



Featured

Freedom of Movement: First Jobs and a Holistic Life in the Gig Economy, Pt I

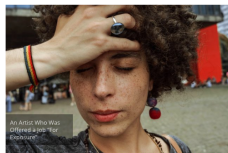
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In his most recent album, *Warm*, Jeff Tweedy's song "Having Been is No Way to Be," takes a poetic, self-reflective, and critical look at quality of life under artistic pressure and intimates his new axis of finding a balanced life – one between the romanticized self-destructive genius and the living partner focused on self-care and connection. We are greeted with a Tweedy who is skeptical of the damage that can happen when the spirit and the body are shredded in gears of success, singing "I just got tired, shining like a spider web's and empty stage" and "I wonder how much freedom you can dream." In speaking with emerging to mid-career visual artists based in the United States about their first jobs for this article, I was presented with diverse tactics for dreaming freedom – employment strategies that make space to make art. Their approaches include freelance gigs outside of the arts, collaborations with non-profits that share their values, creating multiple nodes of production in the studio and monetizing existing practices. Interestingly, these combinations are not necessarily all first jobs or seen as temporary strategies until they "make it" in the art market or enter contemporary art's cult of celebrity. Rather, their first jobs and those that follow help form a shining web of sustainability where art and earning can co-exist in an economic system that undervalues artists' labor.

First Jobs, From University and Beyond

LA-based artist **Lukas Geronimas** sees his art practice as being primary yet accepts that this currently still includes outside labor. "I consider my transition from an artist who makes their money off of things other than their art to one whose revenue is generated solely from art to have started when I left grad school, and to continue until circumstances beyond my control push me into the career bracket," observes Geronimas. He adds that he has come to terms with finding other ways to support himself, though, all the while aiming to maximize flexibility while minimizing compromise. "As someone who has a hard time justifying serial production (partly because there has never been a demand for my work that needed to be satisfied), I've come to terms with having to find other ways to make money to support myself. Being an artist has much to do with finding freedom of movement in within an established cultural framework, so I consider establishing ways of generating income that provides me with the time to work on art production when necessary." For Geronimas this has included working as a carpenter (exclusively word-of-mouth, as a self-described artist) and as a muralist for commercial spaces.

In the challenging cultural – and economic – framework within which visual artists now operate, a strategic first job can become a long term ally in creating financial stability. In the 2010 census, more people than ever before (2.1 million) claimed artist as their main occupation, yet the U.S. census bureau found that only 10% of art school graduates make a living solely off of their art. Contemplating these two statistics in tandem instantly highlights the challenges of making a living solely from art, often making supplemental employment necessary. Even working artists are more likely to beal "passion exploitation," where taking pleasure in their work is used by employers as "reasoning to justify a lack of compensation or benefits," leaving creatives underpaid or being asked to work for "exposure," as per a recent [study](#).



Curator and arts organizer **Jacqueline Mabey** eloquently and honestly describes challenges for artists and art workers in her stellar essay *The Spiritual Hunt* (2019). "While a life in the arts has never been a simple proposition, the position of the contemporary artist or art worker has been fundamentally altered by a series of developments, within the field and the larger society, starting at the end of the 1960s. The end result is that many practitioners are forced to weather a perfect storm of greater debt load, higher cost of living, stagnant wages, and increased competition. Today's artists and art workers labor 24/7, without security, and are expected to be thankful for every scrap thrown their way."

When we then consider the uncertainties of the gig economy – the ecosystem of contract labor where flexibility and autonomy also mean no employer-worker rights protections – the landscape becomes even rockier. **Trebzor Scholz** writes in his 2017 book *Unemployed and Underpaid*: "Full-time jobs are fragmented into freelance positions, turning workers into "micro-entrepreneurs" who are competing under conditions of infinite labor supply. Increasingly, companies retain a small number of core employees, making up the rest with temporary contract laborers." According to a 2018 NPR poll, contract workers and freelancers could make up half the U.S. labor pool in the next 10 years. This shift from employer/employee to contract worker has visibly diminished the stability of some positions that artists have traditionally held such as art handling – where, today, larger pools of less experienced contract workers are brought into museums, where there were formerly full-time staff – or college teaching – where faculty members are replaced by adjunct teachers who are reliant on a class "making" and sometimes commute long distances to multiple university employers to make ends meet.

Where Life and Art Meet

So what can 90% of visual artists who are not supported solely by the market do to live a whole life when they are in a precarious field that increasingly intersects with an unpredictable gig economy? It seems that the answers are as individual as each artistic practice itself, requiring an introspective deep dive into each artist's specific interests, needs, background, and skills. The solutions also are not necessarily temporary as many working artists understand that the signifiers of success like a commission or solo show do not necessarily bring financial security. **Makay** observes, "The art world is a place where the indicators of success—international travel, a packed schedule, press coverage—do not guarantee the rewards that come with achievement in other fields." The field of massage therapy has allowed artist **Bethany Fancher** a similar "freedom of movement" like that described by Geronimas in his practice. Working in New York, India and Nashville, Fancher realized very early on that she wanted her first job to be separate from the art world, "I loathe being a salesperson, which relates to pitching for grants. So early on I looked for a job I might have an affinity for, I could make my own hours and be my own boss, be active and work with my hands, not make a bunch of waste on the planet and maybe even help someone – making a better than minimum wage job could be an artist without the pressure of constantly seeking funding from foundations or trying to sell work. I discovered being a massage therapist was a good fit. My job allows the cyclical nature of art projects. I can orchestrate chunks of time for that and my job is integrated into who I am."

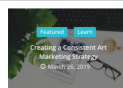
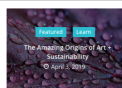
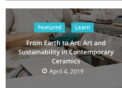
Katie Cercone (High Prietzetz Or Nah) and **David Williams** (*Undakova*)'s project **ULTRACULTURAL OTHERS** in Manhattan's lower east side is a social practice fusion that combines the best of the artist residency, wellness program, shamanic initiation, alternative education platform, intentional community, and professional development program. Intentionally separating her practice from the art market, Cercone sees the financial margins as a place of empowerment. "One thing that comes up is certainly the artist glean power from living on the financial margins of society; they are in command of their own energy and in that sense it is more fluid. One of my favorite gurus once told me money is the symbol, human beings are the real currency. I consider myself a visionary-manifestor. Focusing on our **ULTRACULTURAL OTHERS** urban mystery "school" as a source of collective, rhizomatic and self-generated income has been a huge leap of faith – an opportunity to conjure a sane, positive relationship to money."

Undakova advocates that artists might want to consider first jobs where they learn things that will bring them "closer to your ideal version of you," adding, "Working with a nonprofit organization that aligns with your practice is one way an artist can afford to live but also keep in alignment with their path." He incorporates this strategy into his own practice by working with **BEAT Global**, a Long Island City nonprofit that produces cross-disciplinary programs led by world-class professional artists that teach the arts of beatboxing, breakdancing, music production, creative writing, MCing, and performing live.

Artists consistently prove that through a considerate, authentic artistic practice rooted in the ability to be resourceful and flexible in a gig economy, it is possible to balance creative genius with practical considerations.

Feel inspired to share your own experiences as an artist and cultural producer securing a first job to before your artistic practice hits its stride? Do you continue to pursue side gigs while you work as an artist for additional financial stability? Share your insights in the comments below!

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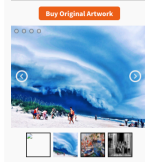
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