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Notes on the exploitation of poor artists

Hans Abbing

In this text¹ I argue that presently the exploitation of poor artists differs structurally from that of other knowledge workers and that this difference has consequences for actions aimed at the reduction of exploitation. The exploitation of poor artists is largely an affair internal to the art world: it is foremost an art elite that profits from low incomes in the arts.^{2,3}

1. Believing that the arts play a pioneering role in the critique of capitalism is attractive

Generally, artists are poor and their socio-economic situation is uncertain. One month they may have some income and the next none at all. Their situation is precarious. The term precarity in connection to labour has been brought to the foreground by social scientists who emphasise that, since the late twentieth century, an economic and social transformation towards post-Fordism has resulted in the increased precarity of workers. The powerful notion of post-Fordism as a contemporary form of capitalism, favouring flexibility, precarity and affective engagement in performed labour, emerges as a result. It is telling that, over the last years, the use of the terms precarity and post-Fordism has become popular in art circles, whereas a decade ago the terms were almost unknown; today they appear to be on everybody's lips. Several explanations for this are likely to apply. First, the terms are illuminating. They contribute to a renewed attention to the bad economic position of artists in our society. Second, over the last two centuries, in spite of occasional alliances with deprived people, the position of artists in society has been predominantly one of relative isolation. Therefore, for critical artists, it is attractive to show that the socio-economic position of artists is not special anymore, and that making a common front with others makes sense. Third, in a time in which the negative effects of capitalism increasingly exceed its positive effects, it is

¹ Some arguments pitched in the current paper I elaborate more thoroughly in my upcoming book: Abbing (2014/5 forthcoming) Draft versions of some chapters are available on www.hansabbing.nl.

² I would like to thank Kuba Szreder and Georgios Papadopoulos for their comments on earlier versions of this text.

³ The concept of economic exploitation used in this text refers to a structural use of people's labour without adequate compensation. This is not necessarily the same as the Marxist concept of exploitation; in the latter an entire segment or class in society is exploited by another.

tempting to blame capitalism for all of the artists' problems and not look at causes which are not directly related to capitalism, like possible exploitation internal to the art world itself. (For me capitalism is an immoral system, which nevertheless brought prosperity to many people, but probably not anymore.)

Fourth, artists and people in the art establishments like to see and present the arts as a forerunner in society, as a continuous avant-garde. This notion increases their self-esteem and the esteem coming from others. They believe that artists in the '60s and '70s of the previous century were pioneers in the criticism of capitalism. It is true that there were many artists among those who criticised capitalism for its stultifying and inhuman (Fordist) modes of production; nevertheless, it were foremost students who expressed this criticism most vehemently. In line with this belief, it is now attractive to think that the arts – with working conditions that have been precarious already for a long time – are presently the first to criticise the increasing precarity in capitalism and carry this load.

Some art world people even think that after the war the arts served as a kind of laboratory for the new, more human modes of production which emerged, but which gradually also increased precarity. That Boltanski and Chiapello called the 1960s critique an 'artistic critique' has added to this idea. But they clearly did not want to say that the critique stemmed from artists or even that those artists played an important role in it (Boltanski and Chiapello (2005 prim. ed. in French 1999). However, even without assuming that the arts served as a kind of a laboratory for the new modes of production, it is probably correct to say that the arts, as the field of creative self-realization, served as a point of reference for the formulation of the artistic critique of capitalism.

As a side note, it is useful to note that although it is true that the artistic critique of the rigid post war society and capitalism at large preceded the post-Fordist rhetoric and may have contributed to the latter, it certainly did not *cause* the emergence of the rhetoric and even less *caused* the new modes of production to come into being.⁴ Chronological succession does not imply causality. It is far more likely that both artistic critique and new modes of production are the result of long-term developments in technology, production and administration.⁵ Moreover, I think that the belief that the arts hold an avant-garde position, both as a laboratory of production and with respect to criticism, rests on a vast overrating of the importance of the arts in society. If there has been and is a laboratory, it is located more generally in the culture industry, which includes the popular arts.⁶

Fifth, I think that the eagerness with which members of the art establishment who earn normal to high incomes now use the term precarity can also be explained by the fact that this

⁴ Though superficial reading of their text may suggest the opposite, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005 prim. ed. in French 1999) as well clearly do not think in terms of a causal relationship.

⁵ They are part of what Norbert Elias (1994, ed.princ. in German 1939) has called a civilization process, which in the second half of the twentieth century led to, among others, de-hierarchization and informalization – see Wouters (2007).

⁶ I distinguish, on the one hand, art and artists and, on the other, popular artists and popular art. Generally, people, including popular artists, do not consider the latter as "real" art.

enables them to exhibit their progressive stance. It brings them prestige in many social circles in which they participate – including circles that are not necessarily leftwing. And finally, it enables the establishment to victimise the arts again, while emphasising the exceptionally high symbolic value of the arts. This way, their own privileged position is accentuated and maintained – see below. (This is not to say that there are no people within the art establishment who honestly believe in these notions and adhere to progressive ideas.)

Before continuing, it may be useful to ask who belongs to the art establishment and who does not. Whereas many readers may have a rather clear idea of people they know or have heard of who may belong to it, it is difficult to draw a line. It seems reasonable to say that those in the art world who are poor do not belong to the establishment. This applies to the large majority of people in the art world, foremost artists themselves, but also to support personnel, volunteers and interns.⁷ In the case of the establishment I am thinking of, first of all, successful artists who are not only successful but also earn a more than decent income. The latter form a very small percentage of all artists. Secondly, there are the people who administer art institutions, especially those with steady and better paid jobs, as well as many curators and mediators. The latter include a relatively large number of people who mediate between art institutions and artists on the one hand and, on the other, local and central government bodies and foundations. Third, quite a few people within governments and foundations as well as private donors and collectors can be said to be part of the art elite. Finally, the same applies to politicians and an elite of art lovers, from collectors to regular visitors of art performances, like classical concerts and opera, who associate themselves with the arts.

2. How similar or different are artists and other knowledge workers?

An inventory of similarities and differences between the positions of the typical artist and the typical knowledge worker with a comparable level of professional schooling can help answer the question if the exploitation of artists is of the same nature as that of other knowledge workers, who share similarly precarious working conditions.

At first glance, the correspondences are striking. (1) Performance is immaterial and often tied to the body of the worker (as is clear in the live production of music, theatre and dance, while visual artists as well produce a product with foremost symbolic value). (2) There is little routine in the labor involved – de-routinization being a characteristic of post-Fordism *par excellence*. (3) Working hours are flexible. The majority of workers have temporary contracts or are self-employed. (4) There is no clear distinction between work and the private sphere. (5) There is much so-called multiple jobholding. (6) Informality (as generally characteristic for bohemian attitude) is important and there is little respect for hierarchical differences (at least visible or ostentatious). (7) Communication and discourse are important. (Most contemporary artists are indeed good with words.) (8) Emphasis is on creativity. Creativity is a measure of success. There is a desire to explore new creative possibilities. Continuous development and innovation are important. (9) Individual autonomy is much appreciated. (10)

⁷ Support personnel, a term used by Howard Becker (1982), help in the realization of artworks without being in charge, like for instance technicians. Often support personnel consist in former artists or artists who do this work as second job.

Self-realization and authenticity are significant goals. (1) Finally, work stress, existential doubts and frustration, burnouts and depressions caused by professional failure or the inability to realize one's own creative potential are common.

But there are also telling differences. (1) The typical artist is very poor. In most Western countries the total income (i.e. including second jobs) of 40% to 60% of artists is small enough to put them below the poverty line.⁸ Evidently, artists are willing to work for very low incomes. At present, the typical knowledge worker with an equal level of professional training is not poor and often relatively well-to-do. In those cases in which their income becomes very low, they will re-train and attempt to find work in a different direction or profession. (2) Unlike comparable knowledge workers, artists have already been poor for a very long time, while working conditions were precarious. (3) Artists have a stronger work-preference. Often when more money comes in, part or all of it is used not for consumption and comfort but for working fewer hours in second jobs and more hours as artists, or for investments in their work as artists.

Moreover, none of the economic logic that prevails in non-art fields of cultural production exists in the arts, as the following differences demonstrate. (4) In the dominant social imagery, in and outside the arts, there is a tension between a strong dedication to art and commercial success.⁹ The intention of the artist is to be altogether dedicated to art and to be as autonomous as possible. For other knowledge workers, positions in which they are less autonomous are often more satisfying, also because they bring more money. Other knowledge workers can also be dedicated to their work and they as well like some degree of autonomy, but they also have other goals than 'work for the sake of work' and they will not negate the underlying economic purpose of their activities. This particular artist-intention is celebrated and propagated by artists, but it is also what is expected from artists. This celebration is absent or far less important in the case of other knowledge workers.

(5) When people, including knowledge workers, are poor, they are ashamed of their poverty and they are looked down on. In our society being poor is bad. This apparently does not apply to artists. Unlike other poor people, artists do not have to be ashamed of being poor. (They may be ashamed, but they will not show it, nor will others openly look down on them for being poor.) (6) A comfortable life is not a widely shared goal in the arts. There is distrust of the pursuit of comfort and a solid career. (7) Public and private support is regarded as good

⁸ For more data on poverty in the arts, their proper interpretation, and on the criteria of defining artists as a professional category, see Abbing (2002) and various articles I have written since, which are available on www.hansabbing.nl.

⁹ It is true that presently a small but growing number of foremost successful artists openly show commercial behavior. This particularly applies to artists who already become successful shortly after graduating. This phenomenon draws much public attention, but one should keep in mind that the relative number of artists involved is very small, that part of the showing-off is provocative, if not an artistic act, and that it therefore indirectly proves that the image is still one of opposition between dedication to art and commercial success and suspicion of the latter. In this context, it is worth noting that almost all very successful artists who fall in this category do not behave like pop and sport stars, for whom commercial success is altogether okay, and unlike them do not mingle with the jet set. For different opinions see Graw (2009) and Stallabras (2004).

and righteous. For the typical knowledge worker, it is a sign of failure. (8) Authorship and signatures matter far more than in the case of other knowledge workers. (9) Unlike pop and sport stars, very successful artists are (still) seen as geniuses rather than heroes. (10) The need for contemporary artists to be altogether innovative goes much further than in the case of most other knowledge workers. For the latter, creative variations on an existing theme are allowed and often demanded, while presently for artists this is taboo. Often the art world puts down artists who are not innovative enough or start to 'repeat themselves'. (11) Finally, and very importantly, respect for art, and artists, is (still) much higher than that for other creative workers.

Therefore, along with many correspondences, there are also important differences between artists and knowledge workers. Specifically, the combination of precarity and low incomes in the arts, which has already existed for a long time, poses many questions. Given the differences, is it possible that the exploitation of poor artists is, at least partly, of a different nature than that of other knowledge workers? In order to see if this is true a detour is necessary.

3. Rationalization and bureaucratization contributed to the high symbolic value of Art

A relationship between the low incomes of artists and the high symbolic value of their work exists, which does not exist in related professions. At first glance, low incomes in the arts seem to contradict art's high value: in spite of the high value of art, the majority of artists are poor. But maybe another logic applies: because the symbolic value of art is high, artists are poor. (This would imply that, if the symbolic value of art drops, in due time artists will start to earn more and will less poor.)

I am talking about symbolic value. Nevertheless, a high financial value both depends on it and contributes to it. The financial value of artwork and art-related objects can be very high. Some artwork costs millions of dollars, while governments and foundations spend huge amounts of money on prestigious new museums and concert halls – think, for instance, of the Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi and the Elbphilharmonie concert hall in Hamburg. Moreover, large sums of money are involved in public and private support. Support signifies the high symbolic value of art. But the typical artist is poor.

High respect for art is related to what has been identified as the 'romantic ethic at the origins of consumerism'.¹⁰ The rationalization, bureaucratization and disenchantment in modernity, which was emphasized by Max Weber, has been accompanied by the equally significant process of re-enchantment.¹¹ Already in the 19th century, this romantic ethic went hand in hand with an emphasis on creativity, self-expression and self-discovery. There is a romantic longing and search for individuality and authenticity. However, for 'normal' members of the bourgeoisie, the latter was beyond reach. Artists were the exception. Hence the high respect for art and artists.¹²

¹⁰ *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism* is the title of a book by Campbell (1987).

¹¹ Only this can explain the consumer revolution in 18th century England. There can be no capitalism without high consumption – see Campbell (1987)

¹² Cf. the text by Diederichsen in this book.

Since the middle of the 20th century, this situation has somewhat changed. In people's *perceptions*, not only for artists but also for other knowledge workers and increasingly for everybody, some degree of authenticity and self-realization is attainable. Authenticity has become both a possibility and a necessity. In this context, authenticity refers to that what people *claim* to be authenticity. Therefore, more authenticity does not necessarily imply less alienation. Moreover, in contemporary capitalism, the attainment of such authenticity is only a temporary situation. To remain authentic, there is a need to consume ever-new products which can give people the feeling of being authentic.

But for the time being, artists remain exceptional, in the sense that they are still seen as more authentic in both their work and life. They can better realize themselves. Indeed, when it comes to work, any knowledge worker, even the CEO of a large company, is replaceable. Within a week after his departure, another has taken his place. The newcomer may have a slightly different approach, but the nature of production and the product does not change. However, when an artist dies, no further works will appear in his typical style or with his sometimes very valuable signature. For instance, the death of Karel Appel implied that no more new and genuine 'Appels' were produced.

The postwar democratization of authenticity and of education is not without consequences for the art world. The arts have become more accessible and attractive. When anybody can be authentic, anybody can become an artist, and becoming an artist can be a realistic goal. One can be a successful artist without having to be a genius or an extremely gifted craftsman. Since artists can still realize the goal of self-realization better than others, while it is highly appreciated, the arts profession is very attractive. Hence the number of students entering art schools has increased. Presently, in a country like the Netherlands, the number of students admitted to the autonomous departments of art schools is five times higher than it was 40 years ago.¹³

4. Exploitation of poor artists is foremost an inner art world affair

Reasoning like an economist, one could argue that artists have chosen to be poor. They chose to be 'poor and happy'. When deciding to become artists, they imagined that they would be compensated for their low incomes by non-monetary forms of remuneration, like work enjoyment and status. Implicitly, such an opinion follows from thinking in terms of exchange: artists are willingly exchanging money for other rewards. But this is not the way people act. At best, they may somewhat weigh short-term costs and benefits.¹⁴ The assumptions of neo-classical human capital theory are incorrect - artists (and others) certainly do not estimate and weigh lifelong financial income and non-monetary income while taking into account overall costs of, among other things, training. Nevertheless, when we forget about rational choice and look at artists from outside, the notion of compensation or lack of

¹³ It is true that prosperity has increased at the same time, as perhaps did the demand for some art products. However, since the number of artists was already large and increased even more, this demand did not bring work and income for the large majority of artists.

¹⁴ In this my thoughts have developed since I wrote my book 'Why are artists poor?' (Abbing (2002)) which was still too much informed by the neo-classical economic perspective.

compensation makes sense. I would argue that artists are not compensated for low income. The hardship of artists appears to be real and considerable. In the case of excited young artists, the low income may be somewhat compensated, but only a few years after leaving art school, compensation starts to diminish. Whereas an average lawyer is neither poor nor unsuccessful, the large majority of artists are poor, regard themselves as unsuccessful and are regarded by others as unsuccessful as well. This does not worry starting artists but, over time, many artists start to consider themselves as failures, even though they will not easily admit this openly.¹⁵

At the same time hardship and failure in the arts are essential for the existence and maintenance of the high symbolic value of art, that is the exceptional prestige of art in society. If artists are so dedicated that they are willing to be poor and possibly fail, something very special must be at stake. After all, artists appear to sacrifice themselves for this sacred object which is called art. In the common romantic imagery surrounding the arts people sacrificing their time and money for art and rejecting commerce (still) plays an important role. – And given their low incomes the overall donation artists make to art far exceeds overall private and public support. – The high symbolic value of art is not only founded on poverty in the arts and the generosity of artists it signifies, but poverty certainly is one of its foundations. Without poverty among artists the symbolic value of art would be less high and the association with art would bring less distinction.¹⁶

Because within this system the labor of artists is structurally used without adequate compensation their anyway is economic exploitation, but this does not imply that a single group can be held responsible. A system like this, which partly rests on the poverty of many of its participants, is reproduced by everybody involved, including the exploited. One way or another every group has some interest in its maintenance or believes it has an interest. The distinction the association with art brings does not only go to a well-to-do art establishment or to art lovers in general, it also goes to poor artists. Moreover, given their low income their rejection of commerce is sometimes more credible than that of other participants.¹⁷ Usually poor artist as well are aware and proud of their special position. But in the case of poor artists, most of all those who have been poor for some time, the symbolic benefits do not take away hardship, while the costs for people in the establishment or for art lovers are low or absent. Seen from outside it are the latter which benefit most from the low incomes in the arts.

In any profession similar relations exist and the difference is always a matter of degree. - Priesthood used to be a profession in which the incomes of some were very low, while the net

¹⁵ In Abbing (2014/5 forthcoming) I say more about this and discuss several other forms of hardship. As far as I know no empirical research on hardship in the arts exists, though it could well be done and should be done. Instead there is much research on success in the arts and on successful artists – a small minority of artists. Evidently researchers are more inclined to do research on the bright side of the arts than on its dark side.

¹⁶ The distinction which the association with art can bring is the main topic of Bourdieu (1984 (ed. princ.in French 1979)).

¹⁷ Bourdieu (1983) points to the phenomenon that anti-commercial behavior can bring symbolic benefits and in the case of a few participant, it can, in the long run, also bring financial rewards.

benefits of a few were high.- But compared with most present day professions of knowledge workers requiring a similar level of previous training the difference is large. In the latter professions the symbolic value of the core activity is much lower and thus is the interest in low income. Moreover, seen from outside persistently low incomes in such professions are not in the interest of their elites or capitalists. Flexibility is profitable, but persistently low incomes and poverty are not, at least not in highly industrialized countries.

5. A Wild West economy exists in the arts

Before looking into the mechanisms that sustain the overall system of exploitation in the arts, it is useful to mention some forms of day-to-day exploitation that are enabled by the extreme willingness of passionate artists to work for very low incomes, which can easily be overlooked. This willingness enables a Wild West economy in the arts. There is extreme and unrestrained competition. However, since this goes against the belief in the goodness of art, it remains hidden or is denied and, likewise, artists themselves do not want to see it.

Due to the high value of art, a belief exists in the arts, among artists as well as art institutions, that everything which serves art is good. The slogan is: '*everything for art*'. However, the consequence is also an '*anything goes*'. Typical artists are ready to give up income and sacrifice a lot to get their works across, also when this way they harm their colleagues who demand proper payment. On the other side institutional functionaries believe that if their institutions serve art they are justified to offer artists low or no payments at all.

It is telling that this phenomenon does not only exist in commercial art sectors but that non-profit art institutions are also involved. Especially at the level of transactions with poor and unsuccessful artists, the '*everything for art*' in the non-profit art sector often leads to severe exploitation of artists. For instance, it is common for non-profits to not pay artists' fees, while for-profit organizations do, although not much. Or non-profit organizations pay ridiculously low fees; but they, *de facto*, let artists pay for being able to perform or show their work by letting them pay for transport, frames, stage-props and so forth; all for art's sake.

Usually poor and unsuccessful (or not yet successful) artists go along with this attitude. 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 really wants the group in his festival. Therefore 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.^{18,19}

All such behaviour leads to what can be called unfair competition. For instance, fringe festivals that often behave badly harm non-profit festivals that (try to) behave more decently. Likewise, artists who deliberately take less money than would have been possible harm artists who refuse to do so. In either case, the decent party may be forced to become more indecent or otherwise stop its activities. Another telling but less shocking example are the numerous competitions with no compensation for participating artists, with prizes which only come in the form of some recognition and publicity. Another example is the common practice of inviting artists to offer work or services for free for charity auctions or events. And poor artists are willing to do so. These behaviours also demonstrate the taking advantage of a group (artists) that is already in a weak position.

All this is not to say that the exploitation in the for-profit art sector is less severe. Moreover, there as well it is often somewhat covered up by an ‘everything for art’ logic. Especially in the relations of for-profits with somewhat successful artists, exploitation can be ruthless. Nevertheless, in day-to-day operations, often standards of proper business behaviour 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 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. And again, violators are shamed.

Art consumers certainly profit from the willingness of passionate artists to work for low incomes. If artists would only work for decent incomes, ticket prices would be higher as would be the average price for 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.²⁰ 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.

¹⁸ Another explanation for this behavior could be that, in working for low incomes, artists invest in a future in which they will be properly remunerated. Some artists probably believe this is the case or they are made to believe so, and this can partly explain their behavior, but because their chances are so small it is not at all a realistic investment.

¹⁹ It is common that interns get paid less in the arts than elsewhere. Therefore, a similar but less extreme mechanism exists in their case. Because interns have a small but nevertheless much larger chance than artists to become successful and find comfortable jobs in the arts sector, the investment aspect in their willingness to work for low or no income is larger.

²⁰ Habenundbrauchen (2012) presents other examples of exploitation of poor artists by for-profits.

6. An art ethos enables inner art world exploitation

In the arts, commerce is denounced and, if necessary, denied or covered up. An art for art's sake is incompatible with commerce. But it is unlikely that the strong denunciation of commerce in the arts only follows from this. The wish to separate art and entertainment is just as important. In order to derive distinction from one's association with art, a strong boundary between art and entertainment must exist. Since entertainment (including popular art) is commercial, art cannot be commercial. Therefore, an opposite relation exists as well: there is a struggle for autonomy to maintain a boundary between art and entertainment. In the course of the 19th century, in the US, simultaneous processes of classification, isolation and framing vested this boundary. People were taught what was art and what was not; art increasingly was to be consumed in special venues; and people learned the "civilized conducts" required for art consumption. In post-aristocratic times in Europe, the previously existing boundary was reproduced, modified and strengthened. The belief that art is not entertainment, and must not be entertainment, remains strong.²¹

Art is not entertainment and therefore commerce in the arts is denounced, while a strong dedication to art and a strife for a maximum of autonomy is promoted or even required of artists. Beliefs and moral convictions – for example: that art is not entertainment, commerce in the arts is bad and autonomy and dedication to art are good – are all part of a more encompassing art ethos that is produced and reproduced throughout society. For instance, almost anybody will agree that artists must not compromise, that success may come late and that poverty in the arts is okay (even though it may not be okay in the case of individual older artists). Meanwhile, at the level of art education, additional moral convictions are installed and reproduced. As professional logics they become part of the mindset of artists. At this level, the conviction that dedicated artists must try to make work that is as autonomous as possible is particularly important. In addition, the notion that, if necessary, artists must be willing to work for very low incomes, for the sake of art, is part of the ethos. Depending on art form or style, other examples can be that artists must connect to existing traditions in their work, that art is complex, that people do not appreciate good art, and so forth.

Nowadays, there is a small but growing number of artists who try to operate differently by striving for various goals at the same time like serving a larger audience, local communities or political goals, and so forth. Heteronomy replaces autonomy. But these more entrepreneurial and market oriented artists who, after a brief period of investment, are no longer willing to work for very low incomes and who care less about the boundary between art and entertainment, are regarded with suspicion and put down as commercial not only by artists making art for the art's sake but also by critical artists. Nevertheless, the increase in the number of these kinds of artists may well signify an increasing uneasiness with the 'everything for art' mentality in the arts. These artists do not see themselves as an avant-garde in the resistance against the existing system of exploitation in the arts, nor are they regarded as such by critical artists, but, seen from outside, they do represent a real threat to

²¹ In fact in their critique of the 'culture industry', left wing people like Adorno and Horkheimer (1991 (1944)) de facto reinforced this demand.

the system. However, instead of being acknowledged for this, critical artists with their anti-commercial stance tend to criticise them.

7. Strategies of resistance

Important differences in the causes of the exploitation of poor artists and of other knowledge workers and in the ways they are exploited exist. This has consequences for strategies of resistance. For instance, the promotion of a new art ethos, which allows or even encourages the pursuit of non-artistic goals as well, like reaching a larger audience, striving for political change and making a profit, and more generally a more entrepreneurial attitude among artists, could well represent an important form of resistance against exploitation in the arts while, in other sectors of knowledge production, this could be a giving way to neo-liberalism, which only serves the interests of capitalists.

I think that, in any case, 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, certainly if it concerns artist, who *de facto* run small enterprises. Although there is no capitalism without a market economy and commerce, the opposite does not apply.²² 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, probably strikes at a cornerstone of capitalism (see Habenundbrauchen (2012)).

In this context, it is useful to assume that various constraints which come with so much feared heteronymous influences on the process of art making, can stimulate rather than hinder genuine creativity. For instance, the self-imposed constraint of getting one's art across to an audience 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. The former could also 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. Presently in New York, the artist's coalition W.A.G.E. actively and successfully pursues a gratification scheme of visual art non-profit

²² Moreover, one has to keep in mind that capitalism alternatively promotes and opposes a free market economy. A succession of periods with large-scale free trade and with large-scale monopolization and the restriction of trade by legal power is characteristic of capitalism.)

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organizations.²³ Gradually, certification could be extended to for-profit organizations, from galleries to commercial festivals. These and other concrete actions may well contribute to the gradual installment of standards of proper business behaviour, also among non-profit organizations who presently appear to believe that, for art, ‘anything goes’.²⁴

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.

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. 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. Because it puts art for which there is little public demand on a footstall, it encourages artists to make also such art, and this is not in the interest of the average artist.

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. 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.²⁵

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

²³ See <http://www.wageforwork.com>. Art Leaks (<http://art-leaks.org/>) is a somewhat comparable initiative that aims at exposing bad practices in the arts and a shaming of the institutions involved. The London based Precarious Workers Brigade (www.precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com) is also active in this area.

²⁴ Certification works better than formal government regulation, because regulation is experienced as just another legal obligation, while both parties willingly and actively take part in certification.

²⁵ Nevertheless, at present a temporary decrease in the number of students of art academies and conservatories may be needed to improve the bad situation of artists.

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. However, this certainly does not imply that I propose a maximum of commercialization or privatization in the arts sector. On the contrary, striving for the continuation or establishment of public spaces where there is room for relatively autonomous art (including popular art!) is also a form of resistance; not only resistance against the exploitation within the art world itself, but also against the excrescences of capitalism.

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