



DRAWINGS

Artistic Lives

A Study of Creativity in Two European Cities

KIRSTEN FORKERT

ARTISTIC LIVES

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Introduction:

Artistic Autonomy and Material Conditions

The motivations for this project come out of my experiences as a freelance artist, critic and organiser, and where I noticed that factors normally seen to be external to the field were directly affecting the production and presentation of work. These experiences led me to question whether culture had become less autonomous than I had thought to be the case, and which I had certainly been trained to believe. I will now describe two of these experiences and the questions they provoked.

For several years, I volunteered as a board member for a media arts organisation in Canada, with a history in the alternative space movement. The organisation presented public screenings, distributed works to media festivals and other events, and facilitated access to video, audio and digital media equipment. Recent changes to arts funding had led to introduction of auditing measures such as the keeping of detailed records of audience attendance figures, which, in retrospect, may have caused some organisations to lie. Arts organisations were encouraged to set their programming at least two years in advance, and concentrate on recognised names and events which took place within narrowly defined disciplinary boundaries. This led to the exclusion of spontaneously curated events – often the most interesting in my experience; events featuring work by users of the facilities, or amateur production, a phenomenon which was becoming more common due to technological developments which made video production cheaper and more accessible.

Fearful of losing funding, many organisations internalised the demands of funding agencies, and policed themselves accordingly. This became obvious when, at a meeting, I saw someone say without a trace of irony that we should curate screenings that will result in the Arts Council giving us more money. In my experience, these kinds of scenarios were common, which consisted of aligning one's interests and goals with policy imperatives, to the point where they seemed indistinguishable. Ironically, because they let funding demands determine their mandate, arts organisations would receive negative feedback on applications about a lack of clear sense of direction. However, in my experience, these issues were rarely raised or analysed, as they were seen to be outside of proper aesthetic discussions. The only response seemed to be a generalised frustration at state interference or what seemed like rather hollow declarations of artistic autonomy – an autonomy which, in many respects, no longer existed. This experience led me to question what seemed like the inability and in some case unwillingness, within the art field, to analyse and discuss the issues which directly affected the production and presentation of work.

Simultaneously, it appeared as though contemporary art was playing an increasingly significant role within an expanding global lifestyle industry. This phenomenon included, for example, art galleries on the ground floor of luxury tower blocks; museum complexes or ‘clusters’, in the lingo of the day, which also included up-scale restaurants and wine bars; the role of such developments within gentrification processes seemed to be rarely discussed. The last ten years also saw an ever-expanding number of biennials which frequently showcased the same artists in different locations, in connection with what often seemed to be plays for legitimisation for cities and local art scenes; these were designed for the international art audience to hop from country to country (Wu, 2007). It was becoming increasingly obvious how contemporary art was being framed within hierarchies of taste and conspicuous consumption; these seemed similar to those theorised by Pierre Bourdieu many years earlier (1984), but also reflected both the newly globalising nature of the art world and also its increasing integration into the lifestyle industry. Perhaps, in retrospect, this phenomenon may have also been a reflection of the conspicuous affluence of a boom economy, connected to the dot-com and property bubbles – very different from the current moment, although the ultra-rich and their glamorous lifestyles have been affected less by the recession than we might think (Monbiot, 2013). All this raised questions about the function and purpose of culture, and the parameters such developments created for the production, presentation, experience and interpretation of art.

My motivation for this project also comes from reflections on the experience of working as a freelancer in the arts, a number of years before beginning the research. I noticed a disturbing coincidence between certain aspects of my experience as a freelancer, and conditions which seemed to exemplify both the competitiveness and insecurity intrinsic to neoliberal society: the sense that one could never turn down a contract due to the financial instability of freelancing; the requirement for a high level of resourcefulness and self-reliance, as well as the sense that this requirement was increasingly becoming the norm. This was also reflected in the feeling of many artists that they were only as good as their last project, their awareness of the shortness of their own careers; and the tendency for many to blame themselves when things did not go well. Disturbingly, it seemed as though these very qualities, particularly self-reliance and resourcefulness, were being championed at the time when the social safety net was being dismantled. These issues were also not being discussed within the cultural field, for some of the reasons mentioned earlier. There also seemed to be a general reluctance amongst artists to discuss issues that affected them directly (for a similar reluctance amongst academics, see Ross, 2000). Basic questions such as working conditions seemed rather banal and unfashionable. In retrospect, they may have also raised the spectre of even more uncomfortable issues such as reliance on benefits or parental support, or more generally socio-economic privilege.

These experiences led me to question my relationship to the art discipline; it was as though I no longer accepted what Pierre Bourdieu calls the *illusio*, or the taking for granted of the principles of the field (1996, p. 333). More generally, I

also began to realise that wider social and economic conditions had a much greater influence on cultural production than those within the art field wanted to admit or were willing to discuss. This led me to begin this project; I wanted to examine, in greater detail and depth, the specific ways in which social conditions affect cultural production – including who can become an artist, who can sustain an art career, and who can have the time and space to make art. My experiences also led to wonder why social conditions in the arts were not being considered, and the blind spots this might reveal within both art and social research. There has been a long-standing tendency within the art field to ignore the social and economic conditions of cultural production, because these issues are seen to be irrelevant to aesthetic discussions. This can be understood in terms of how the cultural field has developed and defined itself in relation to other fields, and the limits and boundaries of the discipline. The art field's positioning of itself as exceptional – as operating according to different rules – may lead other fields, including those within social research, to also perceive the field as such, leading them to ignore the experience of artists. If the ways in which artists support themselves is seen to be such an unknown, then it is all too easy to think that artists form a homogeneous social elite, rather than a varied group with different degrees of socio-economic privilege, and thus, different resources for supporting themselves. If artists are assumed to be a homogeneous, relatively privileged group, then any poverty or hardship they experience is seen to be a choice rather than a necessity. It also becomes too easy to assume that artists can simply create from nothing – or even that creativity is driven by scarcity, which can shake one out of complacency and force one to be inventive. As I have suggested earlier, this blind spot around the material conditions of cultural production has particular policy implications within the current neoliberal context. The assumption that people can create from nothing, regardless of neoliberal conditions fits in with imperatives to encourage entrepreneurial self-reliance and independence from the welfare state. Creativity itself becomes framed in terms of this self-reliance.

It is because of these blind spots that I wanted to take an interdisciplinary, rather than conventional art historical approach; other disciplines might have more to offer in terms of understanding social conditions and their effects on artists' lives. I was interested, not in studying individual works or aesthetic approaches, but artists' *lives* – how the artists pay the rent, how they juggle their jobs and their time in the studios, and how they attempt to form communities in the face of insecure living conditions. As a result, this book may seem rather counter- counter-intuitive, as it is based on interviewing artists primarily about their living conditions rather than their art practices, and to consider what artists might share in their living conditions, rather than focusing on the uniqueness of their individual lives and practices. The project also does not study historically significant works or artists, but takes a broader perspective: on the conditions experienced by a range of artists, with varying degrees of success, including those with international reputations and those working in relative obscurity. Greg Sholette has argued that the art world is characterised by a dynamic where

very few artists are successful enough to gain significant visibility within the art press while the majority – including less successful artists, art students, and amateurs – do not (2010). However, these invisible artists are nonetheless necessary for the functioning and reproduction of the art world as they make up an important part of the art audience, and also often work as teachers, gallery staff, artists' assistants, etc. It is these other aspects of the art world which I am hoping to explore: in which artists continue to make and exhibit work, and in some cases have quite successful careers, but would never appear in the pages of glossy magazines.

The project attempts to combine several different approaches, in order to consider artists' working and living conditions: including cultural studies and sociological research on work, housing and cities. The theories of Pierre Bourdieu, to which this study owes a great deal, have explored socio-economic conditions, and particularly the role of class privilege in careers, thereby countering assumptions about artists as a homogeneous group. Privilege provides 'the conditions for freedom from economic necessity', and the 'basis of self-assurance, audacity and indifference to profit', as well as 'the flair associated with the possession of a large social capital and the corresponding familiarity with the field' (1993, p. 68). These conditions give artists from privileged backgrounds considerable advantage over artists from working-class or petit-bourgeois backgrounds, evidenced by Bourdieu's study of nineteenth century writers in texts such as *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) and *The Rules of Art* (1996). There is, of course, another discussion about how both the cultural field and the nature of socio-economic privilege might operate in the arts today; Bourdieu did in fact write about neoliberalism in the 1990s, but did not apply this analysis to culture. For example, how might 'freedom from economic necessity' function within the present context-including, for example, contemporary pressures such as the financialisation of housing and multiple job-holding? How would the required audacity and confidence Bourdieu described manifest themselves today?

The work is also strongly influenced by critical analyses of the cultural industries, including the work of Andrew Ross, Angela McRobbie Bernard Mieke and Rosalind Gill. These authors have not primarily focused on visual artists, but have explored related fields, such as fashion and IT. The project applies these analyses from the cultural industries to visual art, based on the premise that, controversially, art is now operating in ways that are similar to other cultural industries, particularly as these fields involve similar working patterns and conditions to those experienced in the visual arts and in fact could be drawing on the appeal of the artist's lifestyle: long hours, passionate engagement, and high levels of competition and financial insecurity. More generally, the scenarios described at the beginning have indicated the ways in which art is implicated within state and capitalist structures. I am thus starting with the premise that art is no longer separate from the cultural industries: that in certain respects, it may now share certain similarities with fields such as the music industry or publishing – which follows that in fact something can be learned from studies of these

fields. Conversely, these industries also draw on a similar appeal connected to the bohemian lifestyle. Andrew Ross's analysis of the IT industry (2004) examined how many art school graduates came to work in the industry, and how the appeal for working of such companies drew on the bohemian lifestyle: the loft studio environment, the non-standard working hours and informal dress codes, and the blurring of friendships and professional relationships. I am aware that from certain perspectives – particularly those which might be premised on the arts' inherent resistance to commodification – these sorts of observations might be controversial. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

In order to engage with the social conditions of cultural production, the project draws on disciplines that might seem rather unfamiliar and even counter-intuitive from conventional perspectives for studying culture. This project is thus an attempt to map analyses from these fields onto the study of culture – which may, again, seem rather counter-intuitive. In doing so, I am attempting to address another blind spot around artists and cities, in which artists are again positioned as exceptional: as experiencing different conditions from other local residents, or as responding to these conditions in an entirely different way. It is possibly this blind spot which has led debates around artists and cities to be primarily framed around culture-driven economic development, such as, for example, the work of Richard Florida. These discourses tend to be quite promotional in tone, focusing on how to attract the 'creative class' to a given city or region, with the value of the cultural economy justified by 'productivity statistics, that orbit, halo-like, around Creative Industries policy' (Ross, 2009, p. 27). For all this attention to attracting the 'creative class', there little concern for their material conditions – beyond a 'tolerant atmosphere' and the presence of cafes and the like. The costs of economic growth on artists are not considered, particularly economic growth which is based in the financialisation of the property market. As we will see, the deeply ingrained assumption that artists can create something from nothing has particular policy consequences.

Instead of treating cultural production as an exceptional activity and creativity as the ability to create something from nothing, the project situates it within the context of material conditions such as housing and the cost of living, employment, and welfare; it examines how they might exacerbate or limit the risks and insecurities of freelancing in culture. The project also considers the spatial politics of cultural production, and particularly the question of who can have time and space for creative activities – especially in the context of financialised housing economies, where space is at a premium. This requires engaging with some very practical, and even banal issues such as: the rent the artists paid for their homes and their studios; the commuting distance between home, work and studio; the hours the artists had to work in order to pay for living costs in both cities, and the effects of this on the time and mental energy to make art. It also involves exploring the complexities of the relationship between culture and gentrification – and artists not only as agents of gentrification but also as experiencing its effects.

The project also explores the intersection between material conditions and artists' professional identities. The interview process revealed early on that issues such as housing or employment were more important than the state of the art market or availability of arts funding – as arts grants and sales were not frequent enough, nor did they provide enough money for artists to support themselves long term. This led me to focus on other sources of income, which ranged from casual service work or benefits, to highly skilled employment – which in some cases functions as a second career. All this affected the amount of time and energy they commit to their art or to their paid work. In addition to these practical matters, I also explore more subjective issues, such as the artists' identification with their art practice or with their jobs: did they see themselves primarily as artists or as arts managers or educators? What is the relationship between these practical survival concerns and artists' self-understanding, including their sense of hope or anxiety about the future, their relationship to other artists, etc. This is a question not only of material conditions, but also field/discipline. I pay particular attention to the role of the artist and its possibilities and limitations in shaping artists' self-expectations. The significance of the bohemian lifestyle is particularly important, as is the connection between material conditions and changes to professional identity. For example, do high living costs or the lack of a safety net intensify pressures to professionalise – such as the taking on of full-time professional employment or pressures to professionalise, and what are the consequences for art practices? Do they make one accustomed to constant work, where one's time is always allocated towards some useful and productive activity? It is also important to keep in mind that professionalisation for artists might mean something different than in other fields, both because bohemianism has been specifically defined in opposition to conventional professional identities, and also because the duration and trajectory of artistic careers can be quite different from conventional career paths. This places the artists in a contradictory situation, which will be discussed later on.

There are further questions about how unstable conditions might impact on relationships between artists and artistic communities in general. Does an unstable living situation – as is the case in London – create a *habitus* of a tenuous and provisional relationship to home and community? I am interpreting *habitus* in this situation as perhaps less 'durable' than Bourdieu defined it – less about the sedimented weight of tradition or knowledge transmitted through generations, then about the ways in which one can become used to a particular way of living, and have a particular sense of one's scope for agency. This also raises questions about how one can observe *habitus* in fieldwork and particularly within interviews. For example, does it manifest itself as an involuntary or unconscious sense of ease or comfort with certain issues or topics and discomfort with others, expressed through awkward silences? These questions will all be explored.