

## State Of Practice

A large gap exists today between the reality of being an artist and the image of the Artist which is portrayed by history and media, and perceived by the general public. The artist's role in society is confusing and mysterious to many people. What do artists actually do for society, how can they help with regeneration; particularly in a time of recession, and who should pay for it?

There is, understandably, a lot of talk amongst artists lately about money. Many artists are discussing the hows and whys of getting funding and of getting paid. There are discussions in a-n magazine, in books and articles, and even groups and movements inspired by the cuts in Arts Council funding, the recession and the 'age of austerity'. I myself am part of Ellie Harrison's 'Artists' Lottery Syndicate'<sup>1</sup> - a collective of forty artists who are playing the National Lottery for a year (using a system of numbers designed to maximise our chances of winning) both as a way of protesting the shift of Lottery money away from the arts whilst at the same time aiming to win some of it back (hopefully more than we initially put in!)

I know from talking to my peers and colleagues that the proposed 25% cut in government arts funding has already started to have an effect on various projects and organisations. The trickle-down effect of organisations preparing for cuts is the cancelling of small projects, perhaps involving one or two artists - a small deal for a medium-sized organisation maybe, but a big deal to the many who may rely on that regular income in order to survive in the highly competitive world of the self-employed artist where, for the vast majority of us, it seems to be a continuous struggle to ensure that we are paid what we are worth.

Emily Speed has been writing regularly on the subject of artists getting paid fairly in her blog<sup>2</sup> on a-n.co.uk, and Ellie Harrison's MA thesis looks at how we 'reconcile our careerist mentality with our impending doom.'<sup>3</sup> Although the doom Harrison is referring to is environmental I feel that there is a strong parallel - the question raised is the same: what is the purpose of art in this new situation? Joyce Cronin's recent Rant<sup>4</sup> on the Axis website asked whether art students should be taught to think commercially. Alison Sharkey's Rant<sup>5</sup> (which immediately followed Cronin's) asked 'What Makes You An Artist?' with the ensuing debate questioning the labelling of 'amateur' and 'professional' and whether a 'true' artist makes a living from their work or vice-versa.

For me the question of money raises even bigger issues. We inhabit a society where money seems to be the most important ideal: we need money to live, and our current societal structure rewards the making of money. Money is the goal. In Sharkey's discussion many artists mentioned how, on telling people that they were an artist, the first thing they would be asked is 'do you make a living from that?' as if this somehow validates the label you have given yourself, and of course, why do it if it doesn't make money? As an artist money is required in order to make things happen. I remember many times discussing with lecturers, colleagues and gallerists how I was unable to realise a certain idea because I couldn't afford it; I couldn't afford the materials or the time. The reply was often something along the lines of 'there are always ways of getting things done' etc... and to a degree this is

correct - you can get things for free, for barter, for a mention. But sometimes you just need money. Sometimes you have to pay your rent. Sometimes you have to eat. Money, for me, is a means not an end. I need to make money because society demands it, but I don't need it to tell me whether I am an artist or not.

Whether by choice or circumstance (although I think a bit of both) my work has shifted away from a studio-based practice (I haven't had a studio since my degree, and I can't afford one at the moment) and photographic works (I can't afford the printing costs) to a situation where I work in the space where the exhibition is taking place - the venue has become my studio - and materials are often found in skips or left behind from previous shows. Due to this my works are temporary; they exist for the duration of the show and are then destroyed or recycled. Conceptually this is not a problem for me. My work is derived from the space it is to be built in - I call it location-specific (as apposed to site-specific, which I define as work that can be built into various sites but is not necessarily *about* that site) and is often integrated into the fabric of the building. This means that my costs are quite low: I only have to pay for travel expenses, subsistence and accommodation, and on some occasions for specialist materials when required. In many cases venues and organisers will pay my travel costs and I will often stay at a kind person's house. However, very rarely do exhibition organisers pay an actual fee to artists for their time - and this, I think, is an important issue. It seems that I am expected to sell work in order to pay for my time and, as I shall discuss shortly, my work does not lend itself to this idea.

My time has a value. It can take several days to build a work on-site - unfortunately this is time I sometimes need to be spending earning money. Like the majority of artists I do not earn tremendous amounts, and what I do earn often comes from other work: as an artists' assistant, taking part in seminars and talks, teaching etc... It seems expected that I should give up time earning in order to produce the work that an exhibition requires of me (and sometimes even pay them for the privilege). We are stuck with the image of the 'starving artist' as if somehow you have to have paid your dues, living hand to mouth and working for nothing in order to prove your commitment. In any other job, even if you start on the bottom rung, you get paid. Some artists can afford to exhibit for free - they might have a comfortable sales base for their work, they might just be independently wealthy? Some feel compelled to exhibit for nothing because they want to show - to expand their portfolio, gain exposure - further entrenching them in debt. I'm guilty of this, and recently I've vowed to stop exhibiting for free. And it's difficult. Because I'm not particularly financially motivated I find myself drawn to interesting projects that don't necessarily turn a profit. I can tell myself that every good work I make goes towards making a stronger portfolio, thus making subsequent proposals and applications more successful, but this doesn't pay the rent and again feeds into the notion of paying your dues. I feel that some exhibition organisers may be taking advantage of this - why pay when there is a pool of eager artists willing to work for free? I have been in shows where money is spent on drinks, canapés and vol-au-vents to be given away at the private view. I'd much rather this money was given to the artists - even if it is only a token amount - and then charge a cost price to visitors for their refreshments. Shift the focus of the private view. Remove the show-business.

Now that we are in an 'age of austerity' it feels that opportunities will be even fewer and far between. The cost of living keeps rising and we are forced into the mindset of 'must make money'. I know that many artists sell their work. My work doesn't really lend itself to this model. 'Why don't you change it?' you might ask, 'Why not make drawings of proposals like Christo and Jeanne-Claude' for example? 'I don't want to' is the simple answer. I make the work that I want to make, not the work that I think other people might want. I feel that my practice has been influenced enough by my circumstances. My working method is perhaps like that of a builder; I'm commissioned to make something. The cost of this is derived from the materials it might use and the time it takes to build. I am not asking for hundreds of thousands of pounds because you are buying my art, I just want paying for my time.

Over the past few years I've been taking a long hard look at my practice. A few years ago I applied for an MA and didn't even get an interview. I looked at my portfolio and realised that my work was all over the place (a mix of installation, photographic and net-based works that didn't really have a clear direction), so I decided to focus and I worked very hard on developing the installation side of my practice. The outcome of this has been a consistent series of installation works which I am very happy with. I have also noticed a distinct improvement in success at getting shows I apply for, and even having people approach me. However, many of these were for free, or expenses only.

More recently I have been questioning the purpose of my work - and the purpose of art in our society in general. If it is going to become harder to make and show work I need to have a damn good reason for doing it. I'm also aware, as Ellie Harrison states in her thesis, that the need for art (and artists) may also be reduced as priorities shift. A lot of work I see these days really doesn't address this issue. A lot of artists are making one-note works with flippant visual punch lines that seem to lack any depth or layers. A lot of art looks like what people think art should look like and is 'about' specific themes with no breadth or depth. Although this is a personal thing - I see no point in making work *only* about specific things: 'this is my work about memory', 'this is my work about trans-humanism', 'this is my work about the language that monkeys communicate with' etc. This bores me and I also find it very limiting.

Perhaps a reclassification is called for? 'Artist' is a title that covers a broad range of activities. A lot of what is called art I feel is often nearer to craft or design. There are certain sensibilities in artworks that are more decorative than functional i.e. more focused on how it looks than whether the meaning or purpose is communicated - or even if it has a meaning or purpose. I'm proposing a change in classification - to create a new labelling system for creative works.

It must be pointed out that I am *not* saying that there is a scale that goes from one kind of work to another, and one end is of little value and the other is of greater. I just wish to reclassify the terms for things that I feel are a different kind of art. In all of these forms there is good and bad work - there are good and bad batik, there are good and bad minimalist conceptual video installations. It should be a level playing field where the only thing that matters is whether it is any good or not, not whether batik is better than video. I am also not rubbishing work from the past - works that

perhaps *did* only intend to address one theme and/or were more decorative or design-based. But this work has been done; we don't need to retread old ground, especially in such a crowded sphere of opportunities. We need to ensure that art moves on.

I propose a new system. I propose new terminology - an extra layer of definition - to define a practice, a kind of work, that strives to express thoughts, meanings and ideas relevant to our current global situation, free from the constraints of cost, style, fashion, being popular, following trends, the gallery system and the idea of the artist being a celebrity. I want to free creativity from the constraints of money. I recently read in the Observer magazine (22.08.10) a short interview with film maker Don Letts where he expressed a view I have heard from various other people. He said 'The downside of affordable technology is mediocrity. Back in the 70s every three minutes of film cost £20. Now you can get a 90-minute digital tape for a fiver. The price used to weed out people who were just fucking about'<sup>6</sup>. I think he's got this all wrong. He does have a point about seriousness - those that are determined will try to find ways to afford film etc. but this is exactly the way of thinking I want to get rid of; the idea of having to pay your dues, the struggling artist. It's an old-fashioned, romanticised image of what an artist is supposed to be and it is stifling creativity. Letts' model only allows those with access to money the access to resources. By making the tools and materials expensive art making becomes the field of those with some kind of privilege (whether it be perseverance, belligerence or a rich daddy - and not all of these things make a good artist). By making these things inexpensive you open up possibilities for those that would perhaps otherwise never have had the chance. Sure, if more people are making work the amount of mediocre work increases - but so does the amount of the good and even great work. The trick would be to ensure quality by some other method - not by whether you can afford it, but whether you can prove its worth.

I'm not jealous of the money, either. My goal, as I mentioned before, is not to make money (beyond that which is needed to make life comfortable). I'm jealous of the opportunities that having money brings, and I resent the fact that without money I am unable to pursue the making of my work. I resent being forced into the 'must make money' mindset. I wish to create a system where opportunity exists without the need for money - that the art pays for itself without it having to be commercial. Human beings have been making art for a very long time. The need and ability to create images and objects is inbuilt - I would even say it is a basic human right - and the need now for art that isn't flippant and that has a purpose that can be communicated is probably more important than ever as it is the only way of changing the minds of those that want to cut funding. Prove it to them with your work.

The gap between the reality of being an artist and the broader public perception of what an artist is can only be bridged by this mutual understanding. In our current situation, where only very recently incredible amounts of money have been spent on artworks, arts centres and regeneration projects involving artists, and we are now moving into a period where there is going to be less money available, we, as artists, have to make sure our work justifies its existence. As viewers we have to be clear about what we want, but also understand that art can be difficult - we have to

be open to new ideas and not be put off because we don't understand something. So this new system I propose should be a way of re-classifying art into something that removes the knee-jerk reaction many people have to the idea of art, and also tries to eradicate the negative and unhelpful images of artists as either starving and struggling or super-rich libertines. Both of these exist of course, but the majority of artists operate somewhere in between these two extremes.

It is about changing perceptions and changing approaches to working. I try to do this through my own work, and I'd be the first to admit that it's difficult and I'm not sure if I've ever achieved this, but that's the intention. I no longer want people to associate art with a waste of time and money. I want to create a state of practice - a physical and psychological situation of art making where the benefits: of education, enjoyment, revelation and inspiration, far outweigh the hindrance of whether it turns a profit.

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<http://www.counterwork.co.uk>

1. <http://www.artistslotterysyndicate.co.uk>
2. [http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists\\_talking/projects/single/497389](http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/projects/single/497389)
3. <http://ellie-harrison.blogspot.com>
4. <http://www.axisweb.org/dlForum.aspx?ESSAYID=18100>
5. <http://www.axisweb.org/dlForum.aspx?ESSAYID=18101>
6. Observer magazine, 22nd August 2010  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/22/don-letts-this-much-know>