

Career-in-Focus: Demystifying Artists' Labor

By Christina Nafziger

When I first started this section, it began with the intent to gather resources from artists and creatives as a way to collectively share knowledge to build our careers. Because, as many of us have probably experienced, most of what we do was definitely not covered in art school.

But as the state of the world changes, the ways in which we interact with each other transform, and as the landscape of art continues to expand, so must this section. There is a need for a space for artists and creatives to engage in conversation, to discuss the parts of being an artist that often go unseen. And that is what this section is for—to ask the tough questions, to confront issues within the arts ecosystem, and to truly talk about these challenges in real time.

In this issue, I ask our art community: What part of being an artist do you wish was demystified and/or de-romanticized? I can't tell you how many times my non-artist friends and family ask me questions about what I do, and it can sometimes be quite difficult to even know where to start. Having a career as an artist isn't necessarily taught as a viable career path, and so it can seem so out of reach for many folks (even other artists!) to even imagine what that looks like in order to make being an artist, curator, etc. into a reality. No more romanticizing the 'starving artist', no more assuming all artists do all day is make art. What does being an artist actually look like—without it being unrealistically romanticized or devalued as a job?

Let's demystify the 'lone creative genius' and take the 'starving artist' off of a pedestal. As curator Pia Singh so directly puts it, "There's an entire invisible labor force to back the singular 'genius' of an artist." I could not agree more. It takes a lot of people putting in a lot of hard work to make each and every exhibition, performance, and art sale happen. Art is a job, artmaking is labor...let's acknowledge it as such!

“

*Being an artist is a
real profession, with an
immense perspective
for the future and is
constantly evolving.*

- Léni Whitford

PIA SINGH

Independent Curator and Arts Writer

As a curator, thinking about acts of care, I think artists have an innate sense navigating the nonsense that occupies so much of the day to day in this world. I think of curating and writing as creative acts as well, and in the sense that there is a contingency between artists and art laborers that overall needs to be articulated as an ecosystem. Against the fields of economics, or the many subjects that compose political landscapes, I think the Arts (broadly) possess the power of refusal, of return, of building resonances between fields. I think being an artist means being able to hold difference, contrasting viewpoints, attuning oneself through active and passive processes in order to respond to situations in a constantly shifting environment. There's an entire invisible labor force to back the singular 'genius' of an artist so, how can we then re-think artistic labor as a collective condition over and above an individual pursuit? How do we as a community in the arts retain our agency in a world that is hell bent on co-opting language and reappropriating our ways of thinking and looking, to ends that might not quite align with notions of artistic autonomy?

LÉNI WHITFORD

Artist

www.leniwhitford.art

I've been a creative person since I was a child, but a professional artist for only four years. This vision of the "starving artist" that you are describing has prevented me from embracing an artistic career, even when my work colleagues (when I was a nurse) complimented my drawings and encouraged me to make a living of them.

Being an artist is a real profession, with an immense perspective for the future and is constantly evolving. These days, art can be an investment for companies. Artists are also called upon for major projects, with the cultural dimension being highly prized in events, or historical commemorations... and that's just a tiny part of all that art can contribute to. Art is everywhere, and gives added value to everything it illustrates: a thoughtful, symbolic, and emotional dimension. The artist is the spokesperson for their society, for their time, bringing their vision, their sensitivity and their talent to bear on thought.

CRISTOBAL ALDAY

Collaborator, Curator, Writer, & Artist

Definitely the labor aspect but also the pay aspect of being an artist [needs to be demystified]. There isn't a pay grade scale for the majority of artists, so how can we ensure they aren't being taken advantage of and are getting paid accurately for their labor? Also, let's de-romanticize that you need to be a well known artist to be valued. There are so many people making great art that don't classify themselves as such but who are very talented. A gray area exists and we should also be celebrating those folks. Value is subjective.

NNEKA PETERS

Artist

www.nnekapeters.com

I would like to de-romanticize being a "full time" artist. The amount of hours you put in weekly doesn't determine if you're an artist or not. Many artists leave their 9-5's without accounting for the transferable business tools and skills that they can use for their art careers. Networking, administration, financial literacy, and sales are all tools that we can transfer and flex from varying career paths. Whether an artist is freelancing full time or not, I think implementing strategy and the long game is important for a sustainable art career.

ALICIA PUIG

Curator & CEO of PxP Contemporary and Author

www.aliciapuig.com

www.pxpccontemporary.com

A little off-topic perhaps, but in the same vein of misconceptions about artists - I have a recurring conversation with my husband whenever we see a film or tv show and one of the characters is an artist. Inevitably, their go-to ensemble is paint-splattered overalls and they are usually portrayed as overly emotional and disorganized. Rarely, if ever, is an artist shown as successful in contemporary media. So, more than anything, I wish that that the idea of who an artist is or could be wasn't so narrow. We are not a monolith.

More specific to the question, there are many artists who believe that once they achieve a

certain goal (e.g. gallery representation, a solo exhibition, museum acquisition) this means that they've made it and their career will only continue to be on an upward trajectory going forward. But the most successful artists are also the ones who keep working, showing up, and putting themselves out there consistently. Now, I'm not talking about hustling to the point of burnout, nor am I saying that you can't take breaks - of course, balance is crucial. It's simply about having realistic expectations. The other thing to keep in mind is that there's always seasons in the art market and the economy as a whole. If you don't plan ahead and anticipate that there will at some point be slower periods, you may find yourself in a very tough situation.

KATRINA THIBODEAU

Artist

www.thibodeauart.com

Being in an industry that's based on vulnerability, it's very difficult to find balance within creating true art from those darker places (ex; trauma, mental health) all while having the professional exterior and playing into the politics of the art industry. If you look at the greats, Francisco de Goya, Vincent Van Gogh, and Edvard Munch, they all created from a place of true vulnerability. Would anyone today invest in someone who is visibly struggling with mental illness so deeply? How are you supposed to present as if you have it all together and convince a gallery or an investor that you're worth investing in while your artwork is about how deeply you struggle?

That may have seemed a bit polarizing, but I believe some of the most profound art is from those who struggle the most yet aren't capable of putting on the face to sell and produce the behind the scenes work that is needed to find success in our industry.

“

the most successful artists are also the ones who keep working, showing up, and putting themselves out there consistently.

- Alicia Puig