

How an Artist Can Hack a Living: A Report

Andrew Taggart, Ph.D.

Preface: No Such Luck

This report was born of a query sent to about 30 friends and acquaintances on April 30, 2015. In that email, I asked those I knew whether they knew anyone who was *manifestly* making a living at making art. With the exception of an art adviser friend whose regular dealings are with investors and collectors, the response was rather wintry. About two-thirds did not respond, which no response I took to mean that they didn't actually know anyone who fit the description; the remaining one-third either said that nobody came to mind or that they thought it vaguely possible that John Smith or Jane Doe might, but they didn't know nor did they have a good way of verifying which was the case. Most, however, expressed considerable interest in receiving whatever resulted from this informal research investigation, and it is this sense of their curiosity that has stayed with me in the two and half months since.

Packing up might have been the thing to do, but that would have been to have neglected one possible subtext. As a matter of interpretation, I could take all this to mean (1) that I don't have a "representative sample" of interviewees, (2) that I am asking the wrong question (why not simply ask a more moderate question about living artists who make a living at doing any number of things or, in any case, something other than art?), or (3) that the living conditions of modern artists ain't that great.

Put aside (1) since I make no claims about the soundness of this *informal* study. No sense in poking holes in a statedly idiosyncratic enterprise. Rule out (2) because it does not speak to the oft-heard desire of modern artists to make a living doing (wait for it..., wait for it...) "what they love." (*There it is.*) That leaves us with (3), which is probably true, I would reckon, but too rashly seems to lead too many to despair. "Well then, if isn't *possible* to make a living by living artistically, *why bother at all?*"

“Why bother,” you ask. Here’s why: so as not to fall into the inductive fallacy. Bertrand Russell illustrated it very pointedly when he narrated the life of a turkey who, each day of his life until up day 1001, had come to expect that it would be well-fed. That had been so without fail from 0 to 1000. And on day 1001--what happened? Oh, he was slaughtered. The joke has the merit of vividly revealing that the past cannot (Kant now) “legislate” entirely for the present or the future. What has not yet come to pass, in other words, may still, if only in some other way, come into existence.

In other words, no such luck doesn’t entail no way, no how. Where there’s a *thought*, there may be *a way*.

Swearing off the Bourgeoisie

“The good—they cannot *create*: they are always the beginning of the end—”

Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*

If you claim to be a modern artist and really mean what you say, then about the bourgeois life one or more of the following thoughts must have come skidding across your mind: stifling, comfort-addicted, safety-obsessed, mechanical, dehumanizing, flattening, tedious, risk-averse, child-centric, uninspiring, work-by-numbers-numbing, soul-crushing, ever-chipper, fusty, a bit too plastic to count as real. The bourgeoisie’s twin attachments to the intimate sphere of family, which it infantilizes, fetishizes, and sentimentalizes, and to work, which promptly and systematically crushes and pulverizes the spirit, join forces in an anticlimactic glorification of comfort, security, and all-around pleasantness. Nietzsche’s Last Men—the ironized “good” in his snarled verse cited above—are those who lack the spiritedness to create, and the bourgeoisie are decidedly they.

Still, the bourgeoisie cannot be fought at all, let alone to the death, because nothing phases this wily class unobservantly rolling along. Therefore, severance, cleft, divorce, dissent must be the first mark of the modern artist: dissent from the saccharine verities of Wall Street *and* Main Street, from those of the blue collar *and* white collar, from the trivialities ever-present in the service economy and the banalities of IT culture, in short, from the whole damnedly ugly thing. Either out of fantasy in most cases or clear-eyed perception in a precious few, one must have begun to throw off these encumbrances in an act, no doubt, of cavalier recklessness and shameless foolhardiness. And then—fuck it all—*not want* to go back!

For there is something *immensely daft* about wanting not to abide by social conventions till the bitter or beautiful end. Don't abide and where does that lead you? Diogenes the Cynic, purported to have lived in a barrel and to have jerked off in public, made this point tactilely clear. Thousands of years later, fin de siècle bohemians and Greenwich Village transplants seconded this motion.

You swear off the bourgeois life and then figure out how to *hack* making a living. And just then reality *smacks you* in the face.

The Modern Artist Losing his Way

That smack--hurts, doesn't it? In time, the outrageousness of it all wears off, the antics look juvenile, you come of age, yet still, despite some cooler scruples, you want to be an artist. I'm sure Nietzsche is misquoted somewhere as saying that the greatest revenge is living otherwise. Splendid, wonderful, great, but when, pray tell, did the modern artist so completely forget himself and lose his way?

In a recent [Newsweek retrospective](#) (July 1, 2015), Sean Elder cites a passage from Peter Coyote's memoir in which the poet Gary Snyder speaks about the responsibility of the artist. Snyder keenly distinguishes between a certain artistic "derangement of the senses" that served as an appropriate flouting of bourgeois rationality around and after fin de siècle and a more contemporary artistic assignment to be exemplars of wise and prudent living:

"When Verlaine and Rimbaud were young," [Snyder] said, they were protesting the iron-grip bourgeois rationality had on all aspects of nineteenth-century French culture—[t]he manners, the view of reality, and the exclusion of 'the wild' from public life. Rationality in business and society were dominant values. 'Deranging the

senses' was one strategy artists like Verlaine and Rimbaud employed to break free of that.

"Today," he continued, "the bourgeoisie is sociopathic, overindulged, distracted, spoiled beyond measure, and unable to restrain its gluttony, even in the face of pending planetary destruction. In the face of such a threat, it has, by necessity, become the responsibility of the artist to model health and sanity."

If the modern artist is indeed born out of the rejection of the bourgeoisie, then it must immediately be added that this birth is not just a question of style or medium but chiefly a question of how to live. Finding the bourgeois life uninhabitable, the modern artist flouts bourgeois conventions best by living otherwise. This, most notable of all, has been his project.

Yet doing so quickly throws the modern artist into a conundrum: if he has set his sights on living otherwise, *how* will he go about doing so? Alas, in the early twenty-first century what appears as if it were an opportunity has been taken on as a burden. Today most artists do not make a living at making art and, as has been pointed out to me on numerous occasions, rarely have they ever done so. Be that as it may, what is plain to see is that few artists living today seem to have *taken very seriously* how to make a living at making art *in a way that is as thoroughly unconventional* as their acerbic remarks about the bourgeois way of life would imply is necessary. There is, I submit, something too unthinking, too taken for granted, too--yes, *bourgeois*--at the heart of the modern artist's view of living. The idea that "making a living" is the same as "making money" is one such assumption. The idea that business is, of necessity, "nasty, long, and brutish" (to misquote Hobbes) is another. The belief that the city is "where it's at" is a silly, unconsidered third.

I am, as ever, sanguine and cheerful; this is my Nietzschean constitution speaking. In what follows, which I have dubbed a report but may just as

well be a personal essay, a harangue, an exhortation, a set of musings, or something else entirely, I am not concerned with the personal failures of particular artists, the burden of history, the rise of the precariat class, the perils of neoliberalism, or with waves upon waves of economic recession. Rather, I am investigating what is possible for artists who are living today. How artists *could* make a living by living artistically is the subject I intend to explore. Without further adieu.

The Historical Backdrop, Very Briefly

The modern institutions built, in part, to financially support and encourage the creative life are in decline. The university, newspapers, literary magazines, philanthropic organizations devoted to the arts (and not to social change), and fellowships no longer, at least for the many, though perhaps not for the few, “add up” to viable models upon which artists can draw in order to eke out a living. Thus, each year there arrive the latest books pointing to the collapse of the newspaper industry and decrying the end of a middling creative class that used to be occupied by seasoned book editors, book reviewers, art critics, and the like. No one, it is said, goes to the symphony anymore; the public is everywhere defunding the arts while doubling down on math, science, and engineering; the university has for some three or four decades abjectified the untenured adjunct living a vagrant life on a mere pittance; high art is a major gamble.

Paradoxically, all this is occurring while young persons, since they were very little, have been raised to “follow your passions,” “do something meaningful with your lives,” “don’t just do what we [your parents] did,” “realize your dreams.” All fine and good, perhaps, except that the early Marx would have sniffed out *ideology* at work: the material supports requisite for such a creative life are manifestly not there even while artists delude themselves that they can continue to rely upon them. But the university will not employ all those throngs of writers finishing their

MFAs, and the big name art galleries won't be showing dime a dozen abstract painters' work anytime soon.

This historical crucible means that the *desire* exists where *reality* denies. And so, artists feel lost and have, so far as I can tell, not yet exercised their powers of imagination to relish the puzzle of figuring out how to make a living as much as they enjoy the challenge of making an interesting work of art. I deny the claim outright that making a living can't be a fascinating endeavor; I believe it can; I know it has. I want us to get excited.

Cheap Shit, Lots of it: Oh, the Horrors of Mass Production!

You see what I see, and it ain't pretty. There's shit out there, a lot of it, and much of it by artists sold on the cheap. Think of Etsy as a case in point: a search for bracelets yields 1,200,000 results, with many such items priced between \$5 and \$60 USD. Try narrowing your search to "leather bracelets": 120,000 results, with prices again ranging from \$5-50 USD. How about "leather bracelets men"? 27,000 (\$5-50). That's a lot of handmade stuff in Makerville sold for next to nothing!

Suppose you consider yourself to be a craftsperson who specializes in making handmade men's leather bracelets. Suppose your craftsmanship is exquisite. How are you going to make a living doing so with such fierce competition, such an oversaturated marketplace, and with the price tags hovering so low?

Let's take a second representative example. Let's say that you're a performer who makes a living by doing gigs. In 2013, Bryony Kimmings, a successful theatrical performer based in London, reported on [her blog](#) that she made £22,800 that year.¹ The blog is chiefly a rant about how

¹ My thanks to Alex Fradera for pointing me to this blog post.

hard it is to make a decent living as a performer in the theater today. Kimmings implies that show business as an industry is to blame, yet she continues to engage with the organizations and with the institution that is, at least as of 2013, making scraping by a burden for her and for her fellows.

These two examples are illustrative of the plight of the artist who produces artifacts (and what goes for the craftsman also goes for the painter, the ceramicist, the tenderfoot architect) and that of the performer whose gigs don't add up. Both are fiercely competing in an unfair market system; both aren't sure what to do; both often turn to two options.

One is to *turn yourself into a factory*. The other is to *sell yourself short*. Not infrequently the two go hand in hand.

1. *Turn Yourself into a Factory*. Get really skilled at turning out more and more shit in order to eke out a living. Yet in doing so, notice that you look more and more like the bourgeois figure you swore off at the outset. You think in terms of productivity, efficiency, cost reduction, and bottom lines; you work an insane schedule; you don't feel at all creative.
2. *Sell Yourself Short*. You keep doing gigs but for peanuts, hoping for some kind of breakthrough. Your reality is full of hustling--once again, you resemble the bourgeois figure you hate--and your thoughts are stuffed with fantasies. Don't dream; dream on.

This is not the picture of a beautiful life, and no amount of hard work is going to change the dilemma: *become a factory or become a hustler*.

Must it be this way? Must it continue indefinitely?

Overview of the Argumentative Strategy

The basic strategy I will employ as I seek to make a case for living artistically will be to analyze the following concepts and statements and interrogate certain ungrounded assumptions:

- The meaning of “making a living”;
- The erroneous identification of making a living with making money;
- The ways in which human beings have--and only can--make livings;
- The mistaken view that all art should be scalable, accessible, or “democratic”;
- The incorrect assumption that it’s good for an artist to compete with other artists by doing a better version of what they do;
- The historical myopia surrounding what forms count as art and therefore what makes an artist an artist;
- The dubious thought that an artist is primarily someone who makes art rather than someone who has a certain aesthetic sensibility (i.e., lives in an artistic manner).

I begin by seeking to get straight about what “material needs,” “making a living,” and “models for making a living” all mean and then proceed to discuss four viable models that, I argue, artists can use today in order to make a living artistically.

Autobiography

I'm a Ph.D.-trained philosophical counselor who teaches individuals and organizations how to inquire into the things that matter most. Years ago, I created a philosophy practice in which I speak daily over Skype with Europeans, Canadians, and Americans about the nature of a good life. Specifically, I train individuals--chiefly, business leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators--to live the right thoughts (self-examination), to say the right things in the right way (eloquence), and to do the right thing under pressure (toughness).

Since leaving the academy in 2009, I have been thinking seriously and systematically about how to make a living as a philosopher seeking to lead a philosophical life. I now make a good enough living that I'm able to support my loving partner Alexandra as well. We live in beautiful Ojai, California.