changed a bit. It still teaches the artist to draw, paint, sculpt, whatever... it doesn't teach him to live in this world. This is actually a huge problem with our institutions, that there is no art entrepreneurship – a complete absence of connection with the modern world." Vuk shared a similar

⁹ For 2022, Serbia allocated 0.87 percent of the total state budget for art and culture, which is the least compared to countries in the region. ("Budžet za kulturu za narednu godinu nominalno veći, ali procentualno isti kao ovogodišnji [The culture budget for next year is nominally higher, but percentage-wise the same as this year's]" 2021).

view when discussing how the educational system fails to teach actors how to create work opportunities. All participants acknowledged that it is useful and necessary for artists to acquire entrepreneurial skills in the contemporary world, but they shouldn't prioritize those skills over art.

In the interviews, social responsibility is implied, but it is most often manifested through the subversiveness trope. Explicitly addressed are the issues of producerism and commodification of art. When everybody has the means to create, artists face the challenge of competing not only with non-artists, but, as Bora said, with algorithms designed to create art. Serbian artists are affected by globalization processes dictated by the dominance of market value. What this means for artists and art remains an open question. We are at the threshold of this shift which has already gained global momentum, especially with the investment-driven NFT art marketplaces in which the art world follows the economy (Whitaker 2019, 21–46; van Haaften-Schick & Whitaker 2020; Nadini et al. 2021).

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we want to emphasize how our main findings can inform future research in the field. First, we believe there is sufficient evidence to favor a more integrated approach to the study of artists, and that further substantive studies should be conducted based on such methodologies. We have found that the historical tropes constitutive of the myth of the artist provide an important frame of reference even when artists are not identifying with them. A deeper analysis of specific tropes could offer important insights into the lives of contemporary artists and contribute to the advancement of their well-being (for example with a focus on the question of whether the re-production of certain markers such as “falling hero” is related to the normalization of destructive lifestyles and mental disorders).

Our case study showed that context could play a significant role in favoring one trope over the other, as was the case with the *autonomy* and *subversiveness* tropes in the Serbian context, indicating the importance of conducting comparative studies. We've found that digital technology and culture have been a significant disruptive force for the process of reproduction and enactments of the artist myth in the contemporary context, magnifying the impact of some tropes (like *fame*) and bringing others into crises (like *individuality* and *autonomy* tropes).

Finally, our research points to a more significant and potential future impact of the *entrepreneurship* trope than that of *social responsibility* we argue are additions to the historical tropes that constitute the myth of the artist. Social responsibility, while an important addition in terms of

the social call for artists to become “public intellectuals” (Becker 1995) seems to be implied in the contemporary context or already constitutive of the contemporary form of the artist myth. On the other hand, the rise of the *entrepreneurship* trope and its markers indicates the possibility of a substantial transformation of all art institutions across cultural contexts in the near future.

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