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Are artists workers? Is making art a job like any other?

1983 words

Throughout the 20th century, the increasing alienation of artists from the ‘mainstream’ labour market served as a mechanism by which to both valorize and disenfranchise the practice of art, driving it into avant-garde subcultures ready to be resuscitated, packaged, and sold, however many years later, as a ‘missing piece’ of cultural history. For the most part, artists themselves seem to have accepted this distinction, viewing themselves as peripheral figures to capitalist processes of labour and production – content to take the distance granted to them as an aid to the observatory nature of their work. This situation is both exacerbated and evidenced by the current pandemic we find ourselves in, in which the creative sector has repeatedly been subjected to inadequate support; presumably the government has felt the sector is either less essential, or will survive more inevitably, given art’s perseverance throughout history. In spite of the clearly negative impact this perspective has on artists, this essay will endeavor to argue that the strength of capitalist standardization makes the status of an artist fundamentally incompatible with our regular understanding of workers: perhaps artists have always been workers in some way, but under neoliberal capitalism, that can never be all that they are.

Despite its antiquated origins, the stakes in the mythic narrative of the artist ‘as lone genius...as inspired’¹ are enduringly high. As the tendrils of capitalism intrude perpetually more irreversibly into our lives, such as with ‘the general diminishment of all-round human creative powers in the interest of narrowly-defined categories of productive labour’², artists increasingly seem like the only ones that can see, feel, or connect to their humanity freely. The performance artist David Hoyle put it best when

¹ H. Molesworth, *Work Ethic*, p34

² J. Roberts, *Art After Deskillling*, p86

he said, 'I think to a greater or lesser extent, most of us are petrified by our potential, in terms of our own personal expression and potential freedom.'³ The unique pressure placed on artists to express their consciousness, through their unique positioning as those sanctioned to receive its gifts, has resulted in a situation in which artists, and their emotional lives, have become embodied products in themselves. The voyeuristic tendencies of galleries to treat artists' most intimate details as integral to readings of their work⁴ speaks to the general social expectation of artists: full surrender to a tradition of ascetic struggle and self-exploration, in which it's required to understand yourself as a totally exposed, individuated being. This perspective also leads to a dangerous, and enabling, romanticization of the squalor of artistic poverty: completely separate from the typical understandings of the struggles of the working class, artistic poverty is seen as a necessary evil, or, perhaps more damagingly, of proof of the individual's total commitment to the mythic being of 'art'. This narrative pushes artists into a dichotomic space, straddling vastly different conceptions and potentialities of wealth: in no other profession could you be expected to work with so little, yet have the aspiration to profit so much.

The clearest examples of artists being marginalised from the workforce is in their differentiation from 'art workers', despite the irony that artists themselves often materially profit from this marginalisation. The myth of the artist often distills into a pure fetishisation of authorship – in which artists can be distinguished as those behind the concept, as opposed to the 'workers' carrying the concept out.

Molesworth articulated this as the split between 'mental' and 'manual' labour⁵.

³ Interview printed in Dominic Johnson, *The Art of Living*, p239

⁴ For example, the recent Tate Britain exhibit making Aubrey Beardsley's sexuality a key curation point

⁵ H. Molesworth, *Work Ethic*, p43

This distinction is challenged in the 2014 'Gramsci Monument', initiated by swiss artist Thomas Hirschorn. Conceived as a fulfillment of the philosopher Gramsci's idea that 'every person is an intellectual', the piece entailed a full structure being built in the Forest Houses in the Bronx, through a process Hirschorn himself refers to as 'unshared authorship', in which he paid staff hired from the houses as construction workers, bar staff, and library assistants. The monument stood there for 77 days, running daily philosophy lectures, providing art supplies to the community and encouraging high levels of community engagement. Hirschorn understood the piece as being totally facilitated and enabled by the community; asking the community to help him enact it, as opposed to offering himself as an aid to them⁶. Whilst there is still a differentiation between the 'artist' and the 'staff', the egalitarian spirit of the project defies typical hierarchical structures of the art market, offering an alternative way for artists to engage with communities.

The disparity between artists and art workers could, therefore, be specified as the distinction between wage and profit: as an embodied product, the artists' wage is either bound up in the profit they can make from the sale of their pieces, often imbued with huge emotional labour, or their potential, such as in the form of residencies. This is a much vaguer and more subjective position than the flat hourly or annual wage granted to those working in more conventional positions in the creative industry, whether heads of auction houses or gallery invigilators. The concept of retirement also draws a clear distinction: Matisse famously reverted to paper cut outs due to the limitations of his age, whilst De Kooning's slow deterioration in his ability to paint due to dementia was branded a late period. For

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5yyegM2u88>

female artists, the inability to retire carries a different meaning, given that many women don't receive institutional recognition until very late in their careers⁷.

Nevertheless, whatever your gender identity, being an artist is a very difficult identity to relinquish.

The question of identity opens a wider door to the typical realities of capitalist work.

For many, perhaps in parallel to those in pursuit of art, professional life seems to operate as an assumed identity – subsuming personal affairs through a draining of energy. This is partially done via capitalistic regimentation of time itself:

standardizations such as the working week dictate the schedules of people's lives for them, defining wider class identities⁸. Artists themselves seem to escape all

conventions of the working week, the studio being an oasis of self-initiation; whilst this relative freedom doesn't exempt them from the international schedule of art fairs, biennales, and gallery seasons, it at least gives them some control over their weekly hours. However, given the fact that art is fundamentally a reflected engagement of

an artists' reality, it can be difficult to define when artists aren't working, because they're always interacting with the world. Speaking on this issue, Molesworth

highlighted the resultantly performative nature of studio practice: if anything an artist

does in the studio is art, it must gain a certain level of intention, and therefore, respect.⁹ Whilst perspectives on what respect modern art deserves greatly vary, the

positioning of art's intangible value at least give it an opportunity to subjectively

define and defend itself – as opposed to (for example) the hospitality sector, which

⁷ Such as the recently publicized case of Carmen Herrera, the Cuban-American painter who sold her first work at 89, now credited as pre-empting many of Frank Stella's 'achievements' such as shaped canvases.

⁸ Marx quoted in Michael Denning, *Wageless Life*: 'the creation of a normal working day is...the product of a protracted civil war...between the capitalist class and working class'

⁹ Molesworth, *Work Ethic*, p39

has been perpetually placed at the bottom of social estimations, with little opportunity for future valorisation. Though coronavirus has rapidly shifted attitudes towards work, introducing the idea of 'key workers', it is yet to be seen if this term will stand the test of time; hopefully it can be the start of a fuller conversation about the mechanisms by which many people get trapped in unfulfilling and demanding professions, either through convenience or necessity. Perhaps this idea of agency is why artists have stayed so silent thus far: members of the public may feel artists to be out of touch, given the perception of art as an actively chosen and self-initiated pursuit. Unfortunately, as with many narratives that surround art, this view erases the many struggles artists themselves go through.

In 'Wageless life', Michael Denning effectively argues that, by our mere existence within a capitalist framework, we become subsumed into the identity of a 'proletarian' – it is not a wage that makes one a worker, but the 'imperative to earn a living.'¹⁰ In this case, despite the many differences between an artistic metaphysical understanding of 'work' and its purist capitalist identity, it is impossible to say that artists are not workers: because everyone is (or, more accurately, will be evaluated as such). Infamous fan of the supply chain Andy Warhol agreed, believing that 'People are working every minute. The machinery is always going. Even when you sleep.'¹¹ This perspective, whilst in some ways bleak, could also be interpreted as letting artists off the hook; the performance artist Penny Arcade takes a much more active view, claiming that 'We call it work for a reason, there has to be some fucking *work* in there, *real* work.'¹² Following her perspective, artists could be differentiated

¹⁰ Denning, Wageless life

¹¹ The Philosophy of Andy Warhol, p96

¹² Interview printed in Dominic Johnson, The Art of Living, p149

because their work, due to its fundamental self-initiation, isn't inevitable, or uniform; its value is in some way subjective, dependent on the artists' own investment. In spite of this, artists are still entrenched in the same capitalist production and supply chains as everyone else: the irony being that the art market, which locks them into universal systems of alienation, is the exact institution with the most investment in the mythic narrative of the artist, as an attempt to obfuscate its own exploitative structures. Pieces such as performance artist Adrian Piper's 'Three Untitled Projects', in which she mailed invitation booklets comprising the artwork to over 150 curators, dealers, and galleries, listing the recipients as the 'exhibit locations', highlight the relative powerlessness of artists in the system of gallery curation. 50 years later, despite the proliferation of platforms such as Etsy for individuals to sell their work, the power still remains with those not identifying as artists themselves. Perhaps the myth of unchecked artistic agency has survived due to its power as an antidote to capitalist supremacy, a small hope; but unfortunately, even though not everyone engaging in the economy can be solely termed a worker, capitalism extends its rule over us all.

Though there may be more similarities between an artist and a stereotyped worker than one would expect, the fact is that those similarities come much more from the subjective interactions those roles have with capitalism, than from innate similarities between the roles themselves. As Roberts argues in his article 'Art after Deskilling', 'for art to remain art...it must experience itself as being 'out of joint' both with its official place in the world and its own traditions'¹³. This perpetual and fundamental othering, innate to art's identity as a social object, will always supersede the

¹³ Roberts, Art After Deskilling, p93

similarities that may exist between artists and workers. Additionally, the naturally spiritual, individuated and emotional nature of making art means that artists will, on some level, always have a sense of duty bigger than that of just paying the rent. As Chagall said, 'art seems...to be a state of soul'¹⁴ – and artist participation in exploitative capitalist structures can't erase this fact. A reappraisal of artists' status within capitalism is, however, necessary: the situation of art has never been more precarious. One need look no further than the recently re-released 'Fatima's next job could be in cyber' campaign to see clearly where the priorities of this government lie. Art is integral to society's understanding of the sources of humanity, and, as such, it is only right that artists be given an uncontradictory way to understand themselves. Our value must be sustainably materialised.

¹⁴ My Life, p109