

Inner Art World Exploitation of Poor Artists¹

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Artists are poor. They are willing to work for very low incomes

The income of artist is very low. In the Netherlands 40% of all visual artists earn less with their art work than corresponds with the poverty level, and 94% earns less than the income of the average worker. Their situation is anyway precarious: one month they may have some income and the next it can be gone. At first glance artists are poor in spite of the high value of art. However, I will argue that artists are poor not in spite of but because of the high value of art. The high symbolic value of art indirectly causes poverty.

Presently there is a tendency in art circles to argue that the *precarity* in the arts is of the same nature and has the same causes as the increasing precarity of the ever growing army of self-employed people in the economy at large; not only of people with little education, but also with much education. But as I argue (in the original text), in spite of some correspondences there (still) are major differences. Moreover, I do not altogether trust the motives of at least some people in the art establishments earning normal to high incomes, who point to capitalism and post-Fordism as the sole culprit. This way they keep themselves out of range and can exhibit a progressive stance. Moreover, it enables them to victimize the arts again, while at the same time emphasizing the exceptionally high symbolic value of the arts, which shines on them.

We need to look at precarity in the arts from another angle. But this must also not be the common angle of the economist. He may well reason that artists are compensated for their low income by receiving all sort of non-monetary advantages, like work enjoyment and status, and hence chose to be “poor and happy”. It is true that artists are prepared to work for low incomes. However, this does not imply that artists chose to do so. When people decide to become artist they do not rationally

¹ This text is a much abridged and partly rewritten version of a text I wrote earlier. It does not contain notes and a literature list. These can be found in the original text with the title *Notes on the exploitation of artists*, which is a chapter in the edited book *A Joy Forever. The Political Economy Of Social Creativity*, MayFly books, which can be downloaded for free.

weigh life-time costs and benefits, nor do they do this when they decide to continue to work as artist and not to leave the profession. At best one can say that artists have an *inclination* to work for low incomes. This is an inclination which follows from an internalized art ethos based on general notions of good and bad in the arts. The inclination can be said to be indirectly forced upon them. Compensation is anyway unlikely. The hardship of most 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 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 (sometimes with the exception of family, friends and a small circle around him) and has little voice. Most often he regards himself as a failure—even though he will not easily admit this openly.

How is it possible that an inclination to be prepared to work for low incomes is implanted in artists, and not only in a few artists but in the large majority of artists, that is, a very large group as the number of artists has grown much over the last half century? It becomes understandable if we realize that artists have indeed internalized an art ethos with the consequence that making sacrifices for art has become a second nature.

The art ethos enables inner art world exploitation

The art ethos consists of beliefs, moral convictions and rules for proper behavior. The foremost conviction is that art is good, it has goodness. Moreover, artists have a calling. They must be dedicated to art and willing to make sacrifices. Part of the ethos is widely shared, not only among artists and art lovers, but in society at large. For instance, almost anybody will agree that artists must not compromise, that success may come late and that poverty in the arts is okay.

The ethos gradually developed in the nineteenth century when a separation between art and entertainment was created and people developed an existential relationship with art. Artists were special. They could be true individuals, authentic and realize themselves. They also had to be autonomous. A pursuit of profit or even just an eagerness to make a somewhat comfortable living would go at the cost of art. An art for art's sake was incompatible with commerce. Therefore the

rejection of commerce is an integral part of the art ethos. The rejection of commerce also led to the establishment in the nineteenth century of non-profit art institutions who exist to the present day and also adhere to the art ethos. The same as artists they are dedicated to art. The slogan which is most typical for the art ethos is an “*Everything for Art*”. This is a moral conviction which is supposed to be absent among commercial artists and commercial art institutions. (I say more about the art ethos and its origins in my book *Why are Artists Poor* and in my forthcoming book *The Art Period*.)

Because so many people are familiar with the art ethos, adhere to its values and express them in their conversations, the ethos is continuously reproduced. Successful artists, an art establishment and art-lovers who, often without being aware of this, have an interest in the continuation of the ethos play an important role in its reproduction. (But also poor artists contribute to the reproduction, even though this is not in their interest.) They have an interest in the art ethos because the hardship and many failures in the arts contribute much to the existence and maintenance of the high symbolic value of art, that is the exceptional prestige of art in society. The prestige shines on them and allows some of them to have attractive and well-paid jobs in the arts. If artists are so dedicated that they are willing to be poor and many of them fail, something very special must be at stake.

The high symbolic value of art is not only founded on poverty and the sacrifices of artists as well as the many failures, but they certainly add to it. Without poverty and failures the symbolic value of art would be less high and the association of art establishments and art consumers with art would bring them less distinction.

A Wild West economy exists in the arts

The extreme willingness of passionate artists to work for very low incomes enables a Wild West economy in the arts. This is not limited to the commercial sectors in the arts. It is just as present in the supposedly uncommercial art world. Often there is extreme and unrestrained competition and little or no solidarity. However, since this goes against the belief in the goodness of art, the competition remains hidden or is denied, also by artists who tend to pay lip-service to solidarity.

In the non-profit sector, more than in the commercial, sector, the slogan is indeed: *everything for art*. However, the consequence is also an *anything goes*. In the dealings of the non-profits with poor and unsuccessful artists, the ‘everything for art’ mentality often leads to severe exploitation of artists. For instance, it is common that non-profits do not pay artists’ fees, while for-profit organizations do, even

though they do not pay much. Quite often non-profit organizations do not pay artists but instead make them pay for being able to perform or show their work by letting them carry all sorts of costs, like those of transport, frames, stage-props and so forth; all for the sake of art.

Usually poor and unsuccessful (or not yet successful) artists go along with this behavior. 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, at the same time, they desperately attempt to become noticed; for future income or recognition, but even more for art. Therefore, it is understandable that 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 says: he** really wants the group in his festival. 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. (Other less shocking examples of taking advantage of artists within the non-profit areas in the arts exist, like that of the numerous competitions in which there is no compensation for participating artists, or that of the common practice of inviting artists to offer work or services for free for charity auctions or events.)

All such behavior leads to what can be called unfair competition. Institutional functionaries believe that as long as their institutions serve art they are justified in offering artists no proper payments, but at the same time they harm not only artists, but also other institutions who try to treat artists properly. For instance, fringe festivals that often behave badly harm non-profit festivals that (try to) behave more decently. The same applies to art spaces which do and do not treat visual artists properly. Likewise, artists who are so dedicated that they are willing to work for no or little remuneration harm colleagues who demand proper payment. In all such cases, the decent parties, whether artists or art organizations, may be forced to become more indecent or otherwise stop their activities. The result of a mentality of "art for art's sake" is a downward spiral leading to the only stable situation, that is a situation with a maximum of exploitation of artists.

This is not to say that the exploitation in the for-profit art sector is less severe. Moreover, there as well exploitation is often somewhat covered up by an 'everything for art' logic. (Especially in the

relationship between dealers and visual artists exploitation can be considerable.) Nevertheless, in day-to-day activities, often standards of proper business behavior exist which do not exist in the non-profit sector. For instance, in most countries, publishers pay no less than 10% of their whole sale price in royalties. 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. As always, exceptions do exist, but if they become known, the publisher will be shamed. 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.

Art consumers certainly profit from the willingness of passionate artists to work for low incomes and can therefore be said to also participate in the system of exploitation. If artists would only work for decent incomes, ticket prices would be higher as would be the average price of visual art. In addition, firms that operate outside the arts 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 far less than the graphic designer. However, 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.

(On the side it is good to note that large non- and for-profit art organizations often exploit small non- and for-profit organizations, for instance by letting them carry the cost of scouting promising artists, while later on they are the ones which profit from these artists. But this is general phenomenon which is not particular for the arts.)

Strategies of resistance

Important differences in the causes of the exploitation of poor artists and of other knowledge workers in precarious work situations exist, the same as in the ways they are exploited. This has consequences for strategies of resistance. For instance, in other sectors of knowledge production the promotion of more entrepreneurial and commercial attitudes among self-employed workers can come down to a giving way to neo-liberalism, which only serves the interests of capitalists, while among artists it can be a form of much needed emancipation.

I think that it is essential that critical artists and art theorists who want to fight against exploitation in the arts should revise their negative attitude towards moderate forms of entrepreneurship and a pursuit of profit in the arts, and most of all among artists. Cultural entrepreneurship among artists cannot just be bad; it can also be a form of resilience in an increasingly neo-liberal world. Capitalism and a market economy are not the same thing. Moreover, 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 uncritical embrace of the notion of private property. Specifically, the fight against the increasing privatization of public space, in which artists often play a role today, is important and strikes at a cornerstone of capitalism.

In this context, it is useful to realize that having multiple goals and not just artistic goals and that not just going for a maximum of artistic autonomy, can stimulate rather than hinder genuine creativity. For instance, the self-imposed constraint of getting one's art across to an audience which is wider than only a small group of primarily peers and people within an art world elite can well enhance creativity and innovation. In this respect, artists can learn from popular artists. Artists could anyway make an effort to work within the popular arts more often. It could prove more rewarding and challenging than participating in Documenta and alike, even if the exhibitions feature critical art. The curators of such events *de facto* misuse critical art to celebrate art in general and to safeguard the existing privileged positions.

What matters in the struggle against exploitation in the arts is not a noncommittal adherence to social criticism, but concrete 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. (Other examples of effective actions and organizations which coordinate them are mentioned and discussed elsewhere in this book.)

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 mind set and practices and new forms of solidarity. It may even require some shaming of artists who offer their work for free or almost nothing.

However, 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 in the old way.)

As far as public cultural policies are concerned we would need less emphasis on 'excellence' in the arts. In the market there is sufficient interest in art that is supposed to be of very high quality.

Government policies (and government money) promoting excellence among a small group of usually already successful artists primarily serve international cultural competition. It reproduces the superiority of art and hence the existing system of exploitation.

More importantly, public support for institutions and initiatives which guide artists in their attempts to broaden their field of activities is called for. In this context, it is important that the status of activities in the sphere of community art, activities with amateurs, in prisons, in public space, in therapy and so forth becomes higher and comparable with art as it is traditionally provided. **Moreover, art institutions, including museums, could try to raise the status (and quality) of contemporary cheap low cost art in multiples, reproductions as well as digitally produced art.** There are not necessarily too many artists, when the definition of art and artwork becomes wider and artists are prepared to offer their labour in markets that were traditionally not regarded as art markets.

I think that at the moment professionalization and the development of more entrepreneurial attitudes among poor artists (i.e. the majority) is a good thing; and government supported institutions as already exist in some countries can help artists in this. Being down to earth and developing an entrepreneurial and even somewhat commercial attitude can well be regarded as an act of resistance against the existing art-regime. Artists should not always be altogether dedicated to art and attempt to be as autonomous as possible. They should allow themselves to have non-artistic goals as well, including the making of some profit **in order to have a decent standard of living.**