

VALUE ADDED

THE MYRIAD USES OF ART AND ARTISTS

I have an artist-friend who enjoys a healthy sense of personal satisfaction and an externally verified, peer-assessed sense of worth. In the last few years he has had a steady run of success with galleries, critics, curators and collectors, although he has not yet become a household name, nor made enough money to live lavishly. He recently told me an anecdote which drove home, once again, the otherworldliness of contemporary art. His story is ostensibly about money, but my point is not to dwell on that, but rather on those moments when **'art people' realize that the only ones who really understand them are other art people.**

Facing his own cash-flow crunch, my artist-friend had to go begging for patience at the tax office, where he explained that the cultural capital he had painstakingly accrued over the past decade hadn't granted him much leeway with regards to revenue collection. At around the same time, he had also to go explaining his sorry financial situation to his local bank branch in Berlin – a city that contains more art and more artists than almost anywhere else in the world. There, after looking through his financial affairs – the fiscal equivalent of an intimate medical examination – the nice enough woman sitting behind her plastic desk at the bank confessed to him in a solemn whisper: 'I could never live like you do.' The first thing that entered his head, and remained there, was, 'And I could never live like you do, either.'

What her statement implied was that she would never want to be an artist because: a) you don't get paid regularly, if at all; b) she couldn't see the real-world value of the profession; and c) she feels quite comfortable with maintaining her opinion because everything she knows about the expansive and difficult subject of art has confirmed to her that it is close to the bottom of her 'relevant' pile and can stay there. There are myriad variations on this story: the protagonist might be a young intern, an impassioned student of art history, a writer, almost any freelance curator, even a brave-faced gallerist. The scene could take place somewhere else: at a parent's kitchen table, at a yawnsome school reunion or in an out-of-the-blue email. But the leading question will always be: 'What are you doing now?' To many civilians, art people are still suspicious aliens. Money might talk in shrill tones, but the same widespread incomprehension can greet even extremely well-heeled members of the art world. In other words, the suspicion with which art is generally regarded does not stem from the fact that only a few can live well from it.

Even with things being a bit economically wobbly recently, those involved in the art world are unlikely to win much sympathy, since they are still thought of as a bunch of snobby and spoilt purveyors of highly specialized luxury goods which may or may not be a splendid investment or look half-pleasant hanging on the wall. So why on earth do we in the art world continue to do what we do? Is it possible to mount a reasonable defence, which might make sense to the sceptical bank clerk or lay person, or even just to comfort ourselves in dark moments of existential doubt?

Ranging from the serious and seductive whisper to the arms-waving, tearfully impassioned plea (OK, just drunk and exasperated), all of the following points are ones I have tried in conversation, to mixed results: art is the only place left that still allows a relatively autonomous, wild and profound discussion on just about anything that matters to anyone and everyone; **art is just as pointless, useless and necessary as any other activity in the world;** while there has arguably never been a truly adequate depiction of art in film or on television, no good film or television programme could have been conceived without lessons learnt from art; whether justified or not, contemporary art has symbolic power in Western culture, and this power gives art context, responsibility and agency; art can transform images, things and situations into more than they would be if art didn't exist; art is the sibling of language, and sometimes they have good fights; art embraces the absurd, irrational and irreverent; art people often abandon conservative notions of family; art has a wayward conscience in an unconscionable world; there are gender issues and all kinds of racial and sexual discrimination in art, but at least they are

being discussed as problems; art is preferable to religion because it's not about finding a 'one size fits all' resolution; some experiences of art can be better than the best love affairs; **history shows that art is what remains; art is an alternative value system**; art is in everything people do, so someone needs to address that; there are hierarchies within art, but they are volcanically volatile – bursts of energy can come from nowhere and change the landscape overnight; the idea of art is nimble enough to defy definition; art loves problems, misfits, hermits and the reckless; art challenges death and despair; art may be full of contradictions, but at its core lies the idea of championing freedom.

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