

## ***Working the field: visual arts graduates in the current context***

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### **Biography**

Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra, and Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research. Her recent works include the scholarly volume *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (with Caroline Turner; Manchester UP, 2016), and the photography/poetry collaboration *Watching the World* (with Paul Hetherington; Blemish Books, 2015). Her work mostly focuses on the field of creative production; she is also a poet and produces installations of artist books. She is chief investigator on the ARC Discovery project Working the Field: Creative Graduates in Australia and China (DP150101477).

### **Abstract**

Studies in the UK and Australia show that cultural sector employment outcomes for creative graduates are very poor. Creative graduates who enter the field do so aware of the long hours, low wages and free labour required of them, but there is at present little empirical research on what motivates their participation and persistence in the field, nor how such commitments are converted into a sustainable creative vocation. This is a problem for curriculum planners in the creative arts: the combination of high student demand for creative arts programs and the increasingly limited resources available to anyone trying to build a creative career, a creative life offers a challenge to our sector to reconsider how curricula might better support career outcomes for graduates. This paper reports on early findings from an ARC project that investigates the aspirations and lived experiences of graduates of visual arts degrees. Through a combination of curriculum analyses, and interviews with recent graduates, it aims to understand how those graduates articulate the contradictions they face between making a living and making art: between creative careers and creative vocations.

**Keywords:** visual art; creative career; creative vocation; art curriculum; creative graduates

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Pierre Bourdieu's account of the field of cultural production has been with us for decades now, and it is a thoughtful and evidence-based perspective on who makes art and how and why, and who consumes it and how and why. His investigations of the field appeared first, in book form, in 1966, with *The Love of Art*. Across the following decades, he continued to develop the concept of artistic *habitus*, to define and describe the agents and

gatekeepers who occupy and make the field, and to analyse the effects on them of actions and interventions by the government, economy and education. He also articulated the positions and values that energise the field, especially those relational yet contestatory pairs: autonomy and heteronomy; bourgeois and avant-garde consecration; bohemian and professional identities. Importantly, he described and analysed the modes and flows of capital within this restricted field of production: a bifurcated field, in which at one pole 'the producers produce for other producers', and at the other pole, producers produce for the market (Bourdieu 1993, p. 39). This magisterial body of work has generated libraries of secondary research, has informed policy and practice, and has radically intervened in understandings of capital. It is not, though, the final word on the topic. Bourdieu's perspectives emerge from a specific context—the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' French art world—and that context has changed. Consequently, re-assessments and re-analyses have been produced, with important contributions made by Bernard Lahire.

Lahire observes that Bourdieu's 'field of cultural production' is in fact a pair of subfields. The first subfield is what is often considered capital-A Art: 'the consecrated avant-garde and writers aspiring to it'; the second is a 'subfield of large-scale production' (Lahire and Wells 2010, p. 453): market-oriented work. In this he draws on the work of Christophe Charle, for whom Bourdieu's field is a 'derivative' one, compared with the 'fundamental' fields—the economic field, for example. In the latter, 'the stakes are different ... It is not just a question of literary life or death ... but of social life or death' (in Lahire and Wells 2010, p. 453).<sup>i</sup> Charle's logic is based on the fact that the creative field is organized according to recondite and largely subjective rules, compared with, say, the economic field. There is little doubt about who is or is not a success in the economic field, because either they are able to wield economic power, or they are not; and it does not require training in economics to establish such judgments (Charle 1981, p. 15). But when it comes to the creative field, anyone unversed in its axiology would find it difficult to classify the relative status of artists or art works: not only because this requires field-specific literacy, but also because creative artefacts can move quite rapidly across the field: today's classic is tomorrow's kitsch; today's avant garde is tomorrow's sell-out.

Lahire examines the problem of relationship to field, which emerges from the fact that very few artists are fully absorbed in their practice, and therefore have to live what he calls a 'double life'; their energies and identities divided between their artistic and economic roles. In this he introduces something new to Bourdieu's accounts of agents in the field—the problem of labour. This isn't surprising: Bourdieu's analysis remained focused primarily on

members of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French avant garde, and on artists like Flaubert, Baudelaire or Manet who could rely on their families for financial security.

Other issues that emerge in re-investigations of Bourdieu's accounts include: the escalating redistribution of wealth during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted in the diminution of a middle class of leisured creative individuals who are free to participate fully in the field; the rapid increase in the numbers of people achieving educational success at all three levels; and the widespread emergence and uptake of digital technology. This suggests there are fewer people engaged as fulltime creatives, but more people familiar with creative ideas and practices. The affordances of digital technology, the very affordable cameras and recorders and the availability of public stages like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, mean that pretty well anyone can be a maker, and can make their work public. Of course few of these will ever build an audience beyond their friends and family, but occasionally a Lily Allen or an EL James will explode onto the world stage. The effect is that people without training, networks or mentorship, and without having 'paid their dues' in the creative field, are able to lay claim to the status of membership of that field. This suggests the need to re-examine and recast the nominative category of artist or maker, because if anyone can be an artist, then it is difficult to invoke the authority of the field itself to establish evaluative principles and to distribute capital.

The creative field has, of course, never been particularly stable, and nor has it been pure with respect to the market; but its members have put themselves through what can be a grueling apprenticeship, gaining competence in complex techniques, and learning how to operate within the field. There has, for a considerable period of history, been an acknowledged distinction between technicians, amateurs and artists: a distinction whose criteria shift with shifts in history and in the nature of technology. For example: Boltanski and Chamboredon describe the transformations in the social identity of photography since its origins, when photographers were viewed as professional artists. Gradually, with improvements in film stock, processing and development systems, and with the production of cameras capable of automatic focusing and light management, this changed. In the early days, Boltanski and Chamboredon observe, 'the *hoi-polloi* of amateurs and unqualified people was unable to join the profession'. By the 1960s, their respondents told them: 'when young people don't know what to do, they buy a Rolleiflex and call themselves photographers' (1990, p. 154).<sup>ii</sup> Photography has of course remained both art form and profession, and few amateurs could reliably produce work of genuine value, but the identification and nomination of both maker and artifact have become more

blurred.

An additional pressure on the creative field, since Bourdieu published his analyses, are the shifts in the marketplace effected by late capitalism, and the rise of cultural industries and creative industries discourses. The field of creative production, once an institutionally anomie space, is being increasingly marketised: re-coded as a contributor to the GDP and to overall levels of entrepreneurship and innovation. Those of us professionally engaged in training the next generation of creative practitioners in contemporary university courses are likely to have witnessed a similar logic within the academy, with graduates' employment outcomes and income levels apparently of more significance than their creative practices. This is despite the fact that the logic of the creative field is not identical to market logic: 'good jobs' are not what its key agents necessarily seek, because we make art for reasons that are not imagined by the market.

Artists need money, of course we do: the production of any creative work requires raw materials, space, time, personnel, and distribution. Simon Critchley comments, in this regard, 'What I've always liked about the artworld is the nakedness of its mediation by capital'; which means, he argues, that 'The artist is a pirate, both at a willed distance from the law and wholly parasitic and dependent on it' (2010, p. 5). Like pirates, we need both resources and the freedom to operate according to artistic logic; but unlike pirates, we cannot amass treasure. The best we can hope for to win a grant or sell some work. Art doesn't pay the bills; and a life lived as a professional artist is likely to be characterized by what Hans Abbing (2002) describes as the 'cruel economy'.

A Shanghai-based artist interviewed in the course of my current research says:

Artists are gamblers. To be an artist, you need to find galleries that will host your exhibitions, and then you need collectors to buy your works, and then with the money you make, you can continue with your work. That's how it flows. That's what the profession is now. If one link in your chain is missing, you're no longer a professional (A4, 2015).

The decision to live as an artist is, thus, the decision to live with uncertainty. There is no assurance that a new work will achieve successful resolution or, if it does, that anyone will like it. We are only ever contingent members of the field: lose one 'link in the chain', and find yourself out of the game.

There is another aspect of this uncertain life that makes it difficult for artists to occupy a stable position in the social field, and that is how our identities are documented. A second Shanghai artist said 'I think art is a career that's not so much accepted by society ... I have no tax records and that makes going abroad and getting visas difficult' (A3, 2015). An Australian writer described a similar problem: his home is in his partner's name, as are the utilities, and other markers of 'real' citizenship; since he doesn't drive, his only forms of identity are birth certificate and passport. It is remarkably difficult to have freedom of movement or clarity of identity without the documents that demonstrate you are an economic actor.

These respondents are experiencing and describing something that is thoroughly recorded in the literature on the field: the difficulty of living as an artist. But Abbing's reference to the 'cruel' and 'exceptional' economy of the arts describes a deeper problem, one that is rehearsed in the literature focused on creative labour. Lahire and Wells discuss it in terms of economic precarity (2010, p. 457). Bernard Miège describes the 'vast reservoirs of under-employed artists' (1989, p. 72), which limit the chances of building a profile, let alone making a living as an artist. Rosalind Gill agrees that 'One of the shared experiences of growing numbers of people working in the cultural and creative field is of precariousness and job insecurity' (2014, p. 14). David Hesmondhalgh writes:

One feature of cultural work in the complex professional era is that many more people seem to have wanted to work professionally in the cultural industries than have succeeded in doing so. Few make it (2013, p. 83).

Study after study shows the same results: that 'Bohemian graduates'—those who have studied specifically artistic subjects rather than, say, advertising or architecture (see Faggian et al., 2013)—do not have the sort of career trajectories, income levels or working conditions enjoyed by other graduates. Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt set out in some detail the conditions our graduates are likely to experience:

a preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer (e.g. web designer, artist, fashion designer); an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about

finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields (2008, p. 14).

Many of these conditions parallel those formally associated with poorly educated, or manual workers—those who were oriented toward a Fordist or early post-Fordist economy; and yet art workers typically possess significant levels of intellectual capital. I recently completed a project on contemporary Anglophone poets,<sup>iii</sup> during which my co-investigators and I interviewed 75 poets from nine countries. Although we did not recruit these poets through educational institutions, or on the basis of their own educational background, an astonishing 93 per cent of them hold either masters or doctoral qualifications. The community of artists is an educated community. And students continue to enrol in creative arts degrees, and we keep teaching them, although the future does not promise them a great deal.

As we design curriculum then, as we approach our teaching, and as we respond to the demands of university management and government policy, it is important to think through how best to prepare students for the future they will almost certainly have. There is not a great deal of material on which we can currently draw, despite the substantial amount of research carried out on the issue of creative labour. David Throsby and his colleagues offer little in the way of encouragement to those hoping to make a living from their practice, as is evident in the titles of reports like *Don't Give Up your Day Job*, and *Do You Really Expect To Get Paid?* But few labour market experts seem to understand that a poet or a painter is not necessarily suited to employment in the 'creative industries', or constitutionally prepared to work as an embedded creative: virtually the only option presented in the literature. The Creative Industries Innovation Centre (CIIC), for example, offers an overall optimistic view, noting a 21 per cent increase in people employed in the creative industries since the 2011 census. Much of this substantial and rapid increase, though, is accounted for by growth 'in software and interactive media'. While visual arts showed a small growth, 'Writing, publishing and print media ... experienced falling job numbers in the last five years and a declining share of employment in the creative industries' (SGS 2013, p. 9). In short, there are plenty of jobs—as long as you can deliver software, or design, or media production, or advertising.

The CIIC draws on Stuart Cunningham's 'Creative Trident' to explicate the creative labour market, a model that classifies this market as:

- Workers with a cultural profession working in a cultural sector (e.g. an artist in an

opera);

- Workers having a cultural profession but working outside the cultural sector (e.g. a designer in car industry);
- Workers having a non-cultural profession and working in the cultural sector (e.g. a secretary in a film production company). (Cunningham and Higgs 2008, p. 14).

The CIIC names these three categories, in order, as specialist creatives, embedded creatives, and support workers; of these, embedded creatives—people doing creative work in industries outside the creative sector—comprise nearly 50 per cent of the creative workforce (SGS 2013, 39). But the embedded creative role does not necessarily provide a satisfactory option for those artists who want to be making art. In many ways, the offer of a good job in the creative industries is not unlike the advice offered by this artist's parents:

Your parents wouldn't understand if you tried to talk about work with them, but they'd give you advice, full of points you don't agree with. For example, they'd say, 'Hey, I saw someone on TV painting a tiger on rice paper, it was huge, it was great.' There are massive communication barriers here ... but the common social acknowledgment is value: that is, if you've sold your work or not, if there's money (A2, 2015).

Justin Heazlewood (2014) made a different choice, electing to pursue his art rather than income. Though he was talented, well trained, dedicated and networked, he has for the most part survived due to the support of Centrelink, and all the mortification that comes with that. Simon Critchley seems to affirm Heazlewood's decision, writing: 'As unemployment becomes an increasing reality, how might we think of unemployment as an artistic and philosophical category?' (Critchley 2010, p. 7) Unemployment is certainly an option, though not one the government or university management would encourage. And, since many graduates are likely to prefer to avoid penury or precarity, it is incumbent upon us as educators to prepare them for the state of the employment market, and provide them the skills that will allow them to make informed choices about how to craft their creative, and their economic, futures.

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<sup>i</sup> I cite Lahire and Wells here, rather than Charle, because my French is inadequate to the task.

<sup>ii</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we might replace 'a Rolleiflex' with 'an iPhone and an Instagram account'.

<sup>iii</sup> Jen Webb, Kevin Brophy, Paul Magee and Michael Biggs, 2013–2015, 'Understanding creative excellence: A case study in poetry', DP130100402.