

The Economic World Obverse: Freedom Through Markets After Arts Education

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Abstract

What role does arts education play in artistic activity and income? In light of the rise of university arts education and its effects, especially the changing role of teaching in artistic careers, this article questions key assumptions of both winner-take-all and economic-world-reversed analyses of artistic careers. While almost all studies of remuneration in the creative arts find that income is highly skewed, these dominant perspectives take an object-oriented view of artistic life that neglects the vast majority of activities that underpin and compose contemporary arts practices. Looking at arts practices more holistically and using the changing status of art teaching as an exemplar of the expanded field of artistic practice, we document the challenges that the rise of arts education present to traditional analyses of artistic careers, income, and success.

Keywords

arts, income, markets, careers, arts education, value and valuation

Introduction

What role does arts education play in artistic activity and income? Research has suggested that artistic careers are bifurcated into two very dissimilar outcomes, in which a lucky few become “winners” and receive massive financial rewards, while the vast majority earn minimal or no financial returns from their artistic practices (e.g., Abbing, 2002; Menger, 2014). Yet, given this situation, how do we make sense of the continued practices of the art market’s myriad of financial “losers”? As Bourdieu (1993) argues, rather than having tried and failed at financial success, some artists deliberately eschew income in a display of their commitment to making art for its own sake. These artists

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are, in effect, competing in an economic world reversed in which the winners in status (in that world) make the least salable art. In this reframed state of affairs, one can either make art that is oriented toward the market or art that is oriented toward the esteem of other artists, but not both. We consider both of these narratives about artistic careers—winner-take-all and the economic-world-reversed—and show how just a slight shift in analysis demands a reexamination of both prevailing accounts.

Relying on archival data, field research, and interviews with visual artists and writers, we argue that these two theoretical orientations only hold when researchers take an *object-centered view* of artistic careers (Gerber & Childress, 2017). This object-centered view, in which salable artistic objects like sculptures and book manuscripts are the only legitimate outcomes of artistic labor, neglects the vast majority of activities that underpin and compose contemporary arts practices. Instead, we argue, artists construct artistic careers and work to preserve artistic freedom in the process through strategic engagement and disengagement across multiple markets. In this article, we consider the effects of the changing field of arts education, using an attendant reconceptualization of arts teaching across fine art worlds as just one example of the multiple markets across which artists negotiate careers today. In short, artists do not attain careers or fail to achieve them; rather, they strategically work across markets to make careers for themselves.

After positioning our study in the literature, we frame our analyses through a discussion of the rise and effects of tertiary (university-level) arts education in the United States. With data drawn from our studies of the literary and visual arts fields in the United States, we argue that an object-oriented vision of artistic activity neglects the majority of contemporary artists and their careers in favor of a theoretical assumption which may no longer hold. We show how this structural change necessitates a reexamination of the theories of artistic lives that predate it. In the United States, structural and cultural changes in artistic careers and practice over recent decades allow for pathways to autonomy *through* market activity. In this article, we focus especially on the role of teaching in artistic practice. We close with thoughts on the historical and geographic specificity of artistic careers and discuss the possibilities of a sociological theory of those careers that moves beyond this-or-that binarism.

Superstar Markets, Psychic Goods, and Arts Education

Career success in the arts is most often measured in terms of income, with analysts looking to narrowly defined careers and finding wide inequalities (Abbing, 2002; Bille & Jensen, 2016; Caves, 2003; Menger, 1999; Montgomery & Robinson, 2003; Thompson, 2010; Towse, 1996). Sometimes called “winner-take-all” (Ertug, Yogev, Lee, & Hedström, 2016; Frank & Cook, 1996), “winner-take-most” (Thompson, 2010), or “superstar” (Rosen, 1981) markets, the economic returns on artistic objects tends to follow a Pareto distribution, in which “relatively small numbers of people earn enormous amounts of money and dominate the activities in which they engage” (Rosen, 1981, p. 845). Theories vary as to why this is the case, with some looking to the qualities of artworks themselves (Adler, 1985), and others to the role of prior

reputations of creators on their future works (Ertug et al., 2016; Merton, 1972). Others still find evidence of a bandwagon effect among consumers, even net of object and artist characteristics (Menger, 2014; Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006; Salganik & Watts, 2008). Yet in all of these lines of inquiry, it is taken as an implicit assumption that, like actors in other markets, artists compete with each other for economic gain.

Some sociologists question the winner-take-all assumption, and instead posit that while some artists are competing for market success other artists are competing to make the “best” art, as defined within communities of artists. In this reframing, the financial “have-nots” lack artistically generated income because they are instead in search of something else. Rather than selling out to the market, these artists have an “interest in disinterestedness” when it comes to financial profit-making (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 40). This “loser wins” approach relies on the belief that the market for art objects is polluting to artistic values, and instead it is the *lack of sales* which marks one’s seriousness and legitimacy as an artist (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 169). In this formulation to “starve” for one’s art is to have won the countergame, and to play “loser wins” is to have a vested interest in making “pure, abstract, and esoteric” art which is of reputational and cultural value *because* it is not easily saleable (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 120). This orientation among artists is, in Bourdieu’s terminology, an “economic world reversed.”

In some ways, this argument is simply an elegant restatement of an economist’s rational choice model: that, as Menger (1999) has put it, the possible income lost by artists “has been exchanged in return for psychic goods” (p. 556) as a means of dealing with a tension-filled binary (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007). In this tradition, these psychic goods and the autonomous pole in which they are traded are in need of exploration (e.g., Bille, Fjællegaard, Frey, & Steiner, 2013; Dubois & François, 2013). This vision of “pure” art versus a “polluting” but financially remunerative market for the arts is also widely held outside of the academy, and continues to find expression in texts circulated in arts communities (e.g., the recent reemergence of *The Gift* [Hyde, 1983] in high fine art circles). Quite tidily, were these economic-world-reversed assumptions to hold, they could partially explain the long tail of small economic returns in the winner-take-all research stream: many people in the long tail do not making money from their art because they are actively invested in *not* making money from their art. For authors in the economic-world-reversed tradition, survey data on artists’ income (from artistic objects) may produce misplaced worry among winner-take-all adherents.

Regardless of the proffered reason for why artistic income derived from sales is highly skewed, arts activists and the popular media have taken the fact of it to argue that artistic education does not offer rewards commensurate with its often high costs (Jahoda, Murphy, Virgin, & Woolard, 2014; Lam, 2014). But recent research has suggested that obtaining an arts degree and pursuing a career in the arts is not nearly as dour a proposition as is often assumed (Childress & Gerber, 2015; Frenette & Tepper, 2016). When looking to more broadly defined outcomes, few artists actually live in the garret of our imaginations (Strategic National Arts Alumni Project [SNAAP], 2011; Throsby, 2007; Throsby & Hollister, 2003).

Although some empirical work embraces artistic careers constructed of diverse activities (e.g., Craig & Dubois, 2010; Janssen, 1998; Karttunen, 1998; Rosenstein, 2004), analysts focused on arts education have tended to more regularly rely on available statistics and the theoretical baggage that may come with them. As Rosenstein (2004) points out, many studies of arts education and outcomes struggle “to construct research definitions that resonate with socially and culturally salient understandings of who artists are and what they do” (p. 60). As a result, some survey measurements of artistic income may be dangerously out of touch with contemporary artistic practice by inadvertently defining paid work (e.g., teaching) as forms of “self-subsidization” that hinder or overtake “real” artistic careers (e.g., Karttunen, 1998). As the notion that all painters do is paint or all writers do is write has always been a fiction, that artists tend to live and work outside the boundaries of narrow, object-oriented outcome variables is well-documented (Lena & Lindemann, 2014; Menger, 2001). As a result, restricting our understanding of the creative arts to a series of artistic acts and direct cash transfers through the objects produced from those acts may inadvertently bracket out the vast majority of artistic lives and incomes.

In lieu of taking an object-centered view of artistic activity and income, we instead follow authors such as Lindemann (2013) in questioning winner-take-all market assumptions, and build on the work of analysts who look to artists’ own understandings of the boundaries of their artistic practices. We do so because the traditional and narrow object-centered view ignores both all activity carried out by artists that is not expressly the making of salable art (i.e., most of artistic practice) and all income generated from being an artist that falls outside the purview of the sale of objects (i.e., most artistic income for most artists). Through the analysis of artistic activities beyond the production of objects-for-sale, we highlight a blind spot of winner-take-all analyses. In turn, we reconsider world-reversed theories: in practice, even artists who make less salable objects may not eschew remuneration or remunerative motives, or be conflicted about drawing an income from their practices. As Oakley (2009, p. 282) has suggested, “The importance of ‘being an artist’ lies not in its anti-commercialism, but in its assertion of meaning beyond the commercial.” This meaning, we argue, is drawn from a number of sources as artists strategically navigate across multiple markets in the construction of their practices and careers.

More generally our perspective is in broader allegiance with the Zelizerian tradition, which rejects “hostile-worlds” arguments and, instead, highlights the often conflict-free coexistence of economic life with other spheres, including the moral, aesthetic, and professional (for an overview, see Zelizer, 2011). Economic sociology departs from economics by looking closely to the actual workings of economic life as social life. We follow authors in this tradition who look to the arts in order to ask whether and how artistic autonomy interacts with markets (e.g., Velthuis, 2005; Wherry, 2006). We also see our position as being in step with more recent sociological theorizing across a wide swath of literatures which has moved to the consideration of continuities and blended logics and away from this-or-that binarization (e.g., Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Kersten & Verboord, 2014; Lamont, 2009; Mears, 2011; Stark, 2009). In turn, the deliberative strategies we discuss—artists’ visions of legitimate,

autonomous practice underpinned by stable teaching work, and the strategic navigation to balance income and autonomy across multiple markets for artistic expertise and activity—fall in line with the more recent developments in field theory which provides more allowances for both deliberative cognition and strategic action (Childress, 2017; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Gerber, 2017; Leschziner, 2015; Leschziner & Green, 2013; Lizardo, 2012; Lizardo & Strand, 2010).

Rather than being slaves to a highly bifurcated market or maintaining autonomy by keeping one's distance from the market, as we show, artists in the modern United States work to create autonomy through market activities. We explore here one way that they have been enabled in doing so: the rise of postsecondary arts education in the United States. By looking to the ways that artists themselves experience and narrate their careers, we argue for an image of an economic world obverse: artistic work involves a multitude of roles and activities that can, for many, be seen as complimentary, mutually constitutive activities that collectively make up a holistic and rewarding artistic career.

Background: The Rise of Arts Education

The growth of tertiary and graduate arts education in the United States has been dramatic. Today, the vast majority of the 568 accredited Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs in the fine or literary arts in the United States were founded in the past 30 years or so, and over half of all MFA programs in creative writing in the country have been founded since the year 2000 (National Association of Schools of Art and Design, 2016; Abramson, 2011). This dramatic shift is widely discussed and well understood in the humanities (cf. Elkins, 2009; Harbach, 2014), but has been relatively underconsidered in social scientific studies of the arts, creative industries, and artistic careers. Instead, now deeply entrenched in what McGurl (2009) refers to as “the program era” of American arts and letters, much research and reporting on the arts in the United States has focused on the experiences and outcomes of students in these programs (Frenette & Tepper, 2016; Jahoda et al., 2014; Lam, 2014; Lena & Lindemann, 2014; Pink, 2004).

Less well understood in the social sciences is the accompanying rise in teaching positions in these programs, and the effect of this growth on the artistic careers of *practicing* artists (Anderson & Risner, 2013). As advanced degree programs in the arts still rely on small-group “crit” and “workshop” teaching methods, the ratio of teachers to pupils in most arts courses remains (intentionally) low. As a result, increasing enrollment today in arts courses necessitates a tightly linked increase in the number of paid instructors. Today, across all levels of education, a statistical majority of arts alumni have worked at least part time as arts educators in their careers (Frenette & Tepper, 2016). As seen in Table 1, 59% of professional writers and 66% of professional visual artists either have taught or currently teach.¹ What's more, as professional standing increases, engagement in teaching work also increases, which may suggest that access to and the embrace of teaching opportunities allows for a higher likelihood of continued professional standing, or at least is associative with that

Table 1. Engagement in Teaching Work by Status as a Professional Artist, by Major.

Major	All arts graduates	Current and former professional artists	Current professional artists
Writing	44.6%	56.6%	59.1%
Visual arts	58.6%	64.4%	65.6%
Dance	82.4%	90%	92.1%
Music performance	82.1%	88.7%	90.6%
Theater	56.7%	62.9%	65.9%
N	44,046	34,166	24,525

Source. Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, Waves 2011, 2012, 2013.

standing. In total, the impact of the growth of arts education on the income of working artists and their ability to maintain artistic careers has been pronounced. It is for this reason that Harbach (2014) has argued that “the university now rivals, if it hasn’t surpassed, New York as the *economic center* of the literary fiction world”; the same can be said for the visual arts (p. 12; italics added).

In this article, we consider the market for teaching as just one exemplar of labor markets that are open to artists *as artists*. Other occupations that have undergone related processes of symbolic embrace by artists but are not considered here at length include arts administration, nonprofit, and commercial work (cf. Gerber, 2017). Below, we discuss the ways that teaching work has been reconfigured by artists as a legitimate element of artistic careers rather than as the kinds of “second jobs” or “day jobs” that should be bracketed away from artistic practice. As shown by Rabkin (2013), most artists who teach find their teaching work to be deeply intertwined with their formal art making, rather than being distant from their other artistic activities or just a way to make rent. We argue that artists work in different ways across multiple markets—with teaching being a primary one of those markets—to find freedom and autonomy in their artistic practice *while* generating income from their artistic activities.

Method

We draw on two case studies of contemporary artistic practice in the United States, focusing on the visual and literary arts. These two fields are particularly useful for our discussion as they were also the focus of Bourdieu (1993), the central theorist of the economic world reversed. Data on the literary field were collected over 18 months between 2008 and 2010, consisting of open-ended interviews with over 100 publishing professionals, consisting of working novelists, agents, editors, and sundry interlocutors working in and around the book trade. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and were coded for themes in NVivo. Codes relevant to our analysis in this work included topical discussions of “money,” “MFA” programs, “inspiration,” and “career.” A 6-month organizational ethnography of a publishing house specializing in “literary” fiction and nonfiction was also conducted, in addition to participant observational field

research at publishing fairs and festivals, author readings, workshops, and literary events. Fieldwork was conducted on the East and West Coasts of the United States. Secondary sources include archival research in industry trade publications (e.g., *Publishers Weekly*) as well as the popular press.

Data on the visual arts field comes from a study using 80 semistructured in-depth interviews with visual artists and ethnographic fieldwork in four regionally defined art communities carried out in the United States between 2011 and 2013. “Visual artists” were defined for this project as individuals who have publicly exhibited visual artworks (drawing, painting, sculpture, photographs, and other forms commonly shown in institutions like museums of contemporary art) in the year prior to the interview. Taped semistructured interviews lasted on average 1.75 hours each and were transcribed verbatim and in full and integrated with fieldnotes. Transcripts were coded by hand and in ATLAS.ti in two waves of thematic coding; codes relevant to our analysis in this work included discussions of “primary identity,” “goals and success,” “definition of art,” and “art practice and employment.” In this article, the primary source of data from both of the aforementioned studies is formal, semistructured interviews.

Secondary sources include archival research on artists’ organizations (Art Workers Coalition and Working Artists and the Greater Economy) and a database of 911 oral histories with visual artists drawn from archives at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art (all transcribed interviews available from the archive). We draw in particular, in the limited historical analysis presented here, on two subsets of this database: first, artists born in the 1930s and interviewed during the 1960s and 70s (T_1 data); second, artists born after 1960 and interviewed after 2000 (T_2 data, which also includes all interview and documentary data collected discussed above). Although we do not go in depth on this dataset here, we do use our previous work on it to frame our findings in this article (Childress, 2017; Gerber, 2017; Gerber & Childress, 2017).

Much of the below looks at the place of the higher education system in the United States in terms of artists’ roles, careers, and incomes. Our data displays diversity along two important dimensions of arts education engagement: degrees granted and past or current employment in teaching. Our sample includes untrained artists, those with minimal training, and graduates of both low-status and high-status bachelor’s and master’s degree programs. Most of those in our sample have some experience teaching, at least casually, and others have years of work in community, elementary, secondary, or tertiary education. Those involved in college teaching range from occasional adjuncts at low-status bachelor’s programs to the chairs of high-status MFA programs. This study was not designed for quantitative analysis, and does not pretend to approximate a statistically representative sample of all of the visual artists in the United States.² In keeping with conventions in fields such as cultural economics as well as federal occupational classifications, we refer to practitioners of both the visual and literary arts in this article as “artists.” All artists referred to by first name only are pseudonyms and are drawn from our data, while notes on and quotes from artists and others referred to by first and last name are drawn from secondary source material.

As noted, we have drawn on studies of the visual and literary arts as these two fields are at the historical center of economic-world-reversed thinking. There are

many similarities between these two fields that are relevant to this study, but some differences as well. Visual artists and writers' educational trajectories share many features, including (as discussed above) the centrality of the "workshop" (or "crit") model in graduate education that necessitates high faculty-to-student ratios. In both fields, neither the BA/Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) nor the MFA are necessities for practitioners—there is no bar to entry to either field—but in both cases these degrees are today common and widely understood as necessary for some high-status careers. An important distinction between these two fields involves residential clustering and community building: visual artists often cluster residentially, take studio space in warehouse buildings populated by other artists, and attend gallery openings and other field-specific networking and community-building events. Writers, by contrast, are much less likely to share workspaces or attend regular events, and the shift to "school" culture has provided a degree of creative community that writers of the past had to more actively work for and seek out (Childress, 2017). These data are necessarily historically and nationally specific, and we do not aim to represent the fine arts as a whole. As noted in Table 1, however, while professional actors teach at the same rate as do visual artists (66%), dancers, and musicians engage in teaching at much higher rates than do either writers or visual artists. While we do not aim to hypothesize beyond our data, we suspect that our analyses of writers and visual artists may be conservative cases regarding the role of teaching work in professional artistic careers more broadly.

Data and Analysis

Those Who Can't Do. . .

The incorporation of teaching-for-pay as part of an artistic career has become legitimated over the past 50 years among "real," "serious" artists. This change is part of a broader cultural shift among artists, who over this time have reconceptualized their practices: no longer primarily the creators of objects, today artists comfortably provide services as well, and value their skills and time as well as the artistic outcomes of their labor (Gerber & Childress, 2017). Here, we use the term "teaching" to encompass all teaching in the arts—whether at the community, elementary, secondary, university, or graduate level. Teaching can be thought of as a particularly remunerative element of a broad portfolio career that includes professional and service work.

The shift that legitimated teaching as a reasonably uncomplicated element of a portfolio career in the arts was spurred in part by the indirect pathways that state funding for the arts has taken in the United States, with the state "hiding" funding for the arts in institutions like schools and nonprofit exhibition spaces rather than granting artists directly. As we have discussed elsewhere, organizations like the NEA developed a deliberate strategy during the 1970s to provide artistic income to already-working artists under the alibi of institution building (Childress, 2017). This has led to a strong alternative market for artists' time and skills and contributed new wrinkles to the complex relationship between artistic autonomy and market activity. Artistic training in the United States has undergone a professionalization process that has

included emphases on theoretical knowledge and credentials and a more general move to school culture (McGurl, 2009; Singerman, 1999). The still-increasing numbers of students in formal artistic training has resulted in a flowering of arts education as a legitimate career path for “real” artists, rather than the holding ground for “failed” artists that, according to our archival data, it was often assumed to be as recently as the 1960s and 1970s. These jobs are ways for artists to make a living *as artists*—not “day jobs” to be excluded from the analysis of artistic practice. As students, today’s emerging artists have often been taught by artist–teachers whose reputations as serious artists are not drawn into question by the normalized income available to the professorate.³ Teaching positions are clearly no sign of artistic failure today, as the presence of renowned artist–professors is now a marker of elite MFA programs.

To be sure, not all teaching positions are equivalent, and for some disciplines the professorate can be just another winner-take-all market that leaves overqualified and underpaid academics in its wake. As is the case across most disciplines, for artist–teachers part-time work in community and elementary education is often low-paid, precarious, and low-status, while tenured professorships can seem vanishingly rare. Yet in contrast to what we might expect from a researcher with a PhD in sociology or classics, the artists we spoke with rarely saw work in elementary and community education to be a sign of “failure.” Instead, they found these types of part-time artistic employment to be accommodating of an artistic career and even rewarding on their own merits. As Lindemann and Tepper (**IN PRESS**) show, those working as arts educators report a high level of satisfaction with their opportunity to be creative within their job: 92% of those working in arts education (at all levels) report being at least “somewhat” satisfied, rivaling the 95% of those working as fine artists.⁴ As we discuss below, unlike most other educators in university settings, artists do not generally wrap their occupational identities around the professorship, and instead view teaching work as part of a broader portfolio career of artistic work. As a result, what for many academics would reasonably seem to be low-paid, precarious, and low-status teaching work can be, for artists, jobs that allow for flexibility, comparatively low time commitment, regular income, and meaningful work complimentary to one’s own artmaking.

In an example of the type of community work that may seem undesirable to some traditional academics, Jason, a fine artist who works across media, started teaching while he worked on his BFA. With others, he started a community arts program, eventually training and managing other teachers. He remembered that as a “wonderful job,” not only because he found that he enjoyed teaching but also because it was highly flexible and paid far more per hour than other work available to him.

For a college student, every other job is restricted to minimum wage; that’s the most you can make. I was making thirty-five dollars an hour per student. So, I didn’t have to have a real job at that point; it supported me quite well, and I found out that I love teaching.

For someone trying to make a living on this kind of work, the high hourly wage is not as appealing as it might at first appear; we spoke with artists who worked 5 or less hours per week teaching, and presumably many were not able to obtain more. But for

artists who prioritize their artistic practice and feel that it requires an investment of time, looking for a high hourly wage at the expense of security or a steady income can make sense, and was a pattern seen in many interviews with artists.

At the time of our interview, Jason still taught in a community setting, and he both enjoys it and sees it as an investment in himself: “If they didn’t pay me for it I’d still do it for free. I like it that much. I just consider it that I’m refining a skill set that I need.” Jason loved teaching in part because he found the work meaningful and in line with his values, a pattern commonly seen among artists, though certainly not restricted to them (Gerber, 2017; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Other artists who found their way into community- and elementary-level teaching positions felt strongly about the value of their teaching work, and found that it enriched their artistic practice. Gregory, who taught what he called “underprivileged” kids in elementary schools for a time, looked back on the experience as a life-changing one that prompted him to reevaluate his life and his practice: “It was a very good experience, and I felt like a lot of good things happened because I got involved in this other very *real* situation.”

The career path of Armando, a painter, clearly illustrates the sacrifices artists make to do work in line with their values. After Armando finished college he took a job with a health insurance company.

It was hands down the worst experience I’ve ever had in my life. I was so miserable. It was awful. It was awful. I made the most money I have ever made, but . . . I was only there for two and a half years, but in that time I realized that those companies are inherently evil.

He quit, with no other job lined up, and went to an art fair where a local school was recruiting:

They needed an art teacher, there were openings for part-time art teachers. I wasn’t certified, so I took like a twenty-five thousand dollar pay cut to teach art part-time in the local public school systems and it was . . . it was hard, but it was so much better . . . it was just more gratifying for me than participating in something that really is evil.

He made the decision to always “work in the arts,” and at the time of our interview he ran a private school with small classes, which he called “a luxurious way of teaching.” He is primarily a painter, and the school he runs enables his artistic career in many ways, providing financial security and physical space that balances the intermittent windfalls represented by sales and residency awards.

When we met Jason, Gregory, and Armando, they had only taught in community and elementary education; we cannot yet know the full arc of their careers. Whether they move “up” in the teaching world is, to them, irrelevant to their greater goals: like most artists they did not aim to be art teachers, but instead found teaching to be a legitimate element of a career in the arts, usually carried out in order to support the artist’s “habit” (Gerber, 2017) of artmaking. Luis, though, provides evidence that these

kinds of teaching jobs are not as distinct from careers in higher education as we might assume. Luis, a printmaker, was first and foremost an artist and had been for decades; he also worked with a number of community organizations over the years, eventually founding and running an important regional arts organization, and taught art in the prison system. When we met, he had recently started work at an art school, teaching BFA and MFA students in a new position that he had obtained quite suddenly: “The school where I’m teaching, I mean I lucked out . . . I don’t have a masters’ degree, and I didn’t even study printmaking in school really, but I had a body of work,” one built up through decades of work supported largely by teaching in neighborhood and community organizations. He was surprised by the offer:

I thought I was going for an interview, and I wasn’t going for an interview. The head of the school was showing me around, he says, this is where you’re going to work. So, they basically just hired me. I didn’t even put in a resume, I didn’t do anything. He just hired me on the spot.

Luis found later that his “name had come up” in a meeting, and the school’s staff had gone to see some of his work in an exhibition. “He went and he saw them and he goes, I saw your prints and that was it, I wanted to have you over here.”

Artists today are likely to see teaching careers, especially in higher education settings, as *ideal* artistic careers, rather than second-best art-adjacent work. Henry, a sculptor in the Midwest, was an adjunct art professor and held a blue-collar day job—the sort of job that artists in the 1960s and 1970s saw as compatible with artistic practice and the pose of the “art worker” (Bryan-Wilson, 2009). But Henry loved teaching, and entirely rejected the “can’t do, teach” logic in favor of one that sees teaching as a mark of artistic success, and as a natural part of a sustainable career for a working artist. At time of interview, Henry hoped to “drop the day job” soon to focus on his artistic practice *by finding a tenured position*: “I’d like to have a full-time job teaching, and tenure, just get my summers off, it’d be spectacular.” His lack of ambivalence about teaching is reflected in our interviews with other artists; many who do not have permanent teaching positions dream of them, and those with stable teaching positions rarely see such work as detrimental to, or in conflict with, their artistic practice.

Sophie, like many others, hoped to one day teach, and saw it as a mark of success rather than a fate to be avoided. Like others who attended elite MFA programs, she assumed that a teaching career was a natural step that followed success in the arts. As Sophie explained, she was only a few years out of graduate school, and was not ready to look for teaching work: “I would like to teach . . . I feel like maybe in five years I could find a teaching job but right now . . . they’re like, ‘What’s your exhibition history?’” John, a tenured professor, told us:

I always thought that maybe teaching one day would become part of what I do because I like that work. That kind of work is so energizing and rewarding in its own way. I just love that kind of constant learning, that way of interacting with students, this no-two-days-ever-alike kind of thing. I love all of that.

For Sophie, a teaching position and the regularized income that would come with it was the brass ring, not the sign of failure it might have been for earlier generations. Perhaps even more evocative, rather than being a “failed artist” by being a teacher, Sophie felt she was not yet successful enough as an artist to be hired to teach. In turn, John—having already achieved that form of success—rejects the old notion of teaching stealing time from one’s “own work.”

Teaching as Artistic Practice, Teaching Alongside Artistic Practice

Some are less effusive about the benefits of teaching careers, but they shrug off any notion that their artistic practice is negatively affected by their teaching work. Such was the case for a tenure-track novelist, Kelsey, when considering other occupations that would pay less and interfere more with her artistic practice. Kelsey noted quite simply that “working here [at the University] pays well enough, and leaves me plenty of time to write.” Alan, a visual artist working as an adjunct professor, echoed this sentiment: “I am getting paid a lot more for less hours . . . I don’t know where else I could get that kind of hourly rate at the moment.” Both Kelsey and Alan might be understood as the quintessential “art for art’s sake” artists: Kelsey is a published novelist with some acclaim among critics and other authors but without many sales; Alan works within an elite, MFA-educated, coastal art scene and enjoys a measure of esteem among artists while barely drawing any income from gallery sales. Yet if we look only at the art objects they produce, we might think of them as unsuccessful in terms of income and, in their “autonomy,” as emphatically rejecting the market. A more holistic view of their careers as artists, though, shows that they develop their autonomy as artists *through* a market—a labor market in higher education that was designed to minimally infringe on their time in the production of art (Childress, 2017).

Amy, now chair of her university art department and an artist with significant recognition among artists and critics, was more eloquent than most when, with a matter-of-fact directness, she explained how central teaching has been to her artistic career. She always knew that teaching was the path most likely to afford her the artistic autonomy she hoped for:

I personally had no financial cushion. I put myself through undergraduate school and I put myself through graduate school and I had no family support whatsoever. I grew up on welfare in this country . . . I had no capacity to be like, “I’m just going to be an artist.” Like it just wasn’t realistic.

She laughed, and went on:

I wasn’t willing to be a waitress or be a housekeeper or work in a factory when I knew that I could do something else that . . . teaching at a college level seemed to be the most friendly to having a practice.

Amy calls herself very “calculated.” She went straight through college and then an MFA program, immediately applying for—and getting—her first teaching job straight

out of school. For artists like Amy, teaching allows for autonomy from the market for objects—through a market not only for her time but also for her artistic skills in a professional career.

When talking about their lives as artists, a majority of artist-teachers cited positive artistic effects of their teaching careers, and it is clear that for many artists today teaching is a crucial pathway to artistic autonomy and success. As Mallory, a fiction writer who was department chair of an MFA program at the time explained to us, she found a sense of community among other writers—her colleagues and students—in her MFA program that she suspected she would otherwise not have had. Working in an MFA program saves her from what could have otherwise been a fairly isolated life as an artist, and her students give her joy: “They’re just discovering, they’re just getting started. And once in a while some student writes something really wonderful that I’m very thrilled to be around and part of, which is cool.” Through interactions with her students, she feels her own artistic practice is improved:

Very often when I’ve been really hammering on some point with students . . . in a workshop I’ll walk away from it and think, “that’s myself I’m talking about. I’m the one who needs to hear this,” you know?

Mallory, like others, saw her teaching work as contributing directly to her artistic practice, rather than just financially subsidizing it.

Many teaching artists explicitly advocate for teaching careers as promoting artistic autonomy, sometimes drawing on a widely shared lay version of the economic world reversed. Peter, a sculptor and adjunct professor, points directly to the autonomy he finds in teaching art: “I like the teaching because it’s regular and—I’m not in control, but I am. I have bosses, but I kind of decide what we do from week to week, and I like that.” Domingo, a tenure-track sculptor, explicitly contrasts the constraints of the market for objects with the relative freedom of the market he has chosen:

If I started to make art for a gallery, let’s say, then I would say well, what do they want? And then I start to think about what they want and I would start to make work about that, rather than just going to my studio and making art.

He talked about the work he was making now, and told us:

I know this is never going to sell. And that’s one of the reasons I want to teach; I know I can, now I know I can do it well, and I can make money that way to support my . . . my habit.

As evidenced by these artist-teachers, artists’ possibilities in and experiences of work in arts education significantly complicate both winner-take-all and economic-world-reversed theories of artistic positions and careers. While winner-take-all findings hold for the sale of objects, the rise of tertiary education has created a growing “middle class” of practicing artists, who aim for and sometimes find in higher education work that—compared with the other jobs they might hold to make a similar level

of income—does not take up much of their time and more often than not contributes to their creation of artistic objects. In turn, while economic-world-reversed theories posit that those who make generally less salable art have opted for reputational returns over making a living, for the artist–teacher this is not the case: they operate with open eyes in an “alternative” art market and are rarely unwilling to talk about their financial lives and financial motivations. Although while advocating for an economic-world-reversed position Bourdieu saw the patronage system as even more restrictive of artistic autonomy than the market, the patronage system he described—one described by Baxandall (1972) as only illusorily populated by benevolent collectors and patrons—is quite different from the one we see today, with state patronage functioning intentionally at arm’s length from artistic activity (Childress, 2017; Larsen, 2016). Unlike in previous eras, the “program era” of American arts and letters has created a market that indirectly compensates artists for their artistic practices while at the same time the arm’s-length nature of the relationship allows them autonomy in those practices.

To be sure, not all artists who work as teachers find their teaching and art making to be mutually constitutive: “it’s just a way to make money,” as one novelist–teacher told us. Another younger novelist, David, who works in a tenure track position in an MFA program, lamented teaching as a means of support, saying that “It would be nice if we [as novelists] could go back to living from writing.” Yet older artists we interviewed who remember artmaking before the explosion of tertiary education shrug off the nostalgia trap of David’s lament: they remember the near-impossibility of making a living wage at art work while maintaining personal artistic autonomy prior to the growth of arts education.

None of this is to suggest that teaching jobs are perfect, or equally distributed in prestige or pay across artists. Instead, many artists who held teaching jobs (or hoped to soon attain them) recognized them simply as *preferable* to other jobs that were more demanding, allowed for less autonomy, or were at best art-adjacent or insufficiently noble. Among our artist–teacher respondents, we found nowhere near the same degree of self-exploitation (McRobbie, 2002; Oakley, 2009), sacrificial labor (Ross, 2004), free labor to get one’s foot in the door (Frenette, 2013), or the long hours and blending of pleasure and obligation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008, 2013) that have been found across most other creative markets for labor. For our respondents, the real challenge of maintaining “authentic” artistic careers and autonomy was making sure that they did not fall out of balance: the threat of an out-of-balance teaching career, in which one became “too comfortable” and only made art to maintain credentials, was in effect similar to the threat of the out-of-balance market-oriented career, in which one gave up autonomy to make salable art (Gerber, 2017).

For our respondents, the key to authentic artmaking was moderation across different markets and artistic spheres: teaching was simply the preferred occupation for enacting this moderation. One of our interlocutors provided a telling case when he explained why he chose to give up his tenured professorship and instead continue teaching on a much more contingent and lower paid contractual basis for the same department. While he continued to enjoy the teaching, he had found that the service components and general departmental expectations of his tenured professorship got

too much in the way of his art. Rather than allow his artistic career to fall out of balance he decided that for his career (*as an artist*) he would be better off giving up the security of a permanent position to rebalance teaching as a smaller part of his occupational portfolio. Teaching (whether on a contract or on the tenure track) was, for our interlocutors, often superior to most other standardized work as it allowed for the incorporation of, and support for, a broader artistic practice. But there are other such careers that are equally invisible to the winner-take-all and economic-world-reversed analysts. Those who cannot (or will not) teach are not bound to garret-living poverty or money-grubbing salesmanship. In the following section, we briefly discuss several such cases as alternatives to the incorporation of teaching into an artistic career portfolio.

From Objects to Projects

Synnove, a painter who does not work as a teacher, spent some time supporting her art practice through direct and indirect governmental funding; this kind of temporary “contract” work is today common across art worlds (Relyea, 2013). As she explained,

When I was wanting to extend myself as a painter, and also do a project—well, did I tell you about all the money? The state passed a percent for the arts. I wanted some of that money. So, I was thinking of, “Okay, projects, projects, what could I do?”

She clarified:

I wanted to be paid to paint. And I was. I got that time where I treated it like a job and, “No, can’t be at work, got to go paint today.” So, it was a way to give myself time.

Project work has become a normal element of the arts funding landscape. Henry, the sculptor discussed above who hopes to leave his day job, highlighted the availability of project funding when he explained why he had chosen to live in his small city rather than moving to the coasts: “The awesome thing about being in this town as an artist is the *insane* amount of money from fellowships and grants. It’s not matched anywhere.” When he talked about particular artworks, he often talked about their granting history, even suggesting that the difficult process of obtaining funding was key to their development and success: a particular work

had a long history. I had the idea, and then I applied for a project grant, and I didn’t get it. But you got feedback from there, the jurors actually gave you written feedback, so I retooled it and really worked and pushed it.

The next year, he won the grant, and produced a project that was more mature and thoroughly realized than his initial idea would have allowed.

Artists did not only apply for project grants in order to produce their own work; they also found ways to exploit ever more specific CFPs to support themselves and

their practices. Jay, a sculptor, said flatly: "I'm very grantable." He went on to describe a huge and extraordinarily savvy project he had been working with for years, beginning with a small grant from a university: a "mobile studio, a series of demonstrations around the state. They paid me a half-time salary to work with students on the project." He had figured out a way to extract capital resources from the project: "I actually used most of my salary to build the unit, so when I'd built the unit, at the end of the year it belonged to me, because I'd paid for everything." When we spoke, he was in the middle of his 10th year working with (and drawing an income from) the project: that first year he drew no income, using it all to pay for the mobile studio, but the next nine it had been a moneymaker:

I've never marketed it. They come to me, they'll see me demonstrating somewhere, and they'll call and say, "we'd like you to come to our art museum and do a couple of days of demonstrations." They provide the materials, I provide everything else. I do six demos a day and 75-100 kids per demo, 2 or 3 classes. So, I can get 600 kids a day.

He is, indeed, "very grantable," and through grants does financially remunerative artistic work that's deeply intertwined with his artmaking.

Even for artists apparently working entirely within the market for objects, the image of a winner-take-all or economic-world-reversed economy turns out to be more complex than we imagine. Such was the case for Maxine, a novelist who after obtaining an MFA in creative writing was resolute that she did not want to teach to support her art making. Instead, Maxine made about 70% of her living writing on contract for the African American imprint of a romance publisher. In her multimarket path to artistic autonomy, Maxine, however, had to also navigate the desires of her financiers, which for her were sometimes less compatible with her beliefs and her "own" work. As she explained, when writing on contract for the romance publisher, characters and storylines were highly constrained:

Wealth is a requirement most of the time. No drug use, no cursing, the sex has to be romantic. It feels like they're trying so hard to be opposite to "street lit." It's like white romance fiction in blackface, but with greater restrictions. It can feel like the policing of black sexuality.

Why did Maxine choose to write under such constraints? A look at her narration of this writing and her finances shows that she was strategically engaging across multiple markets for art as part of a broader artistic practice. Maxine was, in effect, treating her contract writing as a quasi-artistic form of wage labor, and using her income from that work to support her "own" writing in the less remunerative genre she preferred to work within. In this part of her practice, from which she generated the other 30% of her income, she had complete autonomy in her artmaking, and it was an autonomy she had "purchased" for herself through writing on contract. Although Maxine did not much like her contract writing or believe it to contribute to her actual artmaking, by doing work in one sector of the object-oriented market for art she was able to afford to live while freely practicing her art in a different sector of the object-oriented market.

For artist-teachers, artists getting by grant-to-grant, and artists who balance commercial and noncommercial work, artistic practice in the contemporary United States has important facets that are largely invisible in both winner-take-all and world-reversed accounts. Like artist-teachers, neither Synnove, Henry, nor Maxine are “winners” or “losers” in winner-take-all economies; rather, they fall somewhere in between. None of these artists clearly fall into an economic-world-reversed binarization of artistic practice, as across their practices they work to navigate both the physical need for income and the “psychic good” of unencumbered art making. While artist-teachers are the artists most at home in an economic world obverse, the relationship between income and artistic autonomy is more challenging for artists like Synnove and Maxine as they find themselves having to *balance* income and art-for-art’s sake on an active and ongoing basis, keeping both sides of the market/autonomy coin in sight at all times.

Discussion

While in sociological theorizing and the popular imagination there is an inherent tension between practicing “art for art’s sake” and making a living, the contemporary artistic economy in the United States can best be described as yet another reversal of this “economic-world-reversed”: artists can maintain artistic autonomy, while at the same time finding financial security through a wide-range of residencies, fellowships, and teaching positions in the arts. This arrangement of an economic world obverse has been developed through, enabled by, and professionalized via the contemporary system of arts education.

Our data, grounded in contemporary American artistic practice, complicates the images of artistic careers, autonomy, and success common to both the winner-take-all and economic-world-reversed research streams. We would be the first to caution that our findings are specific to a particular historical and national context: the applicability of our findings may not hold, for example, in contexts where narrower paths to occupations and professional careers mean that the value of an arts education or a career in teaching is viewed with more suspicion. Based on our findings, we would suggest that the degree to which an economic world reversed holds may be dependent on two factors: (a) state sponsorship of the arts through educational, employment, and tax policy and (b) the degree to which marketized artistic practice can defend itself as “high,” “privileged,” “autonomous” art. We expect that, to varying extents, Western European state contexts today might allow for something that looks more like the autonomous pole described in Bourdieu, with their direct subsidies to artists allowing for artistic practice apparently at a distance from market activity wholesale. But the particularities of the American case bring renewed questions about the autonomous pole of artistic fields and to questions of autonomy and identity in professional and nonstandard work in general.

We suggest that our findings support further research across contexts along three lines. First, through the analysis of “alternative” markets—those for time and services, such as teaching—we can understand how income is secured by apparently

“autonomous,” avant-garde, and independent artists. Second, by looking to artists’ practices and accounts, we can begin to disentangle the relationships between what appear to be distinct market and nonmarket activities. Finally, by orienting our gaze to precisely how artists navigate both artistic and financial concerns, we can learn more about artistic autonomy in diverse, complex, and highly unequal markets. Rather than being locked into positional and dispositional space (i.e., making art for art’s sake or marketing art objects for sale) or fully controlled by highly unequal market forces (i.e., trying to get ahead in a single winner-take-all market), we argue that artists strategically navigate market fields; they neither reject the market nor fully embrace totalizing autonomy from it. Artists are calculative and agentic actors and use these abilities to find freedom *through* markets, rather than simply succumbing to or removing themselves entirely from the constraining forces of markets.

Conclusion

We have argued that analysts hoping to understand artistic careers should look beyond art objects to understand the diverse paths and income streams available to artists *as artists*. We have shown that in the contemporary United States not-for-profit institutions (here, exemplified by education programs in the arts) have become the basis for legitimate career paths within the arts. This shift necessitates a reconsideration of the underlying assumptions of much of the literature on artistic careers, especially the emphasis on winner-take-all markets for objects, the assumptions of bifurcated cultural structures of purity and market activity within the arts, and the unnecessarily narrow view of legitimate artistic activity. Looking to primary and secondary market prices for art objects can illuminate many interesting questions; we simply argue that questions about the lives and incomes of the majority of artists are not among them.

The vast majority of artists in the United States neither structure their lives around a winner-take-all market nor an economic-world-reversed; rather, they live in an economic world obverse, one where both sides of the coin are visible at all times and careers are made through purposeful and agentic movement through multiple markets. Without a vision of artistic activity beyond objects and an understanding of the effects of the development of arts education on diverse markets, analyses of the outcomes, benefits, and value of arts education will remain incomplete.

As the next generation of artists work their way through educational institutions in pursuit of artistically rewarding and financially viable careers, we close with a student-centered policy recommendation. In art schools, students are taught—both explicitly and implicitly—many of the skills traditionally necessary for artistic careers. But art school culture, like social scientific analysis, has most often clung to an object-centered view of artistic practice, and left students ill equipped for the rich and diverse art worlds that await them. As teaching work, project-based work, grant writing, and other nonprofit work are now likely to be incorporated by even the most celebrated artists into portfolio careers—are today *part of* standard artistic careers—the skills necessary for such work should, we believe, be offered as part of formal artistic training. If we can acknowledge that such work is a regular and normal feature of legitimate art

careers, we might better prepare students to take advantage of opportunities open to them across art worlds, preparing the next generation of artists to successfully live and work *as artists*.

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Notes

1. These statistics draw on SNAAP data, discussed elsewhere in this issue. The question this data is drawn from was phrased as follows: "Have you ever worked as a full- or part-time teacher of the arts (i.e., classroom setting or private lessons)?"
2. How to define the population of artists, and to what end, is a lively methodological debate among cultural policy and arts researchers (e.g., Karttunen, 1998; Lena & Lindemann, 2014; Menger, 2001). While we have a relatively good sense of populations of artists with MFAs or who make most of their income from artistic practice (e.g., Brooks, 2002; Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2011; SNAAP, 2011; Throsby, 2010), this study derives from research projects that aim to include a broader diversity of artists. For detailed information on these projects, including sampling, interview schedules, coding, and other methodological issues, see Childress (2017) and Gerber (2015).
3. Notable examples of celebrated artists who work in higher education might include Gregory Crewdson (Yale), Junot Diaz (MIT), Richard Ford (University of Mississippi), Andrea Fraser (UCLA), Glenn Ligon (Art Institute of Chicago), Colum McCann (Hunter College), Lorrie Moore (Vanderbilt), George Saunders (Syracuse University), Rirkrit Tiravanija (Columbia), and Kara Walker (Columbia).
4. Professional fine artists do report being "very satisfied" at higher rates than art teachers—78%, versus 56% among all art teachers—but even if we only look to this high bar art teaching certainly performs well compared with other arts-adjacent work like arts administration (where only 30% report being "very satisfied"), working in galleries as a curator, dealer, or owner (35%), or working as a graphic designer or illustrator (38%). While artists value more than the ability to be creative at work, the widespread understanding that art teaching allows artists to flex creative muscles in their "day job" likely contributes both to the desirability of teaching work among those trained as artists as well as the sense that teaching jobs allow artists to earn money *as artists*.

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