

## Precarity and Exploitation of Artists (45)

**This text supplements section 45 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.

*Over the last decades:* PRECARIETY AMONG ARTISTS INCREASES. THE ATTRACTION OF BEING ARTIST LEADS TO INCREASING EXPLOITATION OF SERIOUS ARTISTS BY NONPROFITS AND EXPLOITATION OF POPULAR ARTISTS BY FOR-PROFITS.<sup>i</sup> Further commercialization, in the arts as well as popular art, probably has added to exploitation. Increasingly groups of “entrepreneurial” artists protest against inner-artworld exploitation. And increasingly with success. (This web-text may interest all readers and in particular artists.)

The level of preliminary education of artists is relatively high [41]. —Among those who do not have a higher education degree the large majority graduated from a high level secondary school.— When the income of the average (medium) artist is compared with that of other professionals with an, on average, same level of preliminary education, the income of the average artist is much and much lower [41]. Also when omitting artists, the medium income of workers in the cultural industries is probably also lower than that of professionals with the same level of preliminary education, but certainly not as low as that of artists. Aside: Working in the cultural industry is relatively attractive, but working as artist is evidently still more attractive. Given the increasing number of underpaid trainees in the cultural industries, the medium income of the workers, who are not artist, is probably decreasing, but medium income is still higher than that of artists.

Some art theorists argue that the already longer existing *precarity* among creative artists is of the same nature and has the same causes as the increasing precarity of the ever-growing army of self-employed people in our new gig economy, from building laborers to people cycling for Deliveroo. This is partly true in the case of performing artists, but in spite of some correspondences the precarity of most creative artists started much earlier and has other causes.<sup>ii</sup>

Sometimes art theorists go a step further and argue that after the war the arts served as a kind of laboratory for the new, more human modes of production which emerged, but which gradually also increased precarity. I think it unlikely that capitalists learned from the arts. This is not the way capitalism develops.

Aside: The fact that in their famous work *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) speak of an artistic critique of capitalism and of artistic capital and artistic capitalism has contributed to this conviction. But as Boltanski told me: This interpretation of their text —the arts having served as laboratory— is wrong.

Aside: I do not altogether trust the motives of some people in the art establishments who earn normal to high incomes, and who point to capitalism and post-Fordism as the main culprit. This way they keep themselves out of range and can exhibit a progressive stance. Moreover, it enables them to victimize the arts again.

When there is excess supply of art offered by creative artists, it is inevitable that many of them experience hardship and feel that they have “failed”. Also many leave the arts disillusioned [Section 44 and the supplementary text *A distressful labor of love*]. Hardship and failure in the arts are essential for the existence and maintenance of the high symbolic value of art, that is, the exceptional prestige of art in society. If artists are so dedicated that they are willing to be poor and possibly fail, something very precious must be at stake. After all, artists appear to sacrifice themselves for this sacred object called art. And measured in money terms they excessively internally subsidize their art activities. The high symbolic value of art is not solely founded on poverty in the arts and the generosity of artists, but poverty certainly is one of its foundations. Without poverty among artists the symbolic value of art would be less high and the association with art would bring less distinction.

What applies to creative artists, increasingly applies to performing artists as well. Because performing artists in larger ensembles are employees who as group have more power than individual artists and can negotiate, their incomes are low but not very low. Or employers must at least pay the minimum wage. But over the last decades their bargaining power has gone down, while employers have found ways to employ them without offering longer term contracts. The same as most creative artists they have become independent workers. In our gig economy they are no exception. Now many more “independent” workers depend on trust relations with incomes that resemble gifts or gratuities. They as well have to be thankful. In a neo-liberal environment commercialization in the form of a fanatic pursuit of profit—or income in the case of nonprofits—by lowering labor cost of the weakest parties has contributed to this development.

Because the labor of artists is structurally used without adequate compensation there is *economic exploitation*, but this does not imply that a single group can be held responsible. A system like this, which rests on the poverty of many of its participants, is reproduced by everybody involved, including the exploited. One way or another every group has some interest in its maintenance or believes it has an interest. The distinction that follows from the association with art does not only go to a well-to-do art establishment or to art lovers in general, it also goes to poor artists. Moreover, given their low income their rejection of commerce is sometimes more credible than that of other participants. Poor artists may well be aware and even proud of their special position. But for many of them, and most of all those who have been poor for some time, the symbolic benefits do not take away hardship. Seen from outside it are people in the establishment and art lovers who benefit most from the low incomes in the arts. They, de facto exploit artists and can be blamed for this.

Aside: The concept of economic exploitation used in this text refers to a structural use of people’s labor without adequate compensation. This is not necessarily the same as the Marxist concept of exploitation. The latter refers to an entire segment or class in society, the working class, being exploited by another class.

Aside: In any profession similar relations exist. The difference is a matter of degree. (Priesthood used to be a profession in which the incomes of some were very low, while the financial and other benefits of a few were high.) But at present in the professions of other knowledge workers the symbolic value of the core activity is much lower and thus is the interest in workers having low income. Moreover, seen from the outside, persistently low incomes in other professions are neither in the interest of professional elites nor capitalists. Flexibility is profitable, but persistently low incomes and poverty are not, at least not in highly industrialized countries. Capitalism needs consumption and not only consumption of the rich.

In a situation of excess supply, the bargaining power of the average artist is very limited. This largely explains average low incomes in both the serious and the popular arts. At least until recently, the de facto “willingness” to work for low incomes is high. But differences exist between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors in the arts and popular art.

Unlike for-profits in the popular arts nonprofits in the arts emphasize that they “serve art”. They prick on the artist’s conscience by telling artists: “We serve art. You should serve art, the same as we do.”

“As non-profit we may earn more money than we need to continue our activities but we spend it on art.” —A case of internal subsidization [72].— In other words: “art for the sake of art and not for the sake of money.”

The result is that many non-profit art companies pay ridiculously low fees or no fees at all. Sometimes they even let artists pay for being able to perform or show their work by letting them pay for transport, frames, stage-props and so forth; all for art's sake.

In spite of all talk and fine words about the goodness of art, in practice this leads to a mentality of *for art anything is okay*. Due to the high value of art, a belief exists in the arts, among artists as well as art institutions, that everything which serves art is good. The slogan is: ‘everything for art’. However, the consequence is also an *anything goes*. Typical artists are ready to give up income and sacrifice a lot to get their works across, also when this way they harm their colleagues who demand proper payment. On the other hand institutional functionaries believe that if their institutions serve art, they are justified to offer artists low or no payments at all.

It follows that many poor artists let themselves be underpaid and exploited by nonprofits. When it comes to serving art, they trust that non-profits behave better than for-profit organizations. They also believe in an *everything-for-art* while, while at the same time, they desperately attempt to become noticed; for future income or recognition, but even more for art. The extreme willingness of passionate artists to work for very low incomes enables a *Wild West economy* in the arts. There is extreme and unrestrained competition. However, since this goes against the belief in the goodness of art, it remains hidden or is denied and, likewise, many poor artists do not want to see it.

Artists and non-profit organizations often cooperate in keeping costs and income down by paying no, or very low, fees. The initiative for this can come from either side. For instance, a small theater company may approach the director of a non-profit telling him that they understand that he has a limited budget and that therefore they are, of course, willing to play for free if (in exchange) he will include them in his program. Or the director takes the initiative. He really wants the group in his festival. Therefore, he explains to them that he has, of course, a very limited budget, but that he is willing to have them on his program and pay part of the transport costs, as long as (in exchange) they do not expect payment.

Aside: First, another explanation for this behavior could be that, by working for low incomes artists invest in a future in which they will be properly remunerated, or even become very successful. Some artists probably believe this is the case, or they are made to believe so, and this can partly explain their behavior, but because their chances are so small it is not at all a realistic investment. Second, it is common that interns get paid less in the arts than elsewhere. Therefore, a similar but less extreme mechanism exists in their case. Because interns have a small but nevertheless much larger chance than artists to find comfortable jobs in the arts sector, the investment is less irrational. In their case a willingness to work for low or no income could make sense. (But this does not justify being paid little or nothing.)

All such behavior in the arts leads to what can be called unfair competition. For instance, fringe festivals that often behave badly harm other non-profit festivals that (try to) behave more decently. Likewise, artists who deliberately take less money than would have been possible harm artists who refuse to do so. In either case, the decent party may be forced to become more indecent or otherwise stop its activities. Another telling but less shocking example are the numerous competitions with no compensation for participating artists, with prizes which only come in the form of some recognition and publicity. Another example again is the common practice of inviting artists to offer work or services for free for charity auctions or events. And poor artists are willing to do so. These behaviors as well demonstrate a de facto taking advantage of a group that is already in a weak position.

All these phenomena are also present in the commercial popular arts. There as well it happens that artists are told that working for a low income is a profitable investment and that they should be happy with any remuneration, whatever low it may be. A major difference between the two sectors is,

however, that in day-to-day operations, often standards of proper business behavior exist which do not exist in the non-profit sector. For instance, in most countries, publishers pay 10% (and now sometimes 7%) of wholesale prices to literary authors and not less. If fiction writers are prepared to accept lower or no royalties, or are willing to pay in order to have their work published, publishing houses generally refuse these arrangements. (Presently the business model of publishers is changing. Certain academic writers may get their book published, if they —or their university— pays for the publication. It also happens in the case of “amateur” writers of fiction.)

Another example is that of commercial dealers participating in art fairs. Artists are often prepared to pay part of the cost of the stall if the dealer will exhibit their work at the fair. Going along dealers could pass part of the risk on to the artist. But in most fairs and countries this is not done. Violators are shamed.

The situation is, anyway more transparent than in the case of most non-profits. The commercial companies are after profit and do not hide this. Because of the transparency they do not particularly prick on the artist's conscience.

This is not to say that commercial firms that operate outside the arts do not take advantage of artists' weak bargaining position. For instance, when the services of both an artist and a graphic designer are required for a project in the cultural industries, generally the artist gets paid less than the graphic designer. But market forces come first and not a call on the artist's conscience. Moreover, the weak bargaining position of the artist is not caused by these industries but by the ethos of artists and art institutions, which is reproduced within the art world.

Art consumers also profit financially from the willingness of passionate artists to work for low incomes. If artists and interns who are artists would only work for decent incomes, ticket prices would be higher as would be the average price of exhibitions, like those of the Documentas.

The differences in the causes of the exploitation of poor artists and of other knowledge workers and differences in the ways they are exploited, can have consequences for possible strategies of resistance. For instance, the promotion of a new art ethos, which allows or even encourages the pursuit of also non-artistic goals, like reaching a larger audience, striving for political change and making a profit, and more generally a more entrepreneurial attitude among artists, could well represent an important form of resistance against exploitation in the arts while, in other sectors of knowledge production, this could be a giving way to neo-liberalism, which only serves the interests of capitalists.

In my view it is essential that critical artists and art theorists who want to fight against exploitation in the arts revise their negative attitude towards moderate forms of entrepreneurship and a pursuit of profit in the arts, certainly if it concerns creative artists, who, after all, run small enterprises. The pursuit of non-artistic goals including the making of some profit, and thus operating actively in markets, does not have to go together with an embrace of capitalism and private property. What matters in the struggle against exploitation in the arts is not a noncommittal adherence to criticism of capitalism, but down to earth action.

A good example of the latter is the certification of art institutions that pay proper fees to artists. If they don't, they run the risk of being shamed and, as a consequence, their reputation is tarnished.

Presently in New York, the artist's coalition W.A.G.E. actively and successfully pursues a certification scheme of non-profit visual art organizations.<sup>iii</sup> Gradually, certification could be extended to for-profit organizations, from galleries to commercial festivals. These and other concrete actions may well contribute to the gradual installment of standards of proper business behavior, also among non-profit organizations who presently appear to believe that, for art, 'anything goes'. (Certification works better than formal government regulation, because the latter is experienced as just another legal obligation, while both parties willingly and actively take part in certification.)

Most importantly, it would be useful for artists to develop a professional ethos and a mindset that prohibits working for ridiculously low incomes. They should increasingly refuse to do so and make

clear to their customers and intermediaries, including art institutions, galleries and impresarios, that if they underpay artists, they can no longer count on their services. Since this often goes against the short-term interest of individual artists, it would, indeed, require a different mindset and practices, new forms of solidarity and maybe even shaming of artists who offer their services for little or no remuneration.

[Also somewhere as Wn?] However, at least until recently, the main causes of the artist's continually precarious and exploited condition rest in art education. Here, the detrimental "everything for art" mentality of artists is (re)produced. In order to change this situation, the mindset of teachers has to change fundamentally. Less emphasis on autonomy and an art for the sake of art and more on the possibility and attractiveness of having multiple goals is essential. (So far, the new curricula for instruction in cultural entrepreneurship primarily enable other teachers – the majority – to carry on promoting an "art for the sake of art only" mentality.)

### Literature

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<sup>i</sup> See also (Abbing, 2014a) or, a more academic text, (Abbing, 2014b).

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. (Abbing, 2014b)

<sup>iii</sup> See <http://www.wageforwork.com>. Art Leaks (<http://art-leaks.org/>) is a somewhat comparable initiative that aims at exposing bad practices in the arts and a shaming of the institutions involved. The London based Precarious Workers Brigade ([www.precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com](http://www.precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com)) is also active in this area. Presently there are more organizations demanding a fair remuneration.