

# For a shift in perspective :

## from pricing the artwork, to valuing the process

In the visual arts, two preconceptions seem deeply entrenched and difficult to debunk. On the one hand, artists are still circumscribed within a romantic vision of creation stemming from 19th-century standards, characterized by the bohemian artist, working out of love, passion and the tireless search of a “chef d’oeuvre”. On the other hand, while the field has always been structured around collections, sponsors and institutions, in the era of ultra-liberalism, it presupposes the idea of a free market based on supply and demand, inducing a conception of the artist as producer and the artwork as commodity. In such a context, peer-competition and meritocracy are considered as tokens of efficiency and rationality, enabling the market to bring into the light (and out of the pack) only the most talented and innovative artists.

In practice, these preconceptions imply that the artists, despite being the ones providing content for the institutions (whether commercial or not) and the ones upon whom the art market relies, remain largely under-remunerated. With the exception of the few who may have been selected by the invisible hand, the production of artistic content is still commonly compensated in the form of exhibitions, exposure and visibility. Yet, in the throes of material reality (from which creatives are surprisingly not exempt), the current standards force most artists to take on “day jobs” to meet their basic needs. In a society where work (and not labour) appears to hold the function of cardinal value, the artist’s work is then economically constructed as a part-time activity. Furthermore, the proliferation of art fairs and galleries entails a frenetic and effervescent production of mini-celebrities, supported by ephemeral gallery representation, speculated upon, and often replaced once the novelty has worn off – perfectly in line with the logic of consumption and (over)production specific to the economic dogma in which the field is enrolled. In such a context, the product is either the artwork or the artist. Either way, whilst the final product is seemingly more valuable than the process in the eyes of the market, the translation of this logic into the artistic eco-system induces a disentanglement between the price of the artwork and the underlying working hours. Today, remuneration (whether monetary or symbolic) of artistic production is based on the outcome - the artwork itself - and disregards the labor necessary for its creation. This results in colossal incomes for the few artists crowned by the market, a lump-sum remuneration of artists exhibiting in institutions, and a tremendous amount of unpaid working hours for the vast majority.

With all of that in mind, the observation is unequivocal : we need to make a shift in perspective. One way to tackle these discrepancies could therefore be a transition from pricing the artwork to valuing the process.

Far from being recent, the redefinition of artistic creation as labour and the identification of artists as workers have been a recurrent issue in Western art history since the 1940’s. It led, on the one hand, to a change in representational regimes (minimalism, conceptualism, feminist practices, etc.), and on the other hand, to significant movements of resistance and mobilization (The Artists’ Union, Art Workers Coalition, Wages for Housework, etc.). On the scene today, several groups are raising awareness about artists’ poor working conditions and initiating better regulations with political authorities. These demands, however, generate numerous reactions, both in the way in which such regulations should be implemented and to their ideological framework. For some, they tackle the arduousness of work and self-sacrifice, the value and utility of art, the impossibility of quantifying working hours, and even the fear of seeing artists become employees, at the mercy of a state-imposed aesthetic. For the more liberal ones, they also reawakened the idea whereby artists either produce goods for which there is not enough demand, or there are inefficiencies in the market.

So, while the art-industry seems to want to keep on living the American Dream, many art workers are currently intensifying the claim for a recalibration of power relations, which in practice, involves a renegotiation of rights, a claim for minimum wages, the formation of new unions and collective organizations or the strengthening of existing ones, challenging the romanticizing vision of the suffering artist in the process.

Here are a few hints :

- Make visible all “difficult” conversations about artists fees, working conditions, labor rights and inclusivity, even within exhibition spaces if necessary. → The artist collective and campaign Wages For Wages Against, is doing the important work of un-silencing all abusive situations in the contemporary art field in Switzerland and Europe since 2017.
- Imitate and/or reboot the collectives and unions that have set up certification systems for institutions that respect basic principles of labour law, thus involving the public in the claim for fairer treatment of artist’s labour. → In this regard, the colossal work carried out by WAGE in the US since 2008 “redefines the relation between artists and institutions as being one of labor and not charity”.
- Implement and enforce fee schedules and recommendations advocated by professional associations active in their respective national contexts. In Switzerland, the platform [travaildesartistes.ch](http://travaildesartistes.ch) was created to improve working relationships and labor conditions. It provides a fee calculator and a configurable exhibition contract.
- Accompany the introduction of new regulations with funding tools, allowing for a smooth transition for institutions. In the Netherlands, the support for the implementation of the BKNL fee scale took the form of Mondriaan’s Fund providing partial compensation of the additional costs charged to institutions. The project was a success : after the first year, nearly two third of art spaces were applying the recommended rates.
- Work on and support legislative law-making processes aimed at providing greater protection for artists. In France, the recent campaign and bill proposal “Pour une continuité de revenus des artistes-auteurs·ices” [For a continuity of incomes for artists], led by the Collectif La Buse amongst others, defends the right of artists-authors to be considered as intermittent workers in the eyes of labor laws.

As members of a collective body whose interests should a priori be mutual, it is essential to question what are the social, economic and cultural parameters and capitals that enable a commitment to artistic practice nowadays, and what ought to be changed to make the art worlds and markets inclusive and the artistic practice accessible. Shifting towards a valorization of the process (e.g through systematic remuneration) instead of pricing the outcome, could lead to a more sustainable art industry and would certainly change the current tendency, towards new modes of creating and resisting, inside the capitalist regime.

*\*These ideas stem from many conversations with Marius Quiblier, Camille Dumond, Camilla Paolino, Vicente Lesser Gutierrez, and many more.*

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