THE STARVING ARTIST
Overview of Documented Knowledge

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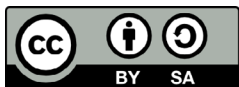**INSTITUTE FOR CREATIVE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

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Understanding a Overview of Documented Knowledge

Conducting an Overview of Documented Knowledge is a research and documentation process, which recognizes the extensive formal and informal knowledge passed between generations of practitioners in the fields of culture, education, and social change. We continually refer to "documented knowledge," in recognition of the deeply-rooted oral histories, cultural practices, and social knowledge passed between generations of key practitioners in our fields, like teaching artists, educators, and culture bearers. These histories and traditions are often unrecognized in Western European academic traditions of "literature reviews" which rely on the publication of the written word; so, we reject this notion and broadly accept the myriad media of 'documentation' and 'knowledge' within these fields of practice.

Creative Generation is committed to publishing Summaries of Documented Knowledge to recognize and amplify the diverse array of types of knowledge and ways of knowing throughout our work. This presents two opportunities: first, to gain a better understanding of the breadth of knowledge on a given topic, and second to resist the systems which prioritize certain sources of knowledge and ways of knowing, excluding some knowledge-bearers.

This Summary of Documented Knowledge is organized into the following sections:
- **Introduction**: This introductory section provides details and context around the specific question or observation being explored. It also highlights the primary fields or sectors of focus and places boundaries on the scope of the exploration.
- **Framing**: This context-setting section provides a high-level overviewing of the findings from the process and provides details on the organization and flow of the subsequent sections.
- **Thematic Sections**: Each section provides an overview of the documented knowledge on the given topic.
- **Conclusion**: This concluding section provides a reflection on the findings and identifies observed gaps in the documented knowledge, which should be further explored.

Introduction

Even if it is only a stereotype, the starving artist is one "so widely held that it has become the subject matter of art itself" (Filer, 1986, p.56). This phenomenon manifests in both art and mind such that artists sacrifice financial comfort when they commit to their craft. It is rooted in the idea, and not necessarily supported by economic evidence (as we will see), that the arts is a career that is financially destitute for most and rich and luxurious for a lucky few (Abbing, 2002). But what brought about this common belief?

This Overview of Documented Knowledge examines not only the phenomenon of the starving artist, but two of the main factors in its existence: elitism and "serious" artistry. Is struggle a rite of passage to being considered a "serious" artist? And how do societal barriers contribute to the arts being an elitist industry – what constitutes high taste and talent, and who has the access and resources to acquire them?

The document is divided into several sections to interrogate these ideas through the documented knowledge in the fields of arts and culture:
- A Dispelling of the Stereotype of the Starving Artist
- An Interrogation of "Elitism"
- An Exploration of a "Serious" Artist

A Dispelling of the Stereotype of the Starving Artist

Filer (1986), using data from the 1980 census, argues against the idea of the starving artist. He calls these stereotypes – artists being lower earners on average with a greater variance of earnings, artists being significantly younger than most of the workforce, and artistic careers having high turnover rates – "stylized facts" (56). A databrief of the results of the 2010 Strategic National Arts Alumni Project Survey (a survey of alumni of arts degrees) also reveals the phenomenon as a myth. What is the truth? We know that works like Kafka's "A Hunger Artist", Puccini's *La Boheme*, and Jonathan Larson's *Rent* must have come from someplace, but is that a place of reality or exaggeration?

The stereotypes rely on assumptions embedded in the ongoing and ever-evolving debates surrounding the value of art, the creative sector, and the practices of artistic, cultural, and creative expression. Many scholars (Matarrasso, 1997; McCarthy et al., 2005; Merli, 2002; Matarasso, 2003; Brown, 2006; Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Poulin, 2020) have debated the intrinsic vs. instrumental value of the arts in the lives of individuals and communities for decades with no conclusive outcomes, which enables the pervasive assumptions about artists in the public discourse.

The following sections interrogate these stereotypes through the lenses of selected documented knowledge.

The Earnings of Artists

There is an idea that there are rewards to artistic creation itself that are not monetary in value: intrinsic benefits like self-fulfillment and discovery. Filer (1986) posits that this may be a factor in drawing people to the profession, resulting in more "amateur" artists than in most other careers (Filer mentions the prominence of community theaters versus the not-widely-accepted "amateur insurance salesman"). In terms of their financial gains, he notes that most empirical studies have taken data only from one discipline or type of artist. Filer finds from the census data that education has less of a significance in terms of its impact on artists' earnings in comparison to the earnings of the general workforce. This is in line with the dominant narrative that artists learn most of their relevant skills while actually working. These relevant skills, or work experience, also have more impact on their earnings. But a question arises from this – why then do artists in general attend school for significant periods of time and for post-graduate degrees, given that there doesn't seem to be much of a payoff?

The SNAAP survey report addresses this – of the over 13,000 alumni surveyed (across 40 states and over 150 colleges & universities) 90% reported that their experience in an arts degree program was good or excellent, and 76% stated that if taken back in time, they would make the same choice to study art at the same institution as before. This seems to have something to do with the non-financial earnings mentioned above – of the survey respondents who were not

currently working in an artistic field, 54% said that their arts training is relevant to their current job, and 88% agreed that creative thinking aids success in the workplace.

There seems to be a consensus that the non-monetary earnings of artists hold intrinsic value to the artists themselves, and not just in relation to their art. This follows with the stereotype of starving artists not needing financial gain in order to feel personally fulfilled – but their lack of financial gain is not necessarily supported by fact.

The Careers of Artists

The results of the 2010 SNAAP survey argue good news for arts alumni. The vast majority of surveyed alumni were employed (92% total, 65% in the arts), with 81% becoming employed quickly post-grad (both in and outside of the arts). Two thirds of them were employed first in a job that was closely related to their goal field or career path. Many were also entrepreneurial, as seems to be common with artists nowadays: 63% of the respondents were self-employed. Filer (1980) provides context to this which may confirm some truth of the starving stereotype: Self-employed artists do earn less than self-employed workers in other fields.

Artists and arts alumni often work multiple jobs concurrently (Filer, 1986; SNAAP, 2010). According to the SNAAP survey, 57% of the current professional artists held at least two jobs. Between this and higher rates of self-employment, skepticism can arise on both sides: are artists not starving only because they are also working outside of the world of artistry, or are they seen as starving because they must employ themselves in order to gain any kind of career?

Though it depends on the artistic path and discipline (no one career path is the same and there is substantial variety among different artistic fields), Filer argues that there is little empirical evidence that artists overall are "starving", though he agrees that the stereotype is a prominent one. The data from the SNAAP survey seems to agree that it's a myth, although some data they provide is mildly contradictory – among the alumni who sought artistic careers but did not end up following those dreams, 30% pointed to debt, including student debt from the degrees themselves. If what Filer says about higher arts education being unnecessary is true, then one must wonder if it is the common evil in all actual cases of starving artistry. But as we'll explore in further sections, there are differing opinions as to whether or not one can even be considered a real artist without a degree in their hands.

An Interrogation of Elitism

Elitism in the arts can be understood as the notion that art must resist allowing access to all and must not give in to commercialism or popularity; that to understand and enjoy art requires a higher level of experience and intelligence (O'Kelly, 2007). In order to access this experience and education, especially in the United States, one needs money. Money to pay for degrees, classes, workshops, museum entry, symphony tickets, seats at the opera and on Broadway. A significant part of the theory of the starving artist that is often overlooked has to do, not with the money gained from the career, but the money lost in order to get there.

The class divide – especially as related to the arts and culture – has been explored in numerous contexts, most notably by Robert Putnam (Bowling Alone, 2000; Our Kids, 2015). Putnam argues that the arts and culture can be a unifying force in our communities, however, the increased tribalism of classism, especially the upholding of "art" as high class and elite, drives a divide within our communities.

Is it really necessary to do all these things and know all these things to be a true artist? It depends on whom you ask – but elitism is ever-present in the art world, and constantly building barriers to artistry.

The following sections interrogate the notion of elitism through the lenses of selected documented knowledge.

Defining 'The Elite'

The "elite", according to Foreman-Wernet (2017), can be defined as inviting only a single (higher) class, but it can also be determined by "superior" skills, experience, and knowledge. In a Postmodern worldview, she says, the ideas of "high" and "low" barriers to cultural sectors have been eliminated. However, many argue that these barriers still exist.

> **"There exist taste cultures that are shaped by education and other socialization processes such that those who have developed knowledge about the arts possess the 'cultural capital' that provides access to not only enhanced appreciation and enjoyment of high culture, but also access to others of similar status and education. Those who lack the requisite cultural capital thus continue to be intellectually, and perhaps psychologically, excluded from the arts." (Foreman-Wernet, 2017, p.276)**

In other words, certain "taste cultures", or perspectives and cultural preferences shaped and informed by education and socialization (see Bordieu in Distinction, 1984), allow for easier access and enjoyment of "high culture" and art. Those without access to the high-level socialization and education necessary for these tastes also lose access to these arts. Foreman-Wernet very specifically uses the word "excluded" – it is not that they go into an art exhibit, see the art and can't comprehend it, and leave – they are not even able to go into the art museum, or society makes them believe they do not belong there in the first place.

Perricone (2018) argues that, while one must be aware of the difficulties of art in order to justify its teaching and pedagogy, as with any other subject, "difficulty" and "art" are both

open concepts with no single definition. The problem here is that the elites make their own, highly exclusionary definition and impose it upon all others, especially those of a lower "class" (both in taste and in socioeconomic status). Perricone, citing Bosanquet (1963), argues that art which appeals to "ordinary people and others" has not diminished its character and worth into something "trivial" or "superficial" simply by doing so. Excellence, states Foreman-Wernet, is defined relative to its cultural sector – that which is considered excellent in popular music is much different from excellence in symphonic music. This is a postmodern view as well – relativism and status hierarchies are at play. The elites would therefore consider popular music as a whole to be of a lower status than symphonic music as a whole, no matter how relatively "excellent". This excludes not only many of the artists, but much of the art's audiences – and in a time where funding for arts is difficult to come by, larger "elite" arts institutions have seen that their exclusionary practices are serving nobody, not even themselves.

Counteracting Elitism

Koontz (2021) believes that while the elites "support an American mythology of equal access and opportunity, they continue to increase their power, status, and influence". These elites, she argues, privilege perceived "authentic" products and arts as favorable, while outwardly promoting "cosmopolitanism": the celebration of differences in people, cultures, and tastes (p. 11). They may be attempting to remedy their centuries of exclusion on the outside, but it is only meant to serve themselves (for a concise summary of this scholarly debate, see Nussbaum in The Cosmopolitan Tradition, 2021).

Foreman-Wernet explains that in employing a "democracy of taste," one understands that a novice or amateur's (as they may be perceived) responses and opinions about cultural objects and experiences are equally as important to the critical discourse as that of someone with a perceived higher cultural capital. This argues for more diversity, accessibility, and participation within the arts and cultural sectors. We are seeing this counteraction to elitism start to take root within many arts organizations, as they insist that "the arts are for everyone" and everyone can feel however they wish about the art – and those feelings are welcome in the discussion. But the concrete actions of arts institutions are not consistent – and just the sentiment of welcoming and inclusion may not be enough by itself.

Outward perception of counteracting elitism is becoming increasingly commonplace, whether through media statements or theoretical ideas, but it remains to be seen how many tangible actions are being taken to implement concrete strategies and action plans.

People are different. Across disciplines and subjects, in art and in everything else, we have different abilities, skills, knowledge, and preferences. We may wonder, as human beings do, how we'll be perceived by others. Not everyone grows up and is able to go to college, let alone experience "high-level" art in their youth or access to the supplies necessary to learn.

It all comes down to money. Though the idea of the starving artist may not be true in data, it may be reasonable to assert that data comes from a group of people who skewed the system by already having access to the resources necessary for a career in artistry. Who is to say that the mother working night shifts, the teenager working two jobs and going to school, and the disabled adult who is not allowed money to their name are not artists if they are not counted in the official data? The question comes down to what is an artist, and how do you become one?

An Exploration of the 'Serious' Artist

In a now-embarrassing article written in 1933, Frida Kahlo (who is renowned enough to not need a description) is described not only namelessly ("Wife of the Master Mural Painter", referring to Diego Rivera) but flippantly as well – supposedly, she only "gleefully dabbles" in painting (Muzdakis, 2021).

This isn't just an isolated incident. Female artists being seen as hobbyists rather than true artists is just one dimension surrounding judgemental and exclusionary perspectives on artistry. According to the 2010 SNAAP survey, 71% of surveyed arts alumni who were not professional artists stated that they continue to be artistic and practice their craft outside of their job.

The following sections interrogate the notion of "seriousness" in artistry through the lenses of selected documented knowledge

The Definition of Artistry

A reddit post by u/xtalaphextwin on r/ArtistLounge asked users "When do you think a person becomes a 'real artist'"? (2021). The top responses were in agreement: the only criteria for being an artist is making art. The prominent notion was that it's a self-determined identification, and art is too wide a subject and craft to confine to a single definition, especially not one that involves monetary gain.

Self-identified professional artists, however, seem to think differently. Bain (2005) examined the occupational and self-identities of contemporary visual artists through interviews and analysis of those interviews – and the results were in strong contrast to the citizen's opinion on an online forum.

The Artist's Personality

Bain (2005) describes the difficulty inherent in defining an artist and a professional versus an amateur, especially given – as we have gone over – there are no degrees or licenses considered necessary to be a professional artist. She then goes on to examine the role of earnings in forming an occupational and self-identity. Work is a defining point in many of our lives, Bain argues, and many people's self-identification centers around their professional identity. This identity is derived from shared workplace experiences and conversations with those in the same profession – but how do artists create identity when they, most commonly, work in isolation? The answer, Bain suggests, is myths, stereotypes, and common ideas around the work of the artist. These provide "ready-made stories of the self" (27).

In examining these cultural myths, Bain goes back in time to the medieval Christian period, during which you'd find professional artists in guilds with religious purposes. Moving forward to the Renaissance, the humanist tradition arose. Artists were more respected socially, considered elite, and liberated from restrictions the guilds may put on them. Artists were seen as heroic geniuses (and were predominantly male).

Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1963, p.101) describe the idea that a genius who wanted to stay true to himself and his vision had to eschew popularity and social status and isolate himself. This emerged as an important quality of the "true artist", and was emphasized later on in the romantic era – the imaginative artist, alienated and guided by emotion and sentiment.

"The spirit of Romanticism was embodied in the stereotypical image of the starving artist living in a garret – an image that glamorized the precarious position of the artist and communicated a powerful new definition of the avant-garde artist as a Bohemian rebel, outsider, and social critic who sacrificed status, money, and material comfort for the supposed freedom this afforded the imaginative spirit to pursue individual creative expression" (Bain, 2005, pp.28-29)

This glorification of the starving artist, Bain argues, is problematic, as it ignores the financial loss artists endured through the downfall of the guild system. But in the 21st century, artists are entrepreneurial, self-driven, innovative – they are taught to "exploit their individuality" and "occupational authenticity" in order to get ahead and be successful (29). The old myth of their falling economic status lies in contrast to studies like Adler (1979) and Filer (1986), which determine that artists face no extreme detriment in terms of employment and earnings. There is an idealized idea of artistic practice, derived from the practice of small-scale production in visual art that seems detached from the claws of capitalism. This is aided by the prominent belief that in doing art, one is developing one's whole self, not just the professional self. Creativity, it seems, is a highly valued and romanticized yet elusive force. And this isn't just fantasy: Bain cites a not-insignificant body of empirical work which determines the artistic personality is flexible emotionally, nonconforming and rebellious, and tends to veer into isolation. The rebellion aspect seems to be particularly salient – not only do artists rebel within the expression of their art, they rebel against established norms and conformities in their personal lives as well.

What Makes an Artist?

So who, or what, is an artist? Though outsiders to the art scene can say it's self-defined (Reddit 2021), artists themselves tend to rank each other and deem who is an artist based on (sometimes arbitrary) criteria. Is it truly a job, and if so, who is professional? Bain asks the question, "Do you have to hate your job to make money at it?" Citing several definitions of "work" that seem to confirm this theory (work must not be enjoyable), Bain still concludes there's no real consensus on this matter as of now. Artistic work is unlike many jobs in that it is unregulated and unregimented – chaotic, like the mind of an artist – and seems to provide some kind of personal fulfillment. Does this make it enjoyable, and does that make it not true work?

The public tends to value the end-product of creative labor more than the process, which can be problematic, as it ignores the struggles artists face in their jobs, just as any other employee. Artists tend to work long hours – those that Bain interviewed worked up to seven days a week, with hours from early morning to after midnight the next day. But this does not mean extra compensation, as it may in another line of work. And rather than reviled, it's celebrated; the artist who throws their entire self into their work in ignorance of financial and survival needs is the truest artist.

> **"...the true and dedicated artist is expected not to compromise artistic vision in order to make sales..." (Bain, 2005, 39)**

In her interviews, Bain noted that male artists in particular viewed female artists as hobbyists rather than actual artists. One man she interviewed, called "Nasco", cited an imaginary scenario in which a woman called herself an artist when she was really just a hobbyist as a frustrating thing to have to deal with. An artist, in most of the interviewee's minds, is defined by acquisition of cultural capital rather than financial gain – unless you're working or living outside of the arts as well.

Secondary employment, however, is common within the artist world. 78% of the artists in Bain's interview sample either had additional employment or received a pension from their previous employer. Additional jobs were often academic jobs; many artists split their time teaching at a university. Pizanias (1992) coined the term "hyphenated artist" to describe this double employment – being what artists become when they work outside of their art in order to maintain financial stability. It seems to be that many of these "hyphenated artists" are consumed by their salaried job and never return to their art, leading to the notion that having a salaried job makes you less of a true or dedicated artist.

Conclusion

The documented knowledge in the fields of arts and culture does not empirically prove the truth of the starving artist, but we can ascribe certain issues in the field to its conception. Elitism builds barriers to keep out artistic hopefuls without access to higher education funds, artistic supplies, and experience. These artists still need money to survive – they must work jobs outside of their art to do so. But will the elites and professionals cast them out? Bain's 2005 interviews seem to indicate a judgment against those who can't dedicate themselves to their art, although an overwhelming amount of evidence points to a large number of artists having secondary employment.
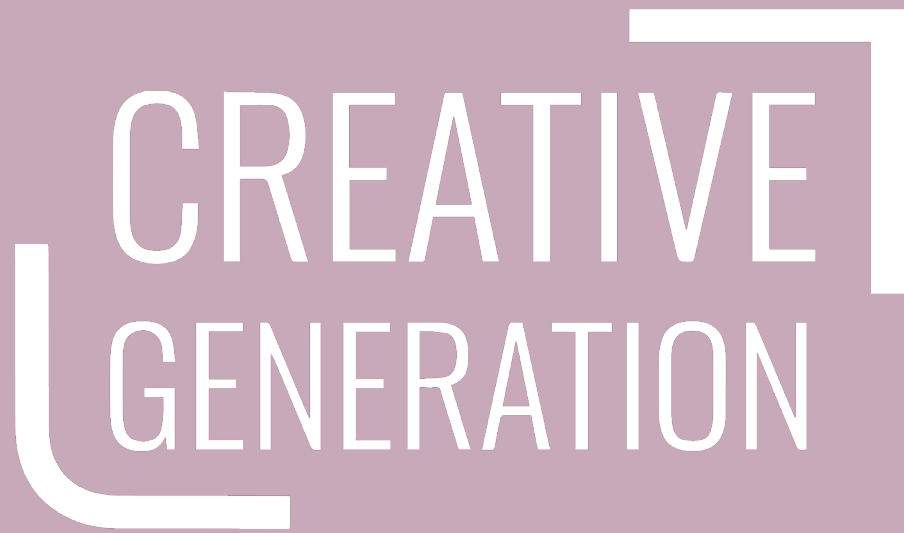
This secondary employment has contributed to the growing discourse on the "gig economy," "multihyphenate" professional identities, and "portfolio careers" (See Shaner-Bradford 2019 and Rinne 2020). There are associated risks with multihyphenate careers of idealizing unsustainable work practices, poor work-life balance, and threatened job security. However, the benefits of expanding your resumé in seemingly disconnected ways have become more emphasized as times change. Skills that you have learned through life and not necessarily only paid jobs can be used for professional benefit, and it's even encouraged. Campbell (2022) proposes the use of the term "Arts Hybrid" in the context of the artistic, cultural, and creative sector, as "A person with multiple professional identities whose work is interdisciplinary in nature, spans multiple fields or domains, and is grounded in arts & culture."

Is it because we as a society are becoming less willing to sacrifice everything for our art and become the epitomized starving artist? Or is it because more and more light is being shed on these barriers – and those who have been kept out for centuries are being heard?

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