

What Are the Chances? Success in the Arts in the 21st Century

By Alexis Clements



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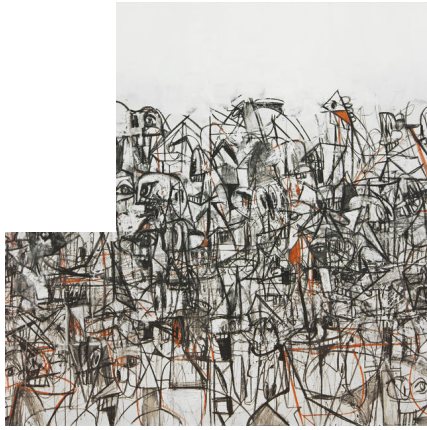
- The chances of your book becoming a *New York Times* best seller in 2012: 0.002 percent [\[1\]](#)
- The chances that a living artist in the United States would receive a solo exhibition at MoMA in 2015: 0.0006 percent [\[2\]](#)
- The median income of those with art degrees who made their living as artists in New York City in 2012: \$25,000 [\[3\]](#)
- The median income for an artist in Canada in 2012: \$21,603 [\[4\]](#)

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- The percentage of total earnings that came from commissions and/or productions of their plays among a group of 250 working playwrights in the United States surveyed in 2005: 15 percent (or \$3,750–\$5,999 for the average playwright in that group) [5]
- The minimum fee set by W.A.G.E. for artists receiving solo exhibits in organizations with total annual operating expenses of \$3,000,000: \$6,000 [6]
- The percentage of artists surveyed by the group W.A.G.E. who received no payment at all for exhibiting or presenting their work in New York City in 2010, not even reimbursement for expenses: 58 percent [7]
- The percentage of artists across the United Kingdom surveyed by the group a-n who received no payment at all for exhibiting or presenting their work in 2010, not even reimbursement for expenses: 59 percent [8]
- Number of years the artist Walid Raad estimated that an artist showing in commercial galleries will achieve “financial success” over the course of their career: four [9]
- Chances of being awarded a Creative Capital grant in 2015 (if you applied): 1.2 percent [10]
- Number of the top 10 most expensive colleges that were arts schools in 2011: eight [11]
- Average cost for a four-year undergraduate degree at one of those eight schools in 2011: \$150,312 [12]
- How much whiter the population of working artists in New York City is than the population of the city as a whole: 224 percent [13]

These are just tiny slices of data, and certainly do not paint a comprehensive portrait of the arts. The data admittedly skews toward New York City, which is where I have been writing about arts and labor for a little while now. I specifically included the numbers for Canada and the United Kingdom because so often people trot out the old yarn that “artists’ lives are so much better abroad” (we’ll get back to that a bit later). The point of this brief sampling is to start a conversation about what success means in the arts today.

Time and again I encounter people of all ages for whom success for artists looks like some version of the following: 1) making a living entirely from your art, and/or 2) getting to spend all of your time making it. My own version, for most of my 20s, manifested as an intensely vague idea that if I were able to get one of my plays or performances produced by a big enough theater or if I were to win a big enough award or grant, then suddenly I would level up — this new echelon of achievement would beget more achievements. I would unlock a portal to a new world where I would consistently have opportunities to produce and share my artistic work, and lucrative financial support would just materialize to go along with each opportunity. Pretty much every article or

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ave read since then, and all the artists I know or have heard from, hat I had entirely the wrong idea.

rewards can certainly come, but they are often short-term and In the best cases, monetary rewards appear to cycle up and down over , but rarely stay high for an entire career. Of course people will be quick to point out that there are some artists out there who do make a living from their art, and that is certainly true, but as the earnings and payment numbers listed above indicate, for the vast majority of those artists that means hustling pretty hard for not a whole lot of cash. And even among the “one percent” artists (because they exist in the arts too), many of the most famous names in arts and entertainment have responded to the inevitable fickleness of the market for their work by starting side businesses to maintain their incomes — everything from licensing or endorsement deals to clothing and perfume lines, from moving to the producer’s side of the table to making large investments in other markets. [14]

And when it comes to time, you might be able to spend much of it working on your art for a little while, but just like the money, that seems to come and go. Esther Robinson, founder of [ArtHome](#) and formerly of the arts funder Creative Capital (a woman who has seen the personal finances and daily calendars of artists at every level up close and in detail), noted in my interview with her for this article that as far as she can tell, no matter where you fall in the fame or success spectrum, you get to spend about 20 percent of your time making art. For those making a living from their art, the other 80 percent is spent doing administrative, managerial, or sales work, and for the rest of us, who don’t make our living entirely from our creative output, it’s a mix of administering our creative work and earning money in other ways. According to Robinson, this 80/20 split is as true for the blue-chip artist or best-selling author as it is for the ones getting up early, staying up late, or saying no to weekend plans in order to make their work.

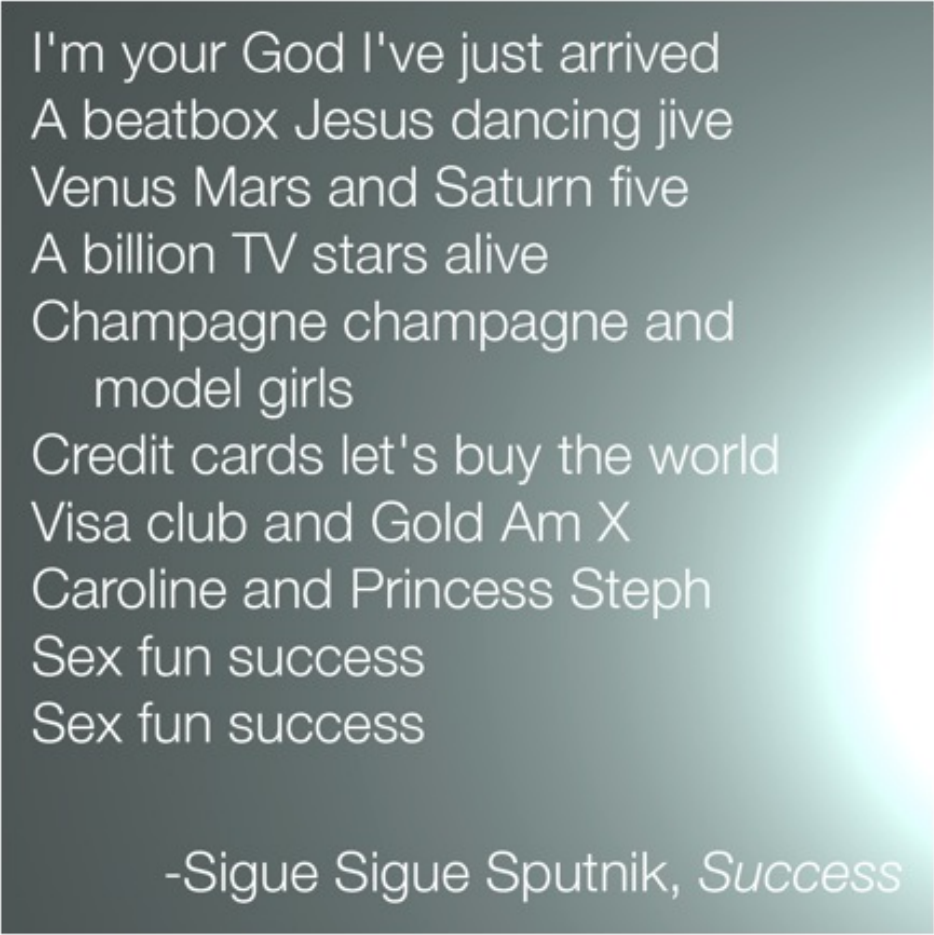
Of course, there are those artists you meet out at events who never really say quite how they make it work, but always seem to spend as much time as they like on their work and never worry about whether or not they have the cash to spend a night out with friends. Robinson offered a clear-eyed assessment of those types: “They haven’t figured something out that you don’t know. That’s the dirty secret of the art world — the people that have the apartments bigger than you inherited them. They are not more talented than you. Nine out of 10 times they walked in with the asset and they left with the asset.”

Which is to say, all signs point to a reality in which no artist, no matter how famous or successful, spends 100 percent of their time on their art, nor do they earn 100 percent of their income from their art alone over the course of their entire career, except perhaps for those with enough support from wealthy



hat worrying about the pesky reality of earning a living will never be

hen is success?



I'm your God I've just arrived
A beatbox Jesus dancing jive
Venus Mars and Saturn five
A billion TV stars alive
Champagne champagne and
model girls
Credit cards let's buy the world
Visa club and Gold Am X
Caroline and Princess Steph
Sex fun success
Sex fun success

-Sigue Sigue Sputnik, *Success*

To try to answer this question, I spoke with four people with unique perspectives on success in the arts. Filmmaker Esther Robison started off at Creative Capital, helping to shape and develop their particular method of funding and providing professional development for artists. After working there for seven years she was looking for a way to impact a larger group of artists than just the small slice that manage to get grants, and so she founded ArtHome. Following countless conversations with artists, she discovered that part of what helped artists who have managed to keep going over the long-term was having some kind of asset that gave them long-term financial stability — whether it be a home or a particular skill or asset from which they could earn money regardless of how much or how little their art was generating. ArtHome specifically focuses on helping artists to build financial solvency, particularly through home ownership.

ke with the artist and activist [Nia King](#), who produces the podcast [We Airwaves](#). The podcast, which King has been producing since early 2013, has led to two books (the second of which was just published), focuses on conversations with queer and trans artists of color and their strategies for navigating an arts world that can be especially dismissive or hostile to their needs.

Two artists who help run an important, small arts nonprofit in the US also spoke with me, but, because we discussed some of the inner workings of that organization, their comments remain anonymous in what follows.

One thing that came up consistently in each of these conversations was the challenge of separating systemic failure from personal failure. In other words, the question of whether you're just making bad art instead of good art must be weighed against broken funding and distribution systems. Racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, and classism all affect the distribution of money and accolades for artists. From [#OscarsSoWhite](#) to the [VIDA Count](#) to the [Gallery Tally](#), the numbers make it clear that discrimination is alive and kicking in the arts, continuing to seriously limit opportunities for success. But structural inequality is not the only thing standing in a working artist's way.

Robinson's experience as a grantmaker gives her a particularly useful perspective on failed funding systems:

The one thing an artist can control is how good their art is, and in the grantmaking process that doesn't have a lot of meaning. That isn't to say it has no meaning, it absolutely has meaning, but it's not one to one: your work is good and you get funding. With all the [funding] cuts, you'll maybe get seven to 10 grants in a lifetime. That's not a system of support; that's an intermittent prize system. And people are making all of these choices based on this possibility.

Further, for Robinson, there is no good way around the limitations of any small group's notions of quality: "I came to have deep questions about one's capacity to understand quality without understanding cultural bias. And if you're looking at the work of an entire nation, a nation of work cannot in any way, shape, or form be reflected in one person's taste, especially not a nation that is such a plurality at this point." On this same idea, Nia King added: "It's really easy to see that the way that art is valued is completely arbitrary, but also completely racist. [...] Whose art we value is a reflection of whose lives we value."

Not to mention, shifts in arts funding have meant that very little public or private arts money ends up in the hands of artists themselves. As [I reported in Hyperallergic in 2012](#):

fact is that the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) devotes less than 2% of its meager budget to direct grants to individual artists. State arts agencies spend only 3% of their grant dollars on individual artists. The bulk of philanthropy in the arts goes to only 2% of the nation's arts institutions, which are among those with the largest budgets. And we know that many of those institutions don't pay the artists whose work they show.

Most arts funding these days is instead being funneled to small and large nonprofits, who then control the rewards and opportunity it affords. Institutional change, both in terms of diversifying leadership and audiences at the vast majority of arts institutions is long overdue, but even where change is happening, shifting cultures within organizations and audiences is rarely a swift or easy process, as one of my anonymous sources noted:

My role being the face of [the organization] remains somewhat confusing. There hasn't been a black face around here in a long time and because my concerns are so specific in some ways, around race and gender, that makes me automatically problematic as a representative. So it will remain to be seen how it plays itself out. Although many of the people that I care about most in this community have been incredibly supportive.

All this stress, all I got is this big
house
Couple cars, I don't bring half of
them shits out
All this ace of spade I drank, just to
piss out
I mean I like the taste, could have
saved myself six hours
How many times can I go to
Mr. Chow's, Tao's, Nobu
Hold up, let me move my bowels...

-Jay Z, *Success*

a pastime of many American artists is to wax rhapsodic about the life in Europe. They love to mention things like Denmark giving small stipends to artists, but they generally neglect to mention that it's only 100 artists out of a total population of 5.7 million people. What makes a bigger difference to the well-being of every single artist in Denmark (and in many other European countries) is free healthcare and education, subsidized child care, a national pension system, and guaranteed unemployment benefits for two years, not a handful of stipends for the lucky few.

Nia King brought this point home in my conversation with her when we spoke about artists' needs:

I think that what artists need to succeed and to continue to have careers are cheap rent and good jobs and access to healthcare. It's the same stuff that other people that don't make a lot of money need. [...] If a country doesn't punish its poor people for being poor as much as the US then you have a better chance of making it as an artist, and also as a human being.

So, if an artist's success isn't measured in money, perhaps it can be measured by fame? Certainly the realities of our current internet-based news cycle means the number of people who get very short bursts of fame has mushroomed, but the number of artists who manage to translate that temporary internet fame (or infamy) into a lucrative career for any significant period of time appears to be as low as the average Snapchat user's attention span. To reach a mass audience, now even more than ever, you have to convince really, really rich people, or the people who control their assets, that they could make enormous sums of money off your work. 20th-century models where vast swathes of the American public were reliably tuned in or at least aware of a finite set of cultural events or references, all selected by a handful of individuals and institutions, have been almost entirely blown up. A very small number of people get regular access to a truly national audience. As with so many areas of our lives in the US these days, there's not much of a middle ground.

How does one decide
that the methods he's using,
they just don't jive,
To truly believe and keep trying
Over and over again.
Living in hopes
That someday you'll be in with
the winners.

-Bonnie Raitt, *What Is Success*

So what, then, is success? If it's not money, time, or mass audience, what the hell is it?

Ultimately, the answer is the same as it ever was for artists: you dictate the terms of success yourself.

I've been asked to talk about arts, labor, and income at couple of art schools and organizations in the past few years, and I generally feel like most people are vaguely pissed off when I raise that particular point. That's the big takeaway? We Americans love a recipe for success. We ache for it. Concocting and selling them generates billions of dollars in revenue, and has always been a lucrative trade, particularly when selling this particular snake oil involves the arts. It's part of why art schools have been able to get away with such staggeringly high tuition costs — people who can will pay because they believe that very expensive piece of paper is a shortcut or workaround to success, or at least to being an artist.

Making art is the only thing that makes you an artist. Learning from others can certainly offer you useful perspective or a new set of skills, but there are plenty of ways to learn from others that don't cost \$150,000. And there are no

ed pathways, no matter what the admissions officers and program are paid to tell you.

national weakness afflicting Americans is a deep belief that they will ception. They will look at those odds listed at the top of this essay and their hearts that they will be that 0.0006 percent; that they will be

Horatio Alger.

Why am I saying all this? So many artists I meet are so desperate for these mythic ideas of success that they are wrecking themselves trying to achieve it. Both Nia King and Esther Robinson spoke at length about artists responding to systemic failures by working themselves into the ground.

From Robinson:

The collapse of the merit system means that when people encounter the system, whether it's the market, whether it's a grant opportunity, or whether it's a critical opportunity to show, they aren't getting the feedback of success that they're looking for. And a lot of people respond to that stimulus by working harder and doing more. And so, I feel like we have a crisis of overproduction. And that overproduction is about people trying the touch validation, and also, possibly to create financial remuneration.

King offered her own take:

It is really easy to feel, when you're getting a lot of rejections, that the problem is you, or that you're not working hard enough. And I think that's one of the hardest things to deal with — the message that you're just not working hard enough. Because I feel like so many of the artists I know are just incredibly hard working, incredibly talented, often working three jobs in addition to doing their art, maybe dealing with disabilities, or raising kids. [...] It's so destructive, especially for people for whom racism and sexism and homophobia are barriers to success. It's just going to make you work yourself to death without any results. I feel like that's really dangerous.

One of the statements I remember being struck by when I participated in a professional development program run by Creative Capital a few years back, is that no one will notice if you take a year off. That ran so counter to everything I felt I was being told — that I had to keep producing, keep hustling, keep my “name” out there. Not long after attending that workshop I went to a panel discussion run by [The Field](#) focused on sustaining long-term artistic careers. All the panelists had been making art for decades instead of years and it was striking to hear each of them say that at some point they had walked away from their artmaking for a period, whether it be for a year or a decade. They

naking art and focused their energy elsewhere. Of course, as any artist
leas and experiences were likely accumulating and taking shape, but
is that it didn't stop them from being artists or prevent them from
: back up. Despite what others might tell you, relentlessness is not a
ent.

There is no secret sauce. Every artist takes a different path.

When I asked my interviewees about their own ideas of success, the answers were nuanced and had as much to do with larger shifts in the culture as they did with their own work. They cared as much about their own artistic interests and intellectual questions as they did about shifting the culture and creating opportunities for other artists or helping them build lives and careers for themselves.

It was particularly interesting to hear about what they imagined the life as an artist might be when they were younger. Robinson, a third-generation artist, grew up with living role models in very close proximity. I got the sense, sitting with her over tea in her apartment, that she has very much crafted a life in that image: a modest but bustling home, over-full with life and ideas, and an industrious commitment to carry on. Her notions of success were clearly delineated. For her films she noted that she has very specific aesthetic concerns and ideas that she wants to focus on, and in her writing and work with artists, she's committed to challenging inherent bias and also to providing artists with new frameworks for survival.

What I want to help artists understand is that there are a lot of forces acting on them that are about system collapse, and training them to move out of that unconscious reactive state and into a state where they know what they want and they've written it down and they're advancing methodically to a goal that they've set themselves.

While King was skeptical from early on that the artist's life would ever be lucrative, she at least felt like she would find compatriots to share ideas and work within the established arts communities around her, but that idea was quickly upended at the art school she swiftly left:

I thought getting into art school was such an honor; that it meant that I was special in some way. I went and had a really heartbreaking and disillusioning experience. I was raised by my parents to think of art spaces and arts education as places that would be liberal, progressive, maybe even radical — places where it was okay to be weird and explore ideas and challenge norms. And what I found when I got to art school was that it felt like an incredibly creatively and politically stifling place for me, as a queer

n of color who was interested in making political art that challenged n and other forms of oppression.

women I spoke to at the arts organization came to the life of an artist different paths, both assuming that it would involve a life of relative and each making very different choices based on that assumption. For one of them, who grew up with black parents who were the first in their families to attend college and build white-collar careers:

I had an urgent sense that I had to make a living. There was simply no chance that I was going to become impoverished as long as my parents were alive. Because their sense of the world was so intensely about how you made money in the world working. I just didn't have a way to understand the arts as a possible way of life.

Despite an early recognition of her own interest and talent, she pursued a high-level career outside the arts, switching to the arts only after a parent passed away.

The other woman also assumed that the arts would involve a life of relative poverty, but as a queer, white kid who stuck out in her hometown, she felt: "What do I have to sacrifice? Because I will probably do it." As a young woman who felt keenly how much people around her viewed her as other, she thought to herself, "Either I'm going to kill myself or someone is going to kill me, so I might as well just do this one thing that I enjoy." After school and some retail jobs, she ended up offering to work as a cleaner in an arts organization she admired, dusting and mopping the floors before eventually getting a part-time gig that morphed over time into something much larger.

As much as the above differences are about choice, they also reflect real class and cultural differences when it comes to navigating life in the US and the realities of having to work in order to survive here. And even though so many people start off knowing that most artists spend much of their lives broke or at least living modestly, something is happening today where many artists have suddenly started thinking they ought to be earning a comfortable living this way after a certain point. Why is that shift happening? Most signs point back to the incredible proliferation of art schools, the vast majority of which market their degrees as vocational programs akin to carpentry or computer programming — as if simply acquiring skills guarantees an income for life. This has never been true in the arts in the US, never.

The rest of the signs point to a pervasive rhetoric in the US that says that the epitome of life is to "live your passion." Everyone should be able to be personally fulfilled by their wage-earning labor. But the ugly lie behind this statement has produced a world in which people feel forced to say garbage like,

passion for customer service,” while interviewing for low-wage jobs
ey will be treated with a level of dispassionate cruelty that is quite
endangering their health and well-being, along with that of their

doubt that people have passions for useful skills or tasks, but many of
us will have to spend much or most of our time doing things we are not in the
least passionate about in order to earn a wage. And even if you do get to do
something that you genuinely feel good about, all of it involves real work,
much of which will not be enjoyable. From Robinson: “It will always be hard.
That’s not going away. Artists I know don’t care, everything is hard. They need
to get over the idea that something will magically not be hard.”

The reality is that you don’t have to earn any money from your art to be an
artist. Professionalization is a relatively new obsession in the arts, but artists
have been making work outside of the arts economy for centuries. It is one
option among thousands. The value of art has very little to do with the amount
of cash it generates, and the value of an artist, or any citizen, is not tied to their
contribution to the GDP. From Robinson:

Artists have a great deal to teach the world about an anti-consumerist way
to put something of value at the center that isn’t money. [...] [Artists]
generally have really good lives. Even with constrained resources, we have
lives of great beauty and great meaning. A lot of the adjustments that
people need to make are simple adjustments — like, your day job makes it
possible, so love your damn day job. Just love it, actually love it. This is
what it takes to make your work, it’s not separate, it’s not in the way, it’s
literally a part of it. Stop separating it out.

I find for myself, having spent a lot of time writing and thinking about the arts
economy, I’m less interested in it over time and more inclined to dip in and
out. I feel in many ways similar to one of the women I spoke to who runs the
arts organization: “People are like, who are you talking to? But I know who I’m
talking to. I’m talking to whoever is reading my [work]. That’s good enough for
me. I feel like that’s why you’re [an artist].”

For me that’s not a lack of ambition, it’s a sense of focus. All of this is not to say
you can’t or shouldn’t have ambitions, that you can’t or shouldn’t go after the
kinds of achievements you see your peers getting, particularly not for those
who continue to be systematically excluded from those opportunities. But the
truth is that there is no future reality in which all artists will have a middle-
class income or better. That has never been the case and there is no sign that it
ever will be. The only chance that will ever happen is if every person in the US
has a middle-class income or better, regardless of the work they do.

about not applying for things, it's about making sure it's really worth
and that you've made realistic plans based on the chances that some
aren't going to work out as you'd like. If you say that you'll only do the
you get a grant: there are going to be trade-offs there. Saying that you'll
a, y, z if you get a, b, c? Be careful. You control the odds by choosing
different games to play. If your only definition of success is becoming a *New York Times* best seller or getting a solo exhibit at MoMA, chances are pretty low that
you will ever achieve it. But if you have different terms for success the odds
could improve substantially that you will achieve it, giving you the opportunity
to slow down enough to build a base of work and resources for yourself that
might help you through a life that will inevitably involve a lot more ups and
downs than most people are willing to admit.



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number of books published in 2012 according to Bowker was 2,352,797, were a total of 41 *New York Times* best sellers in 2012 (23 fiction and 18 non-fiction).

is admittedly a crude measure, but here is what I'm basing it on: The National Endowment for the Arts estimates that there are 2.1 million artists in the US, of those roughly 75 percent fall into categories of work for which MoMA has had at least one exhibition, leaving about 1.575 million living artists in the US whose work could be displayed at MoMA. In 2015, MoMA mounted nine solo exhibitions featuring living, US-based artists.

[3] Analysis of the Census Bureau's 2010–2012 American Community Survey by the BFAMFAPhD Collective.

[4] From Art Gallery of York University's 2012 *Waging Culture Report*.

[5] From the book *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, written by Todd London with Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss, published in 2009.

[6] Based on the W.A.G.E. Fee Calculator, as of May 1, 2016.

[7] From the W.A.G.E. Survey, published in 2012.

[8] From the Artists Information Company's 2014 report, "Paying Artists."

[9] From Anton Vidokle's March 2013 *e-flux* article "Art without Market, Art without Education: Political Economy of Art."

[10] From the Creative Capital website's published data on Past Grants for 2015. I have no desire to pick on Creative Capital in particular; they just happen to be one of the only grantmakers in the arts that publishes their data publicly.

[11] From Lynn O'Shaghnessy's article for *CBSNews.com*, "25 Colleges With the Highest Hidden Price Tags."

[12] From Lynn O'Shaghnessy's article for *CBSNews.com*, "25 Colleges With the Highest Hidden Price Tags."

[13] From the BFAMFAPhD collective's analysis of the Census Bureau's 2010–2012 American Community Survey.

[14] This is just a cursory sampling: from CNN, from the blog *Madame Noire*, and a short commentary at *The New York Times*. And for those that would scoff at

sion of celebrities here, just keep in mind that, 1) many people who celebrities still harbor dreams of their level of fame and financial tion, and 2) celebrity culture is part of what makes information about : businesses clear to the public, whereas many working elsewhere at e echelons of the arts prefer or consciously make sure to keep their ources out of the public eye.

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Bill Roseberry • 3 months ago

"Making art is the only thing that makes you an artist", "No artist spends 100 percent of their time on their art"
How to reconcile these two assertions? Rather by asserting once and for all that artists are NOT subordinate to, or of secondary value to the product of their labor. Art is a verb, in the classic sense, not the object as it is understood presently. (The truth is that no artist spends 50 percent of their time making art and may spend weeks or months or years making nothing of substance.) Otherwise the information in this article and the discussions that it hopefully engenders among artists and artist students is long overdue. Thank-you.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

Kirsten Lund → Bill Roseberry • 3 months ago




that first quote was in the context of education - as in: "Making art is the only thing that makes you an artist" not a piece of paper. So in that sense, I wonder if they need to be reconciled.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

CLICKittyCAT • a year ago

I enjoyed your writing, it made me think and appreciate some things that were not obvious. Thank you.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

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