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The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur

HARD-WORKING ARTISAN, SOLITARY GENIUS, CREDENTIALLED PROFESSIONAL—THE IMAGE OF THE ARTIST HAS CHANGED RADICALLY OVER THE CENTURIES. WHAT IF THE LATEST MODEL TO EMERGE MEANS THE END OF ART AS WE HAVE KNOWN IT?

By William Deresiewicz



Pronounce the word *artist*, to conjure up the image of a solitary genius. A sacred aura still attaches to the word, a sense of one in contact with the numinous. “He’s an *artist*,” we’ll say in tones of reverence

about an actor or musician or director. “A true artist,” we’ll solemnly proclaim our favorite singer or photographer, meaning someone who appears to dwell upon a higher plane. Vision, inspiration, mysterious gifts as from above: such are some of the associations that continue to adorn the word.

Yet the notion of the artist as a solitary genius—so potent a cultural force, so determinative, still, of the way we think of creativity in general—is decades out of date. So out of date, in fact, that the model that replaced it is itself already out of date. A new paradigm is emerging, and has been since about the turn of the millennium, one that’s in the process of reshaping what artists are: how they work, train, trade, collaborate, think of themselves and are thought of—even what art is—just as the solitary-genius model did two centuries ago. The new paradigm may finally destroy the very notion of “art” as such—that sacred spiritual substance—which the older one created.

Before we thought of artists as geniuses, we thought of them as artisans. The words, by no coincidence, are virtually the same. *Art* itself derives from a root that means to “join” or “fit together”—that is, to make or craft, a sense that survives in phrases like *the art of cooking* and words like *artful*, in the sense of “crafty.” We may think of Bach as a genius, but he thought of himself as an artisan, a maker. Shakespeare wasn’t an artist, he was a *poet*, a denotation that is rooted in another word for *make*. He was also a *playwright*, a term worth pausing over. A playwright isn’t someone who writes plays; he is someone who fashions them, like a wheelwright or shipwright.

A whole constellation of ideas and practices accompanied this conception. Artists served apprenticeships, like other craftsmen, to learn the customary methods (hence the attributions one sees in museums: “workshop of Bellini” or “studio of Rembrandt”). Creativity was prized, but credibility and value derived, above all, from tradition. In a world still governed by a fairly rigid social structure, artists were grouped with the other artisans, somewhere in the middle or lower middle, below the merchants, let alone the aristocracy. Individual practitioners could come to be esteemed—think of the Dutch masters—but they were, precisely, *masters*, as in master craftsmen. The distinction between art and craft, in short, was weak at best. Indeed, the very concept of art as it was later understood—of Art—did not exist.

All of this began to change in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the period associated with Romanticism: the age of Rousseau, Goethe, Blake, and Beethoven, the age that taught itself to value not only individualism and originality but also rebellion and youth. Now it was desirable and even glamorous to break the rules and overthrow tradition—to reject society and blaze your own path. The age of revolution, it was also the age of secularization. As traditional belief became discredited, at least among the educated class, the arts emerged as the basis of a new creed, the place where people turned to put themselves in touch with higher truths.

Art rose to its zenith of spiritual prestige, and the artist rose along with it. The artisan became the genius: solitary, like a holy man; inspired, like a prophet; in touch with the unseen, his consciousness bulging into the future. “The priest departs,” said Whitman, “the divine literatus comes.” Art disentangled itself from craft; the term *fine arts*, “those which appeal to the mind and the imagination,” was first recorded in 1767.

“Art” became a unitary concept, incorporating music, theater, and literature as well as the visual arts, but also, in a sense, distinct from each, a kind of higher essence available for philosophical speculation

and cultural veneration. “Art for art’s sake,” the aestheticist slogan, dates from the early 19th century. So does *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the dream or ideal, so precious to Wagner, of the “total work of art.” By the modernist moment, a century later, the age of Picasso, Joyce, and Stravinsky, the artist stood at the pinnacle of status, too, a cultural aristocrat with whom the old aristocrats—or at any rate the most advanced among them—wanted nothing more than to associate.

It is hardly any wonder that the image of the artist as a solitary genius—so noble, so enviable, so pleasant an object of aspiration and projection—has kept its hold on the collective imagination. Yet it was already obsolescent more than half a century ago. After World War II in particular, and in America especially, art, like all religions as they age, became institutionalized. We were the new superpower; we wanted to be a cultural superpower as well. We founded museums, opera houses, ballet companies, all in unprecedented numbers: the so-called culture boom. Arts councils, funding bodies, educational programs, residencies, magazines, awards—an entire bureaucratic apparatus.

As art was institutionalized, so, inevitably, was the artist. The genius became the professional. Now you didn’t go off to Paris and hole up in a garret to produce your masterpiece, your *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* or *Ulysses*, and wait for the world to catch up with you. Like a doctor or lawyer, you went to graduate school—M.F.A. programs were also proliferating—and then tried to find a position. That often meant a job, typically at a college or university—writers in English departments, painters in art schools (higher ed was also booming)—but it sometimes simply meant an affiliation, as with an orchestra or theater troupe. Saul Bellow went to Paris in 1948, where he began *The Adventures of Augie March*, but he went on a Guggenheim grant, and he came from an assistant professorship.

The training was professional, and so was the work it produced. Expertise—or, in the mantra of the graduate programs, “technique”—not inspiration or tradition, became the currency of aesthetic authority. The artist-as-genius could sometimes pretend that his work was tossed off in a sacred frenzy, but no self-respecting artist-as-professional could afford to do likewise. They had to be seen to be working, and working *hard* (the badge of professional virtue), and it helped if they could explain to laypeople—deans, donors, journalists—what it was that they were doing.

The artist’s progress, in the postwar model, was also professional. You didn’t burst from obscurity to celebrity with a single astonishing work. You slowly climbed the ranks. You accumulated credentials. You amassed a résumé. You sat on the boards and committees, collected your prizes and fellowships. It was safer than the solitary-genius thing, but it was also a lot less exciting, and it is no surprise that artists were much less apt to be regarded now as sages or priests, much more likely to be seen as just another set of knowledge workers. Spiritual aristocracy was sacrificed for solid socioeconomic upper-middle-class-ness.

Artisan, genius, professional: underlying all these models is the market. In blunter terms, they’re all about the way that you get paid. If the artisanal paradigm predates the emergence of modern capitalism—the age of the artisan was the age of the patron, with the artist as, essentially, a sort of feudal dependent—the paradigms of genius and professional were stages in the effort to adjust to it.

In the former case, the object was to avoid the market and its sullyng entanglements, or at least to appear to do so. Spirit stands opposed to flesh, to filthy lucre. Selling was selling out. Artists, like their churchly forebears, were meant to be unworldly. Some, like Picasso and Rilke, had patrons, but under

very different terms than did the artisans, since the privilege was weighted in the artist's favor now, leaving many fewer strings attached. Some, like Proust and Elizabeth Bishop, had money to begin with. And some, like Joyce and van Gogh, did the most prestigious thing and starved—which also often meant sponging, extracting gifts or “loans” from family or friends that amounted to a kind of sacerdotal tax, equivalent to the tithes exacted by priests or alms relied upon by monks.

Professionalism represents a compromise formation, midway between the sacred and the secular. A profession is not a vocation, in the older sense of a “calling,” but it also isn't just a job; something of the priestly clings to it. Against the values of the market, the artist, like other professionals, maintained a countervailing set of standards and ideals—beauty, rigor, truth—inherited from the previous paradigm. Institutions served to mediate the difference, to cushion artists, ideologically, economically, and psychologically, from the full force of the marketplace.

Some artists did enter the market, of course, especially those who worked in the “low” or “popular” forms. But even they had mediating figures—publishing companies, movie studios, record labels; agents, managers, publicists, editors, producers—who served to shield creators from the market's logic. Corporations functioned as a screen; someone else, at least, was paid to think about the numbers. Publishers or labels also sometimes played an actively benevolent role: funding the rest of the list with a few big hits, floating promising beginners while their talent had a chance to blossom, even subsidizing the entire enterprise, as James Laughlin did for years at New Directions.

There were overlaps, of course, between the different paradigms—long transitions, mixed and marginal cases, anticipations and survivals. The professional model remains the predominant one. But we have entered, unmistakably, a new transition, and it is marked by the final triumph of the market and its values, the removal of the last vestiges of protection and mediation. In the arts, as throughout the middle class, the professional is giving way to the entrepreneur, or, more precisely, the “entrepreneur”: the “self-employed” (that sneaky oxymoron), the entrepreneurial self.

The institutions that have undergirded the existing system are contracting or disintegrating. Professors are becoming adjuncts. Employees are becoming independent contractors (or unpaid interns). Everyone is in a budget squeeze: downsizing, outsourcing, merging, or collapsing. Now we're all supposed to be our own boss, our own business: our own agent; our own label; our own marketing, production, and accounting departments. Entrepreneurialism is being sold to us as an opportunity. It is, by and large, a necessity. Everybody understands by now that nobody can count on a job.

Still, it also is an opportunity. The push of institutional disintegration has coincided with the pull of new technology. The emerging culture of creative entrepreneurship predates the Web—its roots go back to the 1960s—but the Web has brought it an unprecedented salience. The Internet enables you to promote, sell, and deliver directly to the user, and to do so in ways that allow you to compete with corporations and institutions, which previously had a virtual monopoly on marketing and distribution. You can reach potential customers at a speed and on a scale that would have been unthinkable when pretty much the only means were word of mouth, the alternative press, and stapling handbills to telephone poles.

Everybody gets this: every writer, artist, and musician with a Web site (that is, every writer, artist, and musician). Bands hawk their CDs online. Documentarians take to Kickstarter to raise money for their

projects. The comedian Louis CK, selling unprotected downloads of his stand-up show, has tested a nascent distribution model. “Just get your name out there,” creative types are told. There seems to be a lot of building going on: you’re supposed to build your brand, your network, your social-media presence. Creative entrepreneurship is spawning its own institutional structure—online marketplaces, self-publishing platforms, nonprofit incubators, collaborative spaces—but the fundamental relationship remains creator-to-customer, with creators handling or superintending every aspect of the transaction.

So what will all this mean for artists and for art? For training, for practice, for the shape of the artistic career, for the nature of the artistic community, for the way that artists see themselves and are seen by the public, for the standards by which art is judged and the terms by which it is defined? These are new questions, open questions, questions no one is equipped as yet to answer. But it’s not too early to offer a few preliminary observations.

Creative entrepreneurship, to start with what is most apparent, is far more interactive, at least in terms of how we understand the word today, than the model of the artist-as-genius, turning his back on the world, and even than the model of the artist as professional, operating within a relatively small and stable set of relationships. The operative concept today is the network, along with the verb that goes with it, *networking*. A Gen-X graphic-artist friend has told me that the young designers she meets are no longer interested in putting in their 10,000 hours. One reason may be that they recognize that 10,000 hours is less important now than 10,000 contacts.

A network, I should note, is not the same as what used to be known as a circle—or, to use a term important to the modernists, a coterie. The truth is that the geniuses weren’t really quite as solitary as advertised. They also often came together—think of the Bloomsbury Group—in situations of intense, sustained creative ferment. With the coterie or circle as a social form, from its conversations and incitements, came the movement as an intellectual product: impressionism, imagism, futurism.

But the network is a far more diffuse phenomenon, and the connections that it typically entails are far less robust. A few days here, a project there, a correspondence over e-mail. A contact is not a collaborator. Coleridge, for Wordsworth, was not a contact; he was a partner, a comrade, a second self. It is hard to imagine that kind of relationship, cultivated over countless uninterrupted encounters, developing in the age of the network. What kinds of relationships will develop, and what they will give rise to, remains to be seen.

No longer interested in putting in their 10,000 hours: under all three of the old models, an artist was someone who did one thing—who trained intensively in one discipline, one tradition, one set of tools, and who worked to develop one artistic identity. You were a writer, or a painter, or a choreographer. It is hard to think of very many figures who achieved distinction in more than one genre—fiction and poetry, say—let alone in more than one art. Few even attempted the latter (Gertrude Stein admonished Picasso for trying to write poems), and almost never with any success.

But one of the most conspicuous things about today’s young creators is their tendency to construct a multiplicity of artistic identities. You’re a musician *and* a photographer *and* a poet; a storyteller *and* a dancer *and* a designer—a multiplatform artist, in the term one sometimes sees. Which means that you haven’t got time for your 10,000 hours in any of your chosen media. But technique or expertise is not

the point. The point is versatility. Like any good business, you try to diversify.

What we see in the new paradigm—in both the artist’s external relationships and her internal creative capacity—is what we see throughout the culture: the displacement of depth by breadth. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? No doubt some of both, in a ratio that’s yet to be revealed. What seems more clear is that the new paradigm is going to reshape the way that artists are trained. One recently established M.F.A. program in Portland, Oregon, is conducted under the rubric of “applied craft and design.” Students, drawn from a range of disciplines, study entrepreneurship as well as creative practice. Making, the program recognizes, is now intertwined with selling, and artists need to train in both—a fact reflected in the proliferation of dual M.B.A./M.F.A. programs.

The new paradigm is also likely to alter the shape of the ensuing career. Just as everyone, we’re told, will have five or six jobs, in five or six fields, during the course of their working life, so will the career of the multiplatform, entrepreneurial artist be more vagrant and less cumulative than under the previous models. No climactic masterwork of deep maturity, no *King Lear* or *Faust*, but rather many shifting interests and directions as the winds of market forces blow you here or there.

Works of art, more centrally and nakedly than ever before, are becoming commodities, consumer goods. Jeff Bezos, as a patron, is a very different beast than James Laughlin. Now it’s every man for himself, every tub on its own bottom. Now it’s not an audience you think of addressing; it’s a customer base. Now you’re only as good as your last sales quarter.

It’s hard to believe that the new arrangement will not favor work that’s safer: more familiar, formulaic, user-friendly, eager to please—more like entertainment, less like art. Artists will inevitably spend a lot more time looking over their shoulder, trying to figure out what the customer wants rather than what they themselves are seeking to say. The nature of aesthetic judgment will itself be reconfigured. “No more gatekeepers,” goes the slogan of the Internet apostles. Everyone’s opinion, as expressed in Amazon reviews and suchlike, carries equal weight—the democratization of taste.

Judgment rested with the patron, in the age of the artisan. In the age of the professional, it rested with the critic, a professionalized aesthete or intellectual. In the age of the genius, which was also the age of avant-gardes, of tremendous experimental energy across the arts, it largely rested with artists themselves. “Every great and original writer,” Wordsworth said, “must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished.”

But now we have come to the age of the customer, who perforce is always right. Or as a certain legendary entertainer is supposed to have put it, “There’s a sucker born every minute.” Another word for gatekeepers is *experts*. Lord knows they have their problems, beginning with arrogance, but there is one thing you can say for them: they’re not quite so easily fooled. When the Modern Library asked its editorial board to select the 100 best novels of the 20th century, the top choice was *Ulysses*. In a companion poll of readers, it was *Atlas Shrugged*. We recognize, when it comes to food (the new summit of cultural esteem), that taste must be developed by a long exposure, aided by the guidance of practitioners and critics. About the arts we own to no such modesties. Prizes belong to the age of professionals. All we’ll need to measure merit soon is the best-seller list.

The democratization of taste, abetted by the Web, coincides with the democratization of creativity. The makers have the means to sell, but everybody has the means to make. And everybody’s using them.

Everybody seems to fancy himself a writer, a musician, a visual artist. Apple figured this out a long time ago: that the best way to sell us its expensive tools is to convince us that we all have something unique and urgent to express.

“Producerism,” we can call this, by analogy with consumerism. What we’re now persuaded to consume, most conspicuously, are the means to create. And the democratization of taste ensures that no one has the right (or inclination) to tell us when our work is bad. A universal grade inflation now obtains: we’re all swapping A-minuses all the time, or, in the language of Facebook, “likes.”

It is often said today that the most-successful businesses are those that create experiences rather than products, or create experiences (environments, relationships) around their products. So we might also say that under producerism, in the age of creative entrepreneurship, producing becomes an experience, even *the* experience. It becomes a lifestyle, something that is packaged as an experience—and an experience, what’s more, after the contemporary fashion: networked, curated, publicized, fetishized, tweeted, catered, and anything but solitary, anything but private.

Among the most notable things about those Web sites that creators now all feel compelled to have is that they tend to present not only the work, not only the creator (which is interesting enough as a cultural fact), but also the creator’s life or lifestyle or process. The customer is being sold, or at least sold on or sold through, a vicarious experience of production.

Creator: I’m not sure that *artist* even makes sense as a term anymore, and I wouldn’t be surprised to see it giving way before the former, with its more generic meaning and its connection to that contemporary holy word, *creative*. Joshua Wolf Shenk’s *Powers of Two*, last summer’s modish book on creativity, puts Lennon and McCartney with Jobs and Wozniak. A recent cover of this very magazine touted “Case Studies in Eureka Moments,” a list that started with Hemingway and ended with Taco Bell.

When works of art become commodities and nothing else, when every endeavor becomes “creative” and everybody “a creative,” then art sinks back to craft and artists back to artisans—a word that, in its adjectival form, at least, is newly popular again. Artisanal pickles, artisanal poems: what’s the difference, after all? So “art” itself may disappear: art as Art, that old high thing. Which—unless, like me, you think we need a vessel for our inner life—is nothing much to mourn.

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-death-of-the-artist-and-the-birth-of-the-creative-entrepreneur/383497/>

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