VANISHING SCARCITY:

Basic Income as a Means to Preserve Value in the Arts

By Jude Thomas

In the last two decades the growth and improvement of both recording technology and Internet access have brought about fundamental changes to how people create and consume art. Prior to the 1990s, only institutions with significant capital, expertise, and purpose could take on the effort of producing a music album or a feature film. Today the costs of creation and distribution of an album or film have so decreased so dramatically that virtually anyone with the interest and will can take on and complete such a project.

Easier access to cheaper products is certainly beneficial, but in the case of the arts, a new problem regarding the relationship between quantity and quality: if everyone can easily buy a video camera or a computer with recording software, and then distribute their work for free via platforms such as SoundCloud, BandCamp, or YouTube, we are then flooded with a vast amount of low-quality and mediocre art. Silicon Valley entrepreneur and social critic Andrew Keen, in a 2006 article, lamented the proliferation of every person creating works of art as undermining the labor of professional curators such as record companies, film studios, and publishing houses whose business is to find greatness in art:

Consider Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece, *Vertigo* and a couple of other brilliantly talented works of the same name Vertigo: the 1999 book called *Vertigo*, by Anglo-German writer W.G. Sebald, and the 2004 song "Vertigo," by Irish rock star Bono. Hitchcock could never have made his expensive, complex movies outside the Hollywood studio system. Bono would never have become Bono without the music

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industry's super-heavyweight marketing muscle. And W.G. Sebald, the most obscure of this trinity of talent, would have remained an unknown university professor had a high-end publishing house not had the good taste to discover and distribute his work.¹

In addition to easy and immediate access, these technologies greatly increased the quantity of art works available on the market; that is, how many units of a particular work of art are in circulation. This glut of supply has drastically affected the and item's scarcity, and thus lowered its price. Some artistic mediums, in particular music, photographs, and video, have been dramatically affected by recent technological developments.² In the past, a recording or film would be placed onto a vinyl disc, onto film, or videocassette. Copying the media was difficult, expensive, and quality would degrade with each successive copy. Once digital media became a common storage device—first with CDs in the 1980s, and then with MP3 files and DVDs in the 1990s—making perfect copies became incredibly simple and required almost no effort or expertise on the part of the average consumer. Now, since any amount of perfect copies can be made at almost no cost, the pressure of supply no longer exists, real scarcity disappears, and the effective price of any recording, movie, or other work of art that can be stored and reproduced digitally has tumbled.

For independent artists, who exist outside of the system of Hollywood film studios, record companies, and publishing houses mentioned by Keen, this creates a real obstacle. Since anyone can copy and distribute the content for free, any price set by the artist or seller is in competition with free copies that can easily be acquired online. Once an independent artist has sold a copy of their work, there is nothing to stop the work from being uploaded to the Internet and distributed worldwide without the artist receiving any payment monetary compensation. When this is combined with the challenge of rising above the noise of other individuals creating original content (something the marketing resources of large recording companies and studios have the means to overcome), the ability for an artist to derive a living from the sale of the products they create becomes exceedingly difficult without the support of a patron.

¹ Andrew Keen, "Web 2.0: The second generation of the Internet has arrived. It's worse than you think." *The Weekly Standard*, http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/714fjczq.asp?page=3 (February 14, 2006; accessed February 9, 2015).

² Although this paper addresses issues of scarcity as they pertain to movies, music, and photographs, other mediums of art, such as sculpture—whose very nature seems to be immune to digital copying—will probably face these same challenges in the near future as 3D printing technologies continue to improve.

This situation creates a crisis for artists who posses genuine talent and who have the potential and skill to create high-quality works or art: without the umbrella of a large institution which is willing to expend capital in order to fund the creation of a new artwork, and then market the artwork, artists must raise the funds themselves. Additionally, artists must also expend time and energy to simply pay for the costs of living such as housing and food. That time and energy could instead be spent on their continuing development as artists. As a result, talent and potential is misdirected, human capital is wasted, and the likelihood of a high-quality artwork being created is diminished.

In addition to the crisis faced by independent artists, when one critically examines the history, decisions, and motives of film studios, record companies, book publishers, universities, and nonprofit cultural institutions that traditionally fund artistic projects, the authority they claim as competent and responsible curators of the arts is seriously called into question. Media companies have lost a great deal of money due to the recent revolution in digital distribution,³ and since these entities are essentially moneymaking enterprises, their priority is to maximize profit rather than create and support good art. This is especially evident in the record companies' failure to embrace digital downloads and instead act punitively through lawsuits against content sharing and online piracy.⁴ Similarly, both universities and nonprofit cultural institutions' ability to truly support art in an inclusive and fair manner is often compromised by the political whims, funding demands, and the artistic agendas of each institution.

The adoption of a universal basic income is a solution to this crisis. By directly subsidizing every individual in society, those with the talent and will to pursue a career in the arts will have the freedom to take less irrelevant work for survival; artists can exist as independent agents without relying upon an institution such as a record company for patronage. They will have the freedom to develop and create works of art that resonate with both large audiences and small communities.

³ Tim Arango, "Digital Sales Surpass CDs at Atlantic," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/26/business/media/26music.html?_r=0 (November 25, 2008; Accessed February 11, 2015); between 1999 and 2008, global music sales decreased from \$14.6 billion to \$10.1 billion.

⁴ Steve Knopper, Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age, (New York: Free Press 2009). In 1999 Napster released a peer-to-peer file sharing service that allowed individuals to share music files with each other for free. Thousands of people jumped at the chance to freely exchange their digital music libraries. After the 2001 A&M Records, Inc. v. Napster Inc. decision, Napster was bought off and dismantled. It was succeeded by many different services such as Bearshare, Limewire, and Kazaa. The record companies, after Napster's demise, pursued legal action against individuals who downloaded and shared unlicensed or pirated music files.

Likewise, by eliminating basic survival costs, the choice to support an artist by consumers is not weighed against the need for food and shelter.

A Brief History of Art Labor

The history of how art is produced in societies with specialized labor can be tied to the patrons of art just as much it can be to the artists. Prior to the Renaissance, works of art were most often associated with the patron rather than the artist. Byzantine Patriarch Nicephorus (CE 758–828) especially emphasized the role of the patron as the "poetic cause" of art above that of the artist, the "organic cause." The association of works of art—be it illustrations, poetry, music, or architecture—with patrons as expressions of their wealth and power is not unique to European societies. In China, painters and calligraphers were formally attached to the imperial courts and their works reinforced the control of material wealth possessed by the rulers and emperors.

In Europe, the church was the primary patron of the arts until the late medieval period and into the Renaissance when noble courts and other secular institutions started to become significant patrons of the arts. In general, an artist would begin their training in the church (in the case of music) or as a member of labor guild (in the case of painters or sculptors), and the most successful individual artists would eventually include employment in one of the many courts of Europe. On the peripheries of society however, there was always a class of artists who existed as freelancers:

The career of [composer] Guillaume de Machaut is typical: he was educated as a cleric but became secretary to King John of Bohemia and later entered the service of the court of France, spending the years of his retirement as a canon at Reims. Those composers who existed without patronage—the uneducated man with a natural instinct for music, the lapsed cleric unwilling to submit to church authority—were social outcasts who earned a living precariously as wandering minstrels or general entertainers.⁷

⁵ Paul Binski and Christopher F. Black, "patronage," *The Oxford Companion to Western Art, Oxford Art Online*, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t118/e1998 (accessed February 14, 2015).

⁶ Jessica Rawson, et al., "China," *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T016513pg64 (accessed February 14, 2015). China developed a state-sponsored and centralized system of artist centuries before European societies; in addition, Chinese perceptions of art as opposed to craft was also centuries ahead of European sensibilities, which did not begin to distinguish the two until the Renaissance.

⁷ Michael Hurd "patronage," *The Oxford Companion to Music, Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e5038 (accessed February 14, 2015).

Outside of Europe, patronage largely remained in the hands of courts and rulers, with some patronage being taken on by religious institutions. Within European society, the mode of patronage reflected the political and social climate of the era, and in the 18th century the system of patronage dominated by the church and aristocracy was degraded by the growing middle-class' investments in the arts. As national identity and the consolidated state became more commonplace, state-sponsored schools appropriated the training of musicians and artists,⁸ and new avenues of freelance work began to emerge for artists. During his adult life, Mozart enjoyed a varied career as a freelance composer, performer, teacher, and entrepreneur. He composed operas, organized public concert series, and sold subscriptions for his own music. (Mozart was unfortunately notoriously terrible with money and died in such debt that he was buried in an unmarked grave.)⁹

Centralized state sponsorship of the arts began in earnest in the 18th century and flourished throughout Europe in the 19th century. The British Museum was created by an Act of Parliament in 1753, and after the French revolution the government established the Louvre in 1793. State sponsorship of the arts was not limited to the fine arts; King Ludwig II of Bavaria was one of Wagner's most supportive patrons, he even financed the construction of the Richard Wagner's famous opera house in Bayreuth in the 1870s. 11

In the 19th century the growing wealth of the middle-class allowed for-profit companies to supplant the role of the church or aristocracy as patrons of the arts. One such example was the music-publishing firm Ricordi, which was founded in 1808. Ricordi was not only the regular publisher for Verdi's operas, it also was active in the commissioning of new operas from Verdi, and the firm's manager Giulio Ricordi, "played a central role in Puccini's artistic development." Ricordi was not however, publishing operas and music solely because of a duty to the arts; the firm was

⁸ Charles Plummeridge, "Schools," Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online,

 $http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/43103 \ (accessed\ January\ 9,\ 2015).$

⁹ Andrew Steptoe, "Mozart and Poverty," *The Musical Times* Vol. 125, No. 1694 (April 1984), 196-201

¹⁰ David Rodgers, "museums," *The Oxford Companion to Western Art, Oxford Art Online*, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t118/e1834 (accessed February 16, 2015)

http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t118/e1834 (accessed February 16, 2015).

11 Barry Millington, et al., "Wagner," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*,

http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/29769pg1 (accessed February 16, 2015).

¹² Roger Parker, "Verdi, Giuseppe," Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online,

http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/29191pg4 (accessed January 10, 2015).

¹³ Richard Macnutt, "Ricordi" *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/23413 (accessed February 11, 2015).

making lots of money by taking advantage of the widespread popularity of opera in Italy and Europe in the 19th century.

Theo van Gogh, the younger brother of Vincent van Gogh, is another example of how middle-class wealth came to influence and patronize the arts in 19th century Europe. Theo acted as the primary patron for his brother throughout Vincent's life. Without his support the works of Vincent van Gogh probably would not have existed in the way we know them.¹⁴

In the United States, the lack of centralized religious institutions and landed aristocracy created an art-labor system driven by popular demand and eventually including cultural institutions supported by wealthy patrons. Specifically examining musicians provides an excellent view of how artists worked and lived differently than in Europe or elsewhere in the world.

Musicians in America, from the Colonial period to the middle of the 19th century, generally worked as part-time freelance performers for local venues. However, during the middle-to-late 19th century and into the 20th century, two different systems of patronage began to emerge. The first system was sponsored by wealthy philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie or Thomas Mott Osborne. These wealthy individuals—often captains of industry or finance—sponsored performing arts organizations that eventually evolved into large cultural institutions¹⁵ Many of these institutions, such as the New York Philharmonic or Carnegie Hall, still exist today and enjoy privileged positions in the world of art.

The second system of music patronage evolved out of the tradition of popular music consumption in the United States. Popular music in America was closely tied to a variety of entertainments such as minstrel shows, singing families, popular piano music, and songwriters such as Stephen Foster. These different musical performers and artists found success not only on the performance stage, but also from the growing industry of sheet music sales. Several of Foster's songs, by the 1850s, had sold over 100,000 copies, and after the Civil War more and more popular songwriters began to experience commercial success.¹⁶

¹⁴ Evert van Uitert, "Gogh, Vincent van," *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T033020 (accessed February 16, 2015).

¹⁵ Paula J. Bishop, "Patronage," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*,

http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2252146 (accessed January 10, 2015).

¹⁶ Charles Hamm, et al., "Popular music," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2259148 (accessed February 11, 2015).

It was recording technology however, that completely transformed how music was made and consumed and allowed companies to expand their patronage of musicians. Now that someone could hear music without having to either make it oneself, or have another person create the music, audiences no longer needed to be in the presence of musicians, and people did not require the specialized knowledge of music literacy in order to enjoy purchased sheet music at home. Record companies hired studio musicians and produced recordings for popular consumption. By the end of the 20th century, these companies were making almost \$15 billion a year.¹⁷

For the latter part of the 20th century financially successful composers and performers existed either in the system of patronage by record companies, which was controlled by for-profit companies, or existed in the academic system that had emerged from conservatories and universities. There has also been a large group of musicians who lived as freelance performers. They often find employment as teachers, or as performers in orchestras, or as studio musicians for record companies or film scores. During this time, the cost to self-produce one's own works was extremely high, so composers who were independent of either the record companies or academy were quite rare.

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

Beginning in the 1980s, compact discs, or CDs, became the dominant music storage device. What made them different from vinyl records, cassette tapes, and 8-tracks was their digital nature. The process of recording and distributing music transitioned to digital, rather than analog, platforms. This made the production and distribution of music cheaper, more accessible, and ultimately—along with the development of the Internet—created an environment that allows almost anyone the ability to make a movie or record his or her own album and make a near infinite amount of perfect copies.

Before the digital revolution, recording studios required several expensive pieces of analog hardware. Over the last 20 years, those separate pieces of hardware have been integrated into software packages such as Pro Tools, Cubase, or Reason. What would have cost a studio almost a half-million dollars in the early 1990s today is only about a \$5,000–\$10,000 investment. ¹⁹

¹⁷ Bain & Company, "Publishing in the Digital Era: A Bain & Company study for the Forum d'Avignon," Bain & Company, 2011.

¹⁸ Knopper, Appetite for Self-Destruction, 15-35.

¹⁹ Justin Colletti, "How Long Is This Gonna Take? The Time and Cost of Recording a Full-Length Album," *Trust Me, I'm A Scientist*, http://www.trustmeimascientist.com/2013/05/06/how-long-is-this-gonna-take-recording-an-album-in-the-21st-century/ (May 6, 2013; accessed February 2, 2015).

Additionally, the expansion of the Internet and services such as SoundCloud and BandCamp allow artists to distribute digital recordings for almost no cost.

While cheaper production costs certainly benefited music producers, the problem that emerged with digital media is copying. With a CD recording, it is incredibly easy to rip the tracks to your computer and burn a copy of an entire album. The implications of this first manifested in the 1990s on college campuses. One fan would purchase their favorite album, and then burn dozens of copies for their friends.²⁰ Unlike vinyl, which was nearly impossible to copy, and cassette tapes, which lose quality in copying process, making a CD copy is a perfect sound replica of the original. For the first time artists and record companies had no control of how many units of a product existed.

This problem was magnified when the ISO-MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3, or MP3, technology began to find widespread use on the Internet.²¹ At first it was used in the exchange of underground recordings, but it soon expanded, thanks to the development of Winamp player software, and eventually Napster, which by October 1999, "had 150,000 users, trading 3.5 million files—and was expanding by who-knows-how-much every day."²² A significant portion of music consumers, when given the choice of whether to buy new music or freely exchange it, overwhelmingly choose to freely exchange files online.

Digital recordings and online file sharing completely upended the music industry and other technological developments disrupted traditional production and distribution models in other artistic mediums as well. Digital cameras revolutionized photography, and websites such as Flickr allow photographers to share their images with others in the same way that SoundCloud allows its users to share audio files. Similarly, the ability to send and share images has undermined the idea of a photograph as a unique work of art. The industry of photography has changed so much that Kodak, a company that in 1976 controlled 90% of all photographic film sales in the United States, announced in 2012 it was selling its consumer film division as part of a bankruptcy settlement.²³

²⁰ Knopper, *Appetite for Self-Destruction*, 78-79.

²¹ MP3 is an audio coding format that is used for compressing digital audio files. It was finalized in 1992 and published by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) in 1993. In the last two decades, MP3 files have become the industry standard for digital audio files.

²² Knopper, Appetite for Self-Destruction, 130.

²³ Jasper Rees, "The end of our Kodak moment," *The Telegraph*, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/9025257/The-end-of-our-Kodak-moment.html (January 19, 2012; accessed February 2, 2015).

Throughout the late 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, traditional media industries were transformed as new technologies entered the market.

The consumer on the other hand benefited from these changes. With the advent of digital downloads, audiences could once again purchase single tracks (or download them for free), take thousands of photographs without having to pay for film or developing, and even create home movies using inexpensive video cameras and video-editing software that was bundled with their personal computers. In many ways the technology has been democratized; anyone in the developed world with a modest degree of wealth has access to technology that was at one point only available to heavily funded institutions and companies. Even today, access to these tools continues to expand as mobile technology spreads throughout the developing countries, providing access to both video- and sound-recording technology installed on mobile devices.²⁴

MODERN PATRONAGE AND THE CURRENT ARTISTIC CRISIS

The current technological climate has placed artists and consumers in an interesting position. On one hand, it is easier and less expensive to create and distribute a work of art, but on the other hand, once that work is distributed and sent out into the world, the creator has no control over how that artwork is copied and subsequently shared. The lack of reliability on a return on the investment has only served to create a generation of hobbyists and amateurs. Professional artists must still seek out the financial support of patrons in order to seriously pursue their work. Thus, little has actually changed in how artist live and how art is made besides the adoption of new tools: wealthy patrons pay for artists to make art.

The old models of aristocracy, the church, or the imperial ruler acting as the sole patrons of the arts is gone, and over the last two centuries new entities have stepped into their place to fill that void. These include media companies, academic institutions, and cultural institutions. Each of these act as curators in a variety of art mediums, and making decisions about which works of art get to exist and which artists are deserving of the right to make a living as artists. Their choices support artists such as Pink Floyd, Leonard Bernstein, or Stanley Kubrick, but they also support bands like Starship or finance movies like *Transformers 2*. So when one critically examines the decisions and

²⁴ Pew Research Center, "Emerging Nations Embrace Internet, Mobile Technology," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/02/13/emerging-nations-embrace-internet-mobile-technology/ (February 13, 2014; accessed February 11, 2015).

history of these curating bodies, whether they are actually deserving of that trust is seriously called into question.

MEDIA COMPANIES

In the case of media companies such as Hollywood studios or recording companies, these entities are for-profit agents, and thus their primary concern is making money, not producing great art. It is certainly not unheard of, nor is it uncommon for high-quality works of art to also generate a large profit, and that is the premise that defenders of the for-profit model will use. However, the reality is that large media companies have a history of negative, reactive behavior, and their large corporate infrastructures actually discourage innovation.

Record companies are the best example of this behavior. These companies have consistently resisted artistic and technological change because it threatened whatever their current profit model was at different times. In the early 1980s record companies were hesitant to adopt the CD (which ended up bringing massive profits), and in the late 1990s and early 2000s the shift to digital downloads was resisted because it upset the huge profits gained from selling physical CDs.²⁵

Perhaps the most egregious action on the part of these companies was phasing out the single. During the CD era (1984–1999) the production of singles by record companies stopped. Prior to the CD era, singles were used as promotional devices and were not nearly as profitable as a full-length album: "By the late 1990s, the record business had boiled down much of the business to a simple formula: [two] good songs + 10 or 12 mediocre songs = [one] \$15 CD, meaning billions of dollars in overall sales." When consumers started realizing they could share and burn CDs, and eventually exchange individual tracks for free online, the single returned with a vengeance. Record companies had ignored market demand for the sake of their bottom line.

The record industry reacted similarly to the explosion of file sharing after Napster. Rather than take control of the digital download market by introducing a new product after Napster was shut down by the 2001 A&M Records, Inc. v. Napster Inc. decision, they continued to enact law-suits against file-sharing services and consumers. This allowed Apple to become the dominant force in digital download sales once they introduced the iTunes Store in 2003.

²⁵ Steve Knopper, Appetite for Self-Destruction, chapters 4–6.

²⁶ Ibid, 106.

In addition, record company executives have admitted that finding and promoting new talent is expensive. Terry McBride, a talent manager admitted in an interview with Steve Knopper that the real money is in owning the existing catalogs of recorded music: "You want to take a record label profitable quickly? Don't sign any new artists. Just sell the old catalog. You will be instantly profitable." While this may seem to demonstrate that record companies are indeed interested in innovation and introducing new talent, there is a disturbing reality that these for-profit entities could—at any moment—change their business strategy and give up on supporting new artists, simply because it is more profitable.

Film studios similarly cannot be trusted to act as responsible curators of art. In 2015 alone, over 20 sequel films are planned for release. These include *Furious 7, Ted 2, Jurassic World*, and *Mission: Impossible V.* Did the filmmakers and studios choose to create *Jurassic World* because there was some missed artistic opportunity in the first three movies or in any of the books, or did the studios instead act because of the preceding films did well at the box office? Reinvesting in the same product is essentially less risky than investing in an unknown.

Television studios are just as culpable as movie studios and recording companies. Even though recent years have been described as a "TV's new golden age," the desire to squeeze every possible penny from an excellent idea still exists. Thus when a critically acclaimed show such as *Breaking Bad* ends its run, rather than branch out in new directions, AMC will instead introduce a spin-off series, *Better Call Saul*.

Thus profit-seeking companies cannot be trusted to act as curators of the arts. For every Wish You Were Here, Full Metal Jacket, and Mad Men series, there is Knee Deep in the Hoopla, Transformers 2, and Marco Polo.

ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Art schools, conservatories, or academies have largely been integrated into the university system throughout the world, although specialized art academies such as the Juilliard School do exist and even thrive. Teaching positions in the academic system offer financial security, especially after

²⁷ Ibid, 238.

²⁸ David Carr, "Barely Keeping Up in TV's New Golden Age," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/10/business/media/fenced-in-by-televisions-excess-of-excellence.html (March 9, 2014; accessed February 12, 2015).

securing tenure. In addition to sponsoring artists through faculty positions, academic institutions also encourage their artists to continue making art and afford time developing their craft. Unlike media companies, academic institutions are not supporting artists because of financial gain. These institutions instead are engaged in advancing art; in a manner of speaking, academic institutions are engaging in research by artists and allowing them to create new works of art. This provides a counterbalance to the moneymaking efforts of media companies, but academic institutions face their own unique problems and issues due to their reliance upon (mostly) public funding, and the insular nature of academic life.

The arts academy in Western culture emerged in much the same way that patronage changed throughout the history of Europe. Prior to the rise of the nation-state, the arts were either taught by a master teacher—usually a member of a local guild—who apprenticed a younger individual or, as in the case of music, training came at first from the church schools. As national identity began to emerge, nations and rulers saw fit to sponsor schools dedicated to the training of artists. The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris was one of the most influential early art schools in Europe.²⁹ Again, with the rise of the nation state, schools become more heavily subsidized by government and thus dependent upon public funding for their existence. In the United States, art schools were initially private institutions but eventually many public colleges and universities included departments of film, fine arts, music, theater, and dance.

Academies, due to the lack of the profit motive, are generally concerned with quality in art for its own sake. Artists, composers, and filmmakers are able to create art and work without many of the constraints faced by those who are engaged in commercial endeavors. This environment is excellent for artistic experimentation, and often techniques pioneered in this setting will eventually find wide use elsewhere, even in commercial art.³⁰ So the work done in arts schools can and does contribute to innovations and greater quality in art.

²⁹ Marc Jordan, "Paris, Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture," *The Oxford Companion to Western Art, Oxford Art Online*, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t118/e1966 (accessed February 19, 2015).

³⁰ Milton Babbitt, the composer widely known for writing the infamous and erroneously titled 1958 article, "Who Cares if you Listen?" served as an academic musician for much of his career. His contributions however reached beyond the academic sphere. One of his students was Stephen Sondheim, who is regarded as one of the most commercially and artistically successful composers of American musical theater. Another excellent example of academic art reaching out into the wider world is the adoption of a wide variety of "experimental" techniques by composers and orchestrators of film music in commercial films.

One of the major problems with art schools is that they are each small, insular communities that are exclusionary by nature. Each school has its own purpose—justifiably so—but this determination to have limited focus, in addition to the fact that each school has a finite amount of resources, means that some individuals must be excluded from participating in the academic system. Ultimately the faculty of each school decides who will study at their respective schools, a choice which is subject to the conscious desires and subconscious prejudices of the faculty. This affects not only which individuals are allowed to enter the academic system as students, but also which individuals are hired as faculty (and thus enjoy a stable position as a patronized artist). The prejudice of faculty selection most often manifests as the standard requirement that a candidate must possess an advanced degree conferred by an academic institution. This requirement excludes the entire population of artists who have simply not participated in the academic system as part of their training.

Another structural problem with academic institutions as arts patrons is that they are generally dependent upon public funding for their existence. While acting as patrons of the arts, the schools themselves are patronized by the state and individual donors whom they must constantly justify their existence to. This means that occasionally schools will act out of fear of reprisal and take actions that are ethically questionable. At the time of this writing, The University of Massachusetts Amherst has said it will "no longer accept Iranian nationals into graduate programs in chemical, computer, and mechanical engineering or the natural sciences, to avoid violating US sanctions against Iran."³¹ This action, which means an institution will base its admission decisions upon a person's national origin, was not compelled by the U.S. Department of State (at least not publically):

"All visa applications are reviewed individually in accordance with the requirements of the US Immigration and Nationality Act and other relevant laws that establish detailed standards for determining eligibility for visas and admission to the United States," the official, who declined to be quoted by name, said in an e-mail.

³¹ Jeremy C. Fox and Steve Annear, "UMass Amherst stops admitting Iranians to some graduate programs," *The Boston Globe*, https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/02/13/umass-amherst-stops-admitting-iranian-students-graduate-engineering-sciences-programs/Y7IExi3rrNOe5ika3IdiHK/story.html, (February 13, 2015; accessed February 19, 2015).

"US law does not prohibit qualified Iranian nationals coming to the United States for education in science and engineering," the official continued. "Each application is reviewed on a case-by-case basis."32

The above institution has begun discriminating based upon national origin due to a fear of non-compliance with sanctions that would jeopardize their funding and existence. In this case, fear has cause the school to act irrationally and disregard that each candidate must already be approved by the U.S. Department of State before even being allowed entrance into the country.

So while academic institutions benefit greatly from being dedicated places of art research not beholden to the pursuit of profit, the structural deficiencies inherent in being a small insular system dependent upon state sponsorship means that schools are prone to making choices that are guided by collective prejudice and fear. Those decisions obviously undermine the pursuit of quality in the arts.

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Organizations such as the New York Philharmonic, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the San Francisco Opera are similar to academic institutions inasmuch as they are not beholden to profits or current popular tastes in art consumption, but these institutions have their own cultural agendas and historical interests that undermine their credibility as curators. In general, these institutions have mostly focused their energy toward music and arts created by white men of Europe, and during the second half of the 19th century and most of the 20th century acted as arbiters of taste that wholesale dismissed entire mediums of expression such as film, or vast genres of music like jazz and rock.³³

Even within the styles and genres promoted by cultural institutions, the willingness to embrace new music and works of art is exceptionally low. Since 1904, the median year of opera composition at each of the Metropolitan Opera's seasons has been between 1850 and 1900, and

³³ Lawrence W. Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988) provides an exhaustive study of magazine articles, first-person accounts, and critical reviews of how various popular forms of entertainment such as Shakespeare, opera, and symphonic music were appropriated by a limited segment of society. The legacy of cultural elitism from the latter part of the 19th century and the early 20th century still exists today in American society and is evidenced by the separation of Grammy awards between classical and popular music, and that composers who register with a performing rights organization such as ASCAP or BMI must define themselves as either a classical composer or songwriter.

almost every season since 1904 has been dominated by operas composed by dead men.³⁴ These statistics are common among cultural institutions throughout the United States, demonstrating that museums, opera houses, and orchestras are simply uninterested in promoting new works, but would rather act as storage houses for an established canon of artworks.

The most insidious problem with cultural institutions is their propensity to elevate their own curating choices while disregarding the art of non-Western cultures and works of art outside of the traditional canon as essentially lacking in value. A large metropolitan orchestra, for example, rather than simply dedicating themselves to performing and preserving the music of the 19th century Germanic tradition, they will instead claim to be representatives of culture itself, and will do so to the detriment of other styles of music, often dressing those styles up as exotic or quaint.³⁵ Behavior like this is largely responsible for the existing hierarchy of culture in the United States, and while this hierarchy has significantly eroded since its heyday in the first half of the 20th century, the sentiments still exist, and the financial solvency and attendance of cultural institutions are used to judge the "cultural health" of a community.³⁶

In and of itself, having an organization largely funded by private donors, which pursues particular styles and traditions of the arts is not problematic; on the contrary, artists should be encouraged to form associations, relationships, and cooperatives that explore their own individual artistic goals. It is when these organizations claim to speak for society itself (rather then just themselves), make broad value judgments, and collude with wealthy individuals and prominent media outlets that causes serious problems in the honest evaluation of works of art. Based upon established notions of symphonies, a mediocre work of art by a classical composer or is worthy of more consideration than anything created by Thelonious Monk or Radiohead. In this situation, the value of different works of art is established without regard to the aesthetic elements, and rather to the cultural origins of its creator.

³⁴ Suby Raman, "10 Graphics To Explain The Metropolitan Opera," *Suby Raman*, http://subyraman.tumblr.com/post/101048131983/10-graphs-to-explain-the-metropolitan-opera, (October 26, 2014; accessed February 12, 2015).

³⁵ Amanda Cannata, "Articulating and Contesting Cultural Hierarchies: Guatemalan, Mexican, and Native American Music as the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (1915)," *Journal of the Society for American Music*, Volume 8, Number 1 (February 2014), 76-100.

³⁶ David M. Rubin, "Is the digital revolution the end of the arts as we know them?" *Syracuse Post Standard*, http://www.syracuse.com/opinion/index.ssf/2015/02/younger_folks_perfer_digital_downloads_where_does_that_leave_l ive_local_art_davi.html (February 13, 2015; accessed February 19, 2015).

Context for a work of art is certainly important to the artistic experience, and cultural institutions do provide a sense of context and perspective to different works of art, but the aesthetic elements of an artwork must also be accorded a significant degree of recognition; that is to say that the act of hearing a piece of music, or looking at a painting must be given significant consideration in judging the work's value alongside with the author's backstory. The actions of cultural institutions often prioritize the author's training and personal history so much so that is dominates the aesthetic elements of an artwork. Cultural institutions' track record of which authors are revered most often elevates the traditional arts of Europe and Western culture at the detriment of art that exists outside of that context. This behavior demonstrates that cultural institutions—which have been significant patrons of artists throughout the 20th century—deserve as much scrutiny as trust in their efforts as curators.

THE CRISIS OF THE INDEPENDENT ARTIST

Until the recent digital revolution, the costs of creating an album or movie were so high that only a wealthy patron could truly afford such an expense. Over the last two centuries media companies, and academic and cultural institutions have largely absorbed these costs. As demonstrated above, each of these particular kinds of organizations possess their own unique flaws that undermine the claims of essential credibility as decision makers of artistic quality. With the recent developments in technology, the prospects for an independent artist to afford the creation their own works is better than ever. The primary challenge facing an artist is how they can simultaneously create artworks, continue to develop their craft and skill as an artist, generate enough income to support not only their artistic projects, but also the basic costs of living.

Unfortunately, the technology that has brought down the cost of creating and distributing works of art has also undermined an artist's ability to profit from those works of art. Both artists and patrons have been affected by the complete lack of scarcity of caused by digital distribution; this most often takes the form of content piracy or the unlicensed use of content. In 2011, Frontier Economics estimated the cost of digital piracy to increase reach up to \$240 billion in 2015.³⁷ This may seem like a huge amount of money lost to what is often described as theft, but when considered

 $^{^{37}}$ Frontier Economics, "Estimating the global economic and social impacts of counterfeiting and piracy," Frontier Economics, 2011.

against the almost \$2 trillion in annual revenue predicated for 2017,³⁸ the idea of piracy as this powerful agent disrupting the consumption of artworks becomes far less dire than how it is generally depicted.

At the same time, the damage that piracy causes to individual artists is not trivial. In most cases the real damage of unlicensed use is coming from businesses that simply grab what they want from the Internet, rather than individuals downloading movies. Alex Wild, a nature photographer, has seen his work taken for use without license by dozens of organizations:

Billboards, YouTube commercials, pesticide spray labels, website banners, exterminator trucks, t-shirts, iPhone cases, stickers, company logos, eBook covers, trading cards, board games, video game graphics, children's books, novel covers, app graphics, alt-med dietary supplement labels, press releases, pest control advertisements, crowdfunding promo videos, coupons, fliers, newspaper articles, postage stamps, advertisements for pet ants (yes, that's a thing), canned food packaging, ant bait product labels, stock photography libraries, and greeting cards.

Yesterday evening, while Googling insect references in popular culture, I discovered that a small Caribbean island helped itself to a photograph I took in 2008. My photo shows a slave-raiding ant, a fascinating species that survives as a parasite on the labor of other ants. But the image had been imprinted on the back of a commemorative one-cent piece. Perhaps symbolically, this is one cent more than I received for my part in bringing the coin to the public.³⁹

There are two reasons that Wild's work can be exploited with such impunity: first is the medium of the Internet, which allows for anyone to simply grab any image they find posted somewhere online; Wild has no control over how much a work is posted and distributed through a network of countless computers. The next reason is that Wild's ability to exercise his legal right of control the use of his work is almost completely ineffectual. This is the sobering reality of the failure

³⁹ Alex Wild, "Bugging out: How rampant online piracy squashed one insect photographer," *Ars Technica*, http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2014/09/one-mans-endless-hopeless-struggle-to-protect-his-copyrighted-images/ (September 25, 2014; accessed February 21, 2015).

³⁸ Paul Bond, "Study: Global Entertainment Industry Poised to Top \$2 Trillion in 2016," *The Hollywood Reporter*, http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/global/1565728/study-global-entertainment-industry-poised-to-top-2-trillion-in (June 5, 2013; accessed February 21, 2015).

of copyright. In theory, Wild could simply initiate litigation against anyone infringing upon his images; in reality the average cost of copyright litigation is \$350,000.⁴⁰

The reality of technology, combined with the reality of litigation costs means that Wild can neither rely upon the demand for his product, nor his legal rights as an author in order to generate enough income to both support himself and reinvest in his development as an artist. This is a situation that anyone faces when their product is distributed online, and most infringement of this kind is perpetrated without knowledge by both the infringers and the artists. Despite the high level of demand, the infinite supply of digital combined with free and easy access has driven the effective price down to zero. Thus anyone embarking on the career of being an independent artist is quite simply risking poverty and destitution.

BASIC INCOME, INDEPENDENT ARTISTS, AND VALUE IN THE ARTS

Works of art, like any product of labor, has both a use value and an exchange value. And like any product of labor such as a shoe, a mobile device, or a hamburger, the use value of an object is known by engaging with the object: wearing the shoe, eating the hamburger, or using the mobile device to video chat with a loved one. Art objects are engaged with by experiencing them: one knows the value of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* by listening to it, or one understands the beauty of Alex Wild's photography by looking at the images. Measuring the use value of an artwork can be difficult and has been historically a controversial subject, thus the famous phrase: "There's no accounting for taste." The lack of consensus about what makes certain pieces of art "good" or "bad" is an important reason for why the work of curators is so valuable.

Ultimately, curators make decisions regarding which works of art have the greatest use value, or in other words, which works are the best to experience. We all act as curators to some degree or another—recommending a movie of song to a friend for instance—but many curators have professional motivations. These curators are motivated by profit (media companies), or curate as a means develop future artists (academic institutions), or some curate as a means to advance culture (cultural institutions). Curators connect audiences to artists, and beyond that act, curators also help

⁴⁰ United States Copyright Office, "Copyright Small Claims: A Report of the Register of Copyrights," Submitted to U.S. House Judiciary Committee, September 30, 2013, 8.

audiences develop expectations or place a work of art into a context, which in turn allows an individual to have perspective with which to approach and experience a work of art.

Throughout history the act of art curating has been shouldered by patrons of the arts. They have acted as the ultimate curators by deciding which artists receive wealth and material support for their work. Due to the nature of society and the high cost of art this was unavoidable. Imagine the costs to produce the sculpture *David*, by Michelangelo: a marble quarry needed to be excavated, then a block of marble large enough to create a 14-foot statue had to be moved from the quarry to a workshop, and finally the artist needed to be commissioned to create a sculpture from the marble block. All this occurred using the technology of Renaissance Italy. The wealth of Florence is just as responsible for the creation of *David* as Michelangelo's skill.

Now the situation is different; the costs of production have been reduced so dramatically for some mediums of art that an infinite amount of perfect copies can be created at virtually no cost. Technology has enabled an unprecedented level of access for anyone to engage with and create new works of art. However, the basic costs of survival and life still exist, and the realities of society still act as major impediments to a viable career in the arts; not because a person is not skilled or not willing to work, but rather because they must rely upon the exchange value of the artworks they create in order to afford the basic necessities of life. And since the exchange value is not solely a reflection of an object's use value, an artist is relying upon things external to the inherent value of his or her creation to provide a means for survival. Despite the freedom that technology affords an individual, it has not addressed how a person will meet their basic survival needs, so they must find another means for survival, which in most cases means finding a job. In this situation, the artist loses valuable time that could be channeled into the further development and creation of new and better works of art, and thus the human capital is misdirected and wasted. The potential for a better work or art is lost. This is where patrons have historically stepped in and, to varying degrees, supported artists and supposedly curated the great and talented artists. As Andrew Keen stated in his 2006 Weekly Standard article, the patrons are the best means to find what is great in the arts, and their decisions will produce the best works. Unfortunately, the track record of art patrons does not support that point of view. While it is true that patrons will occasionally discover someone like Alfred Hitchcock or Joseph Haydn, the reality is that arts patrons have been grooming and supporting mediocrity

throughout history. Keen's warning that democratized technology will usher in a great era of "cultural flattening" ignores the reality of history.⁴¹

Universal basic income (UBI) is a powerful solution to the crisis of independent artists and can also shake the foundations of the control that patrons have exerted over the arts throughout human history. When each individual is subsidized, and their survival needs are rendered moot, the choice of creating a work of art no longer becomes a decision involving poverty and destitution. A person has the freedom to devote years of their life toward creating something, and having the financial freedom to continue to refine the work and their skill so that the ultimate product has the greatest chance of resonating with others and becoming a valuable artistic contribution. Likewise, truly independent artists who have no interests in finding broad appeal will be empowered to do the work they want to do without having to conform to systems they did not create nor have any interest in sustaining.

Also because of UBI, small or traditionally marginalized communities will possess a basic level of capital to support art that represents their own community on their own terms. A choice to support an artist will not be weighed against paying for their children's food, or how to afford rent. Thus communities will have more power to directly support the artists they themselves find important, not which artists a record company will choose to support. This gives these smaller communities a greater voice, and allows their artistic message to reach beyond the boundaries of their communities. On a larger scale, every member of society will no longer have to choose between eating and the arts, every individual has the potential to act as a patron without endangering themselves.

Ultimately, will UBI truly increase the level of value in the arts? It is difficult to say; there is little evidence to suggest that the actual volume of great art will increase—certainly there will be a great amount of mediocre works of art. But as we have seen, patrons throughout history have supported works such as Starship's "We Built This City" more often than Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, and we have been surrounded by and engaging with mediocre works of art as long as art has existed. What UBI changes is *who* makes decisions about which works of art get to exist, and which artists are worthy of creating art. Those decisions can be handed over to individual artists and consumers of

⁴¹ Andrew Keen, "Web 2.0: The second generation of the Internet has arrived. It's worse than you think." *The Weekly Standard*, http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/714fjczq.asp?page=3 (February 14, 2006; accessed February 9, 2015).

art rather than remain the hands of patrons who have proven over and over again that their decisions are not based upon the work of art itself and its ability to resonate with people, but rather its ability to make money, or its ability to confirm a set of cultural norms and biases, or its ability to pander to select individuals. Quality and value in the arts can simply be what the artist chooses to represent, and what the consumer chooses to experience.

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