



CULTURE

Visual artists in search of status

More precarious than intermittent workers, these artists are beginning to band together to obtain rights.

By Emmanuelle Lequeux

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Installation of the "New Waves" exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in June 2013.
NICOLAS KRIEF/LE MONDE

" You see Atlas, the one who carries the world? Well, Atlas is us, the visual artists, who carry a world of galleries, museums, art centers, critics, managers, guards... Except that Atlas is on welfare!" A cry from the heart launched by a young sculptor, at the time when performing arts workers began to take the stage in the spring.

LA SUITE APRÈS CETTE PUBLICITÉ

For the past few months, a rarely voiced anger has been simmering. In mid-July, a Facebook group of 650 visual artists formed to channel this anger, centered around the idea of "*a solidarity economy for art*." Is this a class struggle among the precarious workers in the cultural sector? The aim is not to condemn the system of informal performers in the performing arts, but to try to improve it.

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And to remind everyone how they, painters, illustrators, video artists, live. Or rather, survive. For every millionaire whose sales make the headlines, how many thousands are starving, dependent on an ultra-selective market?

It's not widely known, but visual artists are far from being as well-off as freelance artists. They have no official status. For the employment agency, they don't exist: as self-employed workers, their only income comes from selling their artwork. The right to training? It's still in its infancy. And there's no workplace accident insurance either. Social security contributions? Admittedly, the rate is advantageous: 15%. But that shouldn't mask the sector's extreme economic fragility.

It's impossible to draw up a reliable picture, as no recent statistics exist on the subject. However, some figures do emerge: more than half of visual artists live below the poverty line, according to the Committee of Visual Artists and Authors (CAAP), one of the main professional organizations. Their median income? Half that of salaried employees, according to the same source. Of the 52,221 contributors to the Maison des Artistes (MDA, which manages their social protection), 57% declare less than €8,379 in annual income (in 2012), the minimum threshold that triggers access to social benefits (social security, retirement, etc.). This means that 29,765 artists are legally obligated to contribute, yet receive no coverage whatsoever.

Read also the article:  [The House of Artists, a baroque structure](#)



SMALL JOBS, MORE OR LESS RELATED TO MAKING A FOOD

Stage managers, technicians, art school professors: they all juggle multiple odd jobs, some more to make ends meet than others. And they resort to countless makeshift solutions to get by. "*I print all my photos on my printer and pin them up without framing them,*" explains photographer Franck Gérard, who has transformed economic constraints into aesthetic choices. "*I install my exhibitions myself—three days of pinning things up—and only one art center has ever paid me for it. We never receive any money for the creative process either, except through residencies or project grants from the Ministry. I take out loans to finance my travels; selling my work remains a very small part of my income. But I've made my choice; my work is my fight.*"

"*A culture of free access reigns in France,*" confirms another. Indeed, when a visual artist exhibits in an art center or museum, the curator is paid, as are the graphic designer of their catalog, the security guard, and the cleaning staff. But not the artist. On what grounds? They are offered a magnificent showcase to promote their work. Often, the institution allocates them a sum intended for the production of works they can then put on the market. Therefore, there is no need to pay them.

What about the added value he brings to the institution where he exhibits? *"The artist is largely deprived of the money that circulates around him, and more and more exhibitions are selected only for those able to pay for their own production, which means that soon only the rich will occupy the walls,"* says P. Nicolas Ledoux, who initiated the Facebook group already mentioned.



The Palais de Tokyo, in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. DR

"A DRAWING IN THANK YOU FOR THEIR SUPPORT"

"The fear of burning bridges with a museum by simply demanding what is owed creates a very common code of silence," continues Katerine Louineau, an active member of the CAAP. *"It's extremely rare that we're offered exhibition rights,"* confirms the young sculptor Lionel Sabatté, who is beginning to live off his work after years spent on welfare. *"In the allocated budgets, there's rarely any money left over to pay ourselves. But we manage: for example, I brought together a group of collectors to put on my latest exhibition, and I give them a drawing as a thank you for their financial support."*

Recently, the situation has tended to improve. Even if it remains far from the Quebec model, which applies a pricing grid to exhibitions, *"art centers are now very attentive to offering fees to artists, to professionalizing contracts,"* assures Aude Cartier, director of the Maison des arts de Malakoff. *"It is of course symbolic, a few hundred euros, but fundamental to help them find legitimacy ."*

VERY WEAKLY UNIONIZED

However, while smaller institutions strive for impeccable practices, larger players like the Palais de Tokyo and the Centre Pompidou continue to resist. The federation of contemporary art professionals, Cipac, is working to rectify the situation, but progress is slow. The same is true for galleries, which often lack contracts with the artists they represent and sometimes take months to disburse sales revenue. The Committee of Art Galleries also claims to be considering ways to secure this relationship.

So, when will the revolution happen? Not tomorrow. With very low union membership and a strong tendency towards individualism, visual artists struggle to organize themselves. And they're not the type to complain: *"This resourcefulness enriches my work today and allows me greater flexibility ,"* asserts Lionel Sabatté.

The challenge remains to invent. *"We could, for example, pay for months of research with fees, like we pay a dancer's rehearsals, or give us a percentage of the ticket sales, or increase the resale right for living*

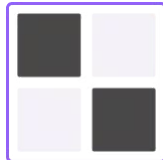
artists in the event of an auction, to set up a mutual retirement fund," suggests P. Nicolas Ledoux.

He adds: "We mustn't forget all those who voluntarily opt out of the market. Politicians have a role to play in protecting those who choose not to live off the luxury industry and the liberal economy. Because the purpose of our work is to produce thought, and that too deserves compensation."

Emmanuelle Lequeux

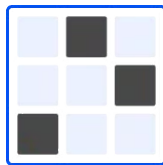
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