

# “Doubts will become the reason for your failure”: The Imagined Futures of Graduating Artists

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This project is the outcome of my reflection on a short ethnographic encounter with graduating Fine Art students, conducted in the form of six interviews, thirty-five to forty-five minutes long. The final paper can be roughly divided into four parts. In the first part, I will be talking about the peculiarities of my chosen site of fieldwork. Following that, I will describe my first day in the field and the personal biases I held – uncovered through reflection. In the next part, I will introduce examples from the second day of my fieldwork, and finally I will apply theories and ethnographies of other writers to develop my argument.

My initial interest was to investigate anxieties that young artists experience due to the financial instability of their chosen profession. However, as I will explain later, that question implied certain assumptions that were not shared by my respondents. Hence, this paper will be dedicated to the imagined futures of graduating Fine Art students and their relationships with different temporalities. The main argument that I am going to develop is that the unconventional nature of



*Medina Gadzhi-Ismalylova, The Dangers of Being Alive (2018, screenshot from the video)*

an artistic career makes the process of transitioning from part-time work on the side as a means of earning money to a self-sufficient artistic career the most uncertain and anxious temporal stage for young artists, as opposed to more ‘traditional’ careers, where the most uncertain stage is associated with the period of time right after graduation. I will then suggest that creativity and dedication are seen as the most important instruments for successful navigation and completion of this transition.

The ethnographic encounter that inspired this reflection occurred when I was in my home city of Moscow. One of my closest friends, Medina, was finishing her Fine Arts degree at the British High School of Art and Design (BHSAD) that year. Future employment is one of her main worries. Discussions about the problems of being a young contemporary artist in the world, where contemporary art is

still often looked down upon, had come to dominate our conversations. Moreover, Medina frequently expressed her discomfort with the fact that the circle of professional artists does not provide a supportive environment for young people, as they do not have a well-established status, so earning money might be a complicated task for them too. With these themes reoccurring in our discussions, I decided to visit Medina's university for two days and to interview other students on her course about their visions of their future career in arts. I expected that most respondents would also feel uneasy about the financial prospects of their chosen career.

Overall, five people agreed to talk to me. I was first hesitant about interviewing my friend too, as I was aware of the potential bias that might be caused by our ten-year-long relationship. However, as on my first morning at BHSAD none of the other respondents were yet in the studio, I thought "why not?" It later proved to be very helpful, as it allowed me to evaluate my position in the field. Formally recording my interview with Medina did not alter my starting perspective, since all the previous talks we shared had already led me to think that almost everyone in the studio would share her position. But, reflecting on the discussion made me

realise that my initial assumption was false.

Joanne Passaro in her article "*You Can't Take the Subway to the Field!*," published in 1997, focused on the fact that it was then more institutionally favourable for anthropologists to travel to distant, traditional sites to conduct their fieldwork, while choosing a big city was still regarded as quite unsuitable because of its fluid social and cultural nature (Passaro, 1997: 151-154). I experienced this concern myself, approaching a British university based in Moscow with students from various backgrounds. This was highlighted by one of my respondents, Yechan, a 27-year-old Korean citizen, when I asked him whether he thought that his national identity was visible in his work. He replied that he has a "triple nationality," with Korean, British and Russian influences forming a "triangle, a mix." In addition to different interlocked national identities, the students at BHSAD also had different educational backgrounds – some had graduated from art schools, while others had decided to pursue a direction in contemporary art only recently. Therefore, it was almost impossible for me to define the group I was studying based on shared past experiences and origins.

However, later some of my respondents mentioned to me how collective practice at university was invaluable to them. This led me to believe that there are some social relationships and bonds, both inside and outside the group, that make it a valid and coherent field of study. Worries about imagined futures of soon-to-become artists were among these social bonds, and the rest of this ethnography will be dedicated to them.

I did not have a list of set questions for each student who agreed to talk to me and instead tried to focus on listening and asking follow up questions. It was prevalent from the get go in my first interview with Medina that financial security would be a major topic of concern. She expressed her anxiety about the relationship between capitalism and artistic freedom. She argued that, on the one hand, artists are the only ones responsible for their work: “you don’t really have customers or clients who tell you what they want from you; there are no people telling you “Oh, we need more art about global warming, we need more art about feminism” – no one says that!” But, on the other hand, she saw a requirement to fit into a strict economic system: “You earn money by providing a service or making a product, and then you spend this money <...>, that’s what it is!” Medina was the only respondent who actively expressed her concerns with this dichotomy, and she was the only one who decided to leave Fine

Art after graduating in favour of more market-oriented creative industries. She wanted to apply the artistic perspective she developed during her four years at BHSAD to other spheres.

Judith Kapferer’s article on ‘creative industries,’ “Twilight of the Enlightenment” can be used to reflect on Medina’s decision (Kapferer 2010). Kapferer dedicated part of her research on culture-consuming society to ‘cultural studies’ such as journalism and media, suggesting that their emergence aimed for “rationalisation of those intellectual pursuits considered to be impractical and/or merely recreational” in the capitalist society (Kapferer 2010: 12). In other words, creative industries are supposed to guide students’ aspirations in career development. Fine Art is what Kapferer’s meant by an impractical discipline. This is something Medina too was alluding to when she expressed her discomfort with the lack of a customer. She mentioned to me that “graphic designers and other professionals <...> will always have someone who needs their service.” Despite her being the only respondent who decided to leave Fine Art after graduation, her motivation was at first more understandable to me than that of those who did not make this decision.

As my aim was to focus on the economic instability of young artists, my next two interviews with Daria and Yechan threw me off-course. Daria works in the medium of science art; a relatively new, emerging professional sphere which uses scientific methods and techniques for the production of artworks. According to Daria, “the main problem lies in the fact that [the] profession of science artist merely does not exist. Its development will probably take another twenty years.” Yechan, coming from a strong Christian background, tries to convey the Biblical story in his work through modern abstract painting. He sees his main goal as “worshipping God in a gallery space.” What united these two respondents for me was that both seemed to ‘bounce off’ my questions about fears of financial struggles in the near future, which confused me and made me realise that my initial predisposition might have been wrong.

With Daria, we first touched upon the complications of being a science artist quite early on in our discussion, but when I decided to follow that line, I did not get the response I had expected. This was emphasised when I tried to relate my own experience of being unsure about my future. I explained to Daria how I considered branching off into academics instead of my initial desire to work in

curatorship since the former seems to be more stable. To this, Daria responded:

“I don’t think that I experience something like this. If you have even the tiniest bit of doubts, they will become the reason of your failure – something will precisely happen to validate them <...>”.

It appeared then that Daria was not anxious about her future but saw it as a demanding, yet exciting challenge.

Yechan, on the other hand, had a clear plan of his future professional development as an artist, structured around the timetable of major exhibitions around the world. This plan seemed very ambitious to me. As a person, who worked in a gallery space a few years ago, I knew about the number of rejections that young artists can receive, which made me wonder whether Yechan considered the possibility of failures and setbacks. His response lay in the same field as his subject – religion and faith:

“Again, financial situation will be the first problem, maybe. But as I told you, I try not to worry too much <...> I believe that God will prepare something for me.”

Any further attempts to develop the conversation of failure and financial instability did not meet any success.

Both respondents accepted the difficulties of being a contemporary artist but were not as anxious about them as Medina was. There are a few possible explanations for this. The most obvious one is that it might be unpleasant to talk openly about your personal feelings to an unknown person. I only met Yechan once, a few years ago, before our discussion, and my interview with Daria was the first time I had met her. However, they may still have represented their true views.

During my second day, I began to seriously reconsider my initial investigation of the anxieties of young artists concerning their imagined futures because my observations thus far contradicted my expectations. My interview with Sofia that morning provided more ground for me to reflect on my position and approach in the field. Surprisingly, the part of the interview that caught my attention was unrelated to my main line of inquiry. Sofia talked about two major themes in her artistic practice: repetition and systematisation, linking them to her analytical mindset. Later, when I asked her about the most common stereotypes about contemporary artists, she mentioned 'artistic behaviour and character', admitting that she shared this stereotype and sometimes felt less of an artist because of her analytical

inclination. This response made me realise that I initially treated my second and third respondents, Daria and Yechan, as people belonging to a 'different realm' than myself, and, instead of connecting to them, to some extent I was trying to 'bring them down to earth', where 'ordinary' people worry about money and jobs, as opposed to imaginary 'artistic' worlds. Realising this, I transformed my main question from 'How do young artists deal with anxieties about their futures?' to 'How do they imagine their futures in general?'

At this point, I want to mention literary research that I have conducted for this paper. Sadly, most resources that I have examined did not provide me with information to support my analysis. I consulted Amanda Gilbertson's article on the education of 'aspiring' Indian middle-class youth, but it seemed to be irrelevant since Gilbertson was developing her argument in relation to the specific economic situation of the region, while my field, the BHSAD, was its own multicultural setting (Gilbertson 2017: 19-32). I then focused on an article by Kristina Dohrn, who studied Gulen-inspired schools in Tanzania (2017: 51-68). This article also seemed promising regarding my research as it emphasised aspiration. However, Dohrn's conclusion about student aspiration draws

on the importance of ideological education, and there was no sense of 'ideology' in any of the discussions I had with my respondents (Dohrn 2017: 51-68). In fact, four out of six interviewees told me they felt a lack of guidance, empathy and proper mentorship from their tutors. I have also looked at various chapters of 'Anthropological Perspectives on Student Futures,' but none seemed very helpful either. However, one quote in the introduction by Amy Stambach caught my attention:

"The social realisation of youth <...> involves the interplay of hope and uncertainty. Hope is a motivator, uncertainty animates the voluminous social field; and social realisation comes and goes both in the sense that people come to know and understand the scope and limits of schooling and that they convert its value into something else, whether it is for short- or longer-term gain or loss" (2017: 12).

All of my respondents were, indeed, hopeful about their future as artists, and that was something that motivated them. But due to the peculiarities of their chosen profession, they experienced limitations and uncertainty differently from students described by Gilbertson and Dohrn. To illustrate that and to introduce my final argument, I would like to discuss my last two interviews, with Alisa and Eliza.

Before our interview, a few people had mentioned Eliza to me since she was studying and working at the same time, covering all personal expenses except her tuition fees. When I asked her about her future plans, Eliza said that she had to continue working since she was used to self-sufficiency, but she also did not want 'to get worn out' and so intended to keep up her artistic practice. Eliza developed an approach based on a balance between being an artist and doing part-time jobs to support herself financially. She had worries about how this was going to work, but her approach made me seriously think for the first time about the part-time work mentioned by almost all of my respondents.

It is not unusual for graduating students to consider doing something not directly related to their desired career after finishing university. A well-paid job might be difficult to find quickly for an inexperienced student in any sphere. Potentially, this common-sense knowledge prevented me from noticing the persistence with which my respondents mentioned side-jobs. Yechan referred to taking up photography, Daria imagined the possibility of making design prints out of her works. With Alisa, my fifth respondent, we discussed whether she had an absolute financial minimum after which she would stop her artistic practice. She mentioned

a stereotype of a 'poor artist:' "all by himself, working in a small studio, living off bread and water, while everyone who becomes famous is selling out." It was obvious that she did not take this concept seriously, just like my other respondents with whom I discussed 'the poor artist' stereotype. The reason for the dismissal of this stereotype must lie in the fact that an artistic career does not involve the traditional 'ladder' with an employee moving upwards through promotions. As Medina mentioned, there is no client and no employer in the common sense of each word. There is no predictability, since one project might be successful, and the next one might turn out to be a failure. Hence, for young artists side-jobs are not an unfortunate necessity, but a familiar scenario. Yechan, Daria, Alisa and Eliza mentioned that they saw side-jobs as a way to support their artistic practice. None of them expressed strong feelings of dissatisfaction or anxiety about that. Returning to Stambach's quote, education in Fine Art promotes students' evaluation of side-jobs as a short-term loss required for long-term success in their sphere of professional interest.

Jane I. Guyer in her article about punctuated time observed in the postmodern condition a shift towards "both very short and very long

sightedness" (Guyer 2007: 410). She pointed out that the concept of 'near future' was disappearing from public imagination, both in a social and in an individual sense in contemporary economic reality (Guyer 2007: 410). I observed this tendency among my respondents. Most of them imagined their immediate future as a combination of artistic practice and financially sustaining activity, while in the long-term they expected to be able to support themselves through art professionally. The 'near future', or transitional period between the two stages, was absent from their account since it was not possible to forecast precisely when and how the transition was going to happen. However, the possibility of doing side-jobs for as long as required lightened this uncertainty and reduced anxiety. Talking about this transition, Daria mentioned:

"Of course, this is not that easy. As a matter of fact, currently, I am a manicurist. And this is strange, that you have to work elsewhere to bring your ideas to life. Difficult, but solvable problem. It depends on time and keenness."

This quote resembles what other respondents reiterated. They saw artistic creativity and dedication as a remedy to anxieties about and the practicalities of the near future. This can be seen through Yechan's

explanation of his relationship with faithful beliefs: “I don’t mean it like I can do nothing, and ‘God will prepare everything,’ I strongly believe in some way and then follow.” This emphasis on creativity and dedication stems from the fact that there are no other reliable instruments of increasing the chances of success among artists. Gaining new qualifications does not necessarily lead to the rise in price of artworks. Being represented by a small gallery for five years does not necessarily lead to being ‘promoted’ to a bigger space. Therefore, young artists who do not have connections in high art circles can only confidently rely on dedication and hope. Hence, my initial assumption about the presence of financial anxieties among graduate artists was not correct. The main anxiety does not relate to money, as education in Fine Art prepares students to see financial concerns as inevitable. It is the transitional period of the near future that is expected to be the most uncertain and worrying. Creativity and dedication are seen as valuable instruments required for dealing with near-future anxiety.

The goal of this paper was to describe my ethnographic enquiry and the setbacks and discoveries on its production path. I attempted to investigate the financial anxieties of graduating Fine Art students

through fieldwork carried out at BHSAD, a faculty of Fine Art in Moscow. The development of my work saw me reflexively refocus my question, as my respondents showed me that the one I was asking presumed that they held certain sentiments. I had in mind that I was biased when approaching the subject of futures for Fine Art students as I had a close relationship with one of the respondents, but realised there was another bias at play: I primarily regarded Fine Art students as detached from the ‘reality’ of complex economic relations. Untangling my position and assumptions helped me to reformulate my question and focus on the imagined futures of artists without upholding such a strong financial focus. I then used the ideas of Stambach and Guyer to discuss how young artists are taught to treat side-jobs as a normal stage in the development of their career in the near future, but find it difficult to account for the transitional period after graduation.

This is because they jump ahead – skipping this transition stage – to imagining their careers as self-sufficient artists. Thus, I realised that anxiety is temporally placed in the period of the near future, and is also not directly tethered to financial issues as such. I proposed that creativity and dedication are

imagined to be the main instruments of overcoming this anxiety because it is difficult for an artist to measure their chances of success in other terms. Some of my respondents have opened up about art being something more than just a career for them. Therefore, I would like to finish this paper with a quote by Sofia:

“No matter how I am going to earn money in the future, no matter where I am going to work – I call myself an artist, probably without a clear understanding of what it means to be one.”

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