



BAD ART IS GOOD FOR US ALL

Alison Gerber

THE ENEMY / Issue Three
theenemyreader.org

For years I ignored artwork that I didn't like. Artwork that no one liked. I don't mean that I didn't see it; bad art is everywhere.¹ I mean, rather, that I didn't imagine it to be something worth engaging with. I didn't see bad art as relevant to social worlds, to my world. I imagined that bad art made sense as a sort of hobby, and one that, as hobbies went, was relatively innocuous. Bad art was, in my imaginings, a sort of basement train set of human activity. Bad artmaking requires finite resources—time, space, money, materials—but seems relatively unlikely to end in drug-addicted squalor, destroy a marriage or a childhood, reopen the hole in the ozone layer. There are worse things you could do with your time. And, clearly, the making of bad art has meaning and value for the maker. Artists follow their muse; they express themselves; they work out intellectual, aesthetic, and psychic problems. Not least, they *enjoy* making art.

Over the last few years I have done research for a project on value in the arts. I crisscrossed the country visiting and speaking with artists in big cities and small towns. I spent time in art communities I hadn't known existed, drank bad wine at openings, gossiped, and looked at a lot of art.² Some of it—not much, but some—was really bad.

When I spoke with the artists who made that bad art, I was often surprised: they told me their art wasn't any good. They didn't care. They made it for themselves, and they loved it. Sometimes they would tell me the story behind a particular work hanging in their living room—a poorly printed, badly composed photograph of a train yard, or a huge canvas with Pollockish splatters that somehow never quite came together into anything more—and then laugh: It's pretty terrible, right? And we would laugh together. These artists told me stories just

like all the others did: of the resources they committed to their work, the long years of practice, the lonely hours in the studio and the thrill of exhibition. They talked about negotiations with family and friends over time and space and money to do the work they wanted to do, the early morning hours before the kids woke up set aside for painting, the coursework and crit groups and gallerists. But unlike most of the artists that I spoke with, these “bad” artists were careful to claim only that their artwork mattered *to them*. Maybe to their families and close friends—maybe. But they didn't claim that their work should be selling, didn't talk prices with me. They never told me that viewers would be transformed through engagement with their work, or that it would outlast them. They didn't talk about the skills they developed through their practices or about maybe teaching one day. They didn't even talk much about the relationships they built through their work, whether with other artists or with viewers. When they talked about value, they talked only about personal, individual, private value, and I think that's all that they saw.

When no one else thinks your work is any good, you're left with only one justification for the time, the energy, the money, the commitment: you love it.

I spent time with and spoke with so many other people over the past years, too; artists who maybe made better art, people who didn't make art at all. When they talked about bad art, drawings almost without qualities and junk sculptures that seemed destined for the trash heap, that private value of self-actualization and self-expression was all they could see. If they even saw it. If they were feeling generous. The stories that bad artists told me, and the confirmations offered by their peers, made me think I had been right. Bad art made sense as a hobby, nothing more.

But because I was bound by methodological commitments, I kept speaking with artists good and bad, in all kinds of places, kept going to openings and dinners and studios and schools. Over time, I began to see patterns not just in what artists told me they thought and felt—this widespread justification, a single gesture towards self-actualization—but also, and quite distinctly, in what they told me they did in and outside the studio, in what I saw them do with their art and their lives.

Unlike most of the artists that I spoke with, these “bad” artists were careful to claim only that their artwork mattered to them.

In a world of “what do you do?” at first meeting (the greeting colored by the demanding cash economies in which the “do what you love” ideology really means, always, “do what you love as a job, for money, or you’re not really doing it”³), a strong commitment to something that isn’t your job doesn’t make much sense, especially if it consumes scarce, finite resources. When no one else thinks your work is any good, you’re left with only one justification for the time, the energy, the money, the commitment: you love it. You love it! And isn’t that enough? Don’t we all deserve something for ourselves?

It *is* enough. That old labor slogan still rings true despite its utopian sheen: eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.⁴ Play, leisure, love: these *are* reason enough, and I don’t aim to argue otherwise. But when I looked at bad artists in the aggregate, I saw that there was something more. And I saw that it mattered to me, to us. I thought that bad art had only individual, private value, but no social value. I was wrong.

When I looked at the lives of those who made what they called, and what their peers derided as, bad art, two widespread patterns became clear. The first was that, almost without exception, those who make bad art don’t aim to make art their job. It wasn’t because they couldn’t make good art: some had even made what they and others viewed as “good art” at some earlier time, and now pursued a different practice. It wasn’t that they didn’t have the training or the networks; many had BFAs and MFAs, some from very good programs. And their lack of interest in a career wasn’t just a squeeze of sour grapes; some had abandoned successful sales careers or positions as art professors for other kinds of work, or had happened upon a pile of money and ended up without a need to support themselves, moving over time from “good” to “bad” work in the process. What these artists had in common was an almost total lack of occupational commitment to the arts. They didn’t keep their CVs up to date, didn’t use openings to schmooze, didn’t implicitly or explicitly say that they one day hoped to be recognized as professionals, as “real” artists, as working artists. They didn’t spend much time trying to sell work, get grants, or find opportunities, and only occasionally dipped a toe into the occupationalized art world for specific purposes and quickly retreated back to shore—back to the world of bad art and self-actualization, of justification that points only to the self.

Except: When I looked to the lives of these artists, I saw another pattern. These artists sometimes put down their brushes and cameras, stopped making art with an ease that I never saw among occupationally committed artists, but only in favor of things they viewed as equally meaningful commitments, and only temporarily. It so happened that, in each case, these activities were of great value (economic and otherwise) but were unpaid or deeply underpaid. Artists stopped making bad art to care for a

dying friend, to volunteer full-time for a cause they believed in. Afterward, they went right back to their own work as though nothing had happened. On the other hand, artists who made “good art”—much more likely to have some level of occupational commitment to the arts, regardless of their training, experience, income, or employment—put what they often called their careers on hold as well, but only for matters sufficiently pressing (care of one’s own children topped the list), only problematically (all tried to fit a bit of artmaking in here and there, often reporting that they did so to the detriment of both activities), and with a great gnashing of teeth. I met some who never bounced back—who, forced to downscale their practices by small children or a serious illness, spoke bitterly of their careers, interrupted—while the bad artists I met picked up their tools and got back to work as though nothing had happened.

In today’s higher art worlds, anything resembling serious participation or a hope that one might contribute to “the conversation” tends to require the performance of occupational commitment and economic activity.⁵ Artists regularly de-emphasize their day jobs and stretch the truth of art world finances in mixed company. The notion of the “professional” artist is disaggregated from both jobs and dollars and is defined variously but always emphatically—a pose required for participation in the international art-historical and critical conversation that people like me see as marking the boundaries of “good” art.⁶ Very occasionally, someone slips in without evidence of such professionalism, but it’s rare.

Over time I came to see how serious, committed artists without occupational visions—those who made up a small proportion of the artists I interviewed but who comprised an overwhelming majority of those who made what we agreed was “bad art”—had, along with their artworks,

created lives that allowed them to dedicate all manner of resources to the making of such artworks—energies that could just as well be channeled to something else, if that something else were sufficiently worthy. For the most part, over a lifetime, these artists remained committed to the studio, often daily: art was important to them, and it took precedence. But occasionally, these artists would apply themselves with just as much dedication to something else.

In today’s higher art worlds, anything resembling serious participation or a hope that one might contribute to “the conversation” tends to require the performance of occupational commitment and economic activity.

Artists who make bad art create space in their lives for commitment to something other than occupational careers, and in doing so they learn to dedicate resources (time, money, space, energy) to something that they care about but which will never pay off in instrumental, externally sanctioned ways. They devote a room in their house or a corner of the bedroom; they commit hours of their day or week to their artistic practice. They work less than they otherwise might in order to have time to make their art, earn less than they otherwise could. They spend precious disposable income on art supplies, art services, museum memberships, courses, artworks.⁷ In all this, bad artists create and protect spaces of possibility.

In my encounters with these artists, what I saw was that unlike those with occupational commitments to the arts, when something came up that they saw as unambiguously meaningful, bad artists granted themselves the space to commit themselves wholeheartedly to care work, political work, community work, religious work— all of those

things that the rest of us are so often “too busy” for, by which we mean that, whatever our ideals, we feel ourselves to be constrained by our careers, our lives, our choices, our goals.⁸ All artists fashion particular spaces in their lives; any artistic practice requires ongoing commitments of finite resources. Bad artists, though, build particular spaces of possibility, swing spaces that can be put to various uses without devaluation or profanation.⁹

Look through an economic lens, and you’ll see problems of finite resources as issues of costs and benefits, and conversations about value as rational discussions where an ideal outcome not only exists, but can be attained. There is a clarity of purpose to that economic lens and its measures of quality and success. But if you use a political lens for that same discussion, it can no longer be quite as rational, and there is clearly no ideal outcome; all outcomes have winners and losers, and the nonquantitative, the nonmonetary, the communicative, the affective, and the personal hold at least as much sway as does the rational.

Making bad art is calisthenics for a kind of social engagement that was once the norm but that is now minimized, implausible, odd and ill-advised under capitalism and the dictates of higher art worlds.

The committed bad artist has the emotional, moral, ethical, and practical experience of commitment to something irrational, non-instrumental, non-occupational, suspect. Bad art has no immediate payoff. Its benefits are intangible and unpredictable; it pays you back in love rather than money. It might never amount to anything. And in a society where commitment to achievement is paramount, and where such achievement is most often gauged by

occupational and economic attainment, being trained in the practice of time-wasting is of incredible value for anyone who hopes for social and political participation. Because for only a very few—a largely privileged few—are social and political goals the stuff of jobs and dollars; for the rest, they detract from our need for jobs and dollars, and they tend to get short shrift.

Making bad art is calisthenics for a kind of social engagement that was once the norm but that is now minimized, implausible, odd and ill-advised under capitalism and the dictates of higher art worlds.¹⁰ It’s training for a sort of resistance: resistance to the dollar as the best and only measure of worth, to the precedence of occupation in the construction of identity. I might not want to look at it, but I’ve learned to be glad to live in a world of bad art.

End Notes

This essay benefited from conversations with Helena Keffe, Joseph del Pesco, and Joshua Smith, and I am grateful for their time and thoughts.

1. Throughout this essay I will use terms like “bad art” and “good art.” All scare quotes and lack of same are intentional. I hope that by the end the reasons for my use of such loaded terms will be clear.
2. This essay draws on a study using in-depth interviews with visual artists in the United States—as well as ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and work with archival and secondary sources—to investigate valuation in the arts. I also used to work as an artist, and artmaking was my primary employment from about 2002 through 2008, which has obviously influenced my research questions and analysis. Though I am now engaged with inquiries and practices similar to those that structured my life then, I no longer introduce myself as an artist in any context.
3. For another perspective on this see, for example, Miya Tokumitsu, “In the Name of Love”, *Jacobin* 13, 2014.
4. See James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Anchor, 2007) for some context on rest and recreation under capitalism.
5. As should be clear by now, I draw on Becker in my conceptualization of art worlds (Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press, 1984))
6. See for example Bain (Alison Bain, “Constructing an Artistic Identity,” *Work, Employment and Society* 19, no. 1 (2005): 25–46) on how important the notion of professionalism is to “serious” artistic practice and identity.
7. As Sholette points out (Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (Pluto Press, 2010)), these artists—part of the vast dark matter
8. Not all of the bad artists I interviewed took this “time off.” The few who did not were all older. Was this swing-space appropriation of resources plausible only to the young, the energetic, those who could envision a return to the arts before it was too late? No, plenty of older artists I spoke with told me of their time off to organize a march on the capitol, to undertake missionary work. The common feature of those who never had taken such “time off” from their artwork was simple: they had undertaken art as a hobby, as a sideline, often late in life, most often in retirement. Thinking of art as a hobby, as leisure, as release turned out to be just as destructive to artists’ capacities to temporarily redirect their passions and resources as thinking of artmaking as a profession was. Bad art turns out to be, as I will argue, a sort of calisthenics for public engagement—but only if you take the making of that bad art very, very seriously.
9. The bad artists I spoke with were not usually engaged in the sorts of conversations that I spend much of my time in, where notions of an expanded practice are widely held, where artists cleaning up their neighborhood and organizing political debates and caring for their families and others and running for office regularly speak of those activities as “performances” or “sculptures”, put them on their CV, promote documentation of their activities in gallery and museum exhibitions They simply did these things, and then got back to the lifelong hard work of making art. Bad artists don’t call their activism social practice; they call it what it is, and commit to it with all that they have. In contrast, see for example Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash*, 1973; WochenKlausur, *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women*, 1994; Steve Lambert, *Public Forum*, 2014; Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-79; and Ben Kinmont, *Sometimes a Nicer Sculpture Is to Be Able to Provide a Living for Your Family*, 1998-present. Antanas Mockus served as two-term mayor of Bogotá,

Colombia. Some of his projects while in office, including the heart-shaped hole he cut into the bulletproof vest he was required to wear, are documented in a catalog from the Walker Art Center (Doryun Chong and Yasmil Raymond, *Brave New Worlds*, 1st ed (Minneapolis, Minn.: New York: Walker Art Center, 2007)). More recently, Jón Gnarr served as mayor of Reykjavík; see for example his contribution to the catalogue for the 7th Berlin Biennale (Jón Gnarr, “The Courage to Be a Lipstick,” in *Forget Fear: 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*, ed. Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza (Köln: König, 2012)).

10. The bad artists I spoke with regularly applied themselves to meaningful, finite tasks of great value. My argument, that these activities are of significant economic and social value and that bad artmaking structures artists’ lives in particular ways that enable such engagements, is intended to be quite different from the one most economists might make. I am interested in value in all of its forms, and would not advocate for the application of cost-benefit analysis to artists’ activities or argue that we should aim to include such activities to show that an art education is “worth it” in terms of future economic productivity. My perspective on value is a growth-agnostic one, and personally I lean towards more sustainability-oriented low- and no-growth paradigms (see for example Juliet Schor, *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth* (Penguin, 2010)). I describe a sort of value in bad art beyond the personal and aesthetic, and it’s one that we could make commensurate with monetary value, but I would argue that in this case the dollar is a particularly poor metric not because the activities I speak of are priceless (see, for example, Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) for a contemporary

sociological view on this issue, one to which I subscribe) or because the dollar can’t work (it can), but because the dollar bullies other measures of value so quickly and efficiently that it silences the vast majority of political, ethical, and moral discussion. My own research, on social processes of commensuration, envisions resistance to commensuration as political, and I would argue that it is often a political lens that should be brought to conversations about value rather than an economic one.

11. Here I shamelessly and with gratitude borrow the metaphor of calisthenics from the brilliant Jim Scott (James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton [N.J.]: Princeton University Press, 2012).