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WHEN POOR ARTISTS CREATE RICH ART: RETHINKING VALUE BEYOND THE MARKET

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Abstract: In the contemporary art landscape, where commercial success often overshadows artistic merit, this study aims to redefine the artistic value of pure art. By emphasizing intrinsic value and creative expression over market appeal, the research highlights the significance of pure art as an independent artistic pursuit. The pervasive influence of commercialism and materialism poses a significant threat to the core essence of art, and artists themselves may overlook the value of pure art due to economic pressures and societal biases. However, the work of certain artists, such as Tehching Hsieh and Henry Darger, exemplifies artistic integrity by defying market forces and pursuing their own artistic visions. Hsieh's year-long performance piece of self-confinement and Darger's extensive collection of unseen artworks serve as powerful testaments to this artistic dedication. This study employs a qualitative research approach, analyzing the works of Tehching Hsieh and Henry Darger to explore the concept of pure art. By examining the artists' intentions and the context in which their work was created, the study seeks to understand the complex and multifaceted nature of artistic value. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance for artists to reclaim the inherent value of pure art, drawing inspiration from those who prioritize artistic integrity over commercial gain. This research offers a fresh perspective on the value and role of art in contemporary society and contributes to empowering artists to reclaim their artistic worth and pursue genuine artistic expression.

Keywords: Pure Art, Artistic Integrity, Artistic Value, Tehching Hsieh, Henry Darger

INTRODUCTION

After graduating from the University of Fine Arts, those around the author frequently asked, "What will you do after graduation?" At the time, the response was, "I will create artwork and open an art gallery." Many people expressed concern, believing that art galleries generate low profits and would make it difficult to earn a living. The author explained, "The gallery will focus on exhibitions and the artistic experience rather than solely on sales." Despite this thorough explanation, many individuals could not comprehend the underlying concept, dismissing it as impractical and overly idealistic. The term "artist," within this societal context, was often imbued with negative connotations—such as being unrealistic, impractical, or disconnected from economic realities—rather than being met with empathy or positivity.

This perspective resonates with experiences at other artists' exhibitions, where attendees were often more curious about the number of artworks sold rather than the quality of the works or the conceptual depth of the exhibition itself. Congratulations were frequently extended based on sales achievements rather than on the recognition of artistic merit or innovative expression. Similarly, in teaching art students, the author was surprised to observe that some undergraduates, even in the early stages of their academic studies, were more preoccupied with the potential commercial value of their work than with critically exploring its artistic essence or pushing the boundaries of creative expression.

While it is understood that artists, like everyone else, must consider practical matters such as earning a livelihood, this necessity should not overshadow the primary motivation for pursuing art, which is the creation and expression of meaningful work. It raises critical questions: Why do we enter the art world to pursue art, only to ultimately prioritize mone-

tary gain? Why do some artists lose confidence in their practice simply because their works are not selling in the market?

This study aims to address these questions by revisiting the complex relationship between artistic value and market value in artworks, as framed by the unique and often paradoxical dynamics of the art economy. Drawing from Hans Abbing's book *Why Are Artists Poor?*, as well as the lives and works of artists who embody the essence of pure art, this research seeks to provide companionship and intellectual support to solitary artists striving to maintain their artistic integrity and commitment to genuine creative practices.

Therefore, this paper will explore three key topics: the underlying reasons behind artists' persistent poverty, the distinctive characteristics of the art economy that contribute to this phenomenon, and the complex relationship between artistic value and market value in artworks. To illustrate these points effectively, the study examines the cases of two artists, Tehching Hsieh and Henry Darger. Both artists created works of significant artistic value, yet their creations lacked market value and did not conform to conventional commercial expectations or norms within the art market.

WHY ARTISTS ARE POOR

In his book, Hans Abbing—a visual artist, economist, and social researcher—sheds light on the phenomenon of poverty within the art world using the frameworks of economics and social science. Summarizing his arguments, Abbing attributes the poverty of artists to the “distinctive characteristics of the art economy.” While his analysis is grounded in economic theory, Abbing also acknowledges the limitations of this approach. To provide a more holistic understanding, he examines the unique tendencies of artists from a psychological perspective.

THE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ART ECONOMY

Hans Abbing identified 21 distinctive characteristics of the art economy. Among these, this study specifically highlights several that reflect the unique psychological tendencies and behaviors of artists:

- Artists overlook or deny their orientation towards rewards.
- Despite these low incomes, an unusually high number of youngsters still want to become artists. The arts are extremely attractive.
- Beginning artists face far more uncertainty than the average beginning professionals.
- Money represents a constraint rather than a goal for many artists.
- Artists are (more than others) intrinsically motivated.
- Artists are (more than others) inclined to taking risks.
- The arts are characterized by an exceptional high degree of internal subsidization. By using non-artistic income artists make up the losses they incur in the arts. (Abbing 2002, 282)

These characteristics highlight the paradoxical nature of the art economy, where financial stability is often sacrificed for the intrinsic and non-material rewards that come with creative practice.

Artists operate within a highly unstable and unpredictable field, yet they do not typically seek significant rewards or high incomes. For many artists, money is not a primary priority but merely a minimal means for survival. Their motivation stems from an intrinsic drive rooted in personal passion and commitment to their craft, rather than external factors such as financial incentives or societal recognition.

As a result, it is challenging to apply conventional economic logic to the art world, given its unique characteristics and value systems. Most individuals in other professions expect fair compensation for their work and often prioritize higher incomes, stable employment, and financial security. While they may also possess intrinsic motivations, their career choices are frequently influenced by external factors, such as societal expectations, cultural norms, and perceptions of success.

It is not the intention to idealize or sanctify artists and the art world. For artists, however, art often holds the utmost importance in their lives. This devotion creates a quasi-religious sense of duty, contributing to the unique characteristics of the art economy. Consequently, if something becomes more important than their art—such as family responsibilities—these artists may feel compelled to abandon their practice. For instance, an artist facing economic hardship and the birth of a child may leave the realm of pure art to seek a stable income for their family.

Although artists often have low incomes, this does not necessarily mean they are entirely impoverished in a holistic sense. Through their artistic pursuits, they derive immense personal satisfaction and receive non-monetary rewards that enrich their lives. Many artists willingly forgo material rewards in favor of these intangible benefits, valuing creative fulfillment over financial gain. Unlike in the past, contemporary artists have more choices available to them. They can seek alternative jobs to supplement their income, though such roles are often low-paying and fail to match their educational qualifications. If more artists find fulfilling and better-paying opportunities, the harsh realities of the art economy may gradually diminish.

Fortunately, the world is evolving in significant ways. Some researchers suggest that humanity is moving toward liberation from

labor, driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and automation technologies. As traditional jobs diminish, a future may emerge where people can enjoy basic incomes and dedicate their free time to meaningful activities without the burden of earning money, potentially reshaping the socioeconomic landscape.

It is concluded that as artificial intelligence and robots take over labor-intensive tasks, humans will have no choice but to seek other meaningful activities during their newfound free time. (Jeon, J. 2019) For artists, however, art is not a type of labor to be liberated from—it is a labor to be passionately pursued and embraced. When this era arrives, artists may gain greater freedom to create, unencumbered by financial pressures and societal expectations regarding conventional employment.

For artists, art is a goal to be passionately pursued, not merely a means to earn money or achieve external recognition. Artists who do not sell their work often support their artistic endeavors by earning incomes through other professions, often unrelated to their creative practices. But how does this differ fundamentally from hobbies pursued by non-artists? The distinction lies in the level of commitment, sacrifice, and personal investment required: hobbies are selectively engaged in during leisure time and with surplus resources, whereas artistic pursuits demand significant and sustained investments of time, energy, and financial resources, often without immediate or tangible returns. Unlike hobbies, which are discretionary and can be postponed or even abandoned when life becomes busy, art is deeply embedded in the artist's identity and creative practice, making it not so easily set aside, neglected, or deprioritized.

From a conventional perspective, this appears paradoxical and counterintuitive. Investing significant amounts of time, effort, and money without a clear expectation of fi-

nancial gain seems irrational when viewed through the lens of traditional economic reasoning. However, artistic endeavors often provide immense personal satisfaction and contribute to the creation of enduring artistic value that benefits both contemporary and future societies. This unique and profound characteristic of the art economy underscores its divergence from conventional economic systems and highlights why traditional economic principles cannot be seamlessly or universally applied to the art world's distinctive dynamics and values.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARTISTIC VALUE AND MARKET VALUE IN ARTWORKS

The relationship between artistic value and market value has been a subject of significant debate among scholars across various disciplines. Many argue that these two values are fundamentally unrelated, positing that the socio-economic market and the art world operate according to distinct and often incompatible principles, shaped by differing priorities and evaluative frameworks. Due to the unique, multifaceted, and often subjective nature of the art world, traditional socio-economic theories cannot be seamlessly or universally applied. While in most industries higher-quality products or brands typically command higher prices, the art market frequently defies this logic through its unpredictable valuation processes. Numerous examples demonstrate how artworks of substantial artistic value may hold relatively low market value or, in some cases, no market value at all, reflecting the distinct and non-linear dynamics of the art economy.

Hans Abbing supports this perspective, observing that many believe artistic and market values function independently within the art world. The relationship between these two values can be examined through three distinct

and contrasting perspectives. The first perspective asserts that artistic value and market value belong to separate domains, with each operating independently. (Abbing 2009, 68) Proponents of this view argue that there is no inherent or significant connection between the two values, although minor correlations may occasionally occur.

The second perspective suggests that artistic and market values are interdependent, with the nature of their relationship varying depending on the specific artwork. (Abbing 2009, 68) While artistic value is often perceived as autonomous, market value frequently fluctuates in response to it. This creates an asymmetrical and complex dynamic in which consumers in the art market rely heavily on expert opinions, whereas experts are less influenced by consumer preferences. Furthermore, market value is shaped by additional factors beyond artistic merit, such as the artist's reputation, the profile of collectors, public appeal, and sophisticated marketing strategies.

The third perspective proposes an antagonistic relationship between artistic value and market value. (Abbing 2009, 68) However, describing this relationship as antagonistic may be an overstatement or oversimplification. Is market value inherently a threat to artistic value, necessitating a deliberate separation to preserve artistic integrity and authenticity? Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the relationship between artistic and market values can be either inversely or directly proportional, depending on the context of the artwork. Importantly, Market value does not inherently undermine artistic value. For instance, a high market value paired with low artistic merit can sometimes benefit the artist, provided the distinction between artistic and commercial success is clearly acknowledged by both the art community and collectors. Problems arise only when market

value is artificially manipulated to inflate the perceived artistic value of a work, thereby undermining the integrity of true artistic merit.

Conversely, a low market value paired with high artistic value does not diminish the intrinsic worth of an artwork. While such circumstances may create economic challenges for the artist, society—both contemporary and future—benefits immensely from the enduring artistic value of the work. Artistic value remains largely unaffected by market performance, though the artist may suffer due to a lack of recognition during their lifetime. In such cases, it is not artistic value that is at risk but rather the artist's livelihood and well-being.

Artistic value is not an isolated construct. As such, artists and art enthusiasts must continuously and passionately advocate for the preservation of artistic freedom. This sentiment aligns closely with the third perspective, which, as Hans Abbing notes, often reflects the prevailing opinion within the art world. Having reviewed these perspectives, I propose the following synthesis: Artistic value is theoretically autonomous, yet in practice, it is inevitably influenced by external factors, including cultural environments, societal pressures, and historical contexts. Consequently, efforts to preserve the intrinsic value of art must balance artistic integrity with the practical realities of market dynamics. However, a fundamental question persists: How can one uphold artistic integrity while simultaneously expanding artistic reach and societal impact? It is evident that the relationship between artistic and market values does not always result in a positive correlation, requiring artists to navigate this complex interplay with care and foresight.

ARTISTS CREATING ARTWORKS WITHOUT MARKET VALUE

The primary role of art is to “create meaning,” offering insights and interpretations that enrich human understanding. According to J.-Y. Kim (2002), “The condition of art cannot exclude the condition of creativity. The condition of creativity means that the answer to the question of what art is must embrace the creativity of art. Art lives on innovation and creativity” (p. 151). This perspective reinforces the idea that creativity is not merely an attribute of art but its very essence, driving its ability to innovate and generate profound meaning.

Throughout history, many talented artists have dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to their craft, driven by a profound commitment to self-expression and creative innovation. Artists are inherently focused, disciplined, and serious about their work, approaching it with a sense of purpose and integrity. However, within the art world, it has always been challenging to sustain a livelihood solely through artistic activities, as the economic structures supporting the arts remain precarious. This harsh and enduring reality is unlikely to change significantly in the foreseeable future.

For instance, Philip Glass's path to international acclaim was far from conventional. In the early stages of his career, he balanced his passion for music with practical jobs, working as a plumber and taxi driver to support himself (BBC, 2015; Hensher, 2015).

While Marcel Duchamp supported himself as an art dealer and advisor to collectors, Duchamp's father encouraged his children's artistic ambitions, providing them with a small stipend to support their creative endeavors and aspirations. Yet Duchamp eventually became disillusioned with the Cubist milieu in which his brothers had been trained. He decided to support himself by teaching English and ceased exhibiting and selling his artwork

in traditional art settings, consciously and deliberately avoiding profiting from his art. Although he earned a modest living through the art trade, Duchamp maintained a critical stance toward the commercialization of art. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Moeller Fine Art)

At various points in his life, Duchamp explored different ways to integrate his art with economic activities, bridging the gap between his artistic philosophy and practical livelihood. In 1922, Duchamp ventured into a fabric-dyeing business in New York, humorously noting that he had transitioned from being a 'peintre' (painter) to a 'teintre' (dyer). Around the same time, he considered becoming a 'fenêtrier' (windowmaker) and later explored possibilities such as professional photography and chess. Duchamp also tried marketing the word "Dada" as an insignia cast in precious metals, designing chess sets for production, and selling his "rotoreliefs" as toys and scientific instruments. These diverse pursuits highlight Duchamp's inventive approach to economic activities, which often intersected with his artistic experiments (Naumann 1999, 396).

Similarly, Grace Hartigan lived in a studio without heat or running water, akin to camping, yet she managed to work in an insurance company and successfully raise her children. (Curtis 2015) These dedicated artists demonstrate the determination to balance their livelihoods with their artistic pursuits, echoing the struggles of many contemporary artists today.

Even under challenging economic circumstances, we should strive to emulate such artists in creating works of significant artistic value. Their inspiring stories remind us that dedication to art, even in the face of adversity, can ultimately lead to profound and lasting contributions to the world of art.

This study aims to introduce the works and lives of two artists, Tehching Hsieh and Henry Darger, to support and inspire artists who have chosen to quietly expand the boundaries of their art. Both artists faced significant economic challenges and remained relatively unknown during their lifetimes. What is particularly intriguing about these two figures is their complete indifference to, or disconnection from, market value.

TEHCHING HSIEH (1950 ~)

Tehching Hsieh, a Taiwanese-born artist, immigrated illegally to New York in 1974, where he continues to reside. Hsieh's work is characterized by its unique approach, often involving projects that demand significant time and physical effort. His pieces frequently revolve around the repetitive performance of a simple action, governed by a set of self-imposed rules over an extended period. This method forms the foundation of his artistic practice. (An 2016)

For example, in one project, Hsieh photographed himself and recorded the time on a punch clock every hour for an entire year. In another year-long project, he confined himself to a self-made cell with no access to media such as newspapers or television. In yet another, he lived tethered to fellow artist Linda Montano with a one-meter-long rope (which they did not remove, even while sleeping or using the bathroom) for a year. During these periods, he refused all contact with galleries and art museums and spent a year living outdoors as a homeless person.

Hsieh's projects often resembled legally binding contracts, with written pledges that outlined his strict self-imposed rules. These pledges, which governed his behavior for the duration of each performance, mirrored the formal structure and language of legal documents. Scholars have noted that Hsieh's adherence to these commitments reflects the

legal doctrine of “good faith,” wherein parties must act with honesty and accountability (Kee 2016, 72–92). By blurring the lines between art and law, Hsieh’s work not only emphasized the personal accountability of the artist but also highlighted the potential of art to critique and reinterpret legal and institutional frameworks.

From 1978 to 1979, Hsieh constructed a small prison within his studio and conducted a project in which he lived inside it. During this time, he prohibited himself from engaging in activities such as watching television, writing, or speaking. This was a significant exploration of time and self-imposed isolation, designed to push the boundaries of daily life and the perception of temporality. The records of these performances, including photographs and statements, not only serve as documentation but also define the artistic framework of Hsieh’s work. These records emphasize the duality of autonomy and restraint, highlighting the relationship between artistic agency and structured limitations (Baik, 2012).

Inside this self-imposed prison, Hsieh survived by eating food left outside his cell by a friend twice a day. Midway through the project, he allowed brief interactions with others to discuss the project. At the beginning of the year, he shaved his head and took a daily photograph, creating a visual record of his growing hair and beard as a testament to the passage of time.

One of Tehching Hsieh’s most remarkable projects, *The Earth*, spanned 13 years. The performance began on December 31, 1986, and concluded on December 31, 1999, when Hsieh was 36 years old. This performance was conducted in complete secrecy, and the mere fact of his survival became the essence of the work. On January 1, 2000, the day after the project concluded, Hsieh announced the piece with a simple statement: “I have survived. December 31, 1999, has passed.” The entire-

ty of this monumental undertaking resulted in nothing more than a single piece of paper bearing these two sentences. Later in 2000, Hsieh declared his retirement from art and withdrew from the public eye in the art world. (Lee 2016)

For Tehching Hsieh, the role of the artist is neither to create objects nor to exist solely within the confines of galleries or exhibitions. Instead, he believed that his life itself should be presented as art, embodying his dedication like a monk devoted to spiritual practice.

Hsieh often referred to himself as an outsider. He described his artistic practice as primitive, emphasizing its raw and unrefined nature. When he arrived in New York, aware that it was the art capital of the world, he chose not to seek out a community or institutions to support his work. Instead, he created his projects independently, allowing people to approach him. He learned from these interactions and communicated slowly, developing his practice over time. (Marina 2017)

In today’s fast-paced world, where efficiency and speed are often prioritized, Hsieh’s method of slow, deliberate work might seem counterintuitive. However, this measured approach allowed him to fully integrate himself into his work. While Hsieh described his style as primitive, viewers perceive his work as profoundly contemporary, reflecting high artistic value.

Despite not earning a living from his art projects, Hsieh expressed deep gratitude for being recognized as an artist. He believed that being categorized as an artist by society provided a life of immense value. Hsieh supported himself financially through carpentry, showing that his artistic dedication was never contingent on market success.

HENRY DARGER (1892 ~ 1973)

Can a work of art be considered “art” if it is never intended to be seen by others? Henry Darger is one of the most renowned Outsider Artists. Outsider Art refers to:

- Art created by individuals who have never received formal training in fine arts and are unfamiliar with the art world or art markets. These artists often work without reference to art history or contemporary artistic trends. Most create purely for themselves, with no awareness of or concern for external recognition. Some create works solely for personal satisfaction, without ever intending to share them with others. (Perry 2019, 158)
- The term “Outsider Art” specifically describes works produced by artists who do not adhere to the prevailing norms of modern art. This category often includes self-taught artists, those who began practicing art later in life, or those who were educated in unique environments such as psychiatric institutions. (Abbing 2009, 358)

Henry Darger (1892–1973) experienced severe psychological trauma during his childhood, which profoundly influenced his later artistic works (Elledge, 2013).

In many ways, Henry Darger epitomizes the concept of the “outsider artist,” living a life marked by isolation and using art as a means of self-definition and resilience. His epic child-slave rebellion saga, depicted in *In the Realms of the Unreal*, narrates the duality of good and evil while serving as a tool for personal transformation (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2022).

He worked as a janitor at a hospital in Chicago, living a solitary and introverted life. Henry Darger devoted the remainder of his life to completing hundreds of large-scale drawings and collages, some exceeding three meters in length. He worked in a small apart-

ment he rented, where he kept his work entirely private, never showing it to anyone.

Darger’s works only became known to the world after his death. Among his creations was a 19,000-page novel titled *In the Realms of the Unreal*, which portrays the struggles of the Vivian girls against the evil Glandelinians. This work reflects Darger’s deep Christian beliefs, as well as influences from classic novels and Native American mythology (Ghanayem, 2024).

Darger constructed a fantastical world marred by turbulent weather, conflict, and child abuse, reflecting the psychological trauma and injustices he endured during his early years. His novel featured seven young princesses and explored complex themes such as child labor and war, intertwined with Christian doctrine.

After Henry Darger’s novels and drawings were discovered, researchers found that he had spent his meager earnings as a janitor enlarging photographs from magazines. Driven by an insatiable passion and desire for creativity, Darger believed he lacked the skill to draw such images himself. As a result, he used inked tracing paper to outline and recreate the images from the enlarged magazine prints.

Today, Darger’s drawings sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars—a stark contrast to the obscurity and lack of recognition he experienced during his lifetime. Grayson Perry, who introduced Darger in his writings, remarked, “I like to think that art gave him something. Art gave him a rich and wonderful life” (Perry, 2014). This shift in recognition underscores the tension between the intrinsic value of art and its market valuation. Perry highlights that while the market value of Darger’s work may fluctuate, the intrinsic artistic value remains unchanged, defying conventional metrics used to measure success in the art world (The Collector, 2019).

After his death, the world came to appreciate Darger's work. While the market value of his creations may fluctuate, the intrinsic artistic value remains constant, unchanged whether during his lifetime or after his passing. The essence of his work does not waver. His dedication to art and the fulfillment he found in the creative process transcend material considerations, defying any attempt to measure them through mundane, worldly metrics.

CONCLUSION

"I am an Artist" To say this out loud requires immense courage ... I feel that becoming an artist is a noble pursuit. We are pilgrims on the path towards meaning. (Perry 2019, 174)

Artists must approach their work with seriousness and sincerity, creating art for the sake of art itself, rather than as a means to chase market trends or conform to external demands, as is often the case with designers in applied arts fields. Those who choose the path of pure art must remain committed to its essence, striving to preserve its conceptual and aesthetic purity amidst external pressures. The standards for success in these two realms—pure art and commercial design—are inherently distinct, with pure art prioritizing intellectual and emotional resonance over commercial viability or market-driven outcomes.

As we move beyond the era of Modern art and immerse ourselves in the ever-expanding realm of contemporary art, we find ourselves surrounded by an unprecedented diversity of styles, thought processes, and values. This multiplicity challenges us, as artists, to engage in deeper inquiries into the essence of creativity and to transcend the conventional limitations imposed by commercial success. Such exploration demands a reevaluation of artistic priorities, encouraging us to prioritize meaning, authenticity, and innovation over monetary gain or market-driven validation.

In *Why Are Artists Poor?* Hans Abbing highlights the stark economic reality faced by artists, noting: "Few professions in the world have incomes lower than that of artists. Only one profession—the clergy—ranks below artists in terms of earnings." Similarly, Grayson Perry, in his book *Playing to the Gallery*, recounts a personal and memorable anecdote: when he told his mother, "I will go to art school," she responded, "That is not a proper job."

Those who decide to pursue pure art are often aware of these realities from the outset. Even for those who may not have known initially, these challenges become evident as they journey further along this path. The decision to dedicate oneself to pure art requires an acceptance of these hardships, paired with a steadfast commitment to artistic integrity.

Ultimately, the essence of an artwork remains unchanged. This study, therefore, aims to inspire artists who may not yet achieve financial success to maintain their confidence and continue to protect their unique artistic visions. As demonstrated in this research, with time, those who were once outsiders can become central figures in the art world.

For artists facing economic or emotional challenges, it is the researcher's hope that this paper can serve as a source of comfort and support, walking alongside them on their long artistic journey.

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