

The Asset of Art



Report #1 of the two-part webinar The Asset of Art, written by Xandra Nibbeling.

During #1 Delphine Hesters

*During #1 Delphine Hesters talked about her research. Also the American author **Jeff Goins** talked about the myth of the suffering artist and about innovative, international cooperation projects.*

Delphine Hesters The socio-economic position of artists as a 'wicked problem'

The Flemish sociologist Delphine Hesters did extensive research into the socio-economic position of artists. This is a *wicked problem*, an important subject for artists, "because it is good to have a grip on the reality in which you operate and to understand the mechanisms that function therein."

Delphine Hesters is the author of the book D.I.T. (Do it together): the position of the artist in the contemporary arts field. As a sociologist, she worked at the Belgian Kunstenpunt, where she conducted extensive research into the socio-economic position of contemporary artists. Hesters not only tries to understand the position of artists, but also how the system works and what puts artists in the position they are in.

Wicked Problem

According to the sociologist, the position of contemporary artists is a *wicked problem*: a complex and layered problem that in itself is connected to other, larger social problems. The many stakeholders of *wicked problems* usually agree that there is a problem, but that there is not a simple one-way solution for this problem. This makes it difficult to solve the problem and it is often not even clear whether anything has been solved at all. The vulnerable socio-economic position of artists is a *wicked problem*, because it is part of larger social problems. Solutions that are put forward in practice or by policy are often only partial solutions and can, in turn, cause new problems.

Shifts

In her presentation, Hesters discussed four major shifts in the art world that have put artists in this position.

First: that of growing inequality in a growing market. In recent years, more money has been available in the arts and globalisation has created more opportunities. There are also more museums, galleries, residencies and biennials than ever before.

New technologies make new ways of distribution and communication possible. However, this growth and potential only benefit a limited number of artists. The visual arts market is a winner-takes-all market: a small number of players make the most of it. The growth of the market as a whole goes hand in hand with a growth of inequality among artists.

A second shift is from interest in art to interest in creativity. The importance of art must be defended time and again, and at the same time, artists - enabled by the broader term 'the creative industry' - are very trendy. In this context, artists are often invited to participate in projects, which offers new opportunities for artists, but also brings with it the danger of instrumentalizing art: the interest often lies not with the art or the artist himself, but with the economic/tourist/social goal.

Individualization and flex-work in the 'collective sectors' of the performing arts and music form the third shift that Hesters observes. Performing artists and musicians are less and less often affiliated with a company. Most artists in this sub-sector now work as flexible workers, on a project basis, which means they have more in common with visual artists. The latter group therefore has more and more allies in other sub-sectors.

This last shift, is a shift in the relationship between artists and the organizations they work with, from the spirit of 'cooperation' to that of 'service'. The shift to service marks a shift in the corporate culture of the arts sector. It is part of a market relationship of supply and demand, in which the price is not only determined by need, but also by scarcity. Demanders and suppliers each act out of self-interest and not out of a cooperative or caring logic. Moreover, greater competition leads to lower prices. When the amount of buy-outs and fees is (partly) determined by 'how far the other party is prepared to go', one is not sitting next to, but opposite each other at the table. This is how we move away from equal cooperation, in which all parties work side-by-side in dialogue and trust towards a common goal and in which an individual artist is a player equal to a large institution.

Challenges

Hesters describes a number of challenges that artists face in practicing their profession, ranging from lack of time to lack of money. For example, artists of all disciplines combine several work circles and projects, both within and outside art, and often for financial reasons. A scientific study of Flemish professional visual artists showed that a visual artist spends an average of 53 percent of his/her working time on the core business, i.e. art.

Of the other activities, 15 percent are related to art, 8 percent of the time is spent on artistic work in other sectors and 24 percent of the working time is spent outside of art. The question for many artists is therefore not only how do I get an income, but also how do I manage my time, how do I get enough space to develop my practice.

Economic Vulnerability

According to the same research, the average net annual income of visual artists is lower than that of artists from other disciplines. Although the average for artists from all disciplines is lower than the average for the entire population in Belgium, most artists are highly educated.

Many artists live below the poverty line or are dependent on a partner with an income. Only 11 percent of all visual artists can live from their work as an artist. (A percentage that is just as high as in most other art disciplines).

Female visual artists have a harder time of it than men. There are just as many men as women among art students, but more women drop out during their careers than men. Financial differences are also pronounced; women in the 54-64 age group earn 10,000 euros less than men in that age group.

Linear career

The myth of the *linear career* in art not only does not correspond to reality, but can also be harmful to artists. After all, the reasoning is all too often turned around: artists who do not 'grow' cannot be top artists. "We need to develop a different language to talk about a career in art", says Hesters, "nowadays the image of a career that goes up in a straight line is no longer realistic, but at the same time this image is still used by policy makers to measure success. Because an artist's career is difficult to grasp in a rising line, this image can be harmful to artists." Contemplation, standstill or reflection on the development of work is necessary, and there is little room for this in that created image.

Changing collectively

"When successful artists are in large numbers still living below the poverty line, we should see this as an important signal that something is wrong, that the whole system of working in the arts is in need of an overhaul," Hesters argues. She concludes that the system as a whole is not sustainable and needs to be changed: "As an artist, you can deal with the system while you are part of it and make it work for you. The question then is with which mindset and strategies you can maintain that. However, you can also choose a different perspective and try to change the system with it, towards a fairer and more sustainable system."

In her publication, Hesters gives several examples of movements and collectives that - based on their own values - aim for change. System change always involves a collective act.

And, she emphasizes: "Artists have always been a driving force in the major changes in the way the arts sector is organized. An example in the Netherlands is the collective of artists and art organizations, which helped to create the Fair Practice Code.

Hesters concludes with a quote from anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." And she adds a call to artists: "Find ways to get out of your survival mode and continue your practice in a meaningful way, but also go beyond that to collective change of the system."

Jeff Goins punctures the myth of the suffering artist

In his book **Real Artists Don't Starve**, Jeff Goins tries to puncture the myth of the suffering and poor artist. He developed a method to liberate the artist from that myth. According to him, it is all about making choices.

Jeff Goins is a storyteller, writer and thinker. He lives and works in the United States where he wrote books and studied how to live as an artist.

He wrote the book **Real Artist Don't Starve**. According to him, being a starving artist is a choice. It is an image, a position that does not necessarily belong to doing creative work. In fact: "The time we live in is the best time for doing creative work, because of the many possibilities it offers".

Transformation

Goins sees an artist as a person who can influence and change the lives of others with what he or she creates. "Art is anything that another human has created that transforms another human being." And: "We have a duty, a calling, to create, to transform the lives of other people and meanwhile try to make a living out of it that supports us living our life as an artist." Your existence is to be able to create art that touches and transforms others, and in order to be able to do so you have to earn a living.

Inspiration

Goins does not offer ready-made solutions with his stories. He sees it as his task to inspire, so that everyone can solve problems themselves, often together. He believes in the power of the group, in coming together. In groups, it is not only about sharing experiences, but also about forming a network and inspiring each other.

A lesson form Goins' youth

"The level of consciousness that causes a problem is not the same as the one you can use to solve it. So, we have to access a higher level of awareness which includes a belief in ourselves, in art and in what is possible". To illustrate this statement, Goins tells a story from his youth.

Goins' former teacher, Mrs Frenkl, instructed the whole class to watch the news and to present something to the class from it. Goins decided to do it differently from the others. He built a set at home, provided costumes and a camera and made a complete news broadcast in which he played all the different characters, arranged the sound and did the editing. On the day it was his turn, he rolled the TV set into the classroom and showed the recorded broadcast to his classmates. Afterwards, there was silence, except for a few laughs and some chuckles. Goins was embarrassed, but Mrs Frenkl said it was the best thing she had seen in a long time. Then the other children began to copy Goins. Goins, however, was too touched by the reactions of his classmates and became insecure.

In retrospect, he realized that this was how it would go for a long time after that. He would make something and constantly wonder if he would get away with it. He would always find ways to stop his process for there would always be people laughing and chuckling. For a long time, it was the latter category of people who would determine what he did and did not do. Until - twenty years later - he finally managed to listen to Mrs Frenkl and decided not to work for the majority, the people who laugh and chuckle.

He threw his fear of disapproval overboard and it became possible to create more. Slowly he began to believe in the possibility of building a life as an artist, so that it could eventually become a reality.

A Choice and four principles

According to Goins, *the starving artist* is a choice and not a necessary condition for being an artist. What is important for the myth to overcome is that you believe in your own success. "All the stories we tell ourselves tend to come true in our lives", says Goins. Moreover, we live in the best of times for doing creative work, which offers numerous opportunities. Goins identifies four principles that will help you take advantage of those opportunities and build a life as an artist: stubborn, scene, patrons, portfolio.

1: Stubborn

All good artists are stubborn, but some stubbornness helps and some is not. Making art is always risky, you never know if it will get you anywhere, so it is good to have a certain kind of stubbornness, to persevere and not cling to the myth of the starving artist. But Goins also warns: "*Be stubborn on vision and flexible on the details*".

2: Scene

It is very important to join a group, a scene. "*You have got to find a scene!*" Successful artists are almost always active members of a community to which they themselves contribute. This provides opportunities and possibilities.

3: Patron

This is not so much about people giving you money, but about giving them the opportunity to support you. A *patron* can be found in the craziest places, make sure they see you too.

4: Portfolio

If you make a lot of different work, you will be seen. There are many ways to think about how you can make work that will find an audience. It does not necessarily have to be one big beautiful work, it can also be smaller works (that are easier to sell). Moreover, this way you build up a portfolio. "*Create sparks*", Goins calls it. By building an extensive and versatile portfolio, in the long run you build a vision of your own practice, which provides direction and clarity.

Breakout rooms

During **The Asset of Art**, small groups of artists discussed these four principles and the questions that arose inside the 'breakout rooms'. How can you apply the principles to your own professional practice? Do they already occur in your practice, and in what way?

How can Goins' ideas be fitted into a world in which the artist has a more precarious position? Are compromises possible in your professional practice?

What are good forms of stubbornness? How to find a scene? How do I find a new audience? And what exactly is a *patron*?

Stubbornness

The good and bad sides of stubbornness were a popular topic. Overall, the opinion was that stubbornness makes it possible to pursue and achieve goals. One of the participants called it exciting and useful to maintain a character trait such as stubbornness while questioning it. Another emphasised that sometimes you have to take a 'bold step' in order to move forward in your work as an artist, for example quitting your job or changing direction. That requires quite a bit of stubbornness.

The ability to reverse the connotation of stubbornness from negative to positive and vice versa was often seen as interesting. One group then did an exercise on *yes* and *no*. There are people who always say *yes* or always *no*. How do you deal with that? Saying *yes* was seen as related to the need for recognition. But a *solid ground* to be able to say *no* sometimes offers more opportunities and space.

This relates to Goins' idea: "be stubborn on vision and flexible on detail. Once your vision of what and for whom you want to create is clear, it is time to say no once in a while and not get too distracted".

Scene

When discussing *the scene*, *the network*, the possibility of *artist-in-residence* comes up in many groups. A diversity of people around you is a way to find new ways. The possibility of making online contacts and finding groups of like-minded people is also frequently mentioned. Another sees possibilities in linking different art forms: "There are then different networks and that is very nice and inspiring." Many artists create their own scene by organising events and exhibitions where they meet many fellow artists.

Patron

At first, there was much confusion about patronage. It was seen as something typically American; they would be much more capable of asking for something than we are, here in sober Northern Europe. But Goins later explained that patronage is not so much about asking others for money, but about giving others the opportunity to give something. It can be knowledge, practical support, or simply a fan who appreciates what you do. You can also see patronage as a partnership. Goins: "*A patron could be anyone in any way. You have abilities that others do not, you are an artist, you can see things the way they could be.*" There are always people who are looking for that, it's about finding those people. A possibility that was mentioned in one of the groups: *artists can also support each other by buying each other's work*. Working together with other artists can not only lead to a new network, but often also to a new audience for their own work.

Portfolio

This topic generated the least feedback.

But there was a question for Goins: how can mid-career artists continue to work on their portfolio? Goins explains that making a portfolio is also about diversifying your sources of income. Which work you made in the past was more successful than others and what could you do with it? How would you get income from that? As an example, he mentioned his book *Real Artists don't Starve*, which is now causing him to speak at this symposium.

The day was concluded with a number of assignments for the artists to research, which were returned to at #2.

The Asset of Art was organized in November #1 and December #2, 2020, for a select group of mid-career visual artists living in the Netherlands with a proven track-record and was initiated by platform: Art is a Guaranty in collaboration with ING, Cultuur+Ondernemen, the Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst, CBK Rotterdam and with the cooperation of Stroom Den Haag.

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