

## Poverty in the Arts

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

Based on the observation in the theses 8-17

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Thesis presented at a meeting of the IGKB (Internationale Gesellschaft der Bildende Künste) with members of the European Parliament in Kehl on 21-11-2012.

#### **1. Support of artists' initiatives which develop schemes of certification of art institutions that treat artists decently is called for.**

On a practical level certification of art institutions which treat artists properly and shaming of those who do not, can be very effective. (This already shows in New York where presently a system of certification is developed and applied by the artists' initiative W.A.G.E..) Gradually certification could be extended to commercial galleries. (Certification works better than formal government regulation, because regulation is experienced as just another legal obligation and right, while in the case of certification both parties willingly and actively take part.)

#### **2. In cultural policies there should be less emphasis on "excellence" in the arts.**

There is sufficient interest in art, which is supposed to be of very high quality. Government policies (and money) promoting excellence among a small group of usually already successful artists primarily serve international cultural competition. Because it puts art for which there is little demand on a footstall, it encourages artists to make also such art and this is not in the interest of the average visual artist.

#### **3. In cultural policies there should be less emphasis on autonomy in the arts. Instead artists should be encouraged to make art which serves multiple goals.**

The justification of art subsidies in parliament and in cultural policy documents is still primarily sought in

the importance of art being autonomous. Much more emphasis could be put on heteronomous art; that is art which serves more goals at the same time, like appreciation by larger groups, income, social contributions, social criticism, recognition of peers, and so forth. Heteronomy is not the same as making compromises! **Having multiple goals can promote creativity and lead to higher quality art than in case artists only want to maximize autonomy.**

#### **4. Support of institutions and initiatives that guide artists in their attempts to broaden their field of activities is called for.**

As long as formal art education drags behind other supported institutions can encourage artists to extend their field of activities or help artists in doing so. 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, therapy and so forth becomes higher and comparable with art as it is traditionally provided.

**There are not necessarily too many artists, when the definition of art and art work becomes wider and artists are prepared to offer their labour in markets, which were traditionally not regarded as art markets.**

#### **5. Nevertheless, at present a temporary decrease in the number of students of art academies and the number of art academies may be needed to improve the bad situation of artists**

**6. Support of initiatives or extra training to vest a new mind set among existing teachers at art academies is crucial.**

The main cause of the continuation of the bad situation of artists rests in art education. Here the detrimental “everything for art” mentality of artists is (re)produced. In order to change this situation the mind set of teachers has to change fundamentally. Less emphasis on autonomy and more on heteronomy is essential. (At present new curricula for the instruction in cultural entrepreneurship primarily enable other teachers to carry on in the old way.)

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<sup>1</sup> Around 40% of the visual artists cannot cover their cost. And, in for instance the Netherlands almost 80% has an income below the Dutch minimum wage. In Europe the average artist earns circa 40% less than the average worker. And the percentage he earns less than professionals with a similar level of previous training is much higher. (Given the available data it is probable that, if artists would work full time in the arts, around 60% would earn less than corresponds with the poverty line, i.e. 60% could not at all make a living from art.)

**OBSERVATIONS**

**7. Visual artists are poor**

There is much talk about rich visual artists and high prices of artworks, but the large majority of visual artists is poor. In Europe in between 40 to 60% of artists has an income from all work, i.e. including second jobs, which is below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup>

**8. Many artists feel they failed as artists and feel ashamed of this. They blame themselves**

Sometimes people believe that artists are compensated for their low incomes, for instance in the form of status and enjoyment in their work. The latter can matter, but most of the time it does not compensate for hardship. Many artists feel ashamed of their poverty and lack of success, even though they will not admit this openly. Hardship is real. In other professions this is altogether different. The average teacher or lawyer earns a good income and is not unsuccessful. He does not see himself as a failed professional. The large majority of artists however, 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 feel they are failures and blame themselves for not being good enough.

**9. Poor artists have reason to blame others rather than themselves**

Artists should blame others rather than themselves for their lack of success and poverty, not because others are insufficiently interested in art, spend too little

money on art or keep governments from giving more subsidy to artists, but because artists are part of a system of exploitation that keeps them down. Politicians and people in the administration responsible for art policies generally contribute to the maintenance of this system of exploitation.

**10. A separation of art and entertainment was in the interest of the bourgeois, but it worsened the situation of many artists.**

The roots of the system of exploitation lie in the 19th century. Whereas up to the middle of that century a majority of artists had normal incomes, this changed when the bourgeois and later higher middle classes succeeded in separating art and entertainment. This way they secured the distinction which their association with art brought them. Commerce in the arts became suspicious and had to be covered up. Artists started to reject commerce, which contributed to their poverty.

**11. Poverty in the arts and many passionate unsuccessful artists was in the interest of the bourgeois and higher middle classes**

Artists being poor and willing to work for low incomes started to symbolize the specialness if not sacredness of art. The bourgeoisie and the later members of the higher middle classes, who associate themselves with art, had and have an interest in the presence of many poor artists.

**12. The strife for autonomy and the assumed superiority of autonomous art works is not in the interests of the majority of artists.**

In the course of the twentieth century the autonomy of art became ever more important. An ethos among artists became vested that work must be made which is as autonomous as possible. The sacredness of art calls for the rejection of any compromise and especially commerce. For a small group of very successful artists this is no problem. Their work anyway fetches high

prices. But it is not in the interest of the majority of artists. Artists feel obliged to make art for which there is little demand. The number of costumers interested is small. And although art institutions buy their work, only few artists can sell their work to these institutions.

**13. There is considerable inner art world exploitation. Art establishments have an interest in artists who are poor and willing to work for very low incomes.**

Also art establishments have an interest in poverty in the arts because it raises the symbolic value of art and their distinction. Moreover, on a day to day level the willingness of artists to work for very low incomes helps to keep costs down.

**14. An “everything for art” mentality has led to a wild west economy in the arts**

Art establishments and institutions like art spaces have an interest in artists who believe in an “everything for art” and are thus willing to work for low incomes. It reduces the bargaining power of artists and it enables a wild west economy in the arts. “Everything for art” leads to “anything goes”, or in other words: “everything is allowed for the sake of art”.

**15. An “everything for art” mentality and low incomes promote severe competition among artists and prevent larger scale solidarity.**

In order to survive artists must believe in the importance of their work for art. But when there are many unsuccessful artists they can only prove this by becoming successful among many competitors who also try to become successful. It is a matter of everybody on its own, while only the “fittest” survive. This prevents powerful collective action. Artists unions tend to be weak, because the number of artists which actively support their actions is relatively small.

**16. Non-profit art institutions misuse the “everything for art” mentality of artists.**

Because non-profit art institutions keep up the slogan

of “everything for art” as well, this makes it easy for them to exploit artists on a day to day level. (Usually they are not aware of it.) For instance, many non-profits do not pay artists fees or they pay very small fees. Sometimes they do not even pay for artists’ expenses. And partly because of the competition, but even more because it is “for art”, artists do not protest or they willingly cooperate. Often for profits behave somewhat better, because they stick to minimum business standards of proper behaviour and shame those among them who do not.

**17. At present in established (contemporary) art circles there is a tendency to narrow the definition of (good) art and governments cooperate. This is not in the interest of most artists.**

In the post war society which is becoming more democratic, part of the arts is also tempted to become more democratic. Art which is attractive for larger social groups sometimes gets more chances. This is not in the interest of art establishments. They de facto attempt to narrow the definition of art. They do so, among others, by declaring that “difficult” art, for which there is little demand and for which consumers must make an effort to appreciate it, is true or superior art. Government money enables this. (In practice governments are double minded. Most of the time they de facto promote exclusion, but at times they also encourage art institutions to become attractive for more people.)

**18. The causes of the precarity in the arts differ from those in other areas of post-Fordist capitalist production. Exploitation in the arts calls for (partly) other forms of resistance and other remedies.**

The exploitation of artists is foremost an inner art world affair. There is an overlap with the exploitation of other knowledge workers, but it is limited. (The overlap is largest in the performing arts.) Therefore the exploitation in the art calls for (partly) other forms of resistance and remedies. See theses 1 to 6.

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