

# The labour of visual art in Western Australia

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## Abstract

This article presents a conceptual model of the labour of visual art developed from the analysis of qualitative data collected from interviews with professional visual artists in Western Australia. The labour discussed relates to the exertions of artists to make places for themselves and their practices within the field of cultural production. It is what Bourdieu has described as a ‘specific labour’ in relation to milieu. Drawing on Florian Znaniecki’s philosophical and sociological work as a means of engaging with the multidimensional cultural values involved, this study found that the interviewed artists laboured across four realms of cultural production. Artists laboured in order to (1) define their practices, (2) create the conditions under which they can continue to practice, (3) attract validations of their practices and artistic identities and all the while they actively laboured to (4) maintain their integrity as an important creative and social resource. These four realms of production are integrated in a dynamic system where artists’ efforts in each impact on and influences the products of the others. Over the course of this article, it will be argued that the labour of professional visual art practice can be, and must be, understood across a number of dimensions and systems of cultural values.

**JEL Code:** Z11

## Keywords

Artistic labour, cultural production, precarious work, visual arts, Western Australia

## Introduction

Professional artists in Australia have been the subject of a series of economic studies in which key aspects of their working lives have been examined. For the last four of these

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reports (Throsby and Hollister, 2003; Throsby and Mills, 1989; Throsby and Thompson, 1994; Throsby and Zednik, 2010), cultural economist David Throsby and his co-authors have used a series of ironic titles to draw attention to the difficulties in approaching art practice (conceptually and in practice) as a real job in a contemporary Australian setting. As artists are involved daily in the struggle to make their creative practice a viable and sustainable occupation, and to negotiate a place for themselves as recognised professionals in the public sphere, they are a key source of data on these issues. This article presents a conceptual model of the labour of visual art emerging from the qualitative analysis of 20 artists' in-depth accounts of their working lives in Western Australia.

The first part of this article provides some background for the research presented here, considering a range of different approaches that have been employed in conceptualising and studying the labour of artists in Australia and elsewhere. The second part of the article outlines its conceptual framework drawn from the work of Florian Znaniecki, the methods employed and other key details of the doctoral research within which this conception of the labour of visual art has been developed. These two contextual sections are followed by a discussion in which the conceptual model of the labour of visual art is introduced diagrammatically and briefly explained. Subsequently the four component labours that make up the conceptual model are discussed in turn: defining practice, creating conditions, attracting validation and maintaining integrity. The kinds of activities in which the interviewed artists were engaged relative to each of these four dimensions of cultural production are briefly outlined. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting a range of potentialities and implications arising from the conceptual model presented and the research project from which it has come.

## **Background**

In the past few decades, there has been significant investment in research and discussion around the working lives of artists in Australia, and elsewhere. Within this work can be seen a range of different approaches to understanding the work that artists are doing. In some cases, artists are considered to be competing for limited opportunity in a market for artistic labour (Menger, 1999; Morgan et al., 2013; Throsby, 2007). In other instances artists have been considered to operate as micro-firms or producers, rather than primarily as suppliers of labour (Throsby, 2006). The precariousness of artistic work has been highlighted (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Morgan et al., 2013), and the concept of the portfolio career has been proposed as a way of understanding the kinds of self-managed and multifaceted work that artists pursue (Bennett, 2010; Bridgstock, 2005). There have been discussions revolving around multiple job-holding among artists and other creative workers (Throsby and Zednik, 2011), and attention has been given to the recognition that some creative work happens embedded in industrial sectors and circumstances that are not themselves considered creative or artistic (Cunningham, 2011). Other debates have continued to highlight the obstacles that artistic work presents for social and economic research and culture and arts policy (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008; Cunningham and Higgs, 2010; Jeffri and Throsby, 1994; Karttunen, 2012; McGuigan, 2009; Oakley, 2009; Shorthose and Strange, 2004). At the same time, there have been increasing pressures to measure and account for the tangible impacts of this work within society (Belfiore, 2009; Belfiore and Bennett, 2010).

There is clearly an already substantial body of work that considers the labour of artists in contemporary Australian society. Much of this work, however, has been concerned with approaching artistic and creative work via research at scale, and especially through quantitative methods. There has not been such a strong investment in empirical qualitative research in this field that could potentially elucidate and evaluate the findings of more broadly brushed quantitative studies. While census data (Cunningham and Higgs, 2010) and national surveys (Throsby and Zednik, 2010) undertaken at intervals enable us to track some longitudinal developments in the working lives of artists, the need to maintain comparability and consistency across categories in such research has impeded these projects from asking many new questions and trying new approaches (Throsby and Zednik, 2010: 97). In 2008, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) identified that ‘research on the career choices and motivations of artists is needed, perhaps employing more qualitative methods, targeting artists in a variety of income and employment situations’ (p. 35). There is, therefore, a place for focused, qualitative research to gather new empirical data about the labour of artists.

In Australia, until recently, economic studies have prevailed as the principal social scientific mode of engaging with the working lives of professional artists (Australia Council, 1983; Throsby and Hollister, 2003; Throsby and Mills, 1989; Throsby and Thompson, 1994; Throsby and Zednik, 2010). Cultural economist David Throsby maintains that both economic and cultural values are at play within the labour of artists, but he also maintains that each can be sensibly considered in isolation from the other. Indeed, they must be considered separately as he writes that ‘economists are deluding themselves if they claim that economics can encompass cultural value entirely within its ambit and that the methods of economic assessment are capable of capturing all relevant aspects of cultural value in their net’ (Throsby, 2001: 41). While this approach facilitates economic research by stepping around cultural values which are ‘multidimensional, deriving from broadly cultural discourse, and having no standard unit of account’ (Hutter and Throsby, 2008: 4), the resulting research has not always been balanced by complementary research with a focus on cultural values.

However, as the work of Moulin (1987 [1967], 1994), Becker (1994) and Bourdieu (1996) suggests, values in the ‘market for symbolic goods’ (Bourdieu, 1996) are inextricably ‘confused’ (Becker, 1994) – where market prices both reflect and influence cultural values. Bourdieu (1996) suggests that values in the field of cultural production are the product of negotiations between the short-term commercial aspirations of artists and other cultural producers (such as publishers and gallery owners) and hoped-for longer term symbolic dividends, or cultural capital (which can also result in financial pay-offs). Bourdieu points out that no artist operates exclusively at either extreme of this continuum and, as Becker (1994) discusses with reference to Moulin’s work, this negotiation is not so simple as assuming that artists’ activity focused on non-economic goals produces only cultural values.

Equally significant is the recognition that artists do not simply produce works of art, they are also engaged in the production of legitimate professional identities as artists (Bain, 2005; Bättschmann, 1997). Becker (2008 [1982]) talks about the establishment and maintenance of a reputation, and Bourdieu (1996) talks about the ‘specific labour’ of artists within a milieu to ‘produce [themselves] as creator[s], that is as *subject[s]* of

[their] own creation' (p. 104, Bourdieu's emphasis). This notion of self-actualisation through creative practice has some resonance with Marx's conception of unalienated labour (Sayers, 2007), and indeed personal fulfilment and the relative autonomy of many professional creative practices have been identified as key motivations and non-monetary rewards within artistic careers (McGuigan, 2010; Menger, 1999; Steiner and Schneider, 2012; Throsby, 2007). However, in the case of artists, we are not merely talking about the way that certain cultural values – such as personal fulfilment and intrinsically conceived artistic achievement – are pursued in lieu of economic gains and rewards. Artists may choose not to pursue commercial gains in the short term as an important prerequisite to achieving legitimate economic gains in the future, although there are no guarantees that such rewards will eventuate. In essence, one cannot develop a clear understanding of artists' decision-making by looking only at those values amenable to economic analysis. Economic values are but one subset of the many cultural values that artists are in the process of balancing and negotiating across multiple dimensions, all of which have some bearing on the decisions of artists as social actors and cultural producers.

Nick Zangwill (2002) has argued that 'the idea that art production is work like any other form of production, [...] is fair enough to an extent. But the general principle that all kinds of work have the same kind of explanation is dubious' (p. 208). In pursuing a more grounded and holistic understanding of the networks of cultural values which artists must navigate within their careers as cultural producers, there is a need to take a primarily qualitative approach to researching the labour of visual artists. Axel Honneth (1982) has suggested that to develop our understanding of any work, there is a need to consider the 'actual claims and ideas about work held by the subjects who are engaged in social production' (p. 46). Research with this focus could identify how artists have conceptualised and understood their own artistic labours, and how such understandings have impacted upon artists' establishment of professional artistic identities in distinction to lay-persons and non-professionals. Such research could also help minimise the impact of what Richard Grathoff (1991) has termed 'conceptual sedimentation' whereby within terms such as work and labour, 'theories of reality have readily been taken as real themselves' (p. 373; see also Honneth, 1982; Sayers, 2007). The goal is not to explain the apparent irrationality and irregularities of artists' behaviour as agents according to conventional economic theories, but rather to interpret their actions in the light of emergent understandings of professional artistic agency.

## **The study**

The need to collect a different kind of empirical data from Australian artists necessitates a different methodological approach from much previous Australian research. The research reported here (McKay, 2013) has taken some of its leads from previous work in the sociology of art, which encompasses an extensive range of approaches, emphases and foci (Foster, 1989; Harrington, 2004; Inglis, 2005b; Zolberg, 1990). In particular, the works of Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu have been very significant in the development of this research project. These two scholars, however, take quite different approaches to their understanding of the agency of artists within social realms (Becker and Pessin,

2008; Bourdieu, 1996: 204–205). For Becker (2008 [1982]), art is the product of collective activity and social cooperation in art worlds within which many social actors participate in the creation and consumption of art, and all of whom are essential to the results, not just the artist to whom the final work is credited. Bourdieu's (1996) conception of the field of cultural production, on the other hand, has an objective structure within which artists are struggling against, or assisted by, prevailing social forces in their competition for dominant positions and limited resources. Becker sees art worlds as shifting social networks in which agents can make almost anything happen, although the inertia (Becker, 1995) associated with social conventions makes some actions more difficult than others. Bourdieu, on the other hand, sees the cultural field as an enduring structure, a space of possibles which determines the limited range of actions available to agents.

In addition to these divergent conceptions of the relationship between social agency and social structure, this research has also been mindful of other criticisms that have been levelled at social scientific studies of the arts. In particular, it has been suggested that sociological approaches can tend to be both reductionist and imperialist (Harrington, 2004; Heywood, 1997; Inglis, 2005a; Zangwill, 2002; Zolberg, 1990) in their explanations of what is really going on in art worlds, discounting the significance of key dimensions of art worlds as social constructs rather than objective features of the circumstances within which artists act. Austin Harrington (2004) observes that a key to overcoming such issues is to ensure that artists are able to recognise themselves and their actions within the findings reported by social research. The research presented in this article has approached these complex issues and their conceptual and methodological implications through the deployment of ideas and methods adapted from the philosophical and sociological work of Florian Znaniecki (1882–1958). Underpinning Znaniecki's humanistic sociology are two interrelated notions: the concept of *cultural reality* and what he calls the *humanistic coefficient* within empirical social and cultural data.

Znaniecki's work is founded upon the notion that all social interaction occurs within cultural contexts, and that these cultural contexts are constitutive of the objective reality within which social agents act. More specifically, Znaniecki maintains that within this cultural reality, it is not helpful to think in terms of the subjectivity of individual agency in opposition to the objectivity of social structures and conditions. He says that

actuality is ... a dynamic center toward which in a process of subjectivation realities and thoughts converge by becoming data and associations of data and from which in a process of objectivation realities and thoughts radiate by ceasing to be data and by becoming rational and logical. (Znaniecki, 2010 [1919]: 50)

Elsewhere, he says that

instead of a duality of [objective and subjective] variables, we find simply a double dynamic bond uniting certain values into a system which, though constructed by human activity, is eminently objective. (Znaniecki, 1967 [1936]: 75)

From this philosophical position, it is possible to acknowledge individual agency, collective activity and contingency in the construction of the dynamic social networks which make up art worlds (Becker, 2008 [1982]). But at the same time, we can recognise

that this construction operates as an objective cultural reality, in relation to which agents orient themselves socially (Bourdieu, 1996) and act according to their definitions of the situation (Znaniecki, 1969 [1919]: 109).

Because of this view of cultural reality, Znaniecki argues that it is vital that sociologists capture data for analysis that includes what he calls the *humanistic coefficient*. He says that

for the scientist this cultural system is really and objectively as it was (or is) given to those historical subjects themselves when they were (or are) experiencing it and actively dealing with it. In a word, the data of the cultural student are always ‘somebody’s’, never ‘nobody’s’ data. (Znaniecki, 1934: 37)

So we can see that according to this perspective on sociological research, the ‘key ideas and beliefs of art worlds’, such as ‘notions of artistic quality, a canon of great works, expressive truth, integrity and vision as necessary personal qualities for artists’ (Heywood, 1997: 188–189), make up an objective cultural reality in relation to which artists act. The humanistic coefficient is therefore an essential element in developing research in which participants are likely to be able to recognise themselves and their actions. Znaniecki himself maintained that the best way of capturing this humanistic coefficient for analysis was through the collection of autobiographies written to order of a minimum length of 100,000 words (Znaniecki, 1934: 191). But researchers have since adapted this memoir method in ways similar to that employed in this research project: ‘Participants were asked to write (or speak) about those aspects of their lives and experiences in which the researcher was interested, rather than provide their whole life history’ (Maniam, 2011: 88).

The research reported in this article (McKay, 2013) sought to examine the circumstances in which visual artists are working in Western Australia, and to develop an understanding of the work that they do to establish and sustain their creative practice in this cultural environment. In order to capture contextual material and to map the field of cultural production, one part of the study involved the collection and analysis of the curriculum vitae (CV) of 322 living Western Australian artists, which were collected from the commercial gallery websites where they were published. To develop a detailed picture of the many dimensions of artists’ work to negotiate a place for themselves and their art works in the field, there were a series of in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 20 visual artists living and working in Western Australia. The focus within the limited scope of this article is on a conceptual model of the labour of visual art emerging from the accounts artists have given in interviews of their experiences of working as professional artists in Western Australia. The findings of the CV study will be published elsewhere.

The interview sample was purposefully selected to try and capture the perspectives and experiences of as diverse a range of practitioners as possible, working in a wide range of visual art media. The 9 male and 11 female participants were aged between 26 and 83 years. In all, 15 of the participants were living and working in the Perth metropolitan area, and 5 in other regions in the south of Western Australia. The identified participants in this study were Rebecca Baumann, Craig Boulter, Penny Bovell, Susanna Castleden, Oron Catts, Erin Coates, Barbara Cotter, Kevin Draper, Pippin



Drysdale, Stuart Elliott, Dr Tom Gibbons, Nigel Hewitt, Peter Hill, Michael Iwanoff, Larry Mitchell, Regina Noakes, Dr Anna Sabadini, Monique Tippett, Cecile Williams and Caitlin Yardley. These artists were involved in different ways in local, national and international art worlds and practised in diverse media including painting, sculpture, jewellery, ceramics, installation, video, community art, public art, environmental art, printmaking and biological art.

Data were collected from participants between April 2011 and February 2012, in most cases over two, hour-long interviews in their studios or other workspaces. At the first semi-structured interview, some demographic details were collected, and a questionnaire with six broad and open questions ensured that the discussion covered a wide range of topics focused on artists' working lives. Questions for the second interview were based around the discussion in the first, re-visiting key ideas, clarifying and elaborating on the relevant material emerging in the first interview. Nearly 38 hours of digitally recorded interview data were then transcribed, coded and analysed by the researcher, working loosely within a conceptual framework derived from analytic induction, a qualitative method employed by Znaniecki and others (Becker, 1998; Cressey, 1971 [1953]; Znaniecki, 1934). Within analytic induction, the researcher proceeds by testing a hypothetical explanation of a phenomenon across diverse cases, especially looking for negative cases that necessitate either the re-formulation of the hypothesis, or help define the kinds of cases to which the explanation applies. Further cases are examined and the explanation of the phenomenon is refined until it is found to apply to all cases examined. While the specific experiences and attitudes of the individual artists interviewed are unique, the strength of the emergent conceptual model presented below is that it can be applied to the activities described by all of the 20 artists in the research sample, despite the great diversity of circumstances and approaches to visual art practice captured.

## **A conceptual model of the labour of visual art in Western Australia**

In 1989, Throsby and Mills published a report on the working lives of Australian artists entitled, *When are you going to get a real job?* This question, ironically posed to artists, is especially poignant as it registers the gap between contemporary societal expectations about real (i.e. productive) work, and the fact that visual artists do not necessarily want a 'job' (and the network of dependencies and obligations that implies); they want to get on with *their* work. The question of what constitutes a real job and real work is of great importance in understanding the labour of visual art. What has emerged from the research reported here is that the 'realness' of an art practice is not a simple threshold of legitimacy, facilitating distinctions between kinds of art and artists and so on. As Znaniecki writes,

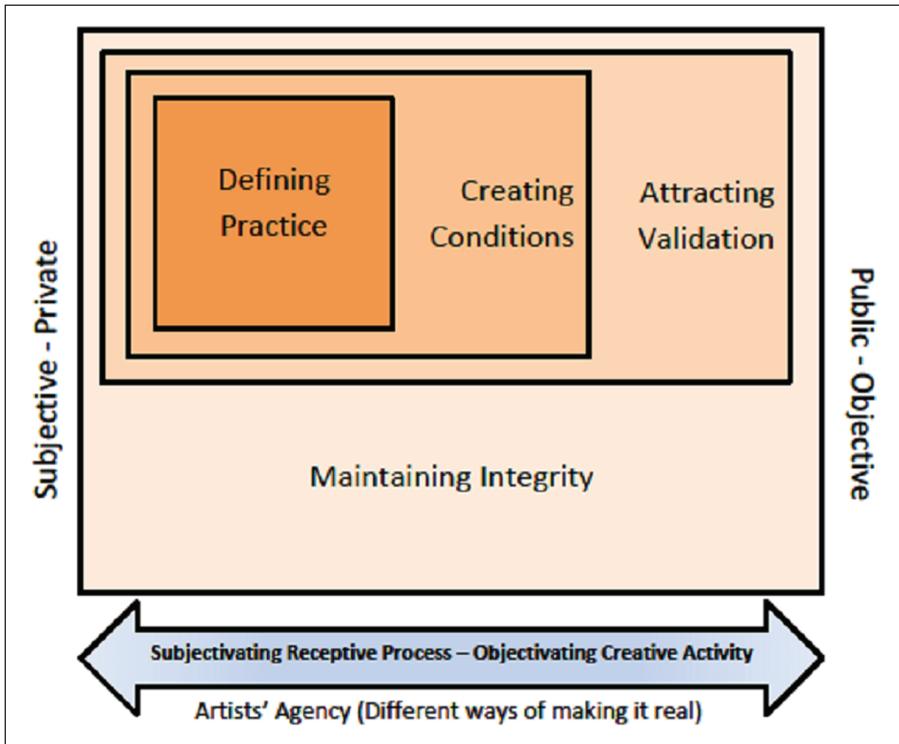
the more frequently an object appears in actuality and the wider grows the sphere of its extension, the greater becomes also the number and variety of new activities of which it is the object-matter, the greater its actual, not merely potential, significance for active thought and its influence on other objects. And thus while existence admits no gradations, there are innumerable possible degrees of realness. (Znaniecki, 2010 [1919]: 143)

So it is that in the conceptual model presented in this article, artists have been considered to labour towards the cultural production of the reality (and legitimacy) of their art works, their art practice and their professional artistic identities at varying degrees of extension. In contrast to the accountant, the dentist or the plumber, artists must direct more of their labour towards achieving the acceptance of themselves, their practices and their products as activities and outcomes that have value in the wider world. Bourdieu (1996) writes that ‘the work of art, like religious goods or services, amulets or various sacraments, receives value only from collective belief as collective misrecognition, collectively produced and reproduced’ (pp. 171–172). In a very tangible sense, artists may not have a real job (i.e. they are not real artists) until they have induced the collective belief of some smaller or larger group of people (patrons, peers, clients, audiences, critics, etc.) in the value of their work.

Znaniecki’s concept of cultural reality, introduced previously, is a very useful way of thinking about the social production of art and artists. This is because of the way he conceives of the dynamic relationship between social agency and social structure. If one emphasises the structural aspects of social organisation, as Bourdieu does, then social actors can be conceived as ‘particles in a force-field, [...] their trajectories determined by the relation between the forces of the field and their own inertia’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 9). If one emphasises the agency of social actors, as Becker does, it becomes difficult to account for the regularities and consistencies of social interaction and cultural production, when social interactions stay ‘organized no more than is necessary for people to get done whatever they have for the moment decided they want to do together’ (Becker, 1995: 302). Rather than subordinating agency to structure, or structure to agency, Znaniecki identifies social agents as key to both the rehearsal and reproduction of social conventions (structure), and also the independent production (agency) of those social and cultural innovations that ensure that society does not remain static and unchanging. As social agents labouring to produce the cultural reality of themselves as artists, their art works, and their practices as legitimate occupations artists may choose to assimilate and reproduce themselves as artists according to cultural patterns in existing cultural realities: a ‘subjectivating receptive process’ (Znaniecki, 2010 [1919]: 52), which aligns their own activities and values in relation to their experiences of the objective cultural worlds in which they are operating. On the other hand, by engaging in ‘objectivating creative activity’, (Znaniecki, 2010 [1919]: 52) artists place their subjectively defined productivity in a public realm where it has the potential to become an objective part of other people’s worlds.

Figure 1 presents the labour of visual art diagrammatically utilising four nested rectangles. Each rectangle represents artists’ labour to produce values in a specific realm of cultural production, identified during analysis of the collected interview data as follows: defining practice, creating conditions, attracting validation and maintaining integrity. These four rectangles have been positioned so as to indicate (1) their interdependence and (2) their orientation in extensive cultural reality. The smallest rectangle, labelled ‘defining practice’, is a prerequisite activity for artists’ subsequent labour and so is positioned within the rectangle ‘creating conditions’, which in turn is positioned within ‘attracting validation’, and all of these concerns impact and are impacted upon by artists’ efforts to ‘maintain integrity’. The positioning of each realm of cultural production,





**Figure 1.** Diagrammatic representation of a conceptual model of the labour of visual art in Western Australia, developed through qualitative analysis of interview data collected from 20 professional artists, indicating four areas of cultural production relative to extension in cultural reality, and artists' agency.

meanwhile, indicates whether the product of this labour tends to work towards the establishment of a private/subjective reality on the left of the diagram as is the case for 'defining practice', or a more extensive, public/objective reality as artists succeed in 'attracting validation' on the right of the diagram.

Artists must continue to labour across all four realms of cultural production, those at greater extension do not supersede more private and subjective cultural production. Similarly, the four realms of cultural production do not represent a linear progression, rather as their nesting suggests, artists' activities in each realm have implications and impacts for the values produced in other realms. The double arrows at the bottom of the diagram also remind us that artists, labouring across these different realms, may exercise their agency in different ways – creating value by conforming and assimilating, or by achieving recognition for their creative innovations. Most artists are constantly negotiating a delicate balance between these different modes of cultural production/reproduction in different areas. A very brief description and summary of each of the four realms of cultural production within which interviewed Western Australian visual artists were found to be labouring will now be presented.

## Defining practice

Across the diverse sample of 20 artists, there were also 20 distinct definitions of art practice that artists described. Emerging from this diversity, however, it was possible to observe that artists' labours to define their practices produced at least two things that were essential for their professional creative practice. The first thing of value that artists produce through their definitions of practice is a degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy. Second, artists' definitions of practice also establish a *raison d'être* for creative practices, making a strong case for the necessity of artists' labours.

Artists were able to produce self-sufficiency and autonomy by stressing that the nature of art practice is such that ultimately artists themselves are both executioners and judges of their own work. The journey of creative practice cannot effectively be evaluated from a vantage point outside the practice because the true success or failure of the practice can only be viewed with reference to the ground previously covered and the future directions that are revealed. As the destinations, or outcomes, of the journey of creative practice are often obscured from the artist themselves, immersion in creative practice is the only means of accessing the intimate knowledge necessary to judge the work. By defining their practices in ways that emphasise the uncanny and inaccessible dimensions of creativity and artistic endeavour, artists ensure that they are their own harshest critics, deriving great strength and also a burden of responsibility from this privileged position.

Artists also discussed their work in terms of communication, and more specifically by suggesting that they had something important to say, something that they were struggling to articulate. The deep personal significance of what artists have to say focuses their practices and keeps them motivated in the project of trying to articulate it for themselves and for others. At the same time, the notion that the journey towards articulacy cannot be mapped out in advance ensures that artists have an ongoing project that they must continue to work at, indefinitely.

As Bernard Beck (1988) has stated, artistic professions are distinctive in holding onto the

sentiment that not doing well in the world of the arts is not a reason for quitting ... As a matter of fact, if you quit because you are not doing well, you probably should not have been here in the first place. It becomes a kind of test of whether you are the 'real thing'. (p. 47)

Artists' definitions of practice are critical in allowing artists to succeed in their own terms, even when externally allocated successes (such as sales, critical acclaim and other forms of recognition) prove to be elusive.

## Creating conditions

Following on from the labour to define practice, over the course of which creative practice is made real and significant for the artist, artists are then faced with the challenge of situating this practice in the real world. While the ideal situation for such a self-defined practice might be an autonomous and sheltered enclave, in some ways immune from the banalities of day-to-day existence and the inconvenient interests of other people, artists

generally have to settle for wrestling as much autonomy as is possible from the stranglehold of real life.

Creating conditions is an activity in which artists are involved in their personal lives and relationships, where partners and families are an important consideration with regards to the allocation of time, resources and attention. Creating conditions also involves the procurement of material resources, and striking a sustainable balance between economically fruitful activity and creative practice, which may or may not be a viable source of income. Artists may also work to create very specific conditions that are conducive to the particular needs of their creative practices, such as privacy in the studio, or overseas travel to stimulate new work.

Artists are engaged in creating conditions that approximate autonomy in the real world. They may seek to make autonomy more attainable by significantly containing and controlling their needs and aspirations, by working towards survival and subsistence rather than affluence and abundance. Artists also attempt to articulate the nature and dependencies of their relationships between the real world and their creative practices by suggesting that experiences out in the world can be as vital for practice as time in the studio. When it comes to the notion of investing in practice, freedom and autonomy generally come at a cost. Importantly, however, artists make informed decisions about how to absorb those costs and in which areas of their lives. These decisions are often made with reference to moral concerns, such as concepts of artistic integrity. Finally some artists can achieve greater autonomy in specific areas of their lives and practice, through relinquishing parts of their profession, and by become dependent on other people whose professional expertise lies in other areas, such as commercial galleries. Clearly such dependencies are built on relationships and the establishment of trust, but these free some artists from certain burdensome aspects of reality, and facilitate them spending more time dealing with the intrinsic concerns of their creative practice.

Through the labour of creating conditions, an artist's practice (which is real and significant for the artist) is accommodated into the larger world. While this may achieve little more than allowing the creative practice to continue to be defined and real for the artist, such labour also potentially lays the foundations on which the reality and significance of the practice may be recognised more objectively and begin to be legitimated in art worlds.

### *Attracting validation*

The labour to attract validation might be conceived as the work that artists do to make their art practice real for other people, in ways that do not merely accommodate practice in a place set aside (like a personal, leisure-time pursuit). Art practice is validated and made real by having people talk about it and buy it; by other measurements of its worth that take into account the status of those individuals and institutions that endorse it; by establishing and maintaining social circles and networks centred around the art practice; and by living up to, or overcoming, the cultural expectations that may exist about who artists are and what they should be doing.

All self-conscious professional artists must cross this threshold, translating intrinsic values into public values, subjective concerns towards objective significance. It is clear,

however, that such translations are achieved in a number of different ways, and that attracting validation can take many forms. Artists may place their work in situations, such as public exhibitions and competitions, where it will attract such independent and objective responses as will validate the ongoing significance of their practice. By collecting various kinds of credentials and building a curriculum vitae, artists are engaged in a process of making clear the extension of the objective reality and the level of significance that their practice has attained, thus presenting a strong case for other people taking the practice seriously. By maintaining relationships with a range of people (clients, critics, mentors, curators etc.), artists invite other individuals into conversations (and other transactions) that centre on their art practice, and so it is that clients, mentors and advocates all become investors in the reality of the practice.

Finally, artists position themselves by self-consciously seeking to manage their relationships with other players and entities in the field, past and present, and by recognising that some alliances and distinctions can in themselves function as reasons to admire and value the practice.

### *Maintaining integrity*

Integrity is both a personal resource and something that is deployed in order to make distinctions and value judgements. It also seems that while integrity is constructed as a personal attribute, it is an attribute under constant scrutiny, measured and assessed on the evidence provided by artists' actions on many different levels. In this way, integrity is something that artists are actively working to maintain.

On a personal level, the labour to maintain integrity is about ensuring that definitions of practice at the core of artists' creative practices are still identifiably their own as they seek to create conditions and attract validation. Artistic and personal integrity is not perhaps the incorruptible and transcendental ideal that it may sometimes be taken to be; it is quite possible that definitions of practice will, over a number of iterations, assimilate elements from other sources and be shaped by various influences. In order for the artist to maintain their vital sense of the integrity of their practice, it is important that the definitions, processes and outcomes of their practice are all matters in which they see themselves, and hear their own voices.

The labour to maintain integrity may therefore involve a range of actions designed to moderate influence, including deliberate strategies such as maintaining distances from sources of influence, and setting up parameters and partitions around aspects of their practices. The labour to maintain integrity, however, may also involve the constant work of filtering, redefining and paraphrasing that transforms a range of influences and circumstantial impacts into influences with which artists are able to identify positively. Ultimately, the maintenance of integrity appears to be dependent upon the artist's capacity to take ownership and accept authorship of the outcomes of creative practice, even in cases where outcomes are significantly shaped by influences external to the intrinsic concerns of that practice.

Integrity is not only a personal resource but also instrumental in social situations as the basis for qualitative and moral distinctions between practices and practitioners. Integrity is maintained in part by making distinctions and drawing attention to deficiencies in other

practices and art worlds. Many decisions artists make, whether about their subject matter or media, or the people and institutions with which they are associated, or the way that they earn their income, and so on, can be instrumental in implicating the art world to which an artist belongs and the system of values to which they might subscribe. Such indicators can be deployed by artists themselves and others, in both positive and negative ways, providing evidence of the integrity of a practice, or of its compromise. It seems to be the case that integrity, differently perceived, is a conscious concern of all the artists interviewed for this study, and its maintenance is an important dimension of the purposeful activity that is the labour of visual art in Western Australia.

## Conclusion

While the details of the nuanced findings of this study require separate and extended treatment elsewhere, the brief outline of the conceptual model of the labour of visual art in Western Australia presented here has served to highlight several things worth noting in concluding this article. First, this article has highlighted some of the limitations of the economically framed and quantitative research projects that have tended to be pre-eminent in Australian studies around artists' labour and careers. Drawing on existing work in the sociology of art, it has been argued that there are good reasons to think that one cannot consider economic concerns in isolation from the other cultural values that artists are negotiating in their working lives.

Second, it has been argued that understanding what artists do and how they do it should begin with a close examination of what they believe themselves to be doing and why they do it that way. As researchers, we should recognise that perhaps existing economic models of rational behaviour, and conceptions of labour, work and production inherited from Marxist theory and industrial workplaces, may not provide us with the best means available to come to grips with professional artistic practice and cultural production.

Third, this article has outlined the potential for older conceptions of cultural production to contribute important insights and ways forward in contemporary social scientific thought and research, even after the cultural turn. In particular, the work of Florian Znaniecki has been presented as providing a conceptual framework and methodological approach that works through some of the key limitations of existing social and economic research in the arts and beyond.

Fourth, the conceptual model of the labour of visual art in Western Australia presented here provides a concrete demonstration of the potential for studies such as this to contribute to knowledge in this field. More specifically, this conceptual model helps make sense of artists' work by considering the multiple systems of value that impact upon cultural production, and recognising that artists labour to produce art works, to produce a professional art practice and to produce themselves as artists. While all these cultural products are intimately connected, it is the interrelationship of these, and the different systems of value relative to each, that ultimately informs artists' decisions and actions. This is not a matter of introducing cultural values as variables to correct for artists' apparently irrational behaviour; rather, this model helps illuminate important aspects of the balancing acts that artists are engaged in daily to build value in the right places.

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### Author biography

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