



## Do Artists Really Work?

Ewa Sulek

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I have a friend whose wife is a painter. He sometimes likes to complain that while he has to jump out of bed at 7am to slave away, she gets to sleep till 10 and then she “just paints”. He often reproaches her for being able to do whatever she wants while he needs to go to the office every day, even if he does not feel like it. He regularly has to do things that he does not care to do, yet he is in no position to quit and indulge in pleasurable activities (that is to say, “like she does”). The way that an artist’s work is perceived in our society is strongly connected with certain precisely defined perceptions and understandings of work itself. Julia Bryan-Wilson in her essay titled “Art and Work” quotes two different definitions of the latter, where it is “an intelligent and deliberate effort” (after Harry Braverman<sup>1</sup>) or simply “what people do all day long” (after Studs Terkel<sup>2</sup>). Artist Martin Kaltwasser, in turn, defines work as “specific, deliberate activity that people need to perform

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<sup>1</sup> H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*, New York 1974, p.38, after: J.Bryan-Wilson, *Art and Work*, [in:] K. Górna, K. Sienkiewicz, M.Iwański, K. Szreder, S.Ruksza, J. Figiel (ed.), *The Black Book of Polish Artists*, Warsaw 2015, p. 70

<sup>2</sup> S. Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, New York 1972, after: ibidem, p.71.

in order to survive in the surrounding environment. The social constraint of work has been a long-lived tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Bryan-Wilson asks a purely theoretical question: “How is sculpting, for that matter, different than manufacturing of a product?”<sup>4</sup> And yet, though the process of manufacturing is not all that different in itself, a whole set of concepts accumulated around the profession of an artist is the essence of the problem.

**“They’re all swollen-headed now.**

**Van Gogh died in destitution, after all”<sup>5</sup>**

In a well-known book titled *Why are artists poor?* by Hans Abbing, the author – an artist and economist at the same time – takes a closer look at the mechanisms controlling the art market in order to answer the question posed in the title. One of the chapters in this book is dedicated to the myths accrued around the profession of an artist which, in my opinion, not only explain why artists are poor but also show how their work is perceived. Doubts on whether what artists do can be considered “work” stems from convictions and myths about art, such as its uselessness, sacredness and its romantic or ideological character. Abbing also writes about the myth of insatiable satisfaction that artists draw from their work and which supposedly compensates them for the low or often zero earnings that the

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<sup>3</sup> M. Kaltwasser, *(Im)balance. Life and Work of a Creative Family in Postmodernity*, [in:] *Short Stories For Art Labourers. Not for Profit Culture*, Warsaw 2009, p.84.

<sup>4</sup> J. Bryan-Wilson, *Art and Work*, [in:] *The Black Book of...*, p.63

<sup>5</sup> “Artists are no celebrities, they should have pensions like policemen, teachers, or farmers,” M. Iwański in an interview with Ł. Trybalski, *Natemat.pl*, <http://natemat.pl/111893.mikolaj-iwanski-artysci-to-nie-celebryci-powinno-zarabiac-tak-jak-policjanci-nauczyciele> (1.05.2016).

work brings.<sup>6</sup> The artist will create art no matter if they are paid or not; what they value more than money is fame, recognition, prestige and satisfaction (which, in fact, is true to a large extent). One more myth that deserves to be mentioned is the conviction that artists need to suffer<sup>7</sup> (“They’re all swollen-headed nowadays! While Van Gogh died in destitution”<sup>8</sup>).

All of the myths about art that Abbing mentions have been doing very well for years, if not for centuries. In the old days, a patron would employ an artist and in that sense the artist worked for their protector. These days the art patronage system is largely based on grants and donations. An artist receives funds regardless if he or she is going to do the job – which in the generally accepted system of work relations is unclear and meets with social disagreement as well as leads to another conviction, namely that artists are lazy (“All they do is drink, do drugs, go to exhibition previews and other parties and then beg money from the society for being losers whose artistic work is not worth anything, even to your average Joe who won’t hang their paintings on the wall next to a portrait of Pope John Paul II and a picture of a rutting stag”<sup>9</sup>). On 21 May 2012 The Civic Platform for Modern Art organized a strike action in Warsaw called “A Day Without Art”. On their Facebook page, the organization posted a photo of an artist named Andrzej Libera holding a banner that read “I am

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<sup>6</sup> H. Abbing *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*, Amsterdam 2002, p.31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Artists are no celebrities...*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

an artist yet that does not mean that I work for free”. The post soon received a number of sarcastic remarks commenting on the fact that someone would call themselves an artist (“such statements only show vanity and big-headedness of artists”; “it is unvaryingly amusing to me whenever someone calls themselves an artist”, “ARROGANCE, ARROGANCE, and again ARROGANCE”)<sup>10</sup>.

A lot of the comments that appeared under the post were supportive of this initiative yet at least the same amount expressed the opinion that “one should earn money only on something for which others are willing to pay”. Artists are often accused of “living in the world of their own”, being unaware of the fact that they also need to earn a living and that “Nothing comes easy!”<sup>11</sup> Mikołaj Iwański notes that artist’s work should be treated just like the work of teachers or policemen and paid for from the public budget along with pension benefits.<sup>12</sup> That, however, raises general disagreement as artistic work does not meet the criterion of “measurability”. Artists believe that they offer society more than they receive from it. Society sees it quite the opposite. It is an unresolvable conflict.

Another moot point is the question as to the value of artistic work. A piece of art’s worth is usually based on expert opinion and on the rules regulating the art market, which

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<sup>10</sup> Comments under the post Zbigniew Libera at the Front Line by the Civic Forum for Modern Art, Facebook, 21.05.2012 <https://www.facebook.com/190696197350/photos/pb.190696197350.-2207520000.1462451916./10150911171182351/?type=3&theater> (6.05.2016).

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Artists Are No Celebrities...

are not very clear. Kuba Szreder notes some problems connected with this when he writes about the criterion that is generally accepted when it comes to art, i.e. productivity and connected with it “the obligation to sell”.<sup>13</sup> Szreder calls this phenomenon “the hegemony of the work-of-art-centrism”.<sup>14</sup> What is forgotten here is another aspect of artistic activity; namely artistic residence or non-commercial art exhibition projects.<sup>15</sup> In addition, what makes it difficult for artists to be perceived as working people is their rejection of the standard rules of the economy by not revealing the prices of the artistic pieces or by turning down commercial activities, or by their dependence on the system of public donations – which is all quite noticeable in the world of art.

### **The money is running out**

In 2008, in a now closed down gallery called “Witryna” (Shop Window) in Warsaw, Oskar Dawicki exhibited his art work called *10 000 Polish Zloty* – the amount that happened to be the total budget of the exhibition. “What I meant to do was to give up on the whole process of receiving money and then completing my task while spending it – or simply to shorten this process to just one link in the chain” Dawicki explained.<sup>16</sup> In 2007 Dawicki made a short film called

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<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, as Hans Abbing proves, the economy of art is quite specific. The fact that works of art do not sell is not proof of a low artistic value. It is often quite the opposite (H. Abbing, *Why....*, p.50).

<sup>14</sup> *The Black Book....*, p.48

<sup>15</sup> “Work (by an art worker) may take a form of a service (commissioned activity), participation in the processes of public communication (presenting of one’s works in an exhibition or publishing a text), animating some social processes (for instance during workshops or interventions), creating common social space and sometimes it can even be the sheer presence (like in the case of an artist’s residence). In such a system, clear boundaries between what constitutes work and what does not, are not present.” Ibidem, p.51.

<sup>16</sup> Oskar Dawicki, Culture.pl, <http://culture.pl/pl/tworca/oskar-dawicki> (18.05.2016).

“The Budget Story” – it lasted nine minutes; only as long as the budget allowed for. The sum of the budget is visible on the screen for the whole length of the film – the initial total of 14,000 zloty decreases with each passing second as the film goes. Jan Nowicki, an actor featured in the film, keeps repeating one line: “The money is running out.” And indeed, when the meter hits zero, the film suddenly stops.

Commentaries on Dawicki’s works often point to the motif of economy in art which is present. And indeed, his piece *10 000 Polish Zloty* can also inspire a discussion on such problems as how the arts market functions based on the public procurement system; we can ponder the issue of artistic freedom or limitations of the artists connected with funds they receive; or we can ask questions about such things as how a piece of art should be priced and who has the right to put value on it. One could also discuss topics raised by Abbing, like how the world of art is suspicious towards money and commercialism in general, or about the peculiar denial with which it approaches the basic laws of the economy.<sup>17</sup> Mutual relations between art and money remain “unclear” and “suspicious”. Dawicki touches upon all these issues. Yet, in a roundabout way, he also speaks of something else; about the rules governing the artist’s work which are incompatible with the market and economy; about having to stick to a budget while creating art (which is an obvious thing to do in any other field); about the sense of coercion connected with working on commission which also means the loss of freedom.

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<sup>17</sup> H. Abbing, *Why ...*, p.45

### **The time grinding machine**

Michał Frydrych in his art work called “The Beekeeper” (2013) tries to analyze how a hierarchical society deprived of freedom functions. “The beehive serves here as a metaphor for an organization where everything and everyone has their own function. Someone is unemployed, someone else is an entrepreneur, yet somebody else has a full-time job. There is no space left for functioning ‘in-between’. An artist is like a parasite in this hierarchical system – an individual seemingly not fulfilling any useful function,” Frydrych explains.<sup>18</sup> A hierarchical organization is utterly different from the way of functioning that is absolutely indispensable for creating art. Artists also face enslavement and a necessity to function within imposed structures. In order to get the status of an unemployed person – which in turn makes him eligible for public health insurance – Frydrych has been using the public employment services for years, although he was de facto working all this time. What is evident here once again is the simplest way in which the concept of work is understood – work is what brings revenue. Meanwhile, the nature of an artist’s work is such that it brings irregular income. Whenever Frydrych earns some money, he needs to sign off from the employment services center and then register again in the next month. Within around three years, Frydrych visited the center exactly 36 times. “The system wasted time in my life; after all, the time of an unemployed person is not worth much as the unemployed does not do anything. It was like a machine that was grinding time that was seem-

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<sup>18</sup> An interview with Michał Frydrych, May 2016



ingly 'empty'. Each time I visited the center, I came back with some useless objects. This whole process is what *The Beekeeper* stems from. That time was no longer wasted but dedicated to art instead".<sup>19</sup> The concept of grinding time appears again in another piece by Frydrych called *Busy Being Busy* (2014). Each day we engage in activities that aim at sustaining a certain model of life that we have gotten accustomed to. "I call it *being pasted in* the way we are living," says Frydrych.<sup>20</sup> He does not show a way out to freedom, he only presents how we "fill" our days with activities, often random activities that become essential only by the sheer fact that they are repeatable. And that is what work means to many people.

### **Celebrity artists**

The artists who repeatedly appear at employment service centers are a professional group with the lowest income in relation to their level of education and their position on the social ladder. Most of them live in poverty often financing their artistic activity from other sources. However, there is also a small group of celebrity artists who have unbelievably high income in comparison to the former group. A painting by Julia Curyło from 2013 shows Jeff Koons armed with an inflatable doll – modeled on a porn star and his ex-wife, Ciciolina – who is mounting an inflatable dolphin and charging at Damien Hirst. The latter, in turn, is sitting on a formalin-fixed shark and holding a diamond skull directed at his opponent. Curyło found an ironic and funny way to show a battle between the two

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<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

most expensive artists in the modern world. Her painting references two art works by each of these artists respectively – that got sold for exorbitant amounts of money.<sup>21</sup> *Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst Sharing the Art Market* is a blunt comment on how the world art market functions – where the winner takes all. But, as Zofia Płoska and Łukasz Ronduda note: “In Poland we deal with a particular aberration of this aberration. It is often the case, in fact, that even those who are the winners in the system of institutional recognition, are in a financially bad situation.”<sup>22</sup> Even the most-renowned artists (like Zbigniew Libera who was mentioned earlier) do not earn good income. The success of Polish artists (such as prestigious exhibitions or awards) does not translate into any improvement of their financial situation. In Poland, symbolic prestige is not followed by the financial prestige. Why is that the case?

### **“It surely is some kind of art”**

*What's With That Art?* is the title of an opinion poll I prepared in collaboration with Bogna Kietlińska from Sens-Lab, a polling company. I wanted to hear the opinion of people who, by the rules that govern the art market, are

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<sup>21</sup> “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living” by Damien Hirst, a piece from 1991 composed of a life-sized tiger shark sunk in a pool filled with formalin; it was sold for eight million dollars. Another one of his sculptures, “For the Love of God” (2007) – a Platinum cast of a human skull set with diamonds, sold for 50 million pounds. Two of the motifs that invariably appear in all of Koon’s works are inflatable animals and the figure of his ex-wife. His piece “Balloon Dog (Orange)” was sold in 2013 at a Christie’s House auction in New York for 58.4 million dollars which made it then the most highly priced piece of art work by a living artist ever sold at auction.

<sup>22</sup> Z.Płoska, Ł.Ronduda, “The Financial Equivalent. Artists Talk about Economy during the Warsaw Gallery Weekend” *Wyborcza.pl*, 26.09.2014 [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,16711245,Ekwiwalent\\_pieniezny\\_Artysci\\_mowia\\_o\\_ekonomii\\_podczas.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,16711245,Ekwiwalent_pieniezny_Artysci_mowia_o_ekonomii_podczas.html) (26.04.2016).

normally not heard as they are no experts, art historians or critics. All of them, however, meet the criteria for being potential consumers of art – they are all college-educated inhabitants of Warsaw. I carried out this poll in April and May 2016, among 85 people - 54 women and 31 men; aged 19-25 (23 people), 26-30 (13 people), 31-40 (37 people) and 12 people over 40 years old. Fifty-one of the respondents have a graduate diploma, ten of them hold a bachelor's degree, eight are graduate school students, 16 – undergraduate students; 56 people have either already graduated or are currently studying for a degree in the arts and humanities; the remaining 29 have degree in the sciences. Among those polled, 30 respondents are professionally involved with culture in a broad sense, 46 have nothing to do with culture professionally and the remaining ones are students who have not started working yet.

The first question on the survey was directly concerned with the main topic of this article, namely: “Do artists actually work?” Over one-third of respondents (31 people) decided that creating art is “a hobby”, 32 classified creating art in the “other” category (half of the answers to this question placed creating art somewhere between work and a hobby, the rest described creating it as a mission, passion, fundamental need, way to express oneself or an absolute necessity). Only 22 of those polled considered creating art as work. For the next step, I presented the group with three art works by Polish modern artists – a sculpture by Michał Frydrych called *Busy Being Busy* (2014), an object that constituted part of Dawicki's artistic performance entitled

*10 000 Polish zloty* (2008), and a painting by Julia Curyło *Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst Sharing the Art Market* (2013). Their task was to give answers to the same set of questions concerned with the presented pieces (the questions regarded such issues as: classifying a given object as a piece of art; its value; the desire to own it). Fifty-nine of the polled considered Frydrych's sculpture a piece of art, 29 admitted that Dawicki's object can be seen as art, and as many as 75 decided that the painting by Curyło can be classified as art. Painting – the more traditional and classical form of artistic expression – is more readily perceived as art than other forms. A much lower percentage of the respondents would consider sculpture to be art, with the lowest percentage perceiving an artistic object as art. People whose professional life is not connected with culture and those who did not graduate in the humanities more often decided that a given object was not a piece of art. The same arguments were predominant when justifying the answers regarding all three art works. Aspects that were taken into consideration (when deciding about artistic value of each of the pieces): 1) creativity, uniqueness; 2) an attempt by an artist to share his or her view (even if it is not understandable to the viewer); 3) the emotions that it evokes; and 4) the time and effort invested in the creation of art work. The respondents also provided the argument that art is “whatever was considered as art”, or that “everything can be art”. Those who decided that the presented art pieces were not art, emphasized the following: 1) a lack of aesthetic value; 2) a lack of *techne*– i.e. the physical effort put into the completion of the art work; and 3) incomprehensibility.

As it turned out, 83 of the respondents would not like to purchase the sculpture by Frydrych and 82 would not even like to own it (even if they did not have to pay for it). Aside from that, 70 people decided that its suggested price was not justified. A somewhat lower percentage of the survey participants (though still over 90 percent of them) would neither buy (79 people) nor want to own (77 people) the piece by Oskar Dawicki; 73 respondents decided that the suggested price was too high. In regards to the painting, we can again see a slight difference – 12 people expressed their willingness to own the art work by Curyło. When it comes to buying the picture – the statistics remain roughly the same – 80 people would not like to buy it, but only 56 respondents decided that the suggested price was not compatible with what they would be willing to pay for the painting. Half of the polled would not pay a dime for Frydrych's sculpture (43 people). Only one person expressed his readiness to buy the art work for the suggested price. As for Dawicki's piece – also almost half of the respondents (41 people) declared an unwillingness to pay any amount for it. Again, only one person was ready to pay the suggested price for this work of art. In regards to the Curyło piece, the number of respondents who would not buy the painting looks similar (36 people). Once more a single person offered to pay the amount close to the suggested price. The same arguments are repeated to justify the above answers: 1) aesthetic value, or rather lack of it; 2) the art work fails to evoke any emotions; 3) the unjustified price 4) a failure to understand what the author meant and 5) uselessness or lack of functionality.

A certain number of the polled (exactly 13 in Frydrych's case, six in Dawicki's case, and nine in Curyło's case) noted that the art work is worth as much as its market value or as much as someone is willing to pay for it.

Most of the respondents have no need to own or buy works of art. Yet, when selling individual art pieces is concerned, a single person willing to buy art is enough for the transaction to take place - which only confirms the earlier assumption about a rather small group of art consumers and about the general lack of social need for art work. Assuming the perspective of "the centrism of the work of art" and trying to look at the piece's concept through the prism of deliberate and well-justified manufacturing that leads to financial transactions, the conviction expressed by most respondents as the answer to the first question is further confirmed: only 22 of the survey respondents considered creating art to be work. The reasons behind this are applying capitalist categories regarding work to the concept of artistic work, romantic myths accrued around the figure of an artist, the misunderstanding of the essence of artistic work and focusing on the physical aspects of their work – manufacturing in combination with manual dexterity.

Let's return to the issue that appeared at the beginning of this article – why would my friend feel so resentful about his wife not having to get up at 7am to go to the office? He, like most other people who work a regular job, is irritated by the artist's rejection of capitalist rules of work. The

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terms usually associated with art, like uselessness, lack of functionality, inefficiency and, on the other hand, talent, vision and creativity; all place art in the domain of a hobby, rather than “real work”.

**translated by Agnieszka Rubka-Nimz**