

A distressful “labor of love” (44)

This text supplements section 44 in my book: Hans Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art, Are the Arts becoming Less Exclusive?* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) DOI 10.1007/978-3-030-21668-9.

- The recurring term “period of serious art” refers to a period from circa 1880 to 1980, a period in which the art of the elite was supposed to be serious while popular art was thought to be mere entertainment. In the book I argue that this period is well passed its zenith but has an aftermath which lasts to the present day.
- I use the term “serious art” instead of “high art” with its positive as well as negative connotation. For the last decades I also use the term “established art”.
- Numbers between brackets refer to the numbered sections in the book.
- Anna is the alter ego of the author.

LOW INCOMES, LITTLE VOICE AND LITTLE RECOGNITION CAUSE DISTRESS. THE NOTION THAT ARTISTS ARE “COMPENSATED” BY AN UNUSUAL HIGH JOB SATISFACTION IS OFTEN NOT VALID. That the arts are extraordinary attractive implies that *expectations* are high and not necessarily that the benefits of being artist are high and come up to expectations. For some it does, for others it does not. It does not for most of the many artists who after having become artist are and remain poor. Also in other respects, like little or no art-world recognition, artists experience hardship. It has been argued that low incomes are, at least partly, “compensated” by non-monetary benefits and in particular by an unusual high work satisfaction. But, unlike economists may be inclined to think: the fact that it takes a long time before poor artists decide to stop being a professional artist does not prove that they are compensated for hardship.

First, for some readers a thinking in terms of “compensation” with its economic connotation, may be a bridge too far. Also social scientists may not like thinking in terms of compensation. But many economists do. Reasoning like these economists, one could argue that artists have chosen to be poor. They chose to be ‘poor but happy’. They think that people deciding to become artists, at the time imagined that they would be compensated for their low incomes by non-monetary forms of remuneration, like work enjoyment and status. Implicitly, such an opinion follows from the economists’ thinking in terms of exchange: artists are willingly exchanging money for other rewards.

But this is not the way people act. At best, they may somewhat weigh short-term costs and benefits. The assumptions of neo-classical human capital theory are incorrect - artists (and others) certainly do not estimate and weigh lifelong financial income and non-monetary income while taking into account overall costs of, among other things, training. Nevertheless, when we forget about rational choice and look at the career of artists from outside, the notion of compensation or lack of compensation can be useful.

I would argue that artists are not compensated for low income. The hardship of most artists is real and considerable. In the case of excited young artists, the low income may be somewhat compensated, but only a few years after leaving art school, compensation starts to diminish. Whereas an average lawyer is neither poor nor unsuccessful, the large majority of artists are poor, regard themselves as unsuccessful and are regarded by others as unsuccessful. This does not worry starting artists but, over time, many artists start to consider themselves as failures, even though they will not easily admit this openly.

Presently doing research on the motivation and work satisfaction of “creatives” is popular. Some research shows that creatives are more intrinsically motivated than non-creatives; others that they

have a higher work-satisfaction. But the latter does not have to apply to average artists. Artists form an extra-ordinary subgroup of creatives. There, nevertheless, is research that shows that the job satisfaction among artists is also high and possibly higher than that of other creatives.ⁱ This suggests that artists are compensated for their low incomes.

Aside: For methodological reasons the existing research on the job satisfaction of artists is inadequate. Findings can be and probably are wrong. My main criticism is that the researched groups of artists are not representative for professional artists in general. Little recognized and unsuccessful artists are underrepresented. Moreover, in the surveys, questions on work satisfaction and possible causes are posed in a way, that answering-as-expected is likely. Moreover, given the questions it appears that no distinction is made between satisfaction with the job and satisfaction while working. In this area of research in depth interviews are required. This is preferable even though in that case the number of interviews is necessarily limited, and generalizing is problematic. Another criticism is that outcomes are sometimes unjustly used to confirm the existence of a work-preference among artists, a preference that has a romantic appeal [72]. (In their research (Steiner & Schneider, 2012) confirm the outcomes of the work preference theory and, given the limitations of their research, not unjustly.)

I have the impression that some researchers are happy with their positive findings. The very low income of artists, and increasingly also of creatives —an income that over the last decades in the lower echelons of the cultural industries is becoming only lower— is for many people a matter of concern. Since research “shows” that both groups are compensated for low income by more job satisfaction, there is no reason for worry about the social economic position of creatives and artists (let alone for guilty feelings).ⁱⁱ

Compensation is related to the idea of above average intrinsically motivated artists. This notion has been around for a long time and may not be wrong but is probably exaggerated. Artists are thought to have an “inner-drive”, and the artist’s work is “a labor of love”. The recurring emphasis on intrinsic motivation may well serve a similar purpose as the notion of compensation. As long as we see to it that artists can survive, they will do their “good” work, irrespective of income. The notion of intrinsic motivation promotes the believe that artists are immune for the way they are treated by others. Artists will produce art and are happy, also when they earn very little and/or are unrecognized.

Various notions of intrinsic motivation exist, but what they have in common is a suggestion that people can reward themselves. Ultimately this is impossible. Rewards are relational. Humans are social beings; they relate to one another and respond to one another. Artists are no exception. Financial rewards as well, have a direct or indirect relational dimension. The artist knows or imagines people who pay for his work, and if he gets his work across, he has *voice*. This way he certainly relates to others. (Social scientists sometimes speak of “psychic income”, instead of non-monetary rewards. I prefer not to, because the term can easily be associated with self-reward.ⁱⁱⁱ)

The average artist has, what some economists call, an “*earnings penalty*”. Suggesting that artists are “penalized” for being and remaining artist and being, on average, poor, is strange. It is therefore preferable to speak of an *earnings differential* as some other economists do. This is the difference between the median (average) income of artists and that of comparable professionals. As noted, the median income of creative artist is very low and the difference (or penalty) is therefore high. The fact that the difference is large, makes it unlikely that in the case of the majority of artists there is full compensation. Artists may be passionate; they are no saints. Non-monetary rewards undoubtedly exist, but so do non-monetary costs.

Compensation is anyway unlikely. The hardship of the average artists is real and considerable. In the case of still excited young artists, their low incomes may be somewhat compensated, but already a few years after having started to work as artist compensation starts to diminish. Only in the case of the small percentage of artists who become well-recognized monetary and non-monetary rewards will increase and possible hardship is more than compensated. This does not apply to the average artist. And whereas an average lawyer is neither poor nor unsuccessful, the average artist is poor, is not

recognized by his art world (sometime with the exception of family, friends and a small circle around him) and has little voice. He may well regard himself as failure—even though he will not easily admit this openly.

I first briefly discuss factors that promote work satisfaction among average artists and which are less important in other professions. Next, I make plausible that the overall work satisfaction of the average artist is less than people often think. In the present context it is useful to distinguish satisfaction *with the job* and the satisfaction a person has *while actually working in the job*, i.e. performing, working in one's studio or office while creating art objects, writing scores and manuscripts, and so forth.

Non-monetary rewards from *having* an art job can be manifold.^{iv} One, which is often mentioned, can follow from a being an independent worker (or “self-employed”).^v This has, however, one major disadvantage: fluctuating income and thus job insecurity. Whether or not benefits of being independent outweigh such cost depends on the person and his situation. (Note that independence does not imply that the reward is not relational. On the contrary.) The above average high status of artists, which follows from “being artist” and creating art that has much goodness, often also represents a non-monetary reward.

Given what has been said in the previous two sections, a being able to express oneself and be authentic, and a corresponding status of being special can also represent rewards. An important thesis in the book is that artists can, possibly more than others, and also more than other creatives, express themselves. Such factors can result, among others, in more job satisfaction. But expressing oneself is only rewarding if others notice the expressions and the artist has *voice*.

Doing “fieldwork” or just listening to or asking artists who one knows, they appear to like their work. Even though they know that this is the answer that most people want to hear, they may well be honest. But people are seldom consistent; later, in a conversation, artists may well refer to the extreme competition among artists, which they do not like at all, or to how bad they felt when they did not receive a subsidy or grant.

In all professions not receiving extras, like a bonus, is painful but it is extra painful in the arts. Any reward or punishment, from praise and criticism of one's work to sales or no sales, and a subsidy or no subsidy is loaded with value. This is the consequence of the extreme goodness of art, as well as often the very personal nature of the product. Nothing is neutral. And artists are the first to experience this. It causes confusion. As said in the book, *after graduating Anna's first application for a subsidy was rejected. She was very disappointed; and in such degree that it was only four years later that she applied again. The continuing frustration or pain was so large that she wanted to save herself from a possible rekindling of it by a new rejection. Nevertheless, with others and colleagues she spoke lightly about it.*

Good research on the topic must be based on in-depth interviews. As far as I know, such research is non-existing. Therefore, I mention what, over a period of 50 years, I noticed in my conversations with little or only somewhat successful creative artists with low incomes. (Such artists form the large majority of artists.) I observed that the most important causes of distress are a *lack of recognition* and *little voice*. The third cause is a *low overall income*. No or little recognition is foremost a lack of *art-world recognition*. Little voice implies that one's work is hardly noticed. There are few sales or few occasions on which one's work is performed or exhibited. A low income restrains artists in making good art. It also prevents them from living a somewhat normal life. (Just like most other people many artists are conformists and certainly no bohemians.)

Aside, over the last decade especially visual artists show their work on the internet, in particular on Instagram. With a few exceptions the number of interested people and followers is small.

Nevertheless, at least for a while, this is satisfying. It feels like having voice. But it does not bring income.

But starting from income, income and voice can also be positively related. Income gives artists artistic *autonomous space* [26] enabling them to make relatively autonomous and expressively authentic art and raise their *self-esteem*. And if the artist has enough autonomous space, he can make meaningful own works and possibly have considerable *voice*: “My work matters. I as a person matter.” Not having such space is distressing.

With so much excess supply there inevitably is much and severe competition for recognition, voice and income. It is not accidental that artists easily blame other artists, who quickly become successful, for cheating and unfair competition. They are thought to have profited from favoritism—for instance, knowing people in committees—or, worse, to have compromised in their work. As I say in the book [among others in section 70], many different forms of blaming and being blamed exist in the art. They as well testify of the large moral weight of anything to do with art.

The hardship of most artists is real and considerable. In the case of still very enthusiastic young artists, their low incomes may be somewhat compensated, but already a few years after leaving art school compensation starts to diminish. Only in the case of the very small percentage of artists who become recognized there can be considerable compensation. But this does not apply to the average artist. And whereas an average lawyer is neither poor nor unsuccessful, the average artist is poor, is not recognized by his art-world and has little voice. Most often he regards himself as a failure—even though he will not easily admit this openly.

Aside, sometimes such artists are recognized by family and friends and this can be satisfying or enable them to keep up appearances for others and for himself.

Aside, it is interesting to note that in spite of severe competition there is also much solidarity among artists. *For a while Anna had a dealer who once a year invited all “his” artists for a dinner. Usually some 30 were there. Anna remembers them as wonderful events. They had lots of fun, were interested in each other’s work and made jokes about each other’s good fortune and misfortunes.* Being as artist among artists it is easy to experience pleasant feelings of solidarity. On the one hand one together believes to be victim of societal evils and on the other to be absolute winner by being a professional artist creating art, art, that is thought to have so much goodness. Poor or rich, unsuccessful or successful one feels being member of a select company and most non-artists agree that the company is special and envy the members.

All in all, it is understandable that artists are confused when having to answer questions about their present and past situation, about how their career in the arts developed and how this affected them personally. No definite proof can be offered on artist being or not being compensated for low income and for the distress which low income brings. However, in my conversation with artists several forms of distress are mentioned. —I present several of distress in the book.— I therefore think it highly plausible that artists are not compensated or only partly. An important source of distress is being blamed for being “commercial”. Due to low income many artists have no choice but making also commercial-art [70].

But, if artists are not compensated: why do not fewer people become artists; and, once having become artist, why do not more artists leave the arts? If this would happen, oversupply would disappear and incomes would rise. (Economists think in terms of movements towards an equilibrium. They may therefore judge the present situation as instable. But it evidently is relatively stable.)

In the book [sections 41 and 42] I explain why the arts are still very attractive and why still many youngsters want to become artists. A much longed for authentic life appears to have become within reach and would-be artists, more than others, believe that they can live such a life, that they can express themselves. This way they expect major benefits. Parents and friends also believe in the benefits. And existing “confused” artists do little to correct the rosy perspective. Art must not and cannot be disappointing. *For a long time, Ana taught life drawing in a private drawing class. A few times she caught herself stimulating an exceptionally good amateur to go to art school. It was only*

afterwards that she realized what in her enthusiasm she had done and regretted her irresponsible advice.

Aside: Performing artists may experience different forms of promise as well as later distress than creative artists. For most conservatory students finding a job playing in a large orchestra is the most important goal; a goal that is much stimulated by teachers. Consequently, there is severe competition. They probably are aware of this. But —what they earlier did not hear or did want to hear— the chances of becoming employed in a large orchestra are extremely low. Moreover, given the 19th century extreme discipline which is required in a large orchestra, the job turns out to be physically very demanding and hardly creative. Playing in an orchestra, musicians have very little autonomous space. The large sick leave among musicians is significant. Nevertheless, most do not soon leave the orchestra job. It is only recently that musicians start to stop earlier.

A majority of artists —including recognized artists— did not follow official art education. (At present the number of professional artists or “working artists” that has followed official art education is very low. In the US only 16% of them has a bachelor degree in the arts; they are “arts graduates”.^{vi}) Moreover, nowadays, relatively many art students choose not to become artists after their graduation. (Often, they had a plan B and followed also other education.) Moreover, many graduated artists leave the arts within a few years.^{vii} As far as I know, no data exists on the average duration of an artist’s career. Nevertheless, given the large number of artists and much excess supply, more artists remain artists than one would expect. Therefore, the question remains: why do artists not leave the profession earlier or remain artist given their low incomes and limited job satisfaction?

Failing as artists is worse than failing in other professions. The same as prospective artist imagine a wonderful future, artists considering to stop imagine all sorts of evils. Only considering to leave can already bring along an experience of shame and sometimes even feelings of guilt. Failing after having been “called” and being privileged, is shameful. Remaining artist and be poor, feels less like failure than leaving. The imagined costs of leaving can be said to be high, higher than the imagined benefits. But the same as before entering the profession, at the exit expectations can also be wrong. Several ex-artists told me that after deciding to leave they felt much relieve, and, even though they had not found a really well-paid non-art job, the jobs they found paid more, were interesting and brought considerable job satisfaction.^{viii}

The existing art ethos is demanding. Being artist is a privilege as well as a duty. There is a duty to serve art. The artist cannot just forget about his duty and leave the arts. He has not only the right, but also the duty to make art, an art that is morally good. In a related meaning of the term duty: by accepting a low income an artist pays a “duty”; as if rendering homage to an imagined sacred object, sacred art and a sacred world of art.

Finally, it is interesting to note that there exists a very large group of young artists —mainly pop musicians— who seem to believe that, whatever they do, they will never “make it” and will be able to make a reasonable living as artist: “So why care?” They have given up, and so feel free to stop caring. “If there is anyway no income, why not make just true art and be true to oneself, and get some satisfaction out of it.” In this respect they resemble the bohemians of old, with the difference that many of the latter were not really poor. These artists make little efforts to sell work or find gigs, they do not start to make somewhat more user- or supporter-oriented art and also do not look for interesting and/or well-paid second jobs. They manage to survive as artist thanks to a very low standard of living, badly paid second jobs and a little help of others, usually parents.

This group of careless artists maintains —honestly or not— that everything is fine, and that they don’t care about money. They, nevertheless, suffer. This is what I noticed in my conversations with young visual artists and popular music musicians who clearly belong to this group. Some had finally left and admitted that it had been no fun. (I also noticed that for several the “I don’t care attitude” was a form of not caring for society, a society which did not care for them. It was a form of protest which had little to do with art. But making art at least allowed a form of self-expression.)

At present a large group of such artists exists in popular music; a group whose relative size may well be larger than it has ever been in the serious visual arts. But also for this group of careless pop musicians, with time having a very low income increasingly causes distress. It is therefore understandable that the large majority of them leaves the arts within ten years.

Aside, in the visual arts, of the few artists who continue, later on one or two become famous and much admired as a kind of freaks. They turn into cult figures. Documentaries are made about them — and shown on ARTE and similar quality channels. Their existence is attractive because it keeps the image of the very poor, but passionate and expressively authentic artist alive.)

Aside: First, even though by now there is ever more accredited art education in popular music, following official education is still not common in popular music and can be a disadvantage, this partly explains that in comparison with an increase in consumer demand the number of popular musicians still increases more than demand, with the effect that more of them after some years stop being a professional musician. Second, the emergence of accredited popular music education, first in the US and Britain, and later also in continental Europe can be interpreted as a process of professionalization in popular music.

Aside: much of what has been said in this section about artists, may also apply to the “semi-artists” who run marginal art-companies, commercial-galleries, art-spaces, venues and so forth. Many of such institutions exist only for a few years.

Over the last decades, however, many aspiring artists are less easily fooled than before. They know that their perspectives are bad. This certainly applies to artists who chose to be educated in one or more other disciplines as well. Moreover, many practicing artists no longer romanticize the own profession. They, moreover, realize that they don't have to be stuck in an apparently inevitable situation and believe that changes are possible, also without leaving the arts. This shows, among others, from numerous comments and blogs on social media. It certainly shows from artists forming groups to collectively protest against those who clearly contribute to their bad economic situation. They, for instance, accuse non-profit museums for not properly paying them for their services. I say more about these groups in the additional text “*Precairity and Exploitation of Artists* (Wt 45).

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- ⁱ (Steiner & Schneider, 2012). Their research is elaborate, but can nevertheless be criticized.
- ⁱⁱ (Wright, 2018) offers an elaborate discussion of a being exploited versus a being compensated. He mentions the possibility of what he calls “hopeful work”.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Among others (Towse, 1992), (Rengers, 2002) and (Adler, 2006) use the term psychic income. (Menger, 2006) uses the term non-monetary income and sometimes non-monetary rewards.
- ^{iv} In (Abbing, 2002) I mention more kinds of non-monetary rewards from having an art job and, other than in this section, discuss them in detail.
- ^v Among others (Abbing, 2002) and (Steiner & Schneider, 2012)
- ^{vi} (Jahoda & others, 2014)
- ^{vii} For visual artists in 2002 in the Netherlands see (Rengers, 2002)
- ^{viii} That artists after leaving often find interesting jobs is confirmed by research by (Filer, 1987).