Working for fame or fees? Tensions in exhibition work

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper explores the job marketisation of exhibition work by examining the coexistence of traditional and new market norms and the tensions these conflicting norms generate.
Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, the paper examines this marketisation through the case of the Swedish MU agreement, introduced to regulate artists' work and income when exhibiting at publicly funded institutions.
Findings – Conflicting norms contribute to artists pursuing both symbolic and monetary income simultaneously, creating four dimensions of tension. When facing these tensions, artists employ practices of prioritisation, negotiation and guessing.
Research limitations/implications – The study suggests that marketisation often entails the coexistence of competing norms rather than straightforward change. This coexistence generates tensions, requiring actors to develop coping practices. By examining exhibition work as a case of job marketisation, the study calls for greater attention to how market reforms are experienced and enacted in everyday work practices, and how competing remuneration principles shape professional identities, exchanges and labour market participation.
Practical implications – The paper offers insights into how a specific marketisation process in the art world unfolds in practice. Open discussion about the tensions generated by this job marketisation, and about the prioritising, guessing and negotiating practices that arise when coping with them, may contribute to a better-functioning job market.
Originality/value – The study contributes to research on artistic labour by examining an under-researched income category, how new income norms are experienced and managed in everyday practice, and by offering an empirically grounded account of the changing status of display exhibitions in the contemporary art world.

Keywords Visual artists, Exhibition work, Job marketisation, Market tensions, MU agreement
Paper type Research article

For so many years, we've just been happy about the fame and not the fee (Johanna, artist)

Introduction

The quote above highlights a long-standing feature of the art world: reputation, rather than payment, has been the norm in terms of exhibition remuneration. This points to a key concern for many visual artists, as exhibition work is a cornerstone of artistic practice, often emphasised and established already during art school training. There are generally two primary categories of contemporary art exhibitions: sales exhibitions and display exhibitions (de Voldere *et al.*, 2017; see also Joy and Sherry, 2003; Komarova, 2018). Sales exhibitions are

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usually organised at profit-driven galleries, art fairs, local art tours and art auctions – settings typically referred to as the "art market". Although these exhibitions also serve the purpose of displaying artworks, the commercial aspect of selling artworks remains central. Display exhibitions, by contrast, are often organised at publicly funded institutions such as municipal art museums and galleries and primarily aim to show artworks rather than to sell them.

This paper focuses on the changing norms of remuneration for work related to display exhibitions. Visual artists have traditionally not received direct monetary fees for this work. Instead, they have been rewarded symbolically through public recognition and the enhancement of their CVs, which may in turn lead to monetary income in the form of sales, grants or commissions. This relates to "the restricted economy" (Bourdieu, 1993), in which artistic production is valued predominantly in terms of recognition among art world peers. Within this economy, value is accumulated as symbolic capital under a norm of disinterestedness, where artistic work is expected to be distanced from immediate economic gain. Through these mechanisms, this norm helps legitimise the absence of direct monetary compensation for artistic labour in such contexts.

This norm has, however, become increasingly contested, as demands for direct remuneration of exhibition work have gained prominence. In recent years, there has been a shift towards new normalising guidelines regarding remuneration. A discourse has emerged internationally, emphasising the unsustainability of unpaid labour and calling for increased compensation for artists' work (IAA Europe, 2025). However, while these developments offer opportunities for more sustainable careers, they also create tensions, as artists continue to rely on symbolic capital even as they are increasingly expected to demand fees. In effect, they must now pursue both recognition and remuneration simultaneously: they work for fame while working for fees. With the introduction of new normalising guidelines, artists must navigate situations where competing values are at stake – for instance, maintaining friendly relationships with colleagues while also acting more business-minded.

The norms and activities that shape artists' careers and income have been examined in previous research. Specifically, research has highlighted the central activity of exhibiting (Fillis *et al.*, 2022; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Komarova, 2018; Kompatsiaris, 2020; Peters and Roose, 2022), relating to the role of high-status institutions in validating the value of artworks and artists (Robertson, 2005; Rodner and Thomson, 2013). Additionally, research has pointed to the importance of building and maintaining social capital (Alacovska, 2018; Warkander, 2024), connecting to the management of uncertainty and risk in artistic careers (Menger, 1999; Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007; Kleppe, 2017). Moreover, research has emphasised the key role of arts education in shaping artistic competencies and identities (Røyseng *et al.*, 2007; Lindström, 2016), the importance of developing an artistic voice and producing distinctive, high-quality artworks (Wohl, 2019; Genc and Okan, 2022), while at the same time acquiring generalist skills (Abbing, 2002). Related to this literature is the conversation on professionalisation processes in the art world, in which members of an occupational group, such as visual artists, achieve higher professional status and economic rewards, for instance through the lobbying work performed by industry associations (Wyszomirski and Chang, 2024). Previous research has further addressed the broader shift from viewing artists as product makers – mainly selling objects – to service providers, working with a range of projects (Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Gerber and Childress, 2017).

However, beyond limited research acknowledging display exhibition work as an income category (e.g. Parker, 2013; Gerber and Childress, 2017), a knowledge gap remains regarding work and income from display exhibitions. This paper addresses this gap by showing that display exhibitions have now become workplaces for visual artists, where economic and symbolic remuneration are pursued simultaneously. It examines new economic norms for exhibition work by exploring the tensions emerging from the clash between traditional and new remuneration norms. One formal driver of this shift is the Swedish MU-agreement (MU), which regulates fees for artists' exhibition work. In line with previous research exploring artistic job markets across diverse political and cultural contexts (Gerber and Childress, 2017;

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Komarova, 2018), and tensions between competing artistic and economic objectives (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007; Genc and Okan, 2022; Rentschler and Reid, 2021), this paper offers a particularly interesting example through the MU case.

As such, the contribution of this paper is fourfold. First, it contributes new knowledge to arts marketing research and the professionalisation of artistic work by focusing on an under-researched area in contemporary job markets for artists, as new income norms for display exhibition work are being established. Second, in doing so, it contests the long-standing assumption that display exhibitions at prestigious institutions primarily generate symbolic capital, as the paper demonstrates that display exhibitions increasingly function as workplaces for visual artists, where symbolic and economic capital are pursued simultaneously. Third, the paper expands the discussion around art markets as hybrid markets (Genc and Okan, 2022; Chang and Wyszomirski, 2024) by exploring the job marketisation of another "hybrid market", involving a hybrid exchange object, as artists' labour is exchanged both as a gift and a market exchange (Borgblad and Hagberg, 2026). Fourth, it does so by specifically exploring what tensions this hybrid market generates and what practices artists perform in response to them.

The paper is structured as follows. It first presents previous literature on market norms and tensions surrounding artists' work. This is followed by the method section, which describes the empirical context – MU and the marketisation of exhibition work in Sweden – as well as the qualitative fieldwork and analytical process. The main findings are then analysed and discussed in relation to previous research. Finally, a conclusion is presented.

Literature review

Market norms around artists' work

This paper draws on the notion of marketisation (Çalişkan and Callon, 2010) to understand display exhibitions as an emerging job market for visual artists. Here, *job* marketisation refers to the process through which exhibition work becomes constructed as labour that can be regulated, exchanged and remunerated between organisers and artists. Normalising practices play a central role in marketisation processes. They involve activities that establish market norms, suggesting how a market should be organised according to certain actors (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006). This includes establishing, or changing, formally approved rules as well as the shaping of informal norms and shared understandings about markets (Harrison and Kjellberg, 2016). Creative labour markets are typically informally governed (Alacovska, 2018), lacking the formal regulations characteristic of more conventional labour sectors (Parker, 2013; Chang and Wyszomirski, 2024). Job markets for visual artists are no exception; display exhibitions have traditionally been organised following informal norms regarding work activities and remuneration, including, for instance, a lack of written agreements and no established standard rate of fair payment.

However, a lack of agreements does not imply a lack of work to be done. There are numerous work activities before, during and after a display exhibition (Parker, 2013; Sansi, 2020; Borgblad and Hagberg, 2026). Artists may need to produce new artworks specifically for the exhibition, involving creative, technical, economic and administrative efforts, emphasising the importance of acquiring not only artistic (Wohl, 2019) but also generalist skills (Lingo and Tepper, 2013). Exhibition work may also entail responsibilities such as meetings with the curator, installation, participating in openings and seminars, and writing catalogue texts. However, while a few artists have been economically compensated for their work with display exhibitions, many have not (Artist Information Company, 2023; Konstnärsnämnden, 2008). The lack of remuneration for exhibition work rests partly on the normalising assumption that income from display exhibitions stems either from future sales of artworks or from grants (Petrides and Fernandes, 2020; Peters and Roose, 2022; Robertson, 2005). Hence, these artists have neither been employed by the organiser nor treated as contracted freelancers with standard hourly rates and agreements outlining the terms of the commissioned exhibition work. In practice, they have been relying on income from other sources, such as day jobs and other family members. As Rodner and Thomson (2013) state

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regarding value validating mechanisms in the art world, visual artists' raw material in terms of their hard work is not perceived as "costly" and hence not counted as one of the economic valuation dimensions. Moreover, because artists seek to avoid being perceived as overly eager (Røyseng *et al.*, 2007) or too market-oriented (Genc and Okan, 2022), conversations about pricing artistic labour often remain absent and are treated as art world secrets. Additionally, artists' creative work may sometimes be difficult to detach from administrative or technical practices, and as artworks sometimes unfold as processes or projects with an open-ended timeline and may involve other people, their monetary value and costs can be difficult to estimate (Parker, 2013; Sansi, 2020).

Previous literature on artists' work demonstrates that income norms vary significantly depending on the cultural, political, economic and institutional context in which artists exhibit. This varies depending on whether the state is a key actor in terms of funding art initiatives, or whether that role is instead played by commercial market actors (Komarova, 2018; Robertson, 2005). In Sweden and other European countries, there is an established tradition of supporting culture through public funding (Kleppe, 2017; Lindqvist, 2024), including state working grants and publicly financed exhibition organisers who invite artists to exhibit. Hence, income from sales does not necessarily serve as proof of a successful artistic career, as suggested by Petrides and Fernandes (2020). Instead, success may be tied to receiving competitive state grants (Baldin and Bille, 2021) or exhibiting at prestigious venues (Komarova, 2018; Kompatsiaris, 2020; Fillis *et al.*, 2022). However, the role of the public sector in relation to exhibiting artists is most often seen as a value-validating mechanism for future sales (Chong, 2005; Rodner and Thomson, 2013), rather than as a direct income source. This is indirectly reflected in prior research on artists' work, where display exhibitions at public art institutions are generally excluded as an income category, with only a few exceptions recognising this as "should be" paid work (e.g. Parker, 2013; Gerber and Childress, 2017). In Gerber and Childress (2017), this form of non-payment is understood as a form of sponsoring, as artists themselves subsidise the exhibitions through their unpaid or underpaid work.

Norms surrounding exhibition work also concern relational exchanges with other actors such as commissioners, government officials, organisers and artist friends (Genc and Okan, 2022). Work in the cultural sector is therefore characterised as a gift economy, involving informal gift exchanges based on reciprocity rather than formal monetary payment (Polanyi, 1944/2001). This may entail exhibition work activities that are performed without payment and thus given away as a gift to the organiser in return for exposure and an improved CV (Borgblad and Hagberg, 2026). But informal, unregulated conditions may also entail that work is performed and exchanged through favour swapping with peers (Alacovska, 2018) – or so-called *art bartering* (Dawson, 2026) – such as when artists help colleagues with favours for an exhibition and can expect future counter-favours in return. Hence, social networks are as important as artistic skills for entering and succeeding in the job market (Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Chang and Wyszomirski, 2024; Warkander, 2024). These norms are shaping artists already during art school education (Lindström, 2016), leading artists and other creative workers to navigate their education and careers through informal rules and by accumulating social capital (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). This further relates to the presence of uncertainty and risk inherent in artistic careers (Menger, 1999; Kleppe, 2017), as forms of gifting among artist peers and the sharing of resources are ways to manage such uncertainties and risks.

Taken together, these traditional norms position display exhibitions mainly as important platforms for future career opportunities (Fillis *et al.*, 2022), rather than as direct sources of income. Even artists who do not produce commercially "sellable" artworks can leverage exhibitions and strengthened CVs to apply for grants (Kompatsiaris, 2020) or secure commissions. As there is a shared understanding among artists about future and present work, where the present undertakings hopefully pay off in the future (Abbing, 2002), great pressure is placed on artistic competencies: the development of an artistic voice and unique, high-quality artworks (Wohl, 2019; Baldin and Bille, 2021).

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Shifting norms and the evolution of parallel norm systems. Recently, however, research has also addressed shifting norms related to artistic labour, including seeing artists as moving from product makers to becoming service providers (Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Gerber and Childress, 2017). Although Gerber and Childress (2017) note that norms valuing artistic work itself (rather than artworks for sale) emerged within artist communities already in the 1980s, these norms have not, until recently, been implemented in practice by exhibition organisers and public authorities. A key element of these new norms is the shift from symbolic to monetary remuneration for exhibition work, which has become a central concern for actors in the cultural sector, both in Sweden and across Europe, including artists' associations (Artist Information Company, 2023; IAA Europe, 2025; KRO, 2025), cultural policy bodies (SOU, 2018:23), government agencies and public institutions (Sokka, 2022; Konstnärsnämnden, 2008; de Voldere *et al.*, 2017). This has created a new discourse across stakeholder groups (i.e. not only within artist communities but also among organisers) around artists' monetary income related to display exhibition work. This shift of norms, driven by cultural policy initiatives, can be understood as part of a professionalisation process, in which visual artists as a group are seen as professionals whose labour should be rewarded economically (Chang and Wyszomirski, 2024). Thus, normalising practices may also involve reform efforts (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006), typically driven by policymakers and authorities but also by other stakeholders, including industry associations (Gerber and Childress, 2017; Wyszomirski and Chang, 2024), which, for instance, were central to MU's construction.

However, cultural policy constitutes complex systems that evolve slowly (Lindqvist, 2024), developing through accumulations of new policy layers on established structures, rather than through radical changes (Henningsen, 2015). Hence, even though new normalising practices are emerging, they exist alongside prevailing practices rooted in traditional norms. Shifts in sense-making do not necessarily translate into shifts in practice (Gerber and Childress, 2017). Individual market actors do not automatically act in accordance with new market norms, because they might either lack the ability or the willingness to follow them. Thus, competing normalising practices within a market may result in the emergence of parallel norm systems (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006). As a result, competing norms about how markets should function may generate tensions between different groups of actors and may explain why markets sometimes function poorly (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006).

Tensions arising from competing norms. The tradition of addressing tensions in the art world often refers to the ideas of *art for art's sake* versus *art for business' sake* (Fillis, 2011), pinpointing the clash between artistic integrity and business rationality. The arts marketing and management literature has elaborated on such tensions at both the governance level and at the artistic and creative level. This research has contributed to analyses of tensions among various stakeholders in arts institutions, addressing the sometimes opposing imperatives of artistic missions and organisational stability (Rentschler and Reid, 2021). While tensions within the art world are sometimes positioned as a conflict between stakeholder groups adhering to competing logics, research has also recognised how tensions are embedded internally within stakeholder groups (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). This suggests that tensions embedded within stakeholder groups, such as artists' groups, often remain implicit within their roles and practices until revealed in moments of crisis or organisational change (Ostrower, 2002; Rentschler *et al.*, 2021). This relates to changing work and remuneration norms in the exhibition context, where tensions arise as these new policy norms pose challenges for the exhibiting artists.

The tensions resulting from the coexistence of norms around display exhibition work do not primarily concern the traditional arts-versus-business divide, aligning with the restricted economy and norms of disinterestedness (Bourdieu, 1993). The issue at stake is not a shift toward producing commercial art for broad audiences, which may entail frictions related to artistic integrity (Genc and Okan, 2022). Instead, the emergence of coexisting norms and tensions unfolds *within* the restricted economy, which renders the phenomenon analytically significant. Hence, in line with previous research questioning the distinction between the

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logics of broad and restricted fields, calling for more contextualised analysis of how these logics operate (Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Komarova, 2018), this paper also challenges these binary logics. It examines how norms of symbolic and monetary remuneration – for the very same exchange object: display exhibition work – coexist and remain important. The exploration of parallel norm systems adopts a micro-oriented perspective, highlighting the everyday situations in which tensions arise (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006). By focusing on tensions and practices at the micro-level, enacted by and affecting individual artists, it becomes possible to understand how overarching principles materialise in practice (Andersson Cederholm *et al.*, 2024).

Method

The MU agreement

To explore the coexistence of traditional and new norms and how they influence the job marketisation of exhibition work, this paper turns to the MU agreement in the Swedish contemporary art world. Unpaid exhibition work became a growing concern in Sweden in the years leading up to 2009. This resulted in MU – a new framework agreement between the Swedish state and four artists' associations. 2009 thus marks a formal shift of norms in the Swedish art world, with the introduction of MU, which regulates artists' "right to compensation when works are shown, and for participation in exhibitions, etc." (MU-avtalet In English, 2022). MU offers a significant opportunity to study the changing norms around display exhibitions, as its construction was internationally perceived as unique in the art world (European Artist Rights, 2015; IAA Europe, 2018). By the International Artist Alliance Europe (IAA Europe, 2018, p. 2), MU is described as "very much a best practice model for other European regions".

MU consists of the M-part (short for *medverkan* in Swedish, meaning *participation*) and the U-part (short for *utställning*, meaning *exhibition*). While the U-part relates to standardised, tariff-based remuneration, functioning as a copyright fee, the M-part regulates remuneration for exhibition-related labour, including, for instance, producing new artworks, participating in public programmes, installation and project meetings. The MU guidelines on remuneration are intended to guide all display exhibition organisers, including state, regional, municipal, private and artist-run galleries. Thus, MU serves a clearly stated normalising purpose, which is to improve the financial conditions for visual artists when they work with display exhibitions.

However, recent reports on MU implementation reveal that artists' work hours under the M-part are rarely remunerated (Swedish Arts Council, 2021; Bildkonst Sverige, 2024). Organisers are aware of the new guidelines and agree that the traditional norms of symbolic remuneration are outdated, but claim they lack the resources to pay artists. Thus, despite being introduced 17 years ago, MU has indeed contributed to shifting discourse around artists' income, but has not changed the concrete practices of remunerating artists for exhibition work.

Data collection

The data consist of interviews, observations and documents collected during the author's doctoral project (2014–2019) and postdoctoral project (2022–2026). The main data collection was conducted during 2014–2015 and 2022–2023, with additional documentary material complementing the data throughout both periods.

In total, 60 interviews with 61 individual interviewees were conducted (see Table 1 with interview data). In some instances, two people were interviewed at the same time, and some people were interviewed twice. The interviewees include artists, exhibition organisers, representatives of artists' associations, government officials and professors in Master of Fine Arts (MFA) education. Three interviews in 2023 were conducted with individuals representing organisations (exhibition organisers, artists' associations and national government agencies)

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Table 1. Interview data

Interviewee (alias names)	Work category	Setting	Date	Duration (ca)
Ruth and Anna	Artist association representatives	Their office	October 2014	1 h
Daniel	Artist association representative	Their office	October 2014	1 h
Anna	Artist association representative	Café	October 2014	1.5 h
Eric	Artist association representative/artist	Telephone	November 2014	1 h
Emma	Museum exhibition curator	Their office	November 2014	1 h
David	Museum manager	Their office	November 2014	1 h
Sarah	Artist association representative/artist	Their office	January 2015	1 h
Alex and Maria	Government agency representatives	Their office	January 2015	1 h
Simon	Artist	Their studio	January 2015	1 h
Cecilia	Museum manager	Their office	January 2015	1 h
Oscar	Museum exhibition curator	Their office	February 2015	1 h
Lina	Gallery exhibition curator/artist	Their office	February 2015	1 h
John	Museum manager	Their office	March 2015	1 h
Sofia	Gallery exhibition curator	Their office	March 2015	1 h
Marcus	Gallery director	Their office	March 2015	1 h
Samuel	Museum manager	Telephone	March 2015	0.5 h
Eva	Artist	Their home	March 2015	1.5 h
Jonathan	Museum manager	Telephone	March 2015	1 h
Ella	Artist	Telephone	April 2015	0.5 h
Lucas	Museum manager	Their office	April 2015	1 h
Sebastian	Gallery manager	Their office	October 2015	1 h
Anne	Director of MFA	Teams	March 2022	0.5 h
Olivia	Artist	My office	March 2022	1.5 h
Helena and Christina	Prefect and Professor of MFA/artist	Teams	March 2022	1 h
Peter	Professor of MFA/artist	Teams	April 2022	1 h
Sora	Artist	Teams	April 2022	1 h
Monica	Manager of MFA	Teams	April 2022	1 h
Karin	Professor of MFA/artist	Teams	April 2022	1 h
Henrik	Professor of MFA/artist	Teams	April 2022	1 h
Clara	Artist	Zoom	April 2022	1 h
Sam	Artist	Zoom	April 2022	0.5 h
Ingrid	Artist	Zoom	April 2022	1.5 h
Caroline	Artist	Zoom	April 2022	0.5 h
Julia	Artist	Zoom	April 2022	1 h
Angela	Artist	Zoom	April 2022	1 h
Elisabeth	Professor of MFA/artist	Zoom	April 2022	1 h
Rebecca	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Magnus	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Adrian	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Hanna	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Stefan	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Jenny	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	0.5 h
Linda	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Victoria	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Robert	Artist	Café	May 2022	1.5 h
Frida	Artist	Their studio	May 2022	1 h
Camilla	Artist	Their home	May 2022	1 h
Jonas	Artist	Teams	May 2022	1 h
Karl	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Amir	Artist	Zoom	May 2022	1 h
Kim	Artist	Zoom	June 2022	1 h
Cecilia	Artist	Zoom	June 2022	1 h
Emily	Artist	Zoom	June 2022	1 h
Johanna	Artist	Zoom	June 2022	1 h

(*continued*)

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Table 1. Continued

Interviewee (alias names)	Work category	Setting	Date	Duration (ca)
Thomas	Artist	Zoom	September 2022	1.5 h
Diana	Government agency representative	Zoom	March 2023	1 h
Marika and Sofia	Gallery manager and Exhibition curator	Teams	March 2023	1 h
Hedvig	Museum manager	Zoom	April 2023	1 h
Louise	Artist association representative	Zoom	May 2023	1 h

Source(s): Author's own work

previously interviewed in 2014–2015. This allowed comparison over time and confirmed progression and change in job market norms.

For the 2014–2015 round, a mix of snowball and purposive sampling was used to cover as many experiences of MU and exhibition work as possible (Czarniawska, 2014), including both emerging and established artists as well as small and large exhibition organisers. For 2022–2023, purposive sampling was used, identifying and approaching (almost) all recent graduates [1] and several professors from the five MFA programmes in Sweden. Most artists interviewed in 2022–2023 had begun building their careers, had experience of several exhibitions and could be considered emerging. The five professors interviewed in 2022 were established artists with their own experiences of the job market and exhibition work.

The interview guide was adapted for different groups. Questions to the artist associations and national agencies focused on the construction and revisions of MU, and on the challenges they observed artists facing. Questions to organisers focused on how they work with exhibitions and artist fees in general, including MU in particular. Questions to artists focused on how they work with exhibitions, how they are remunerated for this work, and, generally, how they generate income from their artistic work. All interviewed artists worked with diverse artistic practices, such as painting and sculpture, performance and video work.

Observations were conducted at one exhibition in 2015, at three lectures and one workshop on MU in 2014–2015, and at one online lecture in 2022, all organised for educational purposes by the artist associations. The documentary material comprises industry and government reports on the visual arts sector and MU, alumni reports from one MFA programme, MU campaign and workshop materials, and news and press material.

Data analysis

Interviews and observation notes were transcribed verbatim shortly after they took place. The analysis of all material evolved iteratively between identifying codes and themes and engaging with previous literature and the theoretical framework (Czarniawska, 2014; Gioia *et al.*, 2013). The main analytical work was carried out in three rounds inspired by Gioia *et al.* (2013) and is illustrated in Figure 1.

First round. The first coding round was detailed and inductive to identify all actions and accounts that described potentially significant practices regarding the marketisation of exhibition work. These practices were coded into 17 themes, such as "valuations", "studio work" and "exchanges". Aspects of tension were repeatedly observed during the first coding round in 15 of these codes.

Second and third round. In the second round, the analysis examined these tensions in more detail, resulting in four dimensions of tension, of which one serves as the overarching tension (Art is work or Work is art) involving three sub-tensions (Configuring artists or sellers, Secrecy or transparency around pricing and Upholding or challenging the friendship

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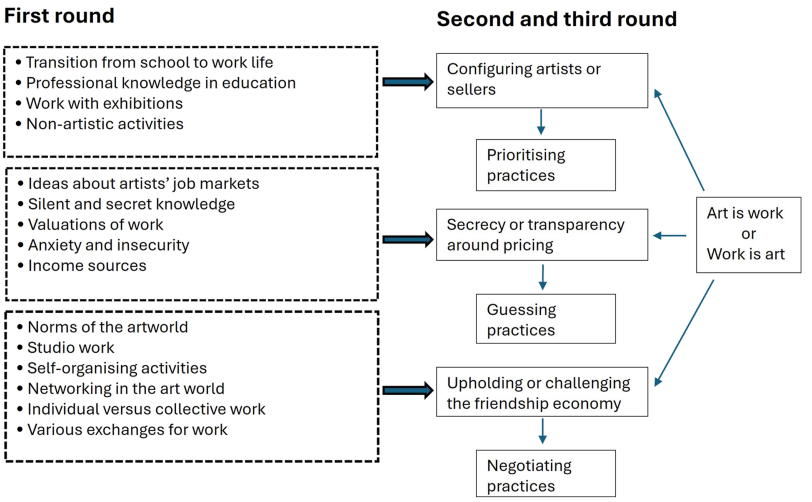

Figure 1. Coding and theming process. Source: Author's own work

economy). While the first-round codes could each be assigned to one main sub-tension category, as illustrated in Figure 1, several of these codes overlapped and were observed in more than one sub-tension, which is common in qualitative analyses (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Finally, in the third round, the practices artists perform when facing these tensions were identified (prioritising, guessing and negotiating).

The two periods of data collection serve different purposes in this paper. The 2014–2015 fieldwork focused on the origins of MU and thus provides background on how new norms and discourses around exhibition work evolved with its introduction. The 2022–2023 fieldwork focused on artists' practices and experiences of exhibition work and primarily served the analysis by identifying tensions unfolding from the coexistence of two market norms. Revisiting the 2014–2015 material revealed that such tensions were already present then but appear more pronounced in the 2022–2023 accounts as new norms of economic remuneration have become more established. The two periods of data collection thus provide a longitudinal quality to the material, as a shift of norms was recognised in the first period, and how this led to the coexistence of both traditional and new norms, which was more emphasised in the second period.

Findings and discussion

The following sections examine how traditional and new norms shape the job marketisation of exhibition work. They analyse what tensions emerge in concrete situations where artists engage in exhibition work and must navigate between traditional and new norms. These tensions are interrelated, comprising one overarching tension that encapsulates the broader conflict inherent in the marketisation of exhibition work. The other three tensions are subdimensions of this overarching one, each highlighting a specific aspect of the marketisation process.

Overarching tension: work is art or art is work?

The first tension captures the broader conflict between coexisting remuneration norms, referred to as *work is art or art is work?* This overarching tension relates to the longstanding art-business divide, a recurring theme in art market research (Fillis, 2011; Genc and Okan, 2022), as well as research on tensions observed in art institutions, where competing but coexisting logics are embedded internally within groups of professionals (Eikhof and

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Haunschild, 2007; Ostrower, 2002; Rentschler *et al.*, 2021). For the specific professional group mainly examined here, emerging artists, this overarching tension entails that they must – and wish to – produce unique and high-quality artworks for exhibitions to strengthen their CVs and reputation within the art world (Fillis *et al.*, 2022; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Wohl, 2019). They aim to remain true to their artistic integrity, vision and personal motivation (Lindström, 2016). In this sense, the outcome of artists' work is the artwork itself, which emphasises valuing the artistic product: *work is art*. Conversely, because the artwork cannot exist without the labour producing it, it is essential to recognise and value the work process (Parker, 2013; Gerber and Childress, 2017; Sansi, 2020), including the material and immaterial resources it requires. This perspective emphasises valuing the artistic labour: *art is work*. According to the new norms, artists are encouraged to value their working hours in the exhibition process and to insist that this labour be taken seriously, just as any other supplier hired by an exhibition organiser would expect. Yet in practice, the situation is rarely as rational as an artist simply delivering what they are paid for; most continue working until both they and the organiser are satisfied. These perspectives therefore clash: to what extent should artists invest their resources – time, materials and emotional energy – into producing the best possible artworks to generate symbolic capital and reputation, and to what extent should they engage in, or refrain from, artistic work that is not economically compensated? As Linda put it:

> Before, I used to work for free all the time, but now I've at least received some support for certain things. But it's never enough so that you actually ... I mean, you still end up working a huge amount. I had a big project where we got funding from the Swedish Arts Council. But in the end, we worked on it for a year or so — actually more than that — and maybe got [1,500 euros] for it, haha, you know. You want to make it work, but it's hard to make ends meet.

Indeed, artists may derive satisfaction from earning income through their artistic work (Genc and Okan, 2022), valuing their labour in ways comparable to other professions, which is seen as an indicator of professionalisation (Chang and Wyszomirski, 2024). This connects to critiques of Bourdieu's (1993) notion of "the economic world reversed", which has been argued to be too one-dimensional (Komarova, 2018; Lingo and Tepper, 2013). Yet, a contradictory discourse among artists is observed in Lindström (2016), where artistic work is defined as "non-work" in contrast to the "normal" work performed by non-artists. In Lindström (2016), artistic non-work is perceived as free, authentic, meaningful, independent and unconditional, rather than seen as an economic exchange. Here, artistic success is not equated with monetary reward – i.e. a job market exchange – but with the ability to sustain artistic practice in one way or another (Abbing, 2002). Thomas reflected on this dilemma around where income is generated, and whether external expectations affect artistic work:

> If people have expectations that you should make art and be an artist, then maybe there's a greater chance that you'll keep doing it, to live up to those expectations. But if there were no such expectations of you, then maybe you'd just feel that you were doing it entirely for your own sake. If the money comes because you're supposed to make art, then maybe there's a greater chance that you'll make art, rather than having to earn money to afford to make art.

Another dimension of this tension tends to emerge in smaller municipal art institutions, which often operate with limited exhibition budgets, yet are expected to comply with MU. Here, the *work is art or art is work* tension manifests as follows: emerging artists may wish to exhibit for free, valuing the opportunity to display their work more highly than receiving economic remuneration. In doing so, they align with the *work is art* perspective. Organisers, by contrast, cannot invite these artists without payment, as they are obliged to comply with MU. They therefore (sometimes unwillingly) adopt the *art is work* position, recognising artists' labour as work that must be compensated. This aspect of the tension thus unfolds between artists who willingly adhere to traditional norms and organisers who reluctantly follow new ones. As a result, organisers are sometimes forced to decline artists' proposals, which can, in turn, reduce the number of exhibitions held at smaller institutions. As Samuel explained:

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> One downside, of course, is that we have to say no to things that would otherwise be very easy to do. Some local artists say, Sure, I can exhibit, I don't need any compensation. / . . . /And then we have to say, "But that's not how it works anymore — we have to compensate you for the work you do." So, honestly, it stops some exhibitions from happening.

As the quote illustrates, this was recognised several years ago when MU had only existed for 6 years, but recent reports still observe this conflict among organisers (Bildkonst Sverige, 2024; Sveriges Museer, 2025).

Having discussed the overarching tension that arises in the job marketisation of exhibition work, the next sections turn to the sub-dimensions that specify and deepen this overarching tension.

Sub-tension: configuring artists or sellers?. The first sub-tension concerns the professional role of the artist. It highlights how artists are multiply configured within markets for exhibition work: they must be configured both as *artists* and as *sellers of work*. This requires not only the development of artistic skills and articulating one's own artistic voice but also the acquisition of business-related competencies.

This tension corresponds to the traditional identity of the artist, which emphasises the quality of the artistry and the artist's body of work (Wohl, 2019) as distinct from entrepreneurial identities (Lindström, 2016). However, it is well established that artists require generalist competencies in addition to artistic skills (Abbing, 2002; Fillis *et al.*, 2022; Lingo and Tepper, 2013). These generalist skills are part of the "creative profession" (Wyszomirski and Chang, 2024) and include forms of business knowledge, such as calculating production costs (in both time and materials), assessing opportunity costs such as income lost from day jobs, understanding agreements and labour legislation, developing negotiation skills and insight into how exhibition organisers and commissioners operate, as well as handling accounting and project planning. However, neither artists nor organisers – i.e. the key job market actors – automatically configure as proper buyers and sellers simply because a new agreement and discourse promoting revised remuneration norms exist. Both groups lack the agency to engage in selling and buying exhibition work, as they are not sufficiently equipped with the competencies required (Callon and Muniesa, 2005) to construct exhibition work as an exchange object.

The tension of *configuring artists or sellers* manifests already during art school education, and leads to students prioritising their time between competing learning demands (and offerings). What forms of knowledge should students prioritise? Should they attend non-mandatory courses in business administration and project management, or devote their time to developing their artistic practice and spending concentrated hours in the studio? And what should be mandatory in the curriculum? As Robert explained:

> When we graduated from [the school], several of us said, "Oh, it would have been great to have some kind of course, like a crash course in running your own business." But then we realised that such a course actually existed, but none of us took it. So, it's a bit hypocritical of me to say that. But you're just so caught up in working on your art, you know, and all the conversations revolve around that. And it's so exciting and fun, really. So, it's probably easy to end up devaluing those kinds of things.

However, most interviewees noted a lack of educational content directly related to professional life as an artist, specifically, practical guidance on "how do I survive as an artist?". This learning gap is also observed in previous research on higher artistic education. Art schools have traditionally reproduced norms and values that encourage students to cultivate artistic rather than entrepreneurial identities (Røyseng *et al.*, 2007; Lindström, 2016), although most artists later pursue their careers through the business form of sole proprietorship. However, as discussed in the previous section, what makes artists attractive to exhibit often stems from the very artistic practice and training that art schools provide. Their primary purpose is to equip students with artistic skills and to develop their "artistic voice" (Wohl, 2019) – key features typically developed during years of art school training. As Elisabeth explained:

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> They need to get the basic education to develop their artistic practice as far as they possibly can. To fine-tune their tools, and also to do what they don't yet quite know what it is — that is, the artistic process. All of that must be the foundation before you start talking about the economy. And to be able to get funding, to be able to exhibit, you have to find your own way of talking about what you do. And to feel, "I stand by this, because I've done my best." So it must come from that.

Although MFAs are argued to professionalise artists into a category in which they also perceive themselves as workers (Gerber and Childress, 2017), this study finds that while MFAs shape artists to become professionals who, *in principle*, value their work – including their time and other material and immaterial resources – they are not formed as market actors who, *in practice*, can readily value resources, calculate costs or negotiate in market situations. However, even though business-related courses and lectures are usually non-mandatory at the MFA level, many informants noted that such courses are a more regular part of the bachelor programmes. The need for business knowledge is also quite individual, given the many different ways of working as an artist (Lingo and Tepper, 2013). For some students, discussions around "how to survive as an artist" take place in individual meetings with supervisors rather than in class settings. Nevertheless, many recently graduated artists reported a lack of business training and skills related to valuing, estimating and calculating work hours for an exhibition project. Yet, despite recognising this gap, not all artist interviewees believed that art school was the right place to acquire such training:

> I'm a bit torn about that. I mean, it's probably good to learn some of it. It really is a prerequisite for being able to keep doing this, that you need to know these things. But at the same time, I think it's quite important that the education itself remains a kind of free zone from those things — a place where you can engage in open-ended creation, exploration, and deepening of something. That's really what it's all about, that's what I think education should be, in a way. (Emily)

In the transition from education to professional life, as artists begin to establish their careers, aspects of the "invisible" structures of the art world (Lindström, 2016) unfold within this tension. Appreciating how to become a professional artist is largely taught informally, and more readily absorbed by students who already possess professional networks (e.g. artist parents) than by those without such art world connections prior to the MFA.

Sub-tension: secrecy or transparency around pricing?. The coexistence of traditional and new income norms also creates tensions around pricing and economic valuation, which relates to the configuration of artists or sellers. The art world has traditionally maintained secrecy regarding artworks' valuations (Philips, 2015; Rodner and Thomson, 2013), artists' incomes (Abbing, 2002) and pricing strategies (Velthuis, 2005). This reflects a reluctance to appear too market-oriented or overly concerned with the economic rather than artistic values of art (Genc and Okan, 2022; Røyseng *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, because artists' work may be difficult to detach from their everyday practices, and because artworks sometimes unfold as processes and projects, rather than products, their monetary values may be difficult to estimate (Parker, 2013; Sansi, 2020). Even for artists themselves, it is often unclear how work hours should be counted. However, under the new normalising guidelines for exhibition work, negotiations and discussions on fees are expected to be brought to the table. The new norms aim to promote greater transparency in negotiations and economic exchanges, for instance, regarding what artists actually earn, what organisers spend on exhibitions, and what proportion of an exhibition budget is allocated to artists' fees.

When confronted with this tension of *secrecy or transparency around pricing* exhibition work, artists often engage in practices of guessing. Guessing here implies a form of practical reasoning and decision-making under uncertainty, where actors make more or less informed estimations or intuitive choices in the absence of clear data or guidelines. This lack of knowledge – both internally for the artist and externally within the art world – about how values are assessed and prices are set contributes to keeping monetary matters shrouded in secrecy. Emerging artists, in particular, fear appearing ignorant or greedy when asking

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practical or financial questions, while both emerging and established artists refrain from sharing economic information because the topic is sensitive, financial resources are scarce, and competition is high. As Ella reflected on collegial discussions:

> It's really sensitive to ask. You don't ask others, colleagues, like, "How much did you get? What was the amount? How do you categorise it — do you call it work, meetings, materials, or what?" I mean, you don't really know. Everything is very secret.

According to many interviewees, when collegial discussions about pricing and valuation occur, although often very informally and quietly, they primarily concern the sale of tangible artworks, such as paintings and sculptures, as well as less easily exchangeable artworks, such as video art. Notably absent, however, are discussions about valuing work hours and hourly rates. Because these informal conversations about pricing between peers are lacking, it becomes difficult for artists to engage in formal pricing discussions and negotiations with organisers. This secrecy is already evident during art school. As Adrian reflected:

> The position of artists would be stronger if we had some kind of course about how to behave in relation to galleries, art halls, and so on. Like, what kinds of deals are normal? How do you act reasonably in those situations?

A professor confirmed that questions about pricing are usually raised in individual supervision sessions because students are too afraid of appearing stupid if they ask them in front of others. Occasionally, such valuation questions are delegated to artists' associations, such as KRO (2025), which issue recommended rates. Interestingly, unlike the pricing of artworks, where more or less established pricing scripts exist, as well as a mediating gallery owner who can perform and legitimise the price-setting (Velthuis, 2005), the pricing of work hours is less dependent on career status and CV. Instead, it tends to be more standardised, based on average wage levels, and is usually the sole responsibility of the artist to suggest, although sometimes with help from artist association advisors.

Sub-tension: upholding or challenging the friendship economy?. The coexistence of gift exchanges and economic exchanges in exhibition work creates tensions within the friendship economy, strongly characterising the cultural sector (Alacovska, 2018). As noted in previous research on surviving in artists' job markets (Kleppe, 2017), this study also finds that arrangements among artist colleagues are based on "favour swapping" (Alacovska, 2018) and implicit assumptions that artists work pro bono for their friends. These practices have persisted due to the lack of economic exchanges under the traditional market norms of exhibition work. As Rebecca claimed:

> When it comes to film productions and things like that, where I've helped friends, I feel like I really have some favours owed to me. I could just say, "Hey, I need someone to do sound for me for a week, you have to come." And I'm glad I do. Especially when working with film within the art world, since it's so dependent on people helping each other out. That's the only way to make those projects happen.

Such informal arrangements help realise exhibitions despite scarce resources. Moreover, they may increase the likelihood of future invitations and collaborations, as artists gain reputations for being easy to work with and generous in sharing their expertise (Kleppe, 2017). This social capital thus functions as a currency that can be mobilised for future work exchanges (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007; Warkander, 2024).

However, the friendship economy and the relations among artist colleagues who work together can develop into complex arrangements and uneasy situations when economic exchanges are involved. Artists clearly wish to maintain friendly relations with their colleagues. Yet they must simultaneously act as business partners when collaborating on exhibitions with limited funds for fees or other forms of payment. When facing this tension in exhibition work, artists must negotiate internally between *upholding or challenging the friendship economy*. While discussing exhibition fees with an organiser can feel intimidating,

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having to negotiate the allocation of fees with artist friends can feel even more awkward. As Thomas reflected:

> It's been a bit difficult to figure out how to handle it, because you're friends, and then it's also work at the same time and all that. It's complicated because it gets so sensitive in a way. Or it's a bit scarier when you are friends — to speak up about things or to say, like, "I think I'd like to have this and that".

This quote illustrates the complexity of maintaining informal and formal business relations simultaneously, and how norms encouraging artists to act business-minded may affect friendships, and vice versa. As Alacovska (2018, p. 1571) argues, the closer the relationship in a collaboration, "the greater the labour discount".

The insecurity of engaging in remuneration discussions with friends also relates to the maintenance of strong networks and social capital, and to the fear of being perceived as "difficult" (Kleppe, 2017). This implies that tensions around the friendship economy extend beyond relationships among artist peers. Friendly relations often also characterise interactions between artists and organisers, connecting to broader concerns about not jeopardising future opportunities for collaboration (Fillis *et al.*, 2022). These dynamics are significant in creative industries and in sectors with many freelance workers (Warkander, 2024). Hence, this tension relates to the issue of being configured both as artists and sellers and to the importance of developing multiple skills as a professional artist (Wohl, 2019). Unique artistic skills are not sufficient for securing collaborations and commissions if one is not also a smooth and easy collaborating freelancer.

Moreover, as discussed in the section on the overarching tension, the implementation of new economic remuneration norms, such as MU, may force organisers to choose between paying higher fees to fewer artists or organising more exhibitions with lower payments. Such dilemmas can affect artists on a moral level, as they often feel loyal to the underfunded organisers and to the art world on which they depend (Alacovska, 2018). Thus, alongside the prevailing sentiment that "it is unfortunate for artists who are not paid", a parallel tension-creating narrative emerges: "it is unfortunate for organisers who cannot afford to pay artists". This creates further tensions around exhibition work, where both traditional (informal) and new (formal) norms around work exchanges coexist. Here, artists must negotiate between upholding or challenging the friendship economy, also in relation to their commissioners.

Conclusion

This paper shows that display exhibitions are becoming job markets for visual artists, where economic and symbolic capital are pursued simultaneously. This coexistence of norms creates the overarching tension of *Work is Art or Art is Work*, encapsulating the sub-tensions of *Configuring Artists or Sellers*, *Secrecy or Transparency around Pricing* and *Upholding or Challenging the Friendship Economy.* Each tension gives rise to specific practices that artists perform in response to these coexisting norms, highlighting that multiple interests are at stake due to artists' continued reliance on symbolic capital as well as their need for monetary income and financial stability. More specifically, the tension of being configured as both artists and sellers gives rise to practices of prioritising; uncertainty around pricing leads artists to engage in practices of guessing; and the tension between upholding and challenging the friendship economy requires practices of negotiating.

Research contributions

This paper has examined an under-researched area and income category for visual artists: work with display exhibitions. As such, the paper contributes to research on artists' work and competing market norms by highlighting a specific job marketisation process within the art world. The analysis nuances the long-standing assumption that display exhibitions at prestigious institutions primarily generate symbolic capital, which may later convert into

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economic capital through sales in *another* market, or grants (Bourdieu, 1993; Fillis *et al.*, 2022; Kompatsiaris, 2020; Robertson, 2005; Rodner and Thomson, 2013).

The findings of this study contribute by addressing a shift in this logic, as display exhibitions are increasingly treated as sites where economic value – and not only symbolic value – is directly generated by exhibition work. Within the publicly funded job market examined in this paper, artists not only adhere to non-market logics but are also explicitly encouraged to adopt market logics, as they are encouraged to be job market actors, i.e. sellers of work. As such, the paper addresses how work itself is valued economically, and not only the exchangified output: the artwork (Borgblad, 2019). Hence, while Fillis *et al.* (2022) contrast with Rodner and Thomson (2013) in that high-profile exhibitions enable access to value-creating networks instantly rather than at some point in the future, this paper also contrasts with Rodner and Thomson in that economic value can be generated instantly at an exhibition, rather than transferred by symbolic capital only. In doing so, the paper further contributes to previous research on hybrid art markets (Genc and Okan, 2022; Chang and Wyszomirski, 2024) by adding insights on hybrid market logics located not across different market contexts, but within the context of display exhibitions, normally associated with the restricted economy of the arts and norms of disinterestedness (Bourdieu, 1993). As such, it also contributes to conversations on professionalisation processes of artists (Chang and Wyszomirski, 2024), by analysing a cultural policy attempt to introduce new income norms to make exhibition work more legitimate as paid work.

Moreover, although the new norms inscribed in MU aim to improve artists' working conditions and economic remuneration, the paper has shown that the emergence and establishment of new norms (generally considered positive) do not simply replace old norms (generally considered negative). The paper thus shows that these new income norms simultaneously generate tensions within the collective of visual artists, as traditional norms of symbolic remuneration still exist. While this paper confirms existing work on tensions being internally embedded in competing norms and practices within specific professional categories (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007; Ostrower, 2002; Rentschler *et al.*, 2021), it adds to this conversation by unpacking, on a micro-level, further dimensions of what may characterise such tensions and what practices artists perform when facing them. As we know more about the experiences of the "creative core" of the art world – the artists who produce the art displayed at our art institutions – it may be easier to identify and understand other situations of competing interests and objectives within and across stakeholder groups in the art world.

Practical contributions

By examining an under-researched site of work – display exhibitions and their monetary remuneration – the paper contributes practical insights into how the job marketisation of exhibition work affects artists' professional conditions. Configuring artists into the dual market actor role, where they act both as *artists* and *sellers*, generates prioritising practices already during art school. This paper confirms previous research showing that artists tend to prioritise artistic development but later regret not attending job-market-oriented courses and events (Lingo and Tepper, 2013). MFA programmes could therefore make job market-oriented training mandatory to strengthen "real-world" knowledge among all students, not only those who already possess informal networks (e.g. artist parents) (Lindström, 2016), which would also benefit the professionalisation of the artist collective (Wyszomirski and Chang, 2024). Moreover, artists often lack guidance on how to value their working hours, partly because pricing strategies are rarely discussed openly in the art world. Additionally, their uncertainty is reinforced when organisers' budgets and capacity to pay are not communicated. As artists resort to more or less informed guessing when pricing their work, this not only risks making artists appear unprofessional but may also enable commissioners to take advantage of artists' weaker position. Encouraging more open conversations about pricing, valuation and exhibition budgets would make these exchanges more transparent and agreement negotiations fairer. Related to

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this, the friendship economy, where artists exchange their work by negotiating their collegial relationships, reflects a broader dilemma in creative labour sectors characterised by relational work and gift exchanges (Alacovska, 2018; Warkander, 2024). More open discussion of this phenomenon, both during education and within the industry, could reduce the risk of artists and other creatives being exploited for their generosity, as many feel loyal to the art world, their colleagues and their commissioners.

These working conditions, and the coexistence of traditional and new norms, are likely to persist as long as the public cultural sector remains underfunded. For the job market for exhibition work to function less poorly in the face of parallel norm systems (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006), the wider art world and all actors engaging in it – artists, organisers and their principals, government bodies and art schools – should take responsibility for addressing these tensions and the prioritising, guessing and negotiating that arise when coping with them. While there is a general discursive consensus among both artists and organisers regarding fair remuneration, this position is most strongly championed by artists' organisations. As member-based bodies representing much of the artistic community, they can advocate collectively for artists' rights. For individual artists, however, asserting such claims is far more difficult, as their relationships with other art-world actors, their current exhibition situations and their future opportunities are all deeply at stake (Kleppe, 2017; Alacovska, 2018; Warkander, 2024). Addressing these tensions more openly may therefore contribute to a more transparent and better-functioning job market.

Future research directions

This paper has focused on artists' experiences of the job marketisation of exhibition work and tensions arising among artists. However, artists represent only one side of this exchange relationship. A fuller understanding of the marketisation of exhibition work therefore also requires attention to the challenges faced by their main counterparts: exhibition organisers. As "buying" actors in this job market, organisers are also affected by new norms concerning remuneration for artists' exhibition work. However, because organisers mainly operate within funding frameworks set by their principals, and because this funding has so far not increased in line with the additional costs generated by MU (Swedish Arts Council, 2021), tensions may emerge between organisers and principals. Future research on artists' work should therefore examine how these new norms influence organisers' practices and their relationships with other stakeholders, such as principals and policy decision-makers.

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Note

1. To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, I refrain from mentioning their exact graduation year.

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