

## *How to work as an artist without being a dick*

A short essay following the *Switching Metaphors* Meeting held in Porto on June 28th, 2008

~ By Lígia Paz

*“Flaubert was smarter than us. He had the wit to come into the world with money, something that is absolutely indispensable to anyone who wants to get anywhere in art.”*

(Théophile Gautier)

### *Personal experience*

In the last couple years, I have worked in several areas: visual artist, professor, stewardess, writer, and public art/public space investigator are some of the latest ones. For some of them, I was relying on my own personal ambitions, taste, and dreams. But like most of the people who start developing artistic work, it didn't pay my bills. I belong to the thirty-something generation: we have finished our university degrees around a decade ago, and we are trying to establish our careers<sup>1</sup> of choice.

This short essay is an overview of the general conditions of that generation of artists, living in the city of Porto, Portugal.

Most of my friends are in the “art business”. By “art business” I mean they are artists – with a matching university diploma that confirms it. They are selected for exhibitions, their work is chosen for catalogues; institutions display them in books, they are invited for posh parties. Some of the most relevant intellectuals in our country see their work as a profitable financial investment and chose it for their private collections and foundations. I have seen their faces in magazines and newspapers, locally and abroad.

We have individuals and institutions with authority in the field recognizing the symbolic importance of their work; people with financial knowledge put money for their work; and critics write in the press about their work. One could expect for those intermediaries to consider their work to be, somehow, socially relevant. Yet none of them is able to live by their artwork.

### *Professionals or just part-time artists? (Is there any young, full-time artist in this country?) Career choices & opportunities*

Although the government recognizes artists as a profession (as the university diploma certifies), career choices for a recently graduated artist are narrow. From the skills learned in the academia, only a few are usable in general jobs. There is a large occupation of cultural-related jobs by artists: either because of an affectionate proximity with the field, or as a strategic choice, since the social network is decisive in the artists' career. So we can find graduated artists working in museums as tour guides, in theatres on the till, or as receptionists in art galleries.

Another field of choice is teaching – in high school or universities, temporary workshops and general educative services in museums. A teaching position, contrary to the other jobs that artists may apply, commonly means a sufficient income to survive, while giving enough free time for them to develop their main work: art.

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<sup>1</sup> *Career* here means pursuing a certain professional activity and matching the creative criteria judgements inherent of that given area of expertise, as well as being financially rewarded for the effort. It's a concept opposed to the use a well-worn formula to achieve success and money, leaving any creative relevance behind.

I have to underline the fact that this goes for most part of the local-living, international-recognized artists. I don't know of any other profession where, ten years after graduation, an individual is not able to live only by their work.

There is a saying that states the obvious: practice makes perfect. For practice, one needs time. Pushing professionals to part-time labour makes a too-easy equation: if you can't work enough hours, you become better at a slower pace.

It seems illogical that despite the fact of being recognized by the government as professional studies, so many young artists are launched either into unemployment or working outside their area of expertise, with resulting frustration. Rather than reevaluate the role of artists in society, it would be wise to analyze their academic formation and develop opportunities within the field. There are interesting possibilities in merging different courses (which would call for a more united, networked University). Interdisciplinary approach could also bring proximity with the general public and consequent acceptance of the benefits of the artists' role in society. The contemporary multiple approach of the artistic work has not yet found a match in the way society perceives art, often reduced to "decoration" and "self(ish)-expression". There is potential for incorporating some of the various approaches in art into the market with other disciplines.

It would also be relevant to recognize the value of art in society and pay for it. It can't be positive to throw, year after year, young artists into the market and condemn them to such an uncertain future. We can't be preparing people for unemployment, despite the fact that they spend 17 years of their life studying. We can't be cynical to consider that artists are natural born genius, and that you can't teach them. Many myths have to be eroded from the common ground. Genius and the *artiste maudit* concept are just two of them.

*But are the art world mechanics the same as in other professions?*

There are obviously certain considerations one must take into account when analysing the artistic field and the role played by economy and symbol.

Given several variables, such as the generally low cultural level of the population, the average low national income, and the inner characteristics of the artworks themselves, on the local level we might consider that most of the artists end up with a very small audience/consumers. The generated works end up being consumed by their peers, and in small numbers by other cultural-related professionals (museum directors, gallery owners, art critics, and so on). But owing to the low cultural level standard, matched by small public and private cultural investment, those cultural professionals are also a small number.

Scholarships and public grants for the arts are very narrow. The quality of the decision-making when attributing funding is quite questionable, by the same reasons explained above. Artists are then pushed to the galleries' market – a social and financial field characterized by low risk taking, poor choice of judgement, and narrow number of consumers (since oriented for sales).

*What about us?*

The questions raised by the Switch Metaphors group are not only some people's problem. Poorness, difficulties in living from art are affecting most of young Portuguese artists today. Problems arise from the market structure, the traditional low education and the inner cultural field limitations – which, in the same measure of society itself, despise whatever controversial, inconvenient themes there are to discuss. Due to educational handicaps, the public able to understand the languages and questions raised by many relevant themes is very

narrow. Museums and galleries, which tend to become more and more profit, success in numbers oriented, put their largest investments in works matching those commercial needs. The dependence of private sponsors and their direct interference in the art selection threatens the independence and quality of the field. The weak composition of our cultural elites and the poor education of the public relegates the political debate around these subjects to almost nothing.

Although the local art market is influenced by world trends, and therefore has found local opportunities to present some *marginal* themes (such as gender ones), those still counts for a minority. There are obviously themes less important to be discussed and displayed, not only as a power-maintenance strategy, but might be mostly as an economic one. Even if the socio-economic characterization of part of the public consuming those *marginal* works is relevant, and can eventually count for a small niche of possible buyers, it still counts as a minority. Due to the social characteristics of general workplaces, young women artists are in a weaker position compared with their men counterparts: statistical evidence proves that in most jobs, men are better paid. Despite what happens in the art business, that single factor must be consider as statistically debilitating for female artists. Again, education and change in society are the basic principles to bring equal opportunities to all.

### *Strategies, thoughts, etcetera.*

I personally believe the best way to include those marginal agendas in the public sphere is through integration, and not by discrimination. Hence, as a general result, it is advantageous to work within a group, with different intentions and objectives. The *ghettification* of themes and intentions leads to a closeness of the group; we all have to succeed in building bridges and common ground with other groups carrying different intentions.

A work of art should be relevant not because of its subject, but because of the way it works that subject. Valuing an artwork just because a woman does it should not get over the quality of the work itself<sup>2</sup>. I personally disagree with the “handicap system”, since the limitations don’t lie in *us* as individuals, but in society as a whole. Hence, support should be given to the *process* (as a way of surpassing the limitations imposed by society), and not as an end in itself. I have reasons to believe that, in topics such as gender, the general art audience (mostly comprising males) is able to acknowledge quality and perceive it as positive, despite the theme it is based on. I believe the segregation comes more from above (the structures of power and economics) than from the public’s ability to understand and appreciate those premises.

Still, there is a large room for improvement, and it should be a basic issue to be worked on the education level; the impact of the art performed in galleries and museums seems to afflict a very small part of the population, so the strategies to get over those problems have quicker (and deeper) results through basic educational strategies.

Given the established hierarchic system of the art market, where money is a deterministic power factor, any artist pursuing less mainstream and accepted subjects has an increased level of difficulties in establishing a career. Complementary to this are the reduced offers for other supports, such as grants. This scenario can only lead to the same state of affairs from other professional areas: creative professionals who have to go abroad to find financial support for their work and recognition for their quality.

Under the current system, the ideal situation would be to develop platforms that would fill the void of middle/launching structures of support for young artists. With a certain degree of independence from the market, those structures should develop strategies working on two main sides: providing financial support to relevant artistic projects, done by a qualified, intelligent, independent jury, while maintaining independence from the art market. On the

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<sup>2</sup> Although there is no such thing as impartial judgement.

other hand, it should provide the tools for education of the general public, integrating them in the comprehension and questioning of the cultural values presented and challenged by art. A good degree of accomplishment could be achieved by the means presented by some artistic work, presenting a closer relationship with the general audience, such as social art, and some concepts of public art. But once again, I have to underline the importance of education in the development of mentalities. It isn't enough to be often confronted with certain matters; one must have the tools to decode them.

### *Conclusions*

Nowadays, the premises displayed in Gautier's quote are still true. Despite the apparent opening of artistic studies to the general population, to those who are not blessed with financial support from family, art becomes a part-time activity. This situation, while affecting both men and women, might have a biggest impact on the financial survival of the latest due to contemporary social organization. Gender issues still present an uncomfortable position for the art market's structure of power, as well as other political premises. Possibilities lie in two major changes in the art field: by building institutional autonomy from financial sponsors, and by raising the public's level of education. It is important to understand that it is not only gender art issues that are at stake, but a whole class of professionals is facing a precarious future. A good strategy for artists working in those issues could be to build bridges across areas and subjects, exploring common ground and expanding similarities with other artists and professionals working in several different areas.

We must not forget that effective social changes take the time of more than one generation. Given our national historical background and contemporary socio-economic circumstances, we should be conscious that most of the opportunities will be found abroad. We are confronted with big challenges, but we are also in a position of making a difference.