

Artists as workers: Theoretical and methodological challenges[☆]

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Abstract

Artistic labor markets expand along a path of highly unbalanced growth: competitive pressure, flexible specialization of the work organization and pervasive work contingency cross individual as well as entrepreneurial ideals such as self-achievement and innovativeness in ways that challenge conventional views of the skilled working process as well as the conventional survey and measurement methods.

High differentiation of artistic products and steady oversupply, which are common traits of an imperfect monopolistic competition, are magnified by work arrangements that evolve towards increasingly fragmented and brokered employment relationship. Work trajectories combine features from professional as well as from entrepreneurial careers, under constraining contingency. Yet, uncertainty of the creative process, that goes along with the 'functional flexibility' requirement in the arts, helps to explain artistic behavior: neither a rational actor nor a deterministically driven agent, the artist may be depicted as a bayesian actor learning to balance self-actualization against occupational risk. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

When one tries to summarize some of the findings of numerous studies on artistic labor markets (for a review and for the detailed references, see Menger, 1999), the following picture emerges:

Artists as an occupational group are on average younger than the general work force, are better educated, tend to be more concentrated in a few metropolitan areas, show higher rates of self-employment, higher

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rates of unemployment and of several forms of constrained underemployment (non-voluntary part-time work, intermittent work, fewer hours of work), and are more often multiple job holders. They earn less than workers in their reference occupational category, that of professional, technical and kindred workers, whose members have comparable human capital characteristics (education, training and age), and they experience larger income inequality and variability.

This portrait seems crudely unattractive. Yet artistic labor markets are steadily expanding, and growing numbers of new candidates to fame or to self achievement enter the market. I will not explain the trend by exploring the causal factors of the growing demand for art and culture. Rather, I will highlight some points of theoretical and methodological interest. Mainly, these points stem from the basic observation that artistic labor markets expand along a path of highly unbalanced growth: competitive pressure, flexible specialization of the work organization and pervasive work contingency cross individual as well as entrepreneurial ideals such as self-achievement and innovativeness in ways that challenge conventional views of the skilled working process as well as the conventional survey and measurement methods.

2. Labor supply and labor demand: Aggregated and disaggregated levels of analysis

Let me begin by pointing to discrepancies between the supply and the demand approach of artistic labor markets.

From the labor supply standpoint, one should say: one individual equals one career, however successful that career might be. But there is a gap between the vocational commitment and the way it transforms into work and it results in a career. Self-employment, freelancing and contingent work, which are the prevailing work arrangements in the arts, have quite similar effects: they bring into the picture discontinuity, repeated alternation between work, compensated unemployment, non compensated unemployment, searching and networking activities, cycling between multiple jobs inside the arts sphere or across several sectors related or unrelated to the arts. Therefore, statistics on numbers of artists, such as those from Census surveys or from professional guilds or unions sources, have to be considered cautiously as indicators of the artistic labor supply and, accordingly, of the actual level of unemployment.

From the labor demand standpoint, things seem simpler: the focus is on contracts, hirings or with works sold on the market. Thus, in contrast to the aggregate view of art as an occupational world, the labor market here is investigated at its most disaggregated level, that of the series of hirings, of work opportunities and of bargaining relationships. These represent an individual artist's working life in a given period; when considered longitudinally, they display a career trajectory. Disaggregated data lead to statistics on the amount of labor demand expressed in terms of quantities and prices of work.

If one brings supply and demand together, the main issue is: what is the impact of the fact that labour demand is expressed mainly in terms of contingent work?

Numerous studies have shown that an increase in the number of artists as reported in the Census data may be far from corresponding to a similar increase in the level of activity, since the former trend may have different and contradictory meanings. If there is more work but an ever more rapidly growing number of individuals, a fiercer competition takes place that implies higher inequalities in the access to employment, more variability in the level and schedule of activity and, on the whole, work rationing for those who share the labor pie and cycle more often from work to unemployment or from arts work to arts-related or non-arts work.

Results from research on the French performing arts labor market may highlight these discrepancies. The data reported in the Figs. 1 to 3 are from the Caisse des Congés Spectacles, a fund that collects employment records from the artists and other technical and administrative personnel employed as intermittent workers in the performing arts in France – nearly 90% of the labor force in that sector. Records come from each individual hiring, with mention of the working time and the amount of fees. These records are registered in order to provide the personnel with monetary compensation for the vacation time they are entitled to claim, according to the legal rules governing contingent employment.

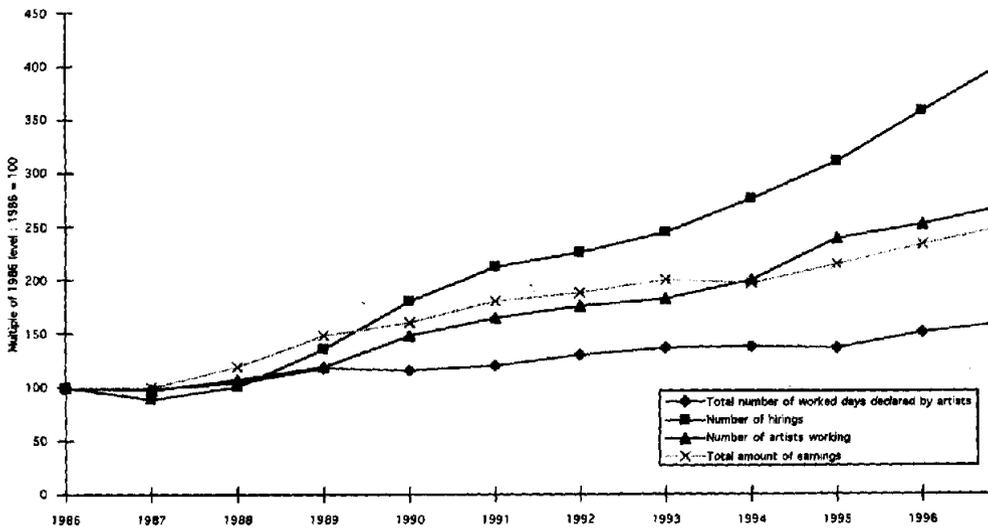


Fig. 1. Trends in the French performing arts labor market: 1986–1997.
Disaggregated data.

As shown in Fig. 1, the French labor market for the performing arts has constantly expanded over the period 1986–1997. However, the trend of the supply of work (the number of artists working) and the demand side trend (the number of hirings, the number of worked days declared and the total amount of earnings) evolved at rates of increase that differ significantly. As a result, displayed in Fig. 2, the mediar

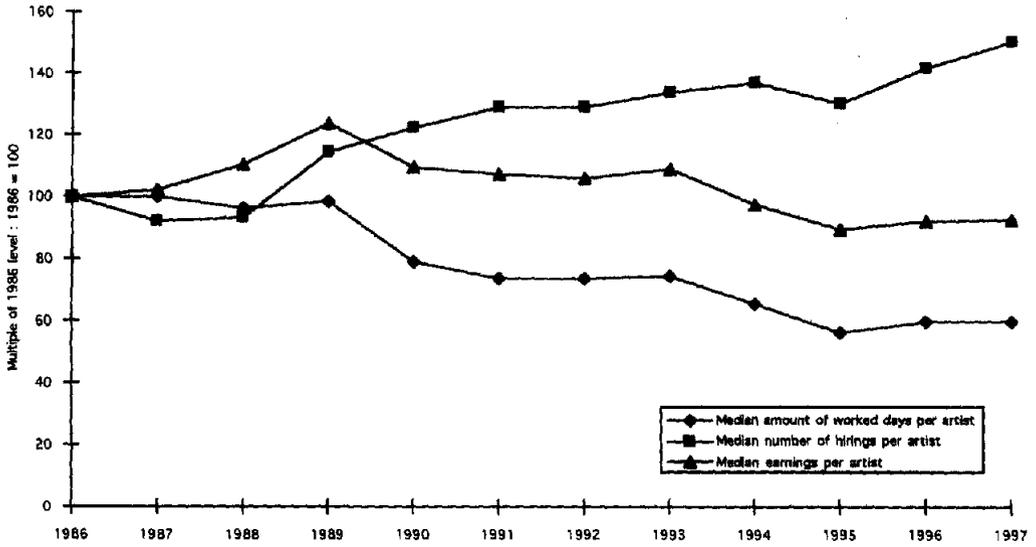


Fig. 2. Trends in the French performing arts labor market: 1986–1997. Median values (1).

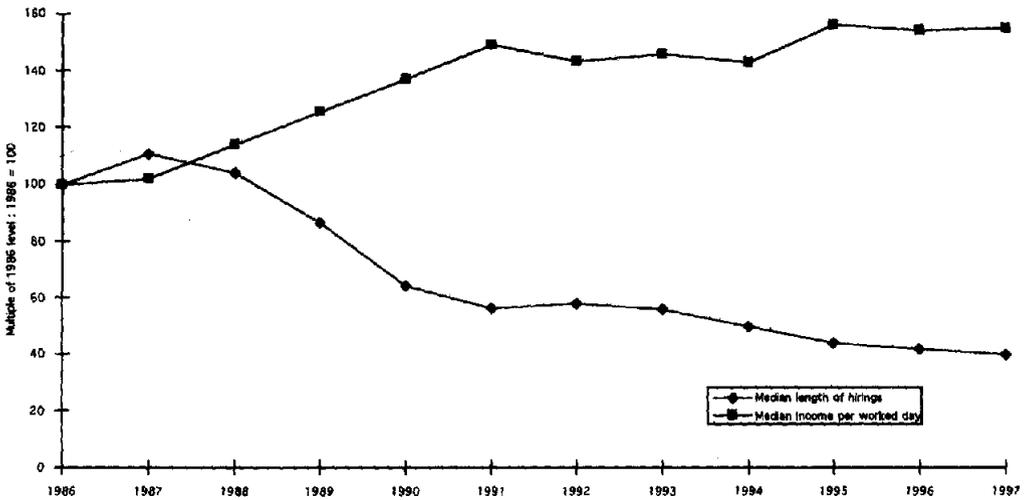


Fig. 3. Trends in the French performing arts labor market: 1986–1997. Median values (2).

amount of working time and earnings per artist (unadjusted for inflation) decreased over the period, although the number of hirings increased: individual intermittent work was increasingly fragmented in shorter hirings, and competition turned out to become fiercer among the growing numbers of artists sharing the less rapidly growing 'work pie'. The last figure illustrates the way people are partly compensated for the increasing risk that goes along with the shortening of individual hirings. On the whole, however, the decrease of median earnings over the period indicates that employers do not insure the artists they choose to hire under such a working scheme against the consequences of the unbalanced growth of that labor market: employers and consumers may benefit from the increasing variety of talents supplying their work, at the expense of the increasing level of unemployment or underemployment, or at least at the expense of increasing variability in the individual working situations, both across the workforce and during the career of each artist.

The overall result is that of an increasingly wider gap between the trends depicting the evolution of each side of the market.

For several years, theoretical as well as empirical work on artistic labor supply has been remarkably pioneering (Throsby, 1994). But it had to be supplemented more and more with no less pioneering studies on the demand side. For the supply side studies may be hampered by several important limitations as to the way artists are identified and information on socio-demographic and economic characteristics is collected, if only available through unbiased declarations. Of course, such studies exist more and more, and most of us have done some, with varying levels of satisfaction.

Ideally, one should follow true cohorts of artists through longitudinal surveys to get reliable and valuable informations on the main issues of core interest which I will review in a moment. Since cross-sectional data provide us with a set of snapshots drawn from individual courses of life that very often are everything but regular and predictable, we may find some devices to produce pseudo-longitudinal information (retrospective appraisal of the course of a career with its main steps and turning points). To be sure, these are rather imperfect devices when one tries to get the slightest idea of the variability and complexity of a working life in the arts. That's why such sociographic investigations have lacked substance, although they would claim to play a revealing role in setting the vocational commitment to the arts in a simple deterministic frame of social class causation, against idealistic celebration of the irresistible inner drive to the arts.

3. Data and surveys on artistic contingent work

The labor demand study has specific characteristics in the arts. Concerning employment and wage structure, information focuses less on individual firm policies than on industry wide work agreements and institutions. One unexpected result of the early development of contingent work in the arts is that we have become expert at identifying employment and earnings records over time and at using completely disaggregated data to identify a number of characteristics of each individual job worker throughout his or her career.

As these sources were better known and became available, new research opportunities have appeared. The research done by Christopherson and Storper (1989) on data provided by the Motion Picture Health and Welfare Fund uses records on workers with multiple employers. More recently the research done by Bielby and Bielby (1999) on data from the Writers Guild of America does the same. In France we have completed research from the same kind of sources (Debeauvais et al., 1997; Menger, 1997), and in Canada, we have collaborated with Benoît Laplante using more sophisticated statistical methods – mainly random effects logistic regression for panel data, rather than duration analysis or structural equation models (Laplante and Hébert, 2000).

The statistical information taken from such sources may fit the purpose of building and testing models of job allocation, of earnings prospects, of segmentation of the workforce along several independent (sociodemographic characteristics) and dependent variables. These dependent variables include the work and income track records, portfolios of contractual recurrent and nonrecurrent employment ties and the corresponding network structure of employment relationships. Access to such data is presumably the main way we may expect to model and understand the building of a career through a discontinuous line of engagements.

Issues like the workforce segmentation can be studied in fine detail and carefully modelled as we rely not only on sociodemographic variables depicting initial endowments in human capital resources, but also on the mechanics of work allocation and of reputation building, that is on working and bargaining relationships with employers, with colleagues and with clients whose market characteristics can be known and put in the model. The human capital framework turns out to fit unequally well for catching this second dimension: to mention only one item, the age-earnings profile may vary considerably according to the art form and to the sector considered. Thus work experience may have a positive value only over a short period of time, as in the case of screenwriters studied by Bielby and Bielby (1999), or may display a non-typical profile of evolution, when young artists are much in demand, then experience a more or less long eclipse, before a possible (and often carefully managed) reappraisal of their work and reputation in the later part of their creative career. But things are even more complicated since work experience accumulation may have a positive impact on the odds of managing the portfolio of multiple jobs, for instance on the process of switching from one main occupation to another related one, using human and social capital accumulated.

4. Methodological challenges

The peculiarities of the artistic labor markets I mentioned, therefore, have all a strong impact on the use of customary Census indicators on the occupation as a whole. And of course, they do challenge the normal design of quantitative research on occupations.

For instance, extensive job and sectoral mobility as well as multiple job holding considerably affect the use of conventional work and unemployment indicators.

Unemployment rates may be mismeasured for several related reasons: individuals with artistic occupations may switch temporarily to work mainly in non-artistic occupations when unable to make a living in their primary vocational field, without stopping to produce art works. They would therefore not be classified as unemployed in their artistic occupation if they are primarily engaged in non artistic work during the Census week.

Thus there might be little sense to state that artists supply a unique labor market and hold a unique occupational identity. Not only do artists often supply several related and intricate labor markets, via their multiple job holding practice (Throsby, 1996), but they may also cumulate several occupational roles within their artworld – e.g. creators, performers, teachers, managers, entrepreneurs.

Methodologically, the most successful research design I have tried out was that of combining work on micro-data from professional sources and results from a specifically designed survey, i.e. a survey design based on sampling stratification variables including the amount of work, earnings and sectoral diversification of artistic work, as they are documented in the personnel records collected on a sector or industry-wide basis (mainly by guilds, unions or pension funds).

Thus one can take advantage of the survey methods which remain invaluable as soon as one has to explore basic dimensions like social origin, early familiarization to culture and the arts, general and specific learning (these are the basic human capital variables), but also to survey some highly specific issues like multiple job holding, occupational role versatility, work schedule, cycling behaviour between different jobs and between work, unemployment and nonworking time, and more generally on the patterns of use of time, portfolio of resources, monetary and non-monetary ratings of the work situation, the meanings of work, the nexus of ties that links an artist to his counterparts and the to different actors of his occupational world (agents, dealers, critics, support personnel), the family context, the way of life, and so on.

To take just one or two core issues, I would never have suspected how complex the training process of an actor can be had I not investigated it carefully in my survey research on actors. And the same is true of the sectoral differences in work organization and in hiring processes (brokered or not), and of the proportion of income drawn from the vocational occupation.

Of course, had I not had the information on earnings from a non survey source (the records from the main French performing arts pension fund), I would not have been able to control the reliability of some information about amount of work and income and to adjust for sampling biases.

It is important at this point to consider some key issues as to the overall structure of artistic labor markets and the idiosyncrasies of artistic work.

5. Labor markets under imperfect monopolistic competition

The artistic labor markets seem to correspond to the spot market model of textbook economics.

But it is in fact a rather paradoxical competitive market: on one hand, employment is more and more contingent, as we used to see for secondary labor markets, but on the other hand individuals are highly skilled and nonsubstitutability is a core value, as in the so-called primary labor market. At the same time, segmentation of the workforce may be so strong that in fact the seemingly old-fashioned distinction between primary and secondary markets remains somewhat relevant.

Things might be better conceived in terms of a monopolistic competition with some of its essential features: high differentiation of products (goods and labor services, that is works and performances) and a large variety of consumer preferences (Lancaster, 1979). The application of a monopolistic competition model to the market of art works, which are durable and highly differentiated goods, is well known, since Moulin's pioneering work on art markets (Moulin, 1987). But one might speculate about extending the model to the market of inputs in itself, that is to the labor market. Two core features may sustain that suggestion. Firstly, an artist's reputation provides him with a temporary monopolistic position on the market, as long as his or her skills and talents are in demand. Secondly, the artist may be viewed as a microfirm when attention is given to the supply of the numerous bits of work and efforts out of which the artist makes a living: the way he acts to supply work in several related markets and to perform various occupational roles within his artworld points to the differentiation of the working profiles that underly the competition among artists not only for success in the vocational labor market but also for securing and maintaining a position in the art world taken as a whole.

Possibly a strong objection should be raised: may we apply the same analytic tools to the different strata of a population of artists since the level of reputation, the amount of work and the occupation success vary considerably among them? In other words, shall we consider as monopolistic suppliers of their own work artists who face a rather inelastic demand curve, due to their (temporary or strongly established) fame, as well as artists who are induced to act as monopolistic suppliers (i.e. to trade their human capital and work as freelancers) although their market value and market power are very poor? In the latter case, artists, either young aspiring ones, or moderately or poorly successful experienced ones, face the risk attached to a self-employed or quasi self-employed position without benefitting from the rent attached to the seemingly monopolistic supply of their work.

This has to do with the competitive pressure that characterizes art worlds. As we know, excess capacity of production is a common trait of imperfect monopolistic competition. Now, the oversupply argument appears to be a constant feature in the more or less elaborate views of artistic labor markets.

The organizational characteristics of the arts sphere, as they are magnified by the trend towards a more disintegrated, more brokered system of production, act as an inflationary labor supply factor. An increasing number of aspiring young artists are attracted; barriers to entry are low for organizations as well as for individuals, but a substantial share of the risks are transferred from the firms to the artists who face a fiercer competition and more uncertain career prospects.

Here one should think not only in terms of artists' oversupply at an aggregate level, as a result of growing inter-firm competition in more contestable markets, but

also of an intra-organizational process designed to deal with an uncertain and turbulent market environment.

Organizational flexibility in the arts indeed plays a major causal role in structural oversupply. Employers in project-based organizations seek to draw from a large pool of artists and personnel in order to build efficient and well-matched teams, since they may gain from the variety of talents and skills at hand, and to reduce overheads.

Similarly, for record companies or book publishers, overproduction of new items, along with allocation of numerous personnel to boundary-spanning roles and cooptation of mass-media gatekeepers, is a rational organizational response to an environment of low capital investments and demand uncertainty, especially in the most speculative and entrepreneurial segments of the market: because of a strategy of differential promotion of the numerous items released, the corporate sponsoring is only focused on a small proportion of them.

More generally, however, the notion of oversupply has to be questioned, since it refers to a disequilibrium in only one of the labor markets the artists supply, that of their principal vocational work. As stated above, when multiple job holders cycle between rationed and less- or un-constrained job markets, or when individual, cooperative and collective devices of compensation for and insurance against risk are at hand, notions of underemployment or oversupply may be hard to apply, provided that work under such a steady 'management of risk' scheme is more attractive than occupational alternatives outside the arts sphere.

6. The artist: A professional? An entrepreneur? Or just a highly skilled contingent worker?

Several studies, mainly in a socio-historical perspective, have equated the great artist with a kind of innovative entrepreneur designing not only stylistic innovations but also new organizational ways of working and distributing his or her work; see for instance Alpers' study on Rembrandt (1988), or Elias' one on Mozart (1993), or Fitzgerald on Picasso (1995). Basically, current individual work trajectories combine more and more traits from professional as well as from entrepreneurial careers: professional careers rely on reputation certified by the community of peers and by the inner circles of experts and middle men in the art worlds. But artistic careers exhibit low loyalty to organizations, and artists very often have to operate like small businesses, by holding multiple jobs and by setting up more often than not companies or fringe firms. For instance, the number of employers in the performing arts is surprisingly high and so is the turnover.

One striking dimension of the segmentation of the labor force has to do with the entrepreneurial skills a number of artists acquire on the job. For, although brokerage has emerged as a major device for mediating labor allocation and matching processes in a highly fragmented and segmented labor market (DiMaggio, 1977; Bielby and Bielby, 1999), artists may be induced to exercise supervisory or managerial skills and, in so doing, to blur the line between management and labor (Christopherson, 1996). In that respect, the artist's earnings, like those of any self-employed

worker, depend not only on her skill, talent and effort, but also on how well she performs the managerial and entrepreneurial functions (Aronson, 1991). Historical studies mentioned above tell us that this is hardly new, but the way the line is blurred evolves according to new technical, economic and managerial opportunities.

Now, conventional forms of occupational identity and occupational careers are undermined by the current organizational designs of flexible specialization. Contingent employment is expanding rapidly in highly skilled service sectors – law, human resource management, accounting services, higher education, medicine (Smith, 1997; Cohany, 1998; Hipple, 1998).¹ In that respect, and ironically enough, the arts appear to have been forerunners in experiencing the trend toward increasingly flexible labor markets; I should even say, toward hyperflexible markets: freelancing means indeed that one may be hired for only two or three hours, without any costly dismissal procedures (on Hollywood, see Storper, 1989; for a somewhat militating view of the Hollywoodian flexibility model, see Kanter, 1995). In the arts sphere, the whole range of work contingency has existed for a long time.

Two striking features of the contingent employment in the arts are of special interest.

The first feature deals with the way people try to manage their occupational risks. Which risks are manageable and insurable and which are not, which individually (through different schemes of diversification of work and income sources), which collectively (on a professional community basis) and which socially (through cultural policy support)? Answers may vary greatly among the different art worlds, depending on their whole institutional apparatus, but common features exist that bring to light what special kind of workers artists actually represent: they have to identify devices to secure as much as possible the supply of a good, their talent, that, in theory, is infinitely differentiated, but whose evaluation and employment obey in practice to much cruder schemes of hierarchization like the A-list vs. B-list distinction (Caves, 2000).

One should add that only some of the occupational risks in the arts are insurable, since the kind of uncertainty at stake is questionable: is it exogenously determined, as when a lack of jobs and an unsuccessful career should be attributed to insufficient demand for the kind of ability with which the artist is endowed? Or is it endogenously embedded, due to the artist's insufficient ability? But ability and talent themselves may be ambiguous: 'talent' should be considered not only as an exogenous factor of market success but also as an endogenous factor shaped by competition through innovation. The more competition raises the rate of innovation or, at least, of differentiation between prototype-like works, in exploiting and stimulating con-

¹ Reporting the results of the second survey the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has done on contingent work, Hipple (1998: 24) notes that "as in 1995, contingent workers in the 1997 survey were found in both low- and high-skilled occupations. For example, contingency rates were highest for those in professional specialty (6.0 percent [against the 4.4 percent for the whole labor force]), administrative support (6.0 percent) and farming occupation (5.9 percent). The fact that the probability of holding a contingent job was relatively high among occupations with such varying skill levels tends to refute the stereotype that contingent workers are primarily low-skilled".

sumer demand for novelty, the more the sorting mechanism will be based on shifting specifications of marketable talent.

The second trait is the apparatus of collective agreements and social institutions that substitute for the missing role of the normally unique employer, so that creative industries, surprisingly enough, are heavily unionized. For instance, the three-tier compensation scheme depicted by Paul and Kleingartner (1994) shows how collective bargaining contracts and regulatory mechanisms may indicate one possible direction for unions. Instead of protecting jobs from increasing contingency, unions may bargain for the payment schemes to adjust to the new opportunities offered by an enlarged and more diversified distribution of motion pictures and to programs. In France, unlike in most countries where the Unemployment Insurance is beyond the reach of the freelancers, intermittent work is equated with a wage-earning position, in the performing arts, and so allows workers who are eligible (i.e. those who meet the criterion of a certain amount of work over a given period) to get compensated for the unemployed periods of time (Menger and Gurgand, 1996). Indeed, the relationships between professional work and organizational versus spot market labor contract settings diversify more than ever, and so does the whole range of individual vs collective bargaining models over one's employment terms.

One might speculate whether our current sociological models of professionalization, even when trying to combine entrepreneurial and professional features of occupational work, may account for contingency in highly skilled work settings and occupational careers. Obviously, a new research agenda has appeared (Leicht and Fennell, 1997).

7. Contingency and uncertainty

On the one hand, increasing flexibility goes along with increasing differentiation in cultural production: as a result, more and more of the occupational risks are transferred down onto artists. Employment in the arts is increasingly on a short-term contract or freelance basis, which magnifies the shift towards numerical flexibility observed elsewhere in the economy (Smith, 1997). Several factors play a major role in boosting contingency in the cultural sphere – e.g. the dominance of the single-project organizational scheme, the development of a brokerage system (DiMaggio, 1977) that enhances the role of talent agencies in mediating the labor market for contingent employment (Bielby and Bielby, 1999), the segmentation of the artistic labor force according to the reputation level of each of its members within each class of occupational roles, which may explain why even artists may be or become much more substitutable workers, although they claim to be endowed with a unique set of skills, talents and abilities that command their – volatile – market value. Thus the attractiveness of artistic occupations may be exploited to secure a pool of underemployed personnel forming a 'reserve army' and to allocate work on a numerical flexibility basis.

On the other hand, production in creative industries and in the arts relies on functional flexibility requirements that truly originate in the uncertainty of the creative process. In order to catch the operating mechanisms of the artistic labor markets, a

model of behavior under uncertainty is needed: note that in a sense, this model brings us back to the distinction made by a long list of thinkers, from Marx (see Elster's interpretation, 1985) through Hannah Arendt, Albert Hirschman or Eliot Freidson (to mention only a few), a distinction between labor and work. The point has to be discussed at length whenever the issue of the rationales of occupational choice in the arts is at stake. Here I want only to point to the main underlying assumption on which this distinction relies, that of uncertain prospect. Work as opposed to labor refers to nonroutine and noninstrumental dimensions of the creative activity: the more the work escapes routine and predictability of its outcome, the less one can be certain about the chances of successful achievement.

To be sure, artistic work also entails routine aspects, both in relative terms – the various artistic occupations and the various individual achievements in each of them can be ranked according to how routine or nonroutine the work is – and in absolute terms – no artist could reconstruct afresh every time his own frame of activity and no collective work could be achieved either without conventional frames. The fact remains that the unpredictability of artistic creative work is the most demanding, the most rewarding and the most acclaimed dimension.

Insofar as nonroutine activity refers to a wide range of changing and challenging work situations, it therefore implies that abilities may be revealed and skills acquired only progressively, in the course of action, through a process of learning-by-doing which is highly informative and which cannot be perfectly anticipated *ab initio*. The attractiveness of artistic jobs can therefore partly derive from their high learning potential, at least as long as the work is nonroutine and unpredictable enough.

Thus dealing theoretically with the issue of uncertainty may help to escape the dilemma that is raised when one asks whether the artist should be considered as a rational actor (the condition of survival in an ever more competitive market), or as a bounded-rational actor, or as myopic actor induced to take such occupational risks only because he or she forms probabilistic miscalculations of his or her chances of success, or even as a causally driven agent programmed by his initial socialization to enter an artistic occupation.

Consequently, it appears to be much more efficient to consider and to model the artist as behaving like an imperfect bayesian actor, i.e. as gathering information, learning by doing and revising his or her skills, expectations and conception of her self, as building networks in order to widen his range of work experiences, and to get new psychic and emotional foods, in a word as self-actualizing without knowing who exactly he or she is and what exactly he or she is able to do, or to express in his or her work.

The artist, insofar as he acts as a monopolistic supplier, tries to expand the control over his own work and over the market of the goods or services he provides. This outward-oriented goal, driven by the competitive pressure in the market for the arts and entertainment services, would, however, be meaningless, were it not matching the inward-oriented goal of self-discovery and self-actualization, a goal that may be pursued only as long as the variety of work experiences and challenges is optimal and as the balance between invention, security at work and temporary routine exploitation of innovation is secured.

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