On Shifting Attitudes and Value of Creative Work.

LALALABOUR.

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A while ago, I briefly spoke to a fellow passenger on a train somewhere between St. Étienne, France, and Zürich, Switzerland. Somewhere on the borders of France, Switzerland and Germany, the guy told me he was a freelancer working as a business analyst for a big medical company. He was a freelancer just like me, travelling and working across Europe. Just that...knowing anything about working for the big pharma, I didn't even dare to think how much he earned, let alone I dared to ask. Nor did I want to think how would that relate to my own earnings at that point.

And I sure know why. The big pharma makes big bucks. The creative industries...don't, and seldom do the bucks flow to freelancers of the industry – trickle, at best. It is the industry where young people aspire to work in, the industry in which workers thrive to express themselves, the industry and lifestyle of dreamers. The industry in which people work out of passion. The industry in which work itself is more important than its monetary value, and an industry in which workers are offered visibility, connections and freedom to express as reward for work done. It's LALALABOUR. Correct?

Not really, not even if we wanted to believe it. Not even if we have been told our entire working lives that the creative industries make so little money that it's our choice if we want to work in the industry that cannot pay decently.

In Europe, the creative industries both make more revenue than the big pharma and employ more – especially under-30s. The creative and cultural industries revenue 535.9 billion euro
a year, and are the third largest employer after construction sector and food and beverage service sector – restaurants and bars.

The economic effect of the creative industries in the EU was studied for the first time in 2014, and the report came out at the end of the year. Out of the total revenue, 127.6 billion euro comes from visual arts, including design, photography and museums, for instance; 93 billion euro from advertising, 90 billion from TV, 36.3 billion from books, 36.2 billion from architecture, 31.9 billion from performing arts, and so on.

Still, as the report states, ‘despite the prominence of their output in our daily lives, the creative industries have long played the role of the last-minute winner in an economy where manufacturing, business services and the public sector capture the limelight.’

Touché.

Thinking that the creative industries are somehow less prominent than other sectors seems also very much to penetrate the creative industry itself. Reasons for entering the industry are the aforementioned self-expression and freedom, following one’s dreams, and often also working independently and being in charge of one’s own work and time. In reality, that dream is often faced by restrictions of making a living financially.

Often, when it comes to financial boundaries of independent creative work, the reasons are real and tangible. Budgets are small, and funding is given to materials, spaces or travelling for a project instead of paying the creative person who conducts the project. Customers or the audience don’t want to pay for the outcomes of creative work, and work is asked for free. Especially the independent creative practitioners live in a constant activism of working on some paid projects and working on personal or collaborative non-paid projects while proposing, pitching and applying for the next ones. And nothing there – that is a part of a life of an entrepreneur.

The so-called creative industry is far from homogeneous, and the conditions of work differ similarly. In the aforementioned study, the cultural and creative industries (CCTs) are categorized in 11 sectors: advertising, architecture, books, newspapers, music, performing arts, TV, film, radio, video games and visual arts. The scale is wide, and it embraces creative functions from writing to television programming and distribution, from design to developers and publishers of video games and from advertising agencies to performing arts and supporting activities and venues; from authors to specialized book stores, libraries and newspaper and periodical publishing agency to composers and TV music channels.

Those working as employees in one of the more commercial sub-sectors of the creative industry are in a very different position from those working as independent practitioners. An independent artist is often very different from someone working in advertising. A creative mind educated to support commercial means and working for a big company earns income just as any other employee working in other jobs in the same company or other.

However, even in the commercial branches of the industry, there often is no such thing as entry-level salary, unlike in many other sectors. The way into creative jobs the most often goes through unpaid internships or personal, unpaid projects even after finishing higher-level education. Even after unpaid internships, employment, or making a living as an independent creative, is far from guaranteed.

Partial reason of this precarity of creative work is structural and rises from within the creative practitioners. The creative class typically cherishes
the idea of the ‘precarious creative class’ or ‘the poor and precarious artist.’ Precarity of creative class is theorized and discussed within the creative practitioners, especially within the intellectuals, academics and independent practitioners, with steady, almost unquestionable consensus.

From a psychological point of view, that unanimous humming becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: dwelling in thoughts of precarity keeps one precarious. Creative workers are asking each other to work for free. They sell their work too cheap. There is always someone wanting to do the job cheaper or even for free.

Without the drive of a human being, the creator, there would be no creative work. Even though robots are already almost able to diagnose diseases and write finance and sports articles that are almost indistinguishable from those written by a human, a human being and one’s cognitive and emotional intelligence is the most important and valuable resource of creative work. Why is it, then, that the most important asset of creative work is so poorly appreciated within the creative class itself that the ‘precarious creatives’ are willing to pay a monetary price for physical materials for a project, but do not consider themselves as an immaterial resource of the project, and thus worth being paid for?

Having said that, it goes without saying that the value of creative work is not only monetary. Everything but.

In a study of psychological aspects of creativity, inventor Jacob Rabinow, among many other interviewees, points out that he doesn’t start working with the idea of ‘what will make money.’ He remarks that money is important, but continues by saying that ‘if I have to trade between what’s fun for me and what’s money-making, I’ll take what’s fun.’

If someone is solely motivated by monetary value of work – becoming rich and famous – one will be driven by doing what is necessary for the goal instead of venturing beyond the boundaries of what is already known, which is one of the key points of creative work. What is common to creative persons and their work is that they love what they do, and they love the process despite the outcome, be the outcome tangible or monetary.

Creative work – working on one’s own terms and on issues that are purposeful for oneself – also is a driver of wellbeing in both an individual and societal level, considering that recent studies show that strong sense of purpose in one’s life prevents depression, obesity, insomnia, Alzheimer’s disease, and heart attacks. It is also a driver for longer life. The value of creative work – despite it having a big economic value on a European level – is thus far from only monetary.

What is required for one being able to conduct creative work, then? The ideal requirements of the settings of inducing creative work cannot totally be defined, but there is some evidence of what supports working creatively.

A creative person – as any other person for that matter – lives and works in a macro-environment consisting of the society, external attitudes, stimuli and financial support coming from the environment in which one lives. There is only so much that an individual can affect the macro-environment, and the change in the attitudes or support within which one lives and works, for instance, may not be impossible, but slow.

One’s micro-environment is the immediate environment in which one works in: immediate external surroundings, one’s personal structures.
and internal attitudes. It consists of the environment, activities and surroundings that a person has a possibility to shape and control according to one’s own preferences to achieve a feeling of balance in both space and time.

That personal feeling of control and balance of one’s life and surroundings is a necessary precondition for creative work. The balance of creative work is both rarely being boring and rarely being out of control, and a sense of structure frees psychic energy from survival to self-expression and enables focusing on creative work.

What control and structure means in one’s life and work on a subjective level, however, varies tremendously. Some are at their most creative in a seemingly uncontrolled, chaotic environment, but an obsessively controlled personality can be just as creative as the most chaotic one. But, it is a myth that to be creative one needs to live without or with very little control in one’s life. It is but a matter of different strategies.

Subjective sense of control and structure is not necessarily directly related to monetary value of work or to one’s earnings. However, it does aid in creating a structure in one’s life, as it is basically not possible to live without money in today’s Western society. A person being able to live without any money or to dwell for free is an exception, and for many it is only meant to be a temporary solution. Idealism cannot be eaten nor it covers physically.

In November 2014, I attended a lecture by science fiction writer Bruce Sterling in Amsterdam. In a provocative speech titled ‘Whatever Happens to Musicians Happens to Everybody,’ he used the music industry to observe the functioning mechanisms of the creative industries as a whole.

In his talk, Sterling ran through possibilities of funding for musicians, and stated that giving grants to talented musicians is not a solution because any sum of money won’t make a musician more creative. However, he brought up a new ideal for aspiring musicians: singer, model and former first lady of France, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy.

Whereas Bruni-Sarkozy might not be the most obvious ideal for the creative practitioners, she is the example of modern European culture for Sterling. She makes music, sells well and, according to Sterling, donates all her royalties to charity because she doesn’t want to make music for money, but just to participate as a musician. In this sense, she doesn’t only make a living for herself, but also shares the wealth to others.

Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, however, is well off even without the royalties, and it’s a matter of preference whether one likes her music or not. Just as well we as she should be the new ideal for the creative class, we could speak of actor Leonardo DiCaprio, hip hop artist and producer Russell Simmons or filmmaker Isaac Julien as the new ideals. Leonardo DiCaprio spends his millions on environmental and sustainability issues through Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation. Russell Simmons directs his money to the very grassroots young artists and kids through his Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation. Filmmaker Isaac Julien speaks of social, racial and gender issues through his works – and, in his latest work, Playtime (2013), criticizes the very same big money art world he himself is a part of.

None of them would have succeeded in the first place without their creative talent. Their creative talent hasn’t, in general, decreased because of the earned wealth, but now they are also able to enable opportunities for aspiring young creatives, environmental protection or to pay attention to inequalities of the society through their work that reaches thousands, if not millions of people. Sterling might be correct in saying that any sum
of money won’t make a musician more creative, but also the other way around – money does not need to make a creative any less creative, either.

Earning millions might enable enabling others. Even though we would put millions aside, in the society we are living in, being paid for one’s work enables to create the micro-environment one thrives in – having an apartment, food and not needing to worry about survival.

What would happen, if the creative class would make an attitude shift from ‘precarious creative class’ to ‘wealthy creative class,’ for instance? Someone working in financing would unlikely be asked to work for free – why is it ok within the creative work to ask people to work for free, and get someone to get the work done unpaid or underpaid?

If the creative class would change their own attitude towards monetary value of their work, they would refuse unpaid or poorly paid work, start appreciating their own work and intellectual and artistic property and demand more appreciation and monetary value also from their clients and stakeholders – and not only for the projects, but also for their own work.

If a change is wanted, the attitude shift needs to start from within the creative class and from self-perception of each creative practitioner.

An attitude shift, however, is more easily said that done. A community or a collective – let alone all the independent creative practitioners as a ‘creative class’ – won’t change at once.

As Martin Willi, a Zürich-based psychotherapist and owner of Sunday Inventory gallery says, collectives often have a certain point of view, and it is not easy to break out of that perspective.

“In the end, it is a question of orientation – who do I want to be and who do I want to identify with," he says. “It’s always one or two individuals starting to change their point of view and starting to influence the whole collective.”

“The group doesn’t change as a group. It’s always an individual or two who have the courage to do it in a different way. And then – maybe – the collective can change. But, often, those one or two individuals go out of the collective.”

As Willi points out, it is a question of protection. Through strong common self-perception and preconceptions, an individual or a community protects oneself from exposing oneself to new situations and to possible struggles and disappointments brought by the new situation.

The European Commission considers the creative industries as a sector with a bright future. According to the aforementioned study on measuring the economics of the creative industry in the EU, the sector is seen as a part of a solution to draw Europe out of the serious economic, social and identity crisis.

From this point of view, wouldn’t it be time to leave the ‘precarious creative class’ behind in the self-perception of the creative practitioners, too, and to expose ourselves to new perception of the creative class?

The attitude shift might happen one creative practitioner at the time, but the shift from within can make a significant impact on the industry and to each individual working in it. In total, there are 7 million Europeans working for the creative industries directly or indirectly. That would mean many individual attitude shifts, but the shifts could make a big impact, even though the change would be slow.

In reflection to that, legendary designer Bruno Munari’s words from
1966 are still – or again – very up to date:

“Anyone working in the field of design has a hard task ahead of him: to clear his neighbour’s mind of all preconceived notions of art and artists, notions picked up at schools where they condition you to think one way for the whole of your life, without stopping to think that life changes – and today more rapidly than ever. It is therefore up to us designers to make known our working methods in clear and simple terms, the methods we think are the truest [and] the most up-to-date...”

Only this time, our closest neighbours may need to be our neighbours in practice, fellow designers, artists and creatives, and the aim – first of all – to clear our own minds of preconceived notions of creative work and creative industries.

Maybe creative work isn’t such Lalalabour – work of dreams but of little reality – after all.

References


HEINI LEHTINEN (Finland) is a writer and designer working in the intersection of practical and theoretical connections of design, wellbeing and society. She investigates these connections through various mediums and contexts, such as mass media, exhibitions, spaces, built environments, fashion, psychology and phenomenology. Lehtinen lives and works in the Netherlands.

FICTIONAL COLLECTIVE consists of an international body of creative practitioners. It is a roving cultural system in which individuals are confronted with continuous negotiation and exchange, and a didactic environment without the imposition of an institution. Founded in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, in 2014, Fictional Collective works as a network and a strategic agency to engage and confront design implications in specific geographical contexts. It is inevitably creating an “institution” without the traditional boundaries of the word, and a space without place, based on the identity of people who take part. Through discursive creative media and formats, Fictional Collective generates new perspectives, critical dialogues and tangible outcomes, such as exhibitions, workshops, seminars and interventions.

DEPOT BASEL aims to make it possible to see and experience the many facets of creative work, to illuminate every characteristic of the designed object – anything from commodity to work of art – and not losing sight of the past while concentrating on the contemporary. Depot Basel is interested in stories that connect people to objects and strives to demonstrate the close relation of design to every single person. Those parts of design which remain invisible to the costumer purchasing a product shall be the central focus: creators, ideas, concepts, production, and handicraft.