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Artistic Identity and Society: Exploring the Artist's Perception of Self and Purpose

Radu Florin Pop

Master in Sociology

Supervisor:

Dr. Vera Borges, Integrated Researcher and Invited Assistant
Professor CIES-ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon

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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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Abstract

This thesis explores how contemporary artists perceive their roles in relation to society, democracy, and their sense of responsibility. By examining their autonomy and social engagement, it aims to understand how artists navigate the complex interplay between economic pressures, market forces, and cultural production. Grounded in the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and other scholars, the research investigates the tension between the autonomous art field and external demands for heteronomy. A qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with visual artists, highlights persistence as a core element of artistic identity. The findings reveal that artists often view their careers as a response to an inner calling, one that endures despite economic and social challenges. The study also examines the notion of art's "special" status, where disinterest in profit and involvement in political and social issues become markers of authenticity. This research concludes by emphasizing the need for continuous dialogue between artists, society, and institutions to fully understand art's potential as a force for social change, raising questions for future exploration about the evolving nature of artistic identity and its impact on democracy.

Key Words: Artistic Identity, Autonomy, Social Engagement, Cultural Production, Market Forces.

Resumo

Esta tese explora a forma como os artistas contemporâneos percebem os seus papéis em relação à sociedade, à democracia e ao seu sentido de responsabilidade. Ao examinar a sua autonomia e envolvimento social, pretende-se compreender como os artistas navegam na complexa interação entre as pressões económicas, as forças do mercado e a produção cultural. Baseada nas teorias de Pierre Bourdieu e de outros estudiosos, a pesquisa investiga a tensão entre o campo artístico autónomo e as exigências externas de heteronomia. Uma abordagem qualitativa, utilizando entrevistas semi-estruturadas com artistas visuais, destaca a persistência como um elemento central da identidade artística. Os resultados revelam que os artistas vêm frequentemente as suas carreiras como uma resposta a uma vocação interior, que perdura apesar dos desafios económicos e sociais. O estudo também examina a noção de estatuto “especial” da arte, em que o desinteresse pelo lucro e o envolvimento em questões políticas e sociais se tornam marcadores de autenticidade. Esta investigação conclui enfatizando a necessidade de um diálogo contínuo entre artistas, sociedade e instituições para compreender plenamente o potencial da arte como uma força de mudança social, levantando questões para exploração futura sobre a natureza evolutiva da identidade artística e o seu impacto na democracia.

Palavras chave: Identidade Artística, Autonomia, Envolvimento Social, Produção Cultural, Forças de Mercado.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. Literature Review	4
1.1 Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu's Field of Cultural Production	5
1.2 The Invention of Art: Art as a Cultural Construct	9
1.3 Arts and Technology.....	10
1.4. The economy of Art.....	11
1.5 Relations and Participation.....	12
2. Methodology	16
2.1 Interviews with Artists	17
2.2 Patterns and Themes	20
3. Results and Discussion	22
3.1 Persistence over Time	22
3.2 A Difficult Career/A Difficult Journey	24
3.3 Economic Dimension of an Artistic Career	27
3.4 The Artist as a Special Person	30
3.5 Engagement as a Way of Validation	33
3.6 Discussion of Results	37
3.6.1 The Social Turn: A Lasting Shift or a Trend ?.....	37
3.6.2 Art's Disinterestedness as a Consolation Mechanism.....	38
3.6.3 Art Fairs and the Political Involvement of Art.....	38
3.6.4 Art as a Potential Risk to Power	39
3.7 Implications for Future Research	39
Conclusion	41
References	44
4. Appendices	46
Interview Guides and Questions	46
Focus Group Protocols	47

Introduction

There is concern today about the fate and quality of democracy in the world, but especially about its decline and transformation (Herre, 2022). The rise of the far right or political ideologies such as illiberalism (Plattner, 2019) has prompted counter-movements from society.

In this context, the contemporary artist and contemporary art have often been seen as catalysts that structure political and social debates about society and democracy¹.

The question I ask is how artists perceive themselves in relation to society. I am interested to see if there is an assumed responsibility or (political) duty towards society and democracy. More precisely, towards a certain type of society shaped (or being shaped) by the values of democracy.

The same question can be asked of any citizen and such scientific research is not an exception². It would be just as legitimate to ask the same question about teachers, policemen, politicians or practically any socio-professional category.

I prefer examining processes over outcomes and avoiding dictating the direction of art's development. Modernity marks, among other things, the increasing autonomy of art as a logical consequence of the "invention" of what we now call fine art (Shiner, 2001, p.79-98). Among the acclaimed values of the new realm, we can list freedom, unlimited and even outrageous creativity, and financial disinterestedness (as one of the fundamental values guiding the "authentic" model of artistic life). By asking how the artist perceives himself in relation to society, we can learn something about society itself: for example, that it could be improved, or at least that certain aspects of it are worth re-examining.

This dissertation is intended to be a work about society and democracy, or more precisely about the artist, society, and democracy, although it might as well be about art and freedom. One of the starting points of the work is my personal experiences and especially the way I have perceived the changes in the world around me over the last twenty years. Of course, "the world around me" is a vague concept and can mean the whole world I have access to, as filtered through the media or/and my neighborhood, the places I live or have lived, the events I have witnessed, the people I have interacted with. It also means those structures that you can intuit and perceive embedded in the

¹ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artists-for-democracy-2024-pfaw-2462641>

² <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/active-citizenship-can-change-your-country-better>

practice of people and institutions, but also in the discourse produced to define the things that you then appropriate or capture. The audience that will be asked to describe democracy will surely invoke multipartyism, free elections, a market economy or a high standard of living.

Freedom of expression is also invoked among the characteristics of democracy, but certain dangers (real or imagined) will counterbalance the level of freedom a society can afford without being subjected to the risk of destruction. Migration, corporations, ideological propaganda, the economic, political, and cultural interests of hostile parties, the defense of tradition, the struggle for identity, and historical continuity are, and have been, all reasons to question the place that freedom should occupy in democratic societies.

I have been interested in the way dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, and their leaders tend to present themselves to the world and their own societies: as democracies. In such regimes, every kind of discourse, every kind of institution, or practice is penetrated by the principles of a destructive power against the freedom of the individual. A subjugated art is an art that reinforces such a vision and we have here the sad example of communist art in Eastern Europe, which had turned into an instrument for the production of a cult of personality.

In these fake democracies, there are parties, there are supposedly free elections, a parliament, and a "free" press. Except this is not the case at all. Even in countries that until recently were recognized as democratic, the label of democracy is stuck on a form where the content is becoming increasingly diluted. Colin Crouch uses the term post-democracy to describe this state of affairs... Post-democracy can be understood as a state of functioning of democratic institutions that lacks energy: politics is now done in small political and economic elite circles (Crouch, 2019). Or, in terms of the general public's attitude towards the political system, the symptoms are "boredom, frustration and disillusion" (Crouch, 2004, p.19.)

But what is at stake for autocratic regimes that claim to wear the "mantle of democracy"? As Josh Rogin says in an article in the Washington Post: "They are claiming ownership of the concept of democracy as a key plank of their proposed new world order — one where the actual struggle for democratic progress is demonized and negated."³

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/23/putin-xi-authoritarianism-democracy/>

For instance, the Chilean visual artist Alfredo Jaar is recognized for his artwork that tackles critical social, political, and humanitarian issues like genocide, migration, and the power dynamics of media representation. He believes in comprehending the world before taking action and considers himself to be an informed, responsible, and contemplative individual who is closely attuned to societal dynamics: "I cannot act in the world before understanding the world."⁴, he confesses in an interview. Jaar's perception of himself in relation to society denotes a sense of ethical responsibility, intellectual curiosity, and a commitment to using his art as a tool for research, critique, and potential transformation of society.

So, how does the artist perceive him/herself in relation to society and what might I hope to learn if I know the answer to this question? One possible answer would be that I could find out how free the artist feels and how free society is. Or I might know something about how valuable and how critical artistic discourse is from a certain perspective.

Through art, society and democracy can be perceived (and especially seen), and criticism can be seen because art is often allowed to do so: it is allowed to be free, critical, and even outrageous. Alongside the philosopher, social scientist, or journalist, the artist⁵ can provoke debate and question what society and the political system say is happening.

⁴ <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/alfredo-jaar-art-socially-conscious>

⁵ This enumeration is certainly not exhaustive.

2. Literature review

This chapter explores the intricate dynamics between artists, society, and the art world by examining key theoretical frameworks and critical perspectives on the role and perception of artists within a neoliberal context. Grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the *field of cultural production*, this review investigates the tension between artistic autonomy and heteronomy, illustrating how power structures, economic forces, and institutional influences shape artistic practices. Building on Bourdieu's concepts, scholars such as Victoria Alexander, Julia Peters, and Henk Roose examine the impact of state intervention and market pressures on the arts, revealing the ways artists must navigate their positions in an increasingly professionalized and market-oriented environment. Further exploring this field, Julian Stallabrass, Larry Shiner, Lawrence Levine, Walter Benjamin, Paul Virilio, Hans Abbing, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Claire Bishop contribute critical insights into how contemporary art is commodified, sacralized, and politicized. Through these analyses, this review addresses the central research question: How do artists perceive their roles in relation to society, and do they feel a sense of responsibility toward democracy and social issues in an era of neoliberalism?

1.1 Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu's Field of Cultural Production

Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) presents a thorough sociological analysis of the art world as a "field" in which power dynamics, hierarchies, and struggles shape the production and reception of art. Bourdieu views the cultural field as one where the relative autonomy of art is contested by economic, political, and institutional forces.

There is, however, a certain power of cultural producers that derives from the autonomy of the field of art. This lies in their ability to critically analyze and define the social world. In doing so, they can expose inequalities or injustices, thereby mobilizing the "ruling classes" - those who are marginalized or oppressed in society. By giving these groups a voice or a platform, cultural producers have the potential to challenge and disrupt existing power structures in society, thus subverting the status quo. Essentially, cultural producers and perhaps especially direct producers (artists) can play a key role in promoting social change through their critical perspectives combined with the ability to articulate free speech. As Bourdieu puts it: "The fact remains that the cultural producers are able to use the power conferred on them, especially in periods of crisis, by their capacity to put forward a critical definition of the social world, to mobilize the potential strength

of the dominated classes and subvert the order prevailing in the field of power.”(Bourdieu, 1993, p. 44)

Bourdieu introduces concepts like *habitus* (the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions people possess) and *cultural capital* (the non-financial social assets that promote social mobility) to explain how artists and institutions operate within this system.

In the first part of *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu argues that the autonomy of the art field has its own logic but is not fully detached from external influences. Artistic success, according to Bourdieu, depends not only on the artist's skill but also on their ability to navigate the power structures within the art world. These structures are dominated by institutions, critics, galleries, and patrons who contribute to defining what is considered legitimate or valuable art. For example, the concept of “art for art’s sake” might emphasize autonomy, but Bourdieu reveals how economic and social forces always play a role in defining artistic production. If we refer to the idea of success, to what legitimizes the artist as an artist, there are in Bourdieu's view three competing principles of legitimation in the art world. There is a principle specific to the autonomy of the artistic field that refers to the recognition granted by other artists, then there is the legitimation offered by the dominant class and the institutions of power and thirdly there is the recognition and legitimation of the general public, the masses (Bourdieu, 1993, p.50-51).

Artistic identity and the way in which the artist perceives himself in relation to society are also constructed starting from the assumed principle of legitimation.

Victoria Alexander’s article, *Heteronomy in the Art Field* (2017), builds on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of the *field of cultural production* to explore the increasing heteronomy in the arts due to state intervention, particularly within the UK’s publicly funded arts sector. As was described earlier, Bourdieu conceived the art field as divided between autonomy and heteronomy, where the autonomous pole values art for art’s sake, independent of commercial or political pressures, and the heteronomous pole is dominated by commercial influences. Alexander extends Bourdieu’s analysis by arguing that the state, driven by neoliberal ideologies, has become a major force of heteronomy in the art field, especially through the mechanisms of public funding.

Alexander’s study of the UK’s arts sector demonstrates how the state’s neoliberal agenda has led to the imposition of market-oriented business practices on publicly funded arts organizations,

especially starting from 1979 when Margaret Thatcher became the Prime Minister. This shift undermines the autonomy traditionally enjoyed by these institutions, forcing them to align with broader economic goals, such as increasing audience numbers, improving efficiency, and demonstrating "value for money." She terms this the "Faustian bargain" (Alexander, 2017) whereby arts organizations accept state funding, only to find that they must sacrifice artistic autonomy and conform to managerial practices imposed by the state. This penetration of neoliberal values into the cultural sector reveals that heteronomy is not limited to market forces but can also stem from political influence.

Alexander's argument is particularly relevant to our research question, which explores how artists perceive their roles in relation to society and whether they feel a sense of responsibility towards democracy and social issues. In a neoliberal context, where the state imposes instrumentalized goals on art institutions, artists may find their creative autonomy compromised, limiting their ability to engage critically with social and political issues. It is not only the question of government funds that are allocated to artists but also the business language used in such circumstances that makes the economic perspective on the artistic field seem as natural as possible.

Alexander's analysis suggests that artists working within state-funded organizations may be constrained by the need to meet state-defined objectives, such as audience development or economic impact, rather than freely pursuing artistic or political expression. This resonates with Bourdieu's concern about the erosion of autonomy in the art field due to external pressures, whether from the market or the state.

Julia Peters and Henk Roose's article *From Starving Artist to Entrepreneur* (2020) contributes to the discourse on how artists navigate the increasingly complex relationship between autonomy and heteronomy in the context of state support and market pressures. Peters and Roose investigate how artists in Flanders, Belgium, from 1965 to 2015, justified their grant proposals, revealing how they adapted their rhetoric and strategies over time in response to shifting expectations. Using Bourdieu's framework of autonomy and heteronomy, the study highlights the ways in which artists strategically engage with both field-internal (autonomous) and field-external (heteronomous) justifications, reflecting broader socio-political shifts.

The article identifies six types of justifications artists used in their grant proposals: reputational, aesthetic, romantic, social, academic, and entrepreneurial.⁶ The first three (reputational, aesthetic, and romantic) align with autonomous logic, focusing on art for art's sake, the artist's inherent drive, and recognition within the art field. The latter three (social, academic, and entrepreneurial) reflect heteronomous pressures, where artists justify their work in terms of its social impact, academic value, or business potential.

Significantly, Peters and Roose show that after the 1990s, artists increasingly employed heteronomous justifications, reflecting broader changes in cultural policy and the professionalization of the arts. The rise of the entrepreneurial justification, in particular, illustrates the influence of neoliberal ideologies, where artists are expected to present themselves as self-reliant professionals who manage their careers like businesses. This shift, as the two authors note, marks a departure from the romantic image of the “starving artist” toward a new model of the artist as a creative entrepreneur.

The analysis of the evolving justifications in artists' grant proposals directly connects to Victoria Alexander's (2017) exploration of heteronomy in the arts. Both articles highlight how neoliberal policies and state interventions impose managerial, market-driven expectations on artists and arts organizations, forcing them to align with non-artistic goals. Alexander emphasizes the state's role in shaping cultural production, particularly in the UK, where public funding increasingly comes with strings attached—such as demands for efficiency, audience engagement, and social impact.

As Peters and Roose show, artists are increasingly required to justify their work in terms that align with broader societal values, such as social engagement or entrepreneurial success. The pressure to produce measurable social outcomes can lead to a superficial form of participation, where art is instrumentalized for political or social goals without fostering genuine democratic debate or transformation.

In the same vein, in *Art Incorporated* (2004), Julian Stallabrass critiques the commodification of contemporary art in the era of globalization. He argues that the global art market has transformed art into a luxury commodity, subject to the same capitalist logic that governs other forms of

⁶ These six justifications are inspired by the work "On justification" by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot.

economic production. Stallabrass focuses on how large-scale biennials, art fairs, and galleries reinforce market-driven values, often at the expense of artistic autonomy and criticality. In his book he focuses on the entanglement of art with market forces, exploring how contemporary art has become an integral part of the global economy, mirroring the structures of finance and capitalism. Stallabrass highlights how the art world, which once prided itself on autonomy, has increasingly become subsumed by corporate interests, mass media, and a culture of spectacle. He illustrates these tendencies by the fact that Madonna announced the Tate Turner Prize in 2001 (Stallabrass, 2004, p.148)

One of Stallabrass's central themes is the idea that the art world has created a "zone of freedom," where art is ostensibly free from the rules and restrictions of mass culture and everyday life:

"the profession of artist is so popular, [...] because it offers the prospect of a labour that is apparently free of narrow specialization, allowing the artist, like heroes in the movies, to endow work and life with their own meanings." (Stallabrass, 2004, p.3)

However, Stallabrass dismantles this notion by showing that this so-called freedom is an illusion. Art is not free from commercial pressures but is rather a niche within the broader capitalist economy, where wealthy patrons, collectors, and corporations play a significant role in determining the direction of artistic production.

Stallabrass also emphasizes the role of spectacle in contemporary art, comparing the production and display of art to the practices of the entertainment industry. He critiques large-scale exhibitions and biennials, which have become platforms for artists to showcase work that often emphasizes visual spectacle over critical engagement. These events, he argues, are designed to attract attention from both the public and the art market, reducing art to a form of cultural consumption rather than a space for critical reflection.

Stallabrass's critique of the commercialization of art aligns with earlier discussions by Bourdieu and Alexander on the heteronomy of the art field. He contends that the increasing market orientation of art limits its potential for social critique, as artists are often pressured to conform to market demands and produce work that is easily commodifiable.

1.2 The Invention of Art: Art as a Cultural Construct

Fine arts and the artist as concepts illustrating special skills and preoccupations that go beyond mundane concerns are social constructs. Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art* (2001) examines the historical construction of "art" as a distinct category from craft, entertainment, and other forms of creative labor. He traces the division between "high" and "low" art to the Enlightenment period, when the notion of the artist as a unique, autonomous genius began to solidify. (Shiner, 2001, p.199-206) Shiner argues that before this, there was no clear distinction between art and craft, and both were considered valuable forms of creative expression.

This distinction, which became more pronounced with the advent of modernity, has profound implications for how we understand the role of the artist in society. Shiner points out that by sacralizing art—elevating it above the realm of everyday life and commerce—the art world created a division that still affects how art is produced and consumed today. This sacralization, however, also restricts art's social function by enclosing it in a rarefied space, where it is appreciated only by an elite.

In *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (2002), Lawrence Levine explores how American culture constructed a hierarchy between "high" and "low" forms of art, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. Levine's analysis in Part Two, *The Sacralization of Art*, shows how opera, classical music, and fine art became associated with high culture, while popular forms of entertainment—vaudeville, jazz, and film—were relegated to the lower rungs of cultural hierarchy. This cultural stratification was not just aesthetic but also deeply political and social, as it reflected broader divisions between classes and races.

Levine's is a good way to understand how the sacralization of art contributed to the marginalization of certain groups, as high art became synonymous with the tastes and values of the elite, while more accessible forms of art were devalued. For example, the way in which chromolithography and especially photography are excluded as artistic media reflects the process by which artistic production is denied to the masses, art being exclusively "unique products of the rare individual spirit"(Levine, 2002, p.161)

He critiques the rigid distinctions that developed and challenges the notion that high art is inherently superior or more valuable than popular art. This critique resonates with contemporary debates about the democratization of art and the role of popular culture in shaping collective identities.

1.3 Arts and Technology

Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) is a foundational text for understanding the relationship between art and technology. Benjamin famously argued that the mechanical reproduction of art, through photography and film, had profound implications for how art was valued and experienced. The uniqueness or "aura" of the artwork, which was once tied to its singular existence in time and space, was eroded by its mass reproduction. Benjamin suggests that the decay of aura, caused by the desire of the masses to bring things closer and the tendency towards reproducibility, is a social determination. It is a reflection of the changing values, aspirations, and demands of mass movements in modern society. The desire for closeness and the quest for reproducibility challenge traditional notions of uniqueness and aura, ultimately reshaping the experience and perception of art and other cultural phenomena. We can understand the work of art by starting from the tension that exists between its cult value and its exhibition value, and how these two poles counterbalance each other. (Benjamin, 2008, p.25-26)

This shift, according to Benjamin, had democratizing potential, as art became accessible to a wider audience. However, it also introduced new challenges, as the political and social function of art changed in the age of mass media.

The text of Paul Virilio's *Art and Fear* (2003) examines also the effects of technology and media on art and society. Virilio argues that the acceleration of technological change has produced a culture of fear, where artists are increasingly alienated from traditional modes of production. He is particularly concerned with the impact of new media on the perception of art, as digital reproduction and mass communication have transformed the way art is experienced and consumed.

Virilio's concerns about the alienating effects of technology echo Walter Benjamin's famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), in which Benjamin argues, as we saw above, that the reproducibility of art through photography and film has fundamentally altered its aura and cultural significance. For Virilio, the speed at which images and information circulate

in the digital age creates a disorienting effect, reducing the critical distance necessary for reflection and contemplation.

1.4 The economy of art

Hans Abbing's *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts* (2002) provides an overview of the economic conditions facing artists. It explores why, despite low average incomes, many continue to pursue artistic careers. Abbing argues that the art world operates in an "exceptional economy," where traditional economic principles do not always apply. He points to 21 aspects that contribute to the exceptional nature of the arts economy including the fact that art and artists have a very high status, that artists will be disinterested in profit as a sign of their authenticity and the art they produce, and last but not least, the mystified way in which art and its role have been conceived in relation to other fields of activity. (Abbing, 2002, 282-283)

Abbing identifies a number of factors contributing to the difficult economic situation of artists. A central theme is the tension between the "gift economy" and the commercial market. He argues that while art can be sold as a commodity, it also exists in a domain that values symbolic over monetary capital. The public and many artists embrace the idea that true art is a gift—something priceless, beyond commercial exchange. This romanticized view upholds the notion that artists are selflessly dedicated to their craft, prioritizing creativity and cultural value over financial gain. (Abbing, 2002, 81-83)

Moreover, Abbing highlights the oversupply of artists as a structural issue. He notes that the abundance of aspiring artists leads to intense competition, driving down wages and increasing the likelihood of economic hardship. Many artists continue to work for low or no pay, driven by the belief in the authenticity of their creative work and the potential for future recognition. Abbing also points out that government subsidies, while intended to alleviate artists' poverty, can unintentionally exacerbate the problem by signaling that pursuing an artistic career is a viable option, further increasing the number of artists vying for limited resources.

Abbing's analysis intersects with Victoria Alexander's discussion of heteronomy in the arts. Alexander emphasizes how neoliberal policies and state funding mechanisms shape the art world, imposing external demands on artistic production. Similarly, Abbing critiques the ways in which government subsidies, intended to support artists, may actually perpetuate poverty by drawing

more individuals into the profession than the market can sustain. This overlap reveals a nuanced aspect of heteronomy: state support, while designed to protect artistic autonomy, can introduce market-like dynamics and contribute to the precarious conditions artists face.

Both Abbing and Alexander expand on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the *field of cultural production*, which describes the art field as existing in a constant struggle between autonomy and heteronomy. Bourdieu underscores the role of symbolic capital (prestige, recognition) in the art field, distinguishing it from economic capital. Abbing delves into this dynamic, arguing that artists' pursuit of symbolic capital often comes at the expense of economic security. In the art field, symbolic value is prioritized over market value, reinforcing the myth that artists should suffer for their art. This aligns with Bourdieu's perspective on how cultural production operates within its own set of values and hierarchies, separate from the commercial market.

Furthermore, Abbing's exploration of the "mythology of the arts" resonates with Bourdieu's ideas about the social construction of the art world. Bourdieu suggests that the art field functions according to its own internal logic, where authenticity and self-sacrifice are valorized. Abbing supports this view by illustrating how the art market's exceptional status—rooted in the belief that true art cannot be equated with monetary value—sustains artists' economic struggles. What Abbing calls the mythology of art underlies the ideal of the selfless artist, who pursues art for its own sake rather than for financial rewards, is perpetuated by both the market and cultural institutions, leading to the structural poverty that many artists experience. (Abbing, 2002, 30-31)

Abbing's analysis explores how artists perceive their roles in society and their responsibility towards democracy and social issues. The myth of the "starving artist" shapes artists' self-perception and their relationship with society. By valuing symbolic capital over economic gain, artists often position themselves as serving a higher purpose—contributing to culture, democracy, and social change. This self-conception is linked to the idea that art has an intrinsic social value that transcends market dynamics, a belief that drives many artists to accept economic hardships.

1.5 Relations and Participation

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) proposes a framework for understanding contemporary art practices centered on human interactions and social exchanges rather than on traditional object-based artworks. Bourriaud argues that art in the 1990s and beyond focuses on

the creation of social spaces, fostering community and collective experiences. He identifies a shift in contemporary art towards the "realm of human interactions and its social context," suggesting that the artwork is less an isolated object and more an active site for relational encounters and dialogues. The challenge and chance of contemporary art is according to Bourriaud's theory „...learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution.” (Bourriaud, 2002, p.5)

Bourriaud's theory revolves around the idea that art's primary function in the contemporary era is to create relational spaces. Contemporary art exhibitions function as spaces that break away from the structures of everyday life, offering areas and periods of time that operate on a different rhythm. They promote a form of human interaction distinct from the usual "communication zones" that society typically imposes on us. (Bourriaud N, 2002:6)

By focusing on relational art practices, Bourriaud highlights a model where artists see themselves not just as creators of aesthetic objects but as facilitators of social interactions and communal experiences. This shift in artistic practice aligns with a broader democratic impulse, as it decentralizes the role of the artist, blurs the line between artist and audience, and emphasizes collective participation.

Relational aesthetics implies that the artist's social responsibility extends to the creation of spaces that encourage dialogue, interaction, and community building. However, Bourriaud also points to a potential limitation: while relational artworks create new forms of sociability, they often do so within the "safe" confines of the art world, which can limit their impact on broader social and political issues. This is also where Claire Bishop's critique of relational aesthetics goes. Realistically analyzing the facts, those who are involved in this type of social interaction represent a small group of people with a clear interest in art. Beneficial to some extent, this type of communication is not, however, emblematic of democracy (Bishop, 2004, p.67).

Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012) and her earlier article, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents" (2006), provide a critical exploration of participatory art practices. Bishop argues that the growing trend of socially engaged and participatory art since the 1990s challenges traditional modes of spectatorship, authorship, and the relationship between art and life. However, she also critiques the limitations and potential pitfalls of this "social turn."

In *Artificial Hells*, Bishop examines a wide array of participatory art projects that focus on collaboration, community involvement, and social engagement. She points out that these works often redefine the role of the artist from an individual creator to a facilitator of social interactions, placing the audience in the position of co-producers rather than mere viewers. Bishop contrasts these practices with Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, arguing that the projects she discusses are not merely about relational aesthetics but about a more politicized process of participation. According to Bishop:

Participatory projects in the social field therefore seem to operate with a twofold gesture of opposition and amelioration. They work against dominant market imperatives by diffusing single authorship into collaborative activities...Instead of supplying the market with commodities, participatory art is perceived to channel art's symbolic capital towards constructive social change. (Bishop, 2012, p.12-13)

In "The Social Turn," Bishop emphasizes the diversity of collaborative practices, from community-based projects to interventions in public spaces. She critiques the automatic assumption that all participatory practices are inherently radical or socially beneficial. Instead, Bishop calls for a more critical examination of these works as art, highlighting the need to assess their aesthetic, political, and social complexities. She challenges the notion that participation and collaboration should be judged solely on ethical grounds, such as the artist's intentions or the equitable involvement of participants, arguing that this focus on ethics can overshadow the artistic and conceptual value of the work.

Bishop's critical stance questions the emphasis on ethical models of collaboration in participatory art, where the artist's role is often downplayed in favor of participant-driven processes. In both *Artificial Hells* and "The Social Turn," she observes that this ethical evaluation often leads to an automatic valorization of participatory projects, assuming them to be successful merely by virtue of their social intentions. For example, she recalls the Oda Projesi art project initiated by three Turkish artists who organize events and workshops for their neighbors. For these artists "dynamic and sustained relationships provide their markers of success, not aesthetic considerations." (Bishop, 2006)

For Bishop, this approach can result in art that aligns too comfortably with neoliberal agendas of social inclusion, where participation becomes a tool for soft social engineering rather than genuine critique or transformation.

She warns against the instrumentalization of art within state or institutional agendas, where art is reduced to measurable outcomes, such as community development or social harmony. This critique directly connects to Victoria Alexander's examination of heteronomy in the art field, where external pressures from the state or market impose constraints on artistic autonomy. Both Bishop and Alexander highlight how the imposition of managerial goals—like social inclusion or economic impact—can compromise the radical potential of art.

Bishop's work provides a nuanced perspective on how artists perceive their roles and responsibilities within society and democratic contexts. Her critique of participatory art challenges the assumption that artists' engagement with social and political issues inherently aligns with a democratic ethos. By emphasizing the need for critical evaluation, Bishop questions whether these practices genuinely empower participants or simply reproduce existing social structures. This line of inquiry is crucial to your research question, which seeks to understand how artists navigate their societal roles and the tension between artistic autonomy and social responsibility.

Also, in line with Bourdieu, Bishop recognizes that even socially engaged art cannot escape the influence of external forces, such as state funding, institutional expectations, and market pressures.

In synthesizing these varied perspectives, this literature review underscores the ongoing struggle for artistic autonomy within a field increasingly dominated by market and state influences. The works of Bourdieu, Alexander, Peters, Stallabrass, and others collectively highlight the complex ways in which artists must negotiate their identities, economic realities, and social responsibilities in a neoliberal context. Despite the pressures to conform to managerial and market-driven goals, there remains a critical space within which artists can challenge societal norms, foster democratic engagement, and explore the interplay between art and politics. However, as scholars like Bishop argue, the effectiveness and authenticity of these efforts are contingent upon a careful navigation of external pressures and a critical evaluation of artistic practices. Ultimately, this review sets the stage for further exploration of the artist's position in society, examining how they reconcile the competing demands of artistic integrity, social engagement, and economic survival in contemporary cultural production.

2. Methodology

In order to answer the main question of this research, it was opted for semi-structured interviews with artists. This method allows for an in-depth and flexible exploration of artists' perceptions. Who could better relate how artists perceive themselves in relation to society than the artists themselves?

The above question seems as legitimate as possible because sometimes what the artist reveals to us is not enough and this for several reasons. The first is that what I feel in relation to society is not a datum structured from the beginning and fixed once and for all, so that an interview is just a clear record of one position or another. Opinions, ideas as well as conceptions can fluctuate and sometimes change radically. There is a historical, and not necessarily obviously coherent or logical, processuality to the way I relate to society. For example, the slowness of some expected social changes may induce a feeling of resignation or abandonment of a type of activism specific to a possible phase in an artistic life or, on the contrary, a radicalization of artistic positions or practices. J.R., one of the artists interviewed in the course of this research, makes explicit reference to his past political involvement through his art and the way in which, disappointed by the subsequent events, he radically changed his views on the candidate he had supported. At the same time, he abandoned political and social themes in his art.

The second reason is that the artist exists in a world of constraints, interdependencies and limitations imposed by himself (self censorship) or by other actors of the cultural field, which makes his economic and status interests sometimes conflict with the explicit and public assumption of moral or ideological positions. We can mention here the way in which, following Bourdieu⁷ and completing his approach, V. Alexander illustrates the involvement of state institutions in the legitimization and adoption of an economic ideology in exchange for the funding of art world organizations. (Alexander, 2018)

⁷ Bourdieu insists on how the autonomy of the art world is undermined by the introduction of economic hierarchization criteria, in which profit and success with the public are criteria of value for the appreciation of the artist and his work (Bourdieu, 1993, p.40-52).

What I would like to emphasize by this excursion is that although the direct approach of the artist is as legitimate as possible in the logic of this research, the data can be completed by means of additional sources even if, we must admit, they are not always predictable or completely accessible to the researcher.

Let's list some possibilities, with the caveat that they will not be explored extensively in this thesis: posts, social network accounts, texts (e.g. manifesto theory, but not exclusively⁸). Sometimes, curators of galleries, exhibitions, collectors, can provide relevant information on this topic. The artwork itself and the critics' opinions of it. Direct observation, generated by certain contexts or accounts of close friends or acquaintances can all be valuable sources of data to support research.

2.1. Interviews with artists

Our choice was mainly directed towards the semi-structured interview method because we felt that the artist has reflected by the nature of their activity⁹(Archer, 2000, p.222-227), at least implicitly, on how they feel they relate to society. Another reason for our choice was that through the semi-structured interview a possible processual character of the artist's self-perception in relation to society could be better highlighted (in the personal and coherent logic of the narrative). We could identify, perhaps, a certain type of architecture influenced by the typology of social relations specific to artistic life and this focus on the artist's relationship with society made the choice of the semi-structured interview appear to be the most pragmatic option (Bryman, 2012, 472).

In three cases the interviews were taken with Romanian artists using the Zoom platform. In the first case, A.A. wanted to answer the questions in an additional written form and later provided me with a "personal brand" in the form of an artistic CV. The duration of the interview with A.A. was 1h,12min.

A.A. was also the one who suggested and facilitated the focus group, which he could not participate in for unexpected reasons, but joined us towards the end. In any case the focus group took place

⁸ For example, I thought it was possible to reconstruct the position of the artist Marina Vargas starting from the explanatory text provided in relation to The Tribe mask collection presented at ARCO Lisboa 2024

⁹ At this point we are not referring strictly to the subject of his creation, but to give an example, to the relationship with his audience or the interaction with the institutions that surround his activity.

and included a discussion of 1h,7min,30 sec, with the other four members of the artistic group "Visual Light Crew" of which A.A. is a member.

The last interview with a Romanian artist L.C. also took place through the Zoom platform and lasted almost 55 minutes.

Table.3.1. Individual interviews through the Zoom platform

Name	Nationality	Gender	Age interval	Interview duration
A.A.	Romanian	M	25-40	72,42min
L.C.	Romanian	F	Over 70	54,46 min

Table.3.2. Focus Group Interviews through the Zoom platform

Name	Nationality	Gender	Age interval	Interview duration
N.U.	Romanian	M	25-40	67,30 min
M.D.	Romanian	F	25-40	
R.S.	Romanian	F	25-40	
R.C.	Romanian	M	25-40	

I also followed events relevant to the research topic that took place in Lisbon and tried to get data as much as possible, especially through direct interaction.

One such occasion was the public interview journalist Ricardo Costa conducted with artist Ai Wei Wei. The meeting took place at the Gulbenkian Museum and the pretext was the launch of the graphic novel "Zodiac", however the interview focused on politics and society, illustrating in fact the artist's concepts on the major themes of socio-political debate in society.

The last two events I took the opportunity to collect relevant data for my research were ARCO Lisboa 2024¹⁰ and Vision Art Fair Lisboa 2024¹¹.

In the case of ARCO there were two relevant situations/meetings: with the Brazilian artist Ana Hupe I had an informal but substantive conversation, starting from one of her works, exhibited at the Portas Vilaseca gallery pavilion. The conversation then extended into an email exchange that provided me with the artist's position on the research topic.

The second meeting started with the gallery representative Fernando Pradilla who gave me details about the works of the artist Marina Vargas. Marina Vargas and I also got in touch later by email and she was kind enough to answer my questions.

Regarding Vision Art Fair Lisboa 2024 I had access to the data contained in four semi-structured interviews taken on site with artists who had exhibited their works at this event, the average time was 20.52 min/interview.

Tabel.3.3. Face to face interviews at Vision Art Fair Lisboa 2024

Name	Nationality	Gender	Age interval	Interview duration
N.C.	British	F	55-70	15,33 min
V.G.	Ukrainian/Portuguese	F	40-55	10,51 min
J.R.	American	M	55-70	37,29 min
R.G.	Italian	M	40-55	18,08 min

For both, the face-to-face interviews and the interviews recorded through the Zoom platform, the transcript was obtained using the "podium" software (<https://podium.page/dashboard>).

¹⁰ <https://www.ifema.es/pt/arco/lisboa>

¹¹ <https://visionartfair.com/location-lisbon>

The advantage of using this software is that the transcripts are obtained in .srt format, which makes it easy to identify the minute of the interview by the quoted line¹². This facilitates a possible secondary analysis of the data obtained (Bryman, 2012,482)

Mr. Dan Perjovsch, one of the most highly-rated Romanian artists in the socio-political sphere, was kind enough to extensively answer the interview questions by email.

In total I obtained data directly from 14 artists and in the case of Ai Wei Wei the data was obtained through direct participation in the event mentioned above.

In the next chapter I will use the words of the participants and the transcripts to illustrate the five dimensions uncovered in the interviews.

2.2 Patterns and themes

As I said, the interview may bring with it confirmations, reconfirmations, nuances or denials of positions that may result, for example, from interpretations of the work or from rethinking and reconceptualizing of past attitudes. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, identifying relevant patterns and themes.

Table.3.4. Relevant patterns and themes

Relevant patterns and themes	Questions
1. Persistence over time	<p>To what extent has there been a family influence on your artistic career?</p> <p>To what extent do you think the environment you grew up in influenced your artistic career?</p> <p>How did you choose/become an artist/career as an artist?</p> <p>How important is success to feeling fulfilled as an artist? How would you describe success in the arts?</p> <p>Is art a profession?</p>

¹² For example, a quote from an interview might appear as: A.A. 1. 25-30, which means that the artist A.A. stated what was quoted in the first part-1 of the interview, lines 25-30. In the .srt format each line corresponds to a time of the interview, thus making it easier to listen again by identifying the exact time.

2. A difficult career/A difficult journey	<p>To what extent has there been a family influence in your artistic career?</p> <p>How did you choose/become an artist/as an artist career?</p> <p>Who is your audience/for whom/what do you create?</p> <p>How do you relate to your peers in general/ is there a sense of belonging?</p> <p>Is art a profession?</p>
3. Economic dimension of an artistic career	<p>To what extent has there been a family influence in your artistic career?</p> <p>Who is your audience/for whom/what do you create?</p> <p>How important is success to feeling fulfilled as an artist? How would you describe success in the arts?</p> <p>Who do you think are the important players/actors in the field?</p> <p>Is art a profession?</p>
4. The artist is a special person	<p>What cultural influences do you think have influenced you during your lifetime?</p> <p>Is talent necessary or is practical exercise sufficient?</p> <p>What does art tell us about life and/or society?</p> <p>How do you relate to your peers in general/ is there a sense of belonging to the group?</p> <p>What role does art/artist play in society?</p>
5. Engagement as a way of validation	<p>How would you describe the creative process?</p> <p>Is there anything that stimulates you in this process?</p>

	<p>Who is your audience/for whom/what do you create?</p> <p>How do you relate to your peers in general/ is there a sense of belonging?</p> <p>How important is success to feeling fulfilled as an artist? How would you describe success in the arts?</p> <p>Who do you think are the important players in this field?</p> <p>How do you see art in society (possibly past and present)?</p>
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3. Results and Discussions

The question from which this research started is "How the artist perceives themselves and their art in relation to society? With this question, we implicitly assume that there is an artistic identity and that it is constructed over time. It is not a stable or coherent or even a continuous identity: it can be interrupted and then resumed or, on the contrary, abandoned once and for all.

I would like to emphasize once again that the research I have carried out includes data collected (whether through interviews, informal discussions or participation in events) exclusively from visual artists: painters, graphic designers, street artists or sculptors.

In the course of our discussions, it was taken for granted that artistic identity presupposes a vision of art in general, as if the boundary between artist and art were a rather blurred one, or as if the discussion about how the artist is perceived in society would fundamentally also involve a discussion about the role and even the content of art in general. When one tends to identify oneself as an artist one will also tend to find/construct a referent for the signifier "art" even if there is not necessarily a coherence between these ideas or conceptions that the artist considers appropriate to define art.

From the interviews conducted and in general from the data collected, some common ideas emerged which we propose to discuss below. These common ideas could create a basis for discussion in order to analyze the kind of ideas that constitute the content of artistic identity today.

3.1. Persistence over time

In order to be considered an artist, your presence in the field/world of art must be persistent, lasting, systematic. The time spent actively in the art world and according to a predetermined role is, among other factors, what legitimizes the identity of an artist. As important as the time actually spent is the existence of a record of it: exhibitions, events, fairs, etc.

To be an artist is to be a professional artist, i.e. to make art a profession and not a hobby (the distinction between art as a profession vs art as a hobby frequently appears during interviews). Related to this aspect it is worth exploring in the persistence framework the distinction between art and craft (which is not seen as art in the proper sense). Art practiced as a hobby does not satisfy the criterion of persistence and craftsmanship, although it satisfies this criterion, fails-perhaps- to satisfy the criterion of uniqueness or quality (this aspect remains to be established/determined and could be a starting point for a discussion about art as a system of differences- reference to poststructuralism)

More concretely, persistence in time means making a living from art, that is, in the words of V.G. "to remain on the market", it also means that "you are a real artist" (N.C. 116), validated by the market and that only under these conditions the purchase of a work of art is justified as an investment and thus becomes more attractive. The persistence of the artistic activity over time and its record validates the investment in a work of art. Here, the similarity with the stock market is obvious: it is desirable to buy shares in a company that has been on the market for a long time because this can be interpreted as a guarantee of stability.

The persistence of artistic activity over time is also a basis for a pricing strategy: the price of works of art rises because the artist perseveres in his activity. This is an indicator of the intensity of the "artistic vocation": in contrast to art practiced as a hobby, perseverance is interpreted as a marker of an increased level of authenticity.

The idea of persistence over time is also justified by corroborating and correlating it with another idea common to these interviews, namely that artistic life is full of "discouragements" and "rejections" (J.R. 654)

N.C. declared "Living from art is an amazing thing to do"(N.C. 71-73) and "becoming an artist is starting a dream" (N.C. 18-19) and not an ordinary existence.

Another expression of persistence is the idea that there are signs of artistic inclination in childhood that may or may not surface, but there is a logic of continuity that makes artistic identity subsumed to the idea of persistence over time.

However, persistence is validative (not sufficient, though) because it takes place in an environment of discouragement and rejection.

3.2. A difficult career/A difficult journey

Another common idea from the interviews is that it is difficult to make a living from art. The artists interviewed relied on their family (J.R. explicitly recalls his wife) or jobs more or less related to the artistic field, in order to continue creating and to cover the costs generated by their creative choice.

Art, especially what since the mid-19th century we call fine arts has been associated with creativity, uniqueness, freedom and originality. Asked to give his opinion on what has changed in art in general, Dan Prejovschi replies: "Everything has exploded. Dozens of biennials, art museums, hundreds of thousands of artists, dozens and dozens of galleries... Hybridity ... multimedia and intermedia."

It's the picture of an extremely diverse and competitive world in which the rules sometimes change too quickly and to which you have to adapt in order to stay in the market.

"Being an artist is also an adaptive process due to the competition" says R.G. (R.G.166-168 and 238-240)

Starting from this idea of the difficulty of artistic life and the need to ensure a stable/persistent presence, the artist opts for certain strategies. For example, N.C. states that he chose art fairs because galleries are "too greedy".

In many cases the artist is not only subject to market pressures, but has to confront other types of constraints. Family support can prove crucial, except that it doesn't always come and when it does, it is likely to be time-limited. A.A. started law school and then became convinced that he wanted to study art. He speaks of a kind of revelation he had in his first year of law school, a revelation that practically propelled him towards an artistic career. However, his family was not supportive from the start and a compromise was necessary: he went to art school but continued his law studies in parallel at a reduced frequency¹³, as a backup in case his artistic career failed.

Another surprising confession made by A.A. is that art school did not teach him much from a technical point of view, but he sees it as a great advantage that he was able to penetrate the artistic world in this way and benefit from the contacts, relationships and common activities with other artists. This confession is consistent with the idea that a relevant artistic education has a positive and significant effect on the survival rates of certain groups of artists, such as actors, musicians, and writers but, for other categories, like visual artists and dancers, education seems to have little impact on their long-term careers. (Bille and Jensen, 2016)

In the overwhelming majority of cases, economic difficulties are most often indicated and, as we have just mentioned, artists will recognize that making a living from art is already a great achievement. Beyond the particular contexts, the causes of this situation are structural and are related to the type of economy specific to art. Abbing H. explains in "Why are artists poor?" the main characteristics of this economy, which he calls an "economy of an exceptional type"

L.C. describes her artistic journey underlining the difficulty of access to the recognized artistic world during the dictatorial regime in Romania. She remembers that she failed the first attempt at admission to the Faculty of Fine Arts, painting section, and only succeeded the second time. There were only 9 places each academic year allocated to painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cluj Napoca, a city in the heart of Transylvania. Admission to the university is in this way an indication of the merit, talent and hard work of the candidate and also the guarantee of an artistic career in a system where the state, through its censorship mechanisms, controls every aspect of it: the subjects, the form of expression, etc.

¹³ A.A. managed to finish law school after 8 years

The market economy system also integrates the art market and the natural consequence is that "it's hard to make it in today's art world" (L.C.210) "There are a lot of creators and it's very difficult to become known" (L.C.116) and so, in this context the remark "I've been a teacher all my life" (L.C.) is a bitter acknowledgment not so much of artistic failure as of society's failure to give art and artists the recognition they deserve. Technology is also an important part, though certainly not the only part¹⁴, of the proliferation of artists. N.U. believes that art is being changed by technology in the form of the accessibility of tutorials and videos detailing the creative process, so that art consumers are tempted to take the step to become creators themselves. This idea resonates with observation No. 19 of those which, in Abbing's view, illustrate the exceptional character of the arts economy: unlike other professions, anyone can have access to the body of knowledge (techniques, materials, etc.) of the arts (Abbing, 2002, p.283).

In addition to the economic difficulties, there is the difficulty imposed by the existing power relations in the art world. The difficulty of adapting to the current art world is also generated by what is considered/defined today as art: "You are somehow looked down upon when you try to draw a line between bad taste and good taste." (L.C.237) Discussing success and the key actors in the art world, L.C. emphasizes the idea that there are a small number of actors who decide how success is distributed out of "an impressively large number of art-makers: those who stand out represent an infinitely small number and the rest remain..."(L.C.92)

The same situation seems to be transposed also at the macrosocial level, more precisely in the way society establishes values, roles and status differentiations, but not at the level of financial reward but more at the level of acceptance and respect that society gives to individuals.

N.U. considers that the artist does not fit into the capitalist labor pattern because he often refuses the idea of a career as it is commonly understood today, i.e. accessing different levels through specific actions in what can be outlined as a coherent career, predictable over a specific time span. The consequence of this is that the respect accorded to artists is not the same as that society accords to, for example, doctors or lawyers. The artistic way of life should be recognized as viable, acceptable, meaningful, as legitimate as that of doctors or lawyers. Hence the need for

¹⁴ In addition to the attractiveness resulting from the sacralization of art (Abbing, 2002, p.12-33) there are also causes related to the accessibility of education, the increase of the standard of living and the general well-being of a society.

dialog/engagement with the public on the role and functions of art in society, a dialog that often proves extremely difficult. The acceptance of artistic life as a meaningful way of life seems to depend on the communication relationship with a public that should be educated in this sense.

I don't want to end this excursion without mentioning at least one category of constraints that make an artistic career what I have called "a difficult journey". I called this category "moral and intellectual difficulties". It is not a category that belongs exclusively to the arts, but one could certainly identify a certain specificity of this category¹⁵ in the artistic field. The term "moral" also refers to the way in which moral criteria come to predominate in the appreciation of works of art, as Claire Bishop shows (Bishop C, 2006), but also to the artist's position in relation to the socio-political themes that dominate the contemporary world.

Dan Perjovshi presents his professional trajectory as a path along which he has learned (as he himself confesses) about minority rights, social inclusion and the fact that, for example, the closure of a mine or a factory should not be seen only through the eyes of the neoliberal ideology that was insinuating itself in the early 1990s in the space left empty by the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe: Real people and their lives matter.

Intellectually speaking, the question always remains (for oneself as well as for one's audience) whether the artist has achieved his or her goal (whatever that may be). Probably the most challenging question is posed in the case of artists for whom social change is one of the roles that the artist must assume: "the role of an artist can be similar to the one of a scientist, if we consider that both are laboring for a social transformation. We add layers to the way we have been reading the world so far". (Ana Hupe) Dan Perjovschi presents his role in similar terms: "I draw in order to understand... I am always preparing myself to be an interpreter, a translator of the (political, social) world for the common world..."

3.3. Economic dimension of an artistic career

The creative side of an artistic career is preferred to the economic side.

¹⁵ For example, one could discuss how artistic practice, the creative process, and the artwork are shaped by ethical reflection.

The artists interviewed would prefer someone else to deal with this aspect. Sales negotiations, pricing strategies are parts that have to be done, are unavoidable but are perceived as unpleasant, burdensome.

J.R. says "I can't sell, I'm an artist!" (J.R.624-625) reiterating the idea that the artist is not a businessman.

An interesting example is illustrated by the American artist J.R. He confesses that he could sell a car, but not a work of art or especially his own work of art. His justification is that "a car is just a car", and according to him there is no personal involvement in selling a car. Instead, he confesses: "Trying to sell you my painting it is like suffering".(J.R. 850-851)

The car is not a creation in itself but a mass-produced product that can be evaluated in terms of objective costs and the real conditions of the market in question. But it is difficult to apply the same criteria to a work of art and this makes us wonder: why is a particular work of art valuable?

"Validation from the art system is very important and if you don't have that, you have to basically validate yourself,"(J.R.694) meaning that among other things, you have to believe strongly enough that your works have value.

The work of art, however, lacks the objective validation criteria as in the case of an ordinary car, let's say: perhaps the difficulty of doing the economic part related to sales is generated by this structural lack of knowledge. The rapid change in the rules of art, felt by some artists, reminds us of a corporatist model of organizing practice in which the emphasis is placed on what at a given moment (and often for a short time) constitute the so-called performance indicators.

"Visual Light Crew"¹⁶ is organized according to a business model. It is an artistic group of 5 members, 4 artists and an organizer. They set up their own company after they were cheated on the payment for their first work (a mural commissioned by a construction company) and the suggestion came from the very person who paid them much less for their work: "if you had a company I wouldn't be able to afford to do this" (AA.2.713-722). This type of practice confirms Bourdieu's description and warnings about the penetration of the artistic field by the heteronomous

¹⁶ <https://vlight-crew.com/>

principles of economics. (Alexander V, 2017, p.5-8) The artistic strategies of the group adapt to several types of considerations: type of product, type of project, relationship needs.

Here below, how a schematization of the group economy might look like. For example, often a mural painting is a group project involving participation in an open-call for projects, a work commissioned by the local authorities but in which other cultural associations may be involved.

The project itself, but also its execution presuppose an adjustment/combination/harmonization of artistic styles of the members of the group which are not unitary. There is also an economic part which implies the signing of contracts but also a part of design and logistics. Of course, each stage of the project involves the management of specific relationships¹⁷ with all actors involved.

<u>Type of product</u>	<u>Type of project</u>	<u>Relationship needs</u>
1.Design	1.Business	1.Clients/customers
2.Mural painting	2.Group projects (related to	2.Public
3.Illustrations, stencils, graffiti	events, NGOs, etc)	3.Group members
4.Individual products (paintings)	3.Individual projects	4.Officials/Authorities
5.Performance (social projects)		5.Partners

¹⁷ Professional business relationships, cooperation with group members, family (the group includes two married couples), the ethics of these relationships has its significant part.

Selling is described as a process that involves objective aspects-standardization conventions- that refer us to Becker's "Artworld". (Becker, 2008, p.55-67)

To paint big or small, it becomes a strategic question: a model of the artist I want to be and that must be chosen. "You have to think to the right size and the right content" (J.R.483-485), because sometimes the size no longer allows the buyer to take his painting or installation and walk out the door with it.

And yet money... Success can be quantifiable in money/sales but also in persistence on the market (this can mean in concrete terms sales that allow the validation of a professional artistic career, i.e. making a living from art; but also consecration as an artist).

3.4. The artist is a special person

Art and the artist are special in at least two distinctive senses. In the first sense art is seen as a practice that is concerned with transcendence, communication about what would illustrate the human condition, the "divine/sacred"¹⁸ aspect of the human soul, authentic and meaningful reality, authentic human life, etc.

In the second sense the artist is special because through his art he is involved in the social and political life of the city. He is, alongside the journalist, philosopher, activist and sociologist, a kind of defender of society, but not from the perspective of an established political order, but from a perspective that is universally valid.

The question about the socio-political responsibility of the artist and whether the role of art should be political brought out the following fact: the answers were nuanced or straightforward, but regardless of these answers, what emerged as a point of articulation is the understanding of art and the artist as having an important role in human life: either by the fact that it addresses a superior instance of the mundane (political, social - here the Kantian view of art is evident) or by the fact that art possesses a certain power to change society.

¹⁸ Divine/sacred are not terms used here in a strictly religious sense, but neither do they exclude the religious sense. We think of the sacred understood as ganz andere (R. Otto) or power and reality (M. Eliade)

Perhaps the strongest idea that emerged from the focus group discussion was the need to draw/delineate the boundary between art and "normality". This idea emerged several times and in different forms throughout the discussion.

N.U. believes that an artist "has to feel somehow special in order to be able to create" (FcG1-11-13) The artist has to be able to see something different from a normal person. (FcG1-14-18) M.D. in the same context believes that social and political issues are more in the attention of practical people concerned with their surroundings. In contrast to those preoccupied with the visible realm, the artist views the world through a more poetic lens. (FcG1-136-144) Someone who has no connection whatsoever with the field of art will consider the artist's views radically different from those of the "normal man", different in the sense of naivety, madness or idealism. (FcG1-327-340)

R.S. has the experience of the distance between art/artist and the ordinary man also from the perspective of her experience as a teacher at several schools: she had to teach others that art is not just drawings and doodles and her conclusion is that "the world is narrow-minded when it comes to something new - in reference to art. (FcG1-425-462)

Boundary drawing is a way in which the autonomy of a field is asserted and reaffirmed and this is justified by a number of considerations such as delineation of the most privileged positions (power), legitimacy of access to resources, prestige of the field and of the practitioners within it, definition of goals and what could possibly be called a career, blocking interference from other fields or in other words protecting autonomy. A similar phenomenon, for example, is the way in which science at the end of the 19th century attempts to separate itself from religion and mechanics. In this period, science is presented as the embodiment of human culture: "Science need not justify its work by pointing to its technological applications, for science has nobler uses as a means of intellectual discipline and as the epitome of human culture" (Gieryn, 1983).

In the same way, to say that the artist and his art should not get involved in politics or in the ordinary affairs of the city is to assert the purity and superiority of art but also its autonomy.

N.C. believes that: "Art should speak to the heart, it shouldn't be political or anything like that." (184-186) and that the orientation of art towards politics and social issues is just a fashion that will disappear in a few years. In the same vein R.G. declares that "I feel like art should be a little bit

above (politics) in a way." If a work of art becomes too political, it loses its artistic aura (W. Benjamin) and risks turning into propaganda (R.G. 71-80).

In his turn, J.R. believes in the transformative power of art, but not in the formula of activism but rather in the effect that art has on the public. (J.R. 278-292) J.R.'s artistic-political experience was deceptive because, he himself confesses, power corrupts and he was too naive.¹⁹ (J.R.302-380) In fact, politics is seen as a way in which art can be corrupted.

Another way to assert that the artist is a special person is the idea of dedication: the artist's life is devoted to art. The artist should not involve himself more than an ordinary man in the life of the city because "then he is no longer dedicated to the work he is doing...You are either a politician or a creator" (L.C. 233-236)

This way of looking at things is consistent with the idea of permanence discussed above. You are an authentic artist if you persist in this activity, if you treat art as perhaps the most important thing (or one of the most important things) and the fact that you persist beyond all difficulties indicates in fact the existence of a predestination, of an inner calling. There are, L.C. admits, other professions which allow you to become more involved in politics, but not art, which demands total dedication (L.C.237-240).

On the other hand, the activist artist also believes that art can change society and it is precisely this power that makes it special. Art does not speak in the name of an ideology but in the name of universal values: it is special because it tells the truth.

Trying to gather material for this research, I attended a public meeting that the Chinese artist (currently based in Portugal) Ai Weiwei had with journalist Ricardo Costa.²⁰ The pretext of the meeting was the launch of the graphic novel "Zodiac", but the discussion quickly veered away from the subject of the book to political and social issues. To Costa's question, "Does art fight for democracy?", Ai replied that the desire for freedom (specific to democracy) is a natural desire. Art can help us to understand who we are as well as our history says Ai, that, for example, the

¹⁹ J.R.'s incursion into politics and the transformation of his political views are also described in this article: <https://www.washingtonian.com/2021/01/13/trump-loving-artist-julian-raven-calls-on-president-to-resign/>

²⁰ Here are the details of this meeting: <https://cartazculturallisboa.pt/evento/ai-weiwei-a-conversa-com-ricardo-costa-na-fundacao-calouste-gulbenkian/>

phenomenon of migration is linked to colonialism and globalization. “My art is my political view, they can’t be separated”, says Ai Weiwei.

Here is the belief that art is able and has a duty to tell the truth and that in certain circumstances artistic discourse is a discourse of truth, alongside the discourse of social sciences and philosophy. As Foucault puts it, the parrhesiastic discourse is characterized by frankness, truth, danger, criticism, duty. (Foucault, 2001, p.12-20): „...precisely, parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself).” (Foucault, 2001, p.19)

What may give art an advantage is the fact that its products are probably addressed to a wider audience and being delivered to the senses, they appeal not only to the intellect but also to human emotion.

So art and implicitly the artist are special in at least two senses: art communicates what cannot in principle be communicated: the ineffable, the transcendent, the authentic, the real. In the second sense, even anchored in mundane realities, art and the artist are seen as having the power to change the world, to coagulate, through the values it upholds, humanity.

Both attitudes towards the socio-political engagement of the artist are consistent with the idea that art and the artist are special. The refusal of political, engaged art could represent an assumption of a vision that sees art as a practice with a higher purpose and the artist as a special person who is addressing a higher faculty that transcends everyday worries and concerns. On the other hand, to consider the involvement of art in politics as a duty is to believe in the transformative power of art and its important role in society.

3.5. Engagement as a way of validation

Interaction with the public and with other artists is seen by those interviewed as an essential part of artistic identity.

In all the interviews, the idea of a relationship with the public, with the other artists or the main actors involved in the art world: curators, gallerists, museographers, appeared in one way or another. The importance of the interactions did not result only from direct questions about whether or not there was a sense of belonging to the art world. An interesting example occurred when, in

the focus group, one of the participating artists equated success in art with the extent to which the public is willing and engage in discussions or debates about the artwork. R.S. confesses that for her, success as an artist means that the person who has seen the artwork " effectively comes to me, comes to me, writes to me, says let me tell you my opinion about what I notice here...And let's have a discussion about it."(FcG2 344-348)

In the same way, J.R. links the success of his participation in art fairs to money but also to the interactions with other artists or with the public visiting the fair. Interactions with the public are necessary because the artist needs the appreciation of the public:" you want to have good reception from people. I get a lot of good responses and I like good responses. I like educated responses" (J.R.880-884) This idea of art's dependence on the educated public is articulated with the idea of the acceptance of the artist by society, which was discussed above. Art needs an educated public, and among other things, this need is an illustration of how art is dependent on the system of public institutions.

In general, openness to the public or to those curious to enter into a dialog with artists is quite high. The readiness to grant interviews, the sometimes long discussions held on weekends, the willingness to answer emails proved in the course of this research that dialog about art is seen as a necessity from the artists' perspective. Dan Perjovschi²¹, one of the most important contemporary Romanian artists, immediately accepted to participate in this research by sending detailed answers to the questions, which strengthens our conviction that there is now a moment in the art world of opening up to dialog with the interested public.

I would like to emphasize that there is a clear distinction between marketing-type communication or engagement and direct interaction with the public or other artists. Art fairs and exhibitions are the perfect opportunities for a consistent dialog about art because the artist is in the presence of his work and his audience, whereas social networks are perceived as a burden. N.C. : "I hate Instagram, but I do it... And the dreaded Facebook..." (N.C.238, 241) The **V-light** artistic group with whom I conducted a focus group has a member who is specifically in charge of this type of interaction, let's call them non-artistic. R.C. identifies his own perspective as non-artistic and he is the one who, among other things, manages this type of communication within the group.

²¹ <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/24>

Another distinction to be made is that between the art consumer and the professionals of the art world²², between the ordinary, interested consumer and the specialized art participant.

I was able to identify during the interactions occasioned by this research, two ways of engaging with relevant actors in the art world.²³

The sense of belonging to the group of creators/fine artists can be quite strong and for example L.C. identifies it as guild solidarity. (L.C.396). We could add that it is also the solidarity of those who formally belong to the same group, but more importantly, the solidarity of those who at the same time share the same socio-economic status, create, exhibit in the same places and carry out common activities, linked to a common interest in art (e.g. common visits to art exhibitions).

In communist Romania before 1989, the art world was strictly controlled by the government, by centralizing all the decisions and mechanisms that structured it. We have seen above, for example, that the number of places in fine arts faculties was extremely low (9 places/year in the painting faculty), while only the completion of specialized studies could give you access to the most important advantages that the state offered to artists in exchange for supporting the party ideology through artistic works: studios, financial compensation, exhibition spaces and, most importantly, membership²⁴ in a professional organization (U.A.P. - Union of Fine Artists) which could add a significant percentage to your pension. The current situation is not very different from that of the communist past, with the same structures continuing unchanged without substantial changes. Thus, there are creative spaces from which artists who are members of this professional organization can benefit as well as exhibition spaces that are usually accessible only to members of the organization. Many artists continue in Romania to work together in a common area, exhibit in the same places and sell in the same art shops that belong to the same professional organization and these facts certainly reinforce the feeling of belonging to the "guild".

²² This distinction does not imply, of course, that art world professionals are/cannot be art consumers. In fact, things are exactly the opposite.

²³ I would not want it to be understood that these two modalities are the only possible ones and that they induce a kind of determinism that structures the art world. The relationships between the relevant actors of the art world are rather complex, dynamic, and analyzable from a variety of perspectives.

²⁴ Even today membership of the U.A.P. (Union of Fine Artists) is conditioned by graduation from a higher education program in the field of art: <https://uap.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/STATUT-UAP-09.07.2021.pdf>

In the interviews of Vision Art Fair Lisboa 2024 there also appears a kind of solidarity that can be understood as a feeling of belonging to the group of artists.

For example, V.G. sees art fairs as a space where personal art is tested: "It's like a big supermarket for people. You can find paintings, sculptures, photography, installations, everything, in same place and it's international." (V.G.16-19) This kind of event sediments a sense of belonging of those who not only share a common interest in art but also the same condition, far away from the big galleries or the big exhibitions. The art fair compared to a supermarket appears as a democratized space for art.²⁵ Democratized as artistic environment, artistic diversity, educational background, public. In this structural framework, the public and other artists become a resource through which, through discussions and face to face interactions, the perception of others on the artist's creation can be better understood, and as V.G. considers, can generate the impetus for a possible change in personal art (V.G.20-37).

In contrast to the sense of belonging described above, there is the antagonism towards certain actors in the art world, materialized by denouncing the gender violence that pervades the art world.

For example, in the case of the artist Marina Vargas, represented at ARCO Lisboa 2024 by the Fernando Pradilla gallery, we are presented with the Tribe series: eleven African masks, cleaned/purified and turned away from their traditional ritual role.

Each mask is painted and then worn by a woman artist or working in the art world who describes her experiences of interactions marked by the violence of this world. These testimonies can be heard recorded in the exhibition or they can be read under the photograph of the (anonymous) artist wearing a particular mask. There are strong indicators²⁶ that the artist's testimony under the Makonde mask is that of Marina Vargas herself:

The most serious thing is to suffer a chain of violence and not be able to speak about them because they try to label you as crazy. On July 15, 2018, I suffered an assault at an art fair

²⁵ It is worth noting that not all art fairs are equivalent or equally "democratic". I was able to compare Vision Art Fair Lisboa 2024 with ARCO Lisboa 2024. I won't go into details because space does not allow me but, ARCO Lisboa is considered superior to Art Vision, as ARCO Madrid is considered superior to ARCO Lisboa.

²⁶ <https://www.ideal.es/culturas/artista-granadina-marina-vargas-cancer-mama-20211120162344-nt.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ideal.es%2Fculturas%2Fartista-granadina-marina-vargas-cancer-mama-20211120162344-nt.html>

by a former museum director. He slapped me at his son's gallery booth where I was exhibiting.

In this case the work of art embodies resistance against a certain type of power relations on several levels: gender violence intertwines with the violence resulting from the structural hierarchy of the art world. It is a reconfirmation of Foucault's thesis that the exercise of power gives rise to the possibility of changing power relations or resistance to power. For Foucault, structural changes are important, but equally important are power relations at the level of everyday social interactions and processes, because at this level confrontations and strategies generate immediate effects. As he puts it:

...one of the first things that has to be understood is that power isn't localised in the State apparatus and that nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed. (Foucault, 1980, p.60)

The art world is not an impermeable world, completely autonomous and isolated from everyday realities.

3.6 Discussion of Results

The results of this research provide a nuanced picture of how artists manage their identities, career challenges, economic realities and social responsibilities. These findings intersect with several theoretical concepts discussed in the literature review, in particular Claire Bishop's 'social return', Bourdieu's theories of cultural production and Hans Abbing's analysis of artists' economic conditions. In this discussion, we explore these themes further and explore possible directions for future research.

3.6.1 The Social Turn: A Lasting Shift or a Trend?

One of the emerging questions from the interviews concerns the "social turn" in art, as discussed by Claire Bishop. Some of the interviewed artists expressed skepticism, viewing this turn towards socially engaged practices as a passing trend rather than a fundamental shift in the art world. These responses highlight a tension in the art field: while participatory and socially engaged art projects gain prominence, artists remain divided on their significance and longevity.

Bishop argues that participatory art fosters democratic engagement by breaking down barriers between artist and audience, yet the skeptical views expressed by some artists suggest a different reality. They raise the question of whether this "social turn" is being co-opted by institutional and market forces, reducing its potential for radical social change to a trend that aligns with neoliberal agendas of community engagement and inclusion. Future research could explore whether socially engaged art projects lead to genuine political and social transformation or if they merely simulate participation within a constrained framework dictated by funding bodies and art institutions.

3.6.2 Art's Disinterestedness as a Consolation Mechanism

Several artists in the study emphasized the idea of art as a practice of disinterestedness, aligning with Bourdieu's notion of the "autonomous field of cultural production." They view their artistic pursuits as existing outside the profit-driven motives of the market. This stance reflects the romanticized image of the "starving artist," where the cultivation of superiority through disinterest in profit can serve as a consolation mechanism for the economic hardships that many artists face.

Hans Abbing's exploration of why artists are poor resonates with this sentiment. The belief in art as a "noble" pursuit helps sustain artists' dedication to their craft, even in the face of financial instability. However, this perception can also reinforce systemic inequalities in the art world, as the myth of the self-sacrificing artist allows institutions to perpetuate precarious working conditions. A potential direction for future research is to investigate how this mindset affects artists' economic decisions and their willingness to engage in market-oriented practices. Examining how disinterestedness interacts with the "social turn" can offer insights into whether socially engaged art can reconcile economic challenges with its ambitions for social change.

3.6.3 Art Fairs and the Political Involvement of Art

Art fairs emerged as a topic in the interviews, highlighting their dual role in both showcasing art and shaping the art market. Some artists viewed art fairs as commercial hubs that prioritize profitability over social or political engagement, while others noted how certain fairs attempt to incorporate socially and politically relevant works into their programs. This contrast raises questions about the role of art fairs in promoting or limiting the political potential of art.

Comparing art fairs with other forms of artistic presentation can reveal how the display context influences the social and political engagement of the art. Are art fairs inherently more commercial

and less conducive to socially engaged practices, or can they serve as platforms for political discourse? Further research could examine how the economic and institutional structures of art fairs impact the types of art that are exhibited and whether they provide opportunities for artists to express critical, subversive ideas or merely reinforce market dynamics.

3.6.4 Art as a Potential Risk to Power

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the perception of art as a realm of autonomy, creativity, and limitless imagination. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of the "autonomous field of cultural production" and suggests that art, due to its independence from mainstream economic and political structures, possesses the potential to challenge power.²⁷ The creativity inherent in art practices can generate alternative narratives and perspectives, posing a potential threat to established norms and authorities.

However, the extent to which art can effectively function as a risk to power depends on its ability to maintain autonomy. The findings indicate that artists are increasingly subject to market pressures, state funding conditions, and institutional expectations, all of which can constrain artistic freedom. Future research could investigate the circumstances under which art succeeds in challenging power structures and when it becomes absorbed into the very systems it seeks to critique. By exploring case studies of politically engaged art projects and the reception of such works within various contexts (galleries, public spaces, online platforms), researchers can better understand art's capacity to disrupt or uphold societal power dynamics.

3.7 Implications for Future Research

The insights gathered from this study point to several avenues for future research. One area of interest is the longevity and impact of the "social turn" in art. By conducting longitudinal studies of socially engaged art practices and their outcomes, researchers could assess whether these initiatives lead to meaningful social change or if they are simply a trend that aligns with current institutional priorities.

Another area for exploration is the role of art fairs and other market-driven events in shaping the political and social dimensions of contemporary art. Comparing different forms of art presentation

²⁷ As is well known, Plato was aware of the subversive power of art against the social order.

could reveal how economic factors and institutional contexts influence the content and reception of socially and politically oriented art.

Additionally, investigating the psychological and cultural mechanisms by which artists justify their economic hardships could provide insights into the complex relationship between artistic autonomy, economic disinterestedness, and the perpetuation of precarious working conditions in the art world. Finally, examining how artists navigate the balance between autonomy and involvement in social issues can deepen our understanding of art's potential to act as a site of resistance and critique within neoliberal societies.

This discussion ultimately suggests that the roles and responsibilities of artists in relation to society are multifaceted and constantly negotiated. By further investigating these dynamics, future research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of art's place in contemporary culture and its capacity for democratic engagement and social transformation.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate how modern artists view their roles in society, especially in terms of their responsibility towards democracy and social issues in an era dominated by neoliberalism. The study used a combination of literature review and qualitative research, including interviews with artists, to explore themes such as autonomy, economic challenges, identity, and the artist's involvement in social and political issues.

In Chapter 1, an introduction to the research problem was provided, outlining the context of the contemporary art world and its challenges. Chapter 2 presented a detailed literature review, drawing on theoretical frameworks from key scholars. Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology used in this study. Chapter 4 presented the results of the qualitative research, delving into themes such as the persistence of artistic identity and the economic dimensions of an artistic career..

The research highlighted that artists' perceptions of their roles are multifaceted and deeply influenced by the dynamics of the contemporary art world. The literature review, grounded in Bourdieu's analysis of the *field of cultural production*, revealed the ongoing tension between artistic autonomy and the external pressures of market forces, state interventions, and institutional demands. Scholars like Victoria Alexander and Hans Abbing illustrate how neoliberal policies have increasingly imposed managerial and economic goals on art production, thus challenging the traditional notion of art's autonomy.

The qualitative data gathered from artists supported these theoretical perspectives, showing that many artists grapple with economic hardships and are forced to balance their creative integrity with the demands of the market and state funding criteria. This struggle is further complicated by the contemporary "social turn" in art, as highlighted by Claire Bishop, where artists are expected to participate in socially engaged practices. While some artists embrace this shift as part of their commitment to societal issues, others view it skeptically as a trend co-opted by institutions or market forces, limiting art's potential for true democratic engagement.

One of the constant ideas that emerged from the interviews is the idea of persistence as a structuring element of artistic identity. Persistence in the artistic field is evidence of artistic destiny or an inner calling too strong to ignore.

The artist is made/produced/designed/ to a lesser extent than say an accountant or a programmer. His life is a response to an inner calling and persistence over time proves the authenticity of this calling, usually illustrated in distant childhood memories.

This research explores how artists navigate their identities, economic realities, and social engagement demands. It emphasizes the complex power relations within the art field and the importance of artistic identity shaped by individual beliefs, practices, and interactions with institutions and the market.

During this research, several questions emerged that require further exploration. First, is the "social turn" in art merely a passing trend, as some interviewed artists suggested, or does it signify a lasting shift in the artist's role in society? Longitudinal studies examining the outcomes of socially engaged art projects could provide insights into their impact on political and social transformation.

Second, the study touched on the idea that artists often cultivate a sense of superiority or disinterestedness in profit as a way of coping with economic challenges. Future research could explore this notion in more depth, analyzing whether the valorization of symbolic capital functions as a consolation mechanism for the economic precarity that many artists face.

Third, the comparison of art fairs to other forms of art presentation, such as biennials or public exhibitions, revealed differences in the social and political engagement of the art displayed. Further research could investigate how the context of art presentation affects its potential for political critique and democratic engagement.

Finally, the question remains: Is art inherently a risk to power due to its autonomy, creativity, and limitless imagination? Analyzing specific instances where art has successfully challenged power structures could offer valuable insights into the conditions under which art can function as a site of resistance.

This thesis emphasizes that the roles and responsibilities of artists in relation to society are complex and constantly evolving. Artists today operate in a field that is increasingly influenced by economic, political, and institutional pressures, which in turn shape their perceptions of their societal roles. Despite these challenges, there remains a critical space where artists can question societal norms, foster dialogue, and advocate for democratic values. The penetration of the artistic field by economic principles is not necessarily a fatidic destiny or a unidirectional process. To

invoke a possible analogy, in his article *The Economy of Renaissance Art*, Federico Etro argues that the innovation and creativity seen during the Renaissance were closely linked to the emergence of a more open, competitive art market. He suggests that the shift away from strict patronage systems towards a more market-oriented approach allowed artists to compete for commissions, which in turn encouraged artistic innovation. (Etro, 2018, 504-537)

It may also be a good time to remember the words of Foucault: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." (Foucault, 1978, p. 95)

However, as scholars like Bishop argue, the efficacy of these efforts hinges on artists' ability to navigate external pressures and maintain a critical perspective on their practices.

Overall, this study points to the importance of an ongoing dialogue between artists, society and institutions. The search for artistic autonomy and social engagement reflects not only the artist's identity but also the wider socio-political landscape. Exploring how artists see and fulfill their role in society provides a valuable perspective on the state of democracy and highlights the potential of art as an engine for social change.

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Appendices

Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Introduce the purpose of the research and explain the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the option to withdraw at any time.
2. Obtain informed consent.

Interview Questions

Section 1: Background and Influences

1. **In what way did your family influence your artistic career?**
2. **To what extent do you believe the environment in which you grew up (e.g., village/city, school, friends) influenced your artistic career?**
3. **How did you choose or become an artist? Was it a conscious decision or more of a calling?**
4. **What cultural influences do you feel have shaped you throughout your life?**

Section 2: Artistic Process and Identity

5. **Is talent necessary for success in art, or is practice enough?**
6. **How would you describe your creative process? Is there something specific that stimulates you during this process?**
7. **Who is your audience? For whom do you create art?**

Section 3: Art and Society

8. **What does art tell us about life and/or society?**
9. **How do you generally relate to your peers? Is there a sense of belonging to a group?**
10. **How important is success to you in feeling fulfilled as an artist? How would you describe success in art?**

11. Who do you think are the key players in the art world?

12. Is art a profession, in your opinion?

Section 4: Engagement and the Role of the Artist

13. Should artists involve themselves more in society or politics than an ordinary person, not necessarily through their art?

14. Does art need to be political or social? Why or why not?

15. What role do you think art and artists play in society today?

16. How do you view art's role in society, both in the past and present?

Conclusion

1. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your experience as an artist?

2. Thank the interviewee for their participation.

Focus Group Protocol

Purpose of the Focus Group

The focus group aims to facilitate a discussion among artists about their career influences, artistic processes, societal roles, and perceptions of art in the context of their experiences.

Procedure

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

- Welcome participants and explain the focus group format.
- Emphasize the importance of confidentiality and respectful participation.
- Obtain consent from each participant.

2. Warm-up Discussion (5 minutes)

- Begin with an icebreaker: "What inspired you to pursue a career in art?"

3. Discussion Topics (40-60 minutes)

Topic 1: Background and Influences

- How did your family and upbringing (e.g., city, village, school, friends) influence your path as an artist?
- Were there specific cultural influences that guided you in your career?

Topic 2: Artistic Process and Identity

- Do you believe talent is essential for an artist, or is it possible to succeed through practice alone?
- How do you view the creative process, and what stimulates you during your work?
- Who do you consider your audience, and for whom do you create your art?

Topic 3: Art and Society

- What do you think art reveals about life and society?
- How do you relate to other artists, and do you feel a sense of community within the art world?
- How important is achieving success in feeling fulfilled as an artist, and how would you define success in art?

Topic 4: The Role of the Artist

- Should artists be more involved in societal or political issues than the average person? Why or why not?
- Does art need to have a political or social dimension to it?
- What do you believe is the role of art and artists in today's society, and how has this role changed over time?

4. Closing (5-10 minutes)

- Ask if participants have any final thoughts or comments.
- Thank everyone for their contributions and participation.