

Not Working

Reader

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Made in Art School

The art system's failure across many generations to distribute resources equitably and to provide artists with support to practice over the long term is not a result of ineffectiveness, it is a result of its design. The systems and infrastructures that have developed in the United States around the production, presentation, and exchange of art have been built on familiar processes of inclusion and exclusion. For many artists, this has long been evident as more than a design flaw, understood systemically and experienced firsthand as the faithful adherence by its gatekeepers to race, gender, class, and ability-based forms of exclusion.

For those who weren't subject to such exclusion but were still unable to gain a foothold, the art system's design may have been less evident. Without the lived experience of disenfranchisement, or perhaps lacking critical understanding of the field's inequities, they may have instead blamed themselves for a perceived failure to succeed in a system that renders bare survival impossible for the very people who collectively generate value on its behalf.

But thanks to the increasing standardization of a more political pedagogy by a precarious workforce of art school adjuncts over the past decade, a younger generation is today more likely to blame the system itself, in all its biased and apparently well-meaning glory. That is to say, artists who manage to pass through post-secondary educational institutions are now less likely to see the problem as their own lack of talent or deficient entrepreneurship as some in previous generations might have done.

For art school adjuncts to also explicitly address their students' impending exploitation and precarity—helping them to understand it as being the result of an unregulated scarcity model that can't possibly accommodate or remunerate the ever increasing oversupply of talent pumped into it by the tens of hundreds of thesis exhibitions each year—would be for adjuncts to risk articulating the unsustainable conditions of their own labor.

As a part-time, temporary, contracted workforce that is both underpaid and overworked, and whose actual labor is remunerated in symbolic fees justified as contact hours instead of real hourly wages, the conditions of adjunct labor are an iteration of the conditions of artists' labor. It should come as no surprise then that the art school adjunct workforce is populated by that very same oversupply of artists pumped into the art system by the tens of hundreds of thesis exhibitions each year. Adjuncts are artists with costly MFA degrees competing for temporary teaching gigs because the scarcity model that is the art system doesn't enable them to earn a living from their work.

For art students to understand their teachers, as well as themselves, as functional parts of what is an impossible scarcity equation and broader austerity problem, would be for students to use political pedagogy not only to inform their individual practices but also to fuel collective struggle.¹ And they will need it, because in this equation artists appear to have few options for economic

¹ The involvement of students in recent strikes by staff across art schools in the U.K. struggling against precarity and the marketization of higher education has been critical to movement building.

survival and even less agency to change conditions beyond the marginal benefits derived from a few structural modifications, such as those W.A.G.E.² has made in establishing a compensation floor and minimum payment standards for the U.S. non-profit sector. Beyond these modifications, the potential for artists to organize themselves into a configuration capable of mobilizing politically as a workforce has remained just that.

So, given that the contemporary art field is likely to stay unregulated—or for now self-regulated by institutions—it is incumbent upon artists to share in the collective work of enforcing the modifications we do have while pushing hard for more. Economic equity will involve redistributing the field's composition across class and fully decentering whiteness. To achieve this, artists will need to come together around a shared politics of labor and be prepared to collectivize their leverage. The question is, what is standing in our way?

Perhaps it is something about artists themselves that has become an obstacle to collectivization and maybe it's now time to return to some healthy self-awareness about what the artist's "self" is, how it is constructed, both by and for marketization, and how that process, begun and honed in art school, makes us perfectly exploitable subjects and easily divisible as such.

For those fortunate enough to get in, pay for, and attend one, art school is the place where the artist's self begins to develop in relation to other artists. It is also the primary barrier to entry into the contemporary art field as well as the international cookie cutter of the hyper-individuated artistic subject—a construction the industry demands. Put the two together and you have a farm-to-table factory designed to prep and ready artists for the marketplace.

The marketplace here refers to anywhere value is produced and in the art system that necessarily includes both the non-profit and for-profit sectors. While producing different forms of value and appearing to be on opposite ends of art's moral continuum, these sectors operate in reality through increasing overlap and interdependency. The non-profit sector produces critical value through its perceived status as being outside of, adjacent to, or above the amoral buying and selling of art in the for-profit sector. Ironically though, it is precisely through its perceived moral purity that the non-profit endows itself and the artists who pass through it with monetizable *moral capital*. The logic is that if it's exhibited in a non-profit institution, it serves the public good and therefore has value beyond commerce—and it is exactly this perception that adds economic value to art when it reaches the auction and commercial sales markets.

This being the case, it's easy to see why moral capital is must-have currency in contemporary art. Its monetization, however, is a tricky business. Monetization is largely facilitated by the commercial market—the white-hot center of

capital, luxury, and excess—and it takes place in the public view of other artists. Even though it is widely understood by artists that selling work is one of few income streams available to them, to do so is still often judged as selling out. Without inherited wealth or privilege, an artist's ability to both materially survive and continue practicing over the long term will at some point likely require them to cash in their moral capital on the commercial market, and because this can only be done through mechanisms contemporary pedagogy has trained us to critique by default, the choice to *just sell it* is also the choice to just sell out.

At auction and through gallery representation, the commercial marketplace converts artists' moral capital into economic value and transforms critical value into social access. For most artists, this conversion process is a one-way street: if you defect into the commercial market from the non-profit sector and become a "gallery artist," you might have trouble getting back out the way you came in. In the United States at least, moral capital can only be consumed in the for-profit sector, it cannot be produced by it.

So, if as an artist you choose to retain your moral capital by eschewing the commercial market, you'll likely pay for it with your livelihood. Conversely, if you choose your livelihood and embrace the commercial market you'll likely pay for it with your moral capital. It is exactly here, in the irreconcilability between the economic and the moral, that the social division between artists emerges as a primary obstacle to collectivization.

And if you look closely, you can find the roots of this social division in art school. Even though most students don't yet understand the structural distinction between the non- and for-profit sectors, with liminal awareness their artistic identities have already begun to form in relation to them. While young artists may not comprehend the differences between a charitable organization and a for-profit business, they seem to have an instinct for where they're located along the economic and moral continuums.

Art school is where young people learn to perform their artistic identities and begin to grow into the type of artist they want to be. At age seventeen or eighteen the type of artist we want to be is naturally limited to the types of artists we already know about, and the types of artists we already know about, at least in my generation and thanks to heteropatriarchy and white supremacy, were almost never non-white, rarely women, and always European or American.

But thanks to a generation of more politicized pedagogy, along with some artists who managed to find their way into or around the art school to gallery pipeline, the type of artist a young person knows about could today include BIPOC, LGBTQI, and women artists, as well as others who have been overlooked, are almost or often deceased, and whose output is therefore in limited supply. Despite these changes, however, there can still be found across art

² Founded in 2008, Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) is a New York-based activist organization whose mission is to establish sustainable economic relationships between artists and the institutions that contract their labor, and to introduce mechanisms for self-regulation into the art field that collectively bring about a more equitable distribution of its economy. Lise Soskolne, the author of this text, is a co-founder of W.A.G.E. and has been its core organizer since 2012.

schools a similar set of artist typologies—internal constructions of the *artist self*, each its own composite of attitude, material, and form. Having evolved over generations that excluded non-white subjectivities, they are by default largely representative of self-perceptions grounded in whiteness:

Artist as rebel, gestures at subversion
Artist as skilled worker, pride in craft
Artist as entrepreneur, producer of luxury goods
Artist as performer, life is material
Artist as theorist, text is material
Artist as activist, agent of change
Artist as bohemian, nihilistic dandy

Each typology has a correlate approach to creativity. How the work gets made also represents the artist self in practice:

Creativity is lived, un-credentialed experience
Creativity is sacred, requiring monastic conditions
Creativity is irrelevant, outsourced, and fabricated
Creativity is affective, embodied, and performed
Creativity is critique, deskilled, and subcontracted
Creativity is research-based, commissioned, and project-driven
Creativity is derided except when as ironic authorship

So, while young artists are today rightfully being schooled in intersectional feminism, Marxism, and decolonial theory, they're simultaneously being groomed for professionalization. As the articulation of artistic identity begins to codify within social groups and group critique, its legibility also begins to conform with commercial gallery or institutional marketplace standards. Because these marketplaces are positioned as distinct and in opposition, these typologies often take shape alongside them:

Artist as rebel, gestures at subversion (for-profit/pro-market)
Artist as skilled worker, pride in craft (for-profit/pro-market)
Artist as entrepreneur, producer of luxury goods (for-profit/pro-market)
Artist as performer, life is material (non-profit/anti-market)
Artist as theorist, text is material (non-profit/anti-market)
Artist as activist, agent of change (non-profit/anti-market)
Artist as bohemian, nihilistic dandy (both)

Matriculating into the industry, young artists are thus dispatched from social networks configured around MFA programs to networks configured around commercial galleries and non-profit spaces.

Underpinning all of this is the illusion that the non- and for-profit sectors are locked in opposition at either end of the moral and economic continuums, when, in fact, decades of starvation neoliberalism have forced them into

unequal codependence. With nominal state support for culture, non-profits are today in full hock to toxic philanthropy, private collectors, and financialization in exchange for tax write-offs, money laundering, and other benefits that utilize the moral purity of the public charity as cover. Private collectors not only sit on the boards of non-profits and influence programming; they operate their own grant making foundations and run their own private non-profit museums.

Hanging in the balance is nothing less than the moral authority of the entire art system, and by extension that of artists. Evidence of art's moral authority appearing to approach zero is its now total irrelevance to orchestrated urban gentrification. Today, artisanal food trucks and farmer's markets do a better job at gesturing toward bohemia while the presence of art simply means the luxury market has already arrived. This perception is entirely justified since the field's survival depends on its appeal to a billionaire class, requiring it to be composed of those who perform a similar class position, whether coming by it through their own inherited wealth or adjacent cultural pedigree. To some extent, artists too must meet these criteria since both the non- and for-profit sectors require untold hours of unpaid labor and the privilege of being able to accept speculative compensation in return.

It has been my experience, which may only be reflective of my own generation, that in as much as we blame ourselves for our failure to succeed within the impossible conditions of this industry, we blame and resent other artists when they manage to do so themselves. And why not? We encounter each other in balkanized social worlds competing in a race to the bottom for moral purity on the one hand, and a race to the top for name recognition on the other, with neither providing reliable income.

As if this weren't enough of an obstacle to collectivizing our leverage along with our lot, there is now another obstacle in view. To picture it, place art's diminished moral authority and increasing political irrelevance in the context of massive global inequity. Now place a generation of largely privileged artists schooled in intersectional feminism, Marxism, and decolonial theory making their work in a system that supports itself by converting branded moral capital into economic value. What you have is a professionalized generation of artists tasked with an impossible political assignment: to save art from itself.

In this scenario not only can art *not* save itself from itself, it surely cannot be saved through the individual authorship of what should be collective work. If gaining visibility in the art system today requires artists to differentiate themselves from other artists by authoring their own political dissent as an extension of their aesthetic practices, then there is no basis on which we can come together around a shared politics. For us to dissent and mobilize collectively we would also have to dissent from our own individuation, and currently very few seem able to afford to take such a risk, while the rest may be united in the belief that there is little left worth saving.