Making a Living
Making a Life

A DIGITAL ROUNDTABLE
ON ARTISTIC LIVELIHOODS
AND THEIR LONG-TERM
SUSTAINABILITY
HOSTED BY DOUGALD HINE
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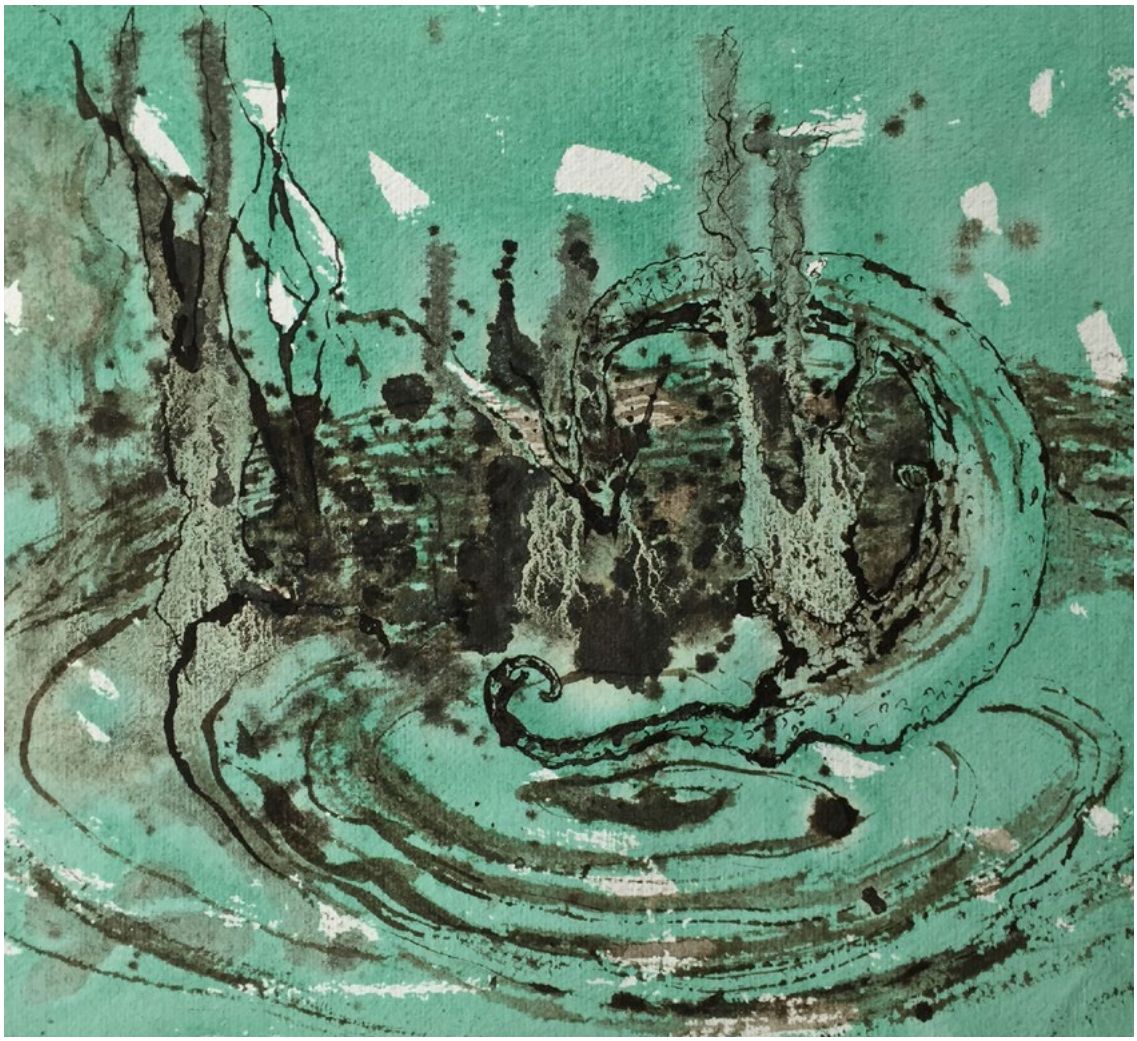


What is revealed in moments of crisis about the resilience or fragility of the ways in which artists currently make a living? Where do we find examples of artistic lives sustained by unexpected forms of social and economic relationship?

In April 2021, Konstnärernas Riksorganisation brought together six artists from Sweden and the UK for a digital roundtable in order to "think aloud and together" about the strategies by which people make a life around the work of art. This was a search for clues, for inspiration and stimulation, for hidden moves and sobering reflections.

To lead into this conversation, we invited the social thinker and writer Dougald Hine to share some thoughts and questions about artistic livelihoods and their long-term sustainability, drawing on his experiences as co-founder of the Dark Mountain Project and a school called HOME, as well as his work as leader of artistic development at Riksteatern.

A swedish translation of the texts can be found on www.kro.se.

Geska Helena Brečević
Artist and project manager at Konstnärernas Riksorganisation

Cover: Caroline Ross. Untitled drawing for an article on Norse creation myths by Andreas Kornevall.
Hand made copper acetate and iron gall inks on paper, 2019.

A Strange Way to Make a Living

by Dougald Hine

The Covid-19 crisis has shaken the ways of living of billions of people. Beyond its immediate medical impacts, the pandemic brings into view the fragility of the systems on which our lives and livelihoods depend.

For those of us who get to call ourselves artists, life before the pandemic already had a quality of precarious privilege: precarious because artists tend to be poorer and less secure than other groups within society; privileged because, if we are able to make even part of a living from our work, this implies that we are paid to do something we love. There is always something strange about the way that artists make a living, at least by the standards of modern societies, since for most people around us, work is – virtually by definition – activity you wouldn't do unless you were getting paid for it, and we don't call that work. We call it a day job.

For twenty years now, I have been writing and speaking and bringing together conversations and creating organisations that are grounded in an awareness of the fragility of the systems and assumptions on which modern societies are built. At first, this was what I did in the time left around the margins of my day-jobs, and then increasingly, I have had the privilege of getting to spend my days focusing on this work. In 2009, Paul Kingsnorth

and I published *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*, and over the next decade, I shared the responsibility for building up the Dark Mountain Project as a journal of words and images, a series of festivals and gatherings, and an ongoing home for difficult conversations about the ecological, social and cultural predicament of our times. Many of my collaborators have been artists, and my hunch is that the strangeness of art – the way it doesn't fit the matrix of use and exchange by which the world is meant to work – means it carries clues for what is worth trying when that matrix fails us, when the world no longer works the way that it was meant to.

So, when we talk about artistic livelihoods, I want to wonder about the strategies by which artists make a living, but also about the ways these strategies connect to the long-term livelihood of the places in which we live and the people around us, given the unsustainability of current economic forms and the ways of living that depend on them. I want to bear in mind the experience of crisis, large or small; the way that it echoes across scales, from the global to the personal and back again. The most difficult passages of our lives are also the most formative, the places in which we are unravelled and remade.

Speaking of crisis, what if the pandemic is not the main event?

The Inuit poet Taqralik Partridge asks us to consider that Covid-19 may be just "the warning shots", an early taste of a chain of crises that will shape the decades ahead. I picture them lined up like storms across the Atlantic in hurricane season: each following its own course, never fully predictable, bringing its own forms of destruction as it makes landfall on the shores of the everyday. In such a situation, there could be no lasting return to business-as-usual, but nor would the pandemic serve as "a portal" – the image offered by the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy – opening onto a new world.

"SPEAKING OF CRISIS, WHAT IF THE PANDEMIC IS NOT THE MAIN EVENT?"

Since the invitation here is to think long-term, I want to take this scenario seriously, to wonder about the shape of artistic lives in times of multiple and deepening crises. I want to recognise, too, that for many people in many parts of the world, including within our own societies, life is already lived in such times.

I'm wondering about artistic livelihoods and the ways they have been supported in different times and places, when I hear the theorist Jay Springett talk about Tholpavakoothu. This is an artform from the Indian state of Kerala, a shadow puppet theatre combining verses from the Ramayana with improvised commentaries. The leather puppets are up to two metres in height. Performances take place between midnight and dawn, the complete cycle of the Indian epic can take up to 71 consecutive nights, and it is never performed for fewer than eight nights. Until recently, these performances took place only in the 'drama-houses' of local temples, with each night sponsored by a household,

"IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT ANY ARTIST WILL FIND THE PEOPLE TO WHOM HER WORK MEANS MOST AMONG THE SPECULATIVE COLLECTORS WHO KEEP PAINTINGS IN AIR-CONDITIONED PRISONS."

a village or a local association. It takes ten years of study and training to become a skilful performer, yet this is not an elite tradition: it is rooted among non-Brahmin communities in villages and small towns. In addition to the nightly sponsorships, each night's performance attracts hundreds or sometimes thousands of one-rupee donations, which are split between the temple and the Tholpavakoothu troupe. In this way, this corner of rural India has supported full-time professional troupes dedicated to this artform for centuries.

In texts about the role and funding of the arts, I notice the phrase 'independent culture' being used, and I wonder what defines this independence. The location of the drama-house within the temple complex might be a clue. In modern societies, we have a story about art as iconoclasm: its role is to bring trouble, to critique existing pieties, to make us see the world anew.

Still, I wonder, because it seems to me that culture is as dependent as it ever was. Art depends, for a start, on all the forms of low-status labour that an artist such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles has used her work to bring into view. It also depends on sources of economic support that bind it to existing institutions of the state and the market. Are these bonds less tight than those that connect the performers of Tholpavakoothu to the institution of the temple? Or just differently shaped, entwined with the tastes of collectors, the values encoded in funding policies, or the negative externalities of the blockchain?

What if we go easy on the rhetoric of independence and pay attention to our dependencies? How we resist or work with them, hide them or bring them into view. How we look for new patterns of interdependence.

Here's a thought, perhaps an embarrassingly obvious one, but let's see where it leads. What if making a life around your art started with finding the people to whom your work matters? What if – for some of us, at least – building a sustainable livelihood for the long-term meant building a relationship with the people to whom your work means the most?

In 2015, the *New York Times* reported on the Geneva Free Port. This is a building resembling a prison which serves as a giant warehouse where over a million of the world's most valuable paintings are kept in storage: "the parking lot of choice for high-net-worth buyers looking to round out investment portfolios with art". It seems unlikely that any artist will find the people to whom her work means most among the speculative collectors who keep paintings in air-conditioned

prisons, though whole tiers of the artworld remain oriented to this economy. On the other hand, I'm not convinced that you'll find the people to whom your work means most among those whose job it is to read your funding application, either.

One obvious way in which artists are connecting with people to whom their work matters is through networked technologies. The closure of exhibition spaces and limits on international travel during the pandemic have driven this to a new level. So a platform such as Patreon becomes the core means (along with part-time jobs) by which The White Pube support themselves, whereas previous generations of art critics would have needed to write for a publication (or start their own). More than other social media platforms, Instagram lends itself to the visual arts, so it has become a place where artists experiment, building relationships and livelihoods. To take just one example, I think of the British painter Mary Grant, who is painting a tiny landscape every day of 2021 and selling these through her Instagram.

There's an approach to making a living here that is older than the digital platforms which now facilitate it. The storyteller, mythographer and painter Martin Shaw told me about the advice he was given by the poet Haki Madhubuti, a veteran of the US Civil Rights movement: if you have even the first whisper of an audience, then focus on setting up your own school or your own press. That's how Shaw came to start the Westcountry School of Myth, in a tent on Dartmoor, and more recently Cista Mystica. These small-scale operations don't have to reach a mass audience in order to generate a livelihood.

I think of the story told by Stewart Lee in *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-Up Comedian*. A decade or so into his career, Lee had become exasperated with the commercial mentality of his management team, as well as the publicly subsidised venues he often found himself playing: "largely empty rooms in unloved council-run theatres, where disillusioned programmers booked whatever was pushed at them, regardless". For a while, he gave up touring altogether, but then a piece of advice from another performer shifted his perspective:

Around that time, my teenage comedy hero John Hegley told me you only need a few thousand fans. And if they all give you ten pounds a year, you're away. And I thought about all the musicians I like – the folk singers and free jazzers and alternative country cowpokes and persistent punk veterans who all hang in there, on small labels, selling self-released CDs for cash out of suitcases after gigs and operating within viable margins, tour, rest, tour, rest and sell some CDs. They survive.

What do the equivalents of this close-to-the-ground approach to making a living look like in artforms that aren't centred on live performance? In one form or another, it's about creating ways for people who want you to be able to do your work to contribute to the economic conditions that make that work possible. Whether that's through new ways of selling your work, or offering glimpses into the process and insights into your thinking; letters, conversations, sharing of experience.

What if – for some of us – building an artistic livelihood meant finding your crew? The peers and sparring partners and co-conspirators and collaborators with whom you discover what you can do. The musician Brian Eno argues that the history of the arts is usually told in terms of individual genius, when really it's a story of 'scenius', the collective genius of scenes: times and places in which a group comes together which is able to provide a quality of mutual support and well-motivated critique through which everyone involved pushes beyond the limits of their previous work.

In his "Microsolidarity" proposal for community building, Richard D. Bartlett suggests that we

lack a vocabulary for scales of belonging between the "self" and the "crowd". He writes about "crews" with up to eight members and "congregations" made up of multiple crews. There's a vision here for forming small-scale collectives of mutual economic resilience, and building connections between these collectives.

When the artist Theaster Gates won the Artes Mundi prize, he jumped on stage and yelled, "Let's split this motherfucker!" The £40,000 prize money was shared equally among the ten artists on the shortlist. This wasn't a pre-existing collective, or even an agreement made in advance among the nominees, as when the 2019 Turner Prize was jointly awarded to Tai Shani, Helen Cammock, Oscar Murillo and Lawrence Abu Hamdan. But in each of these examples, there's a clue to the possibilities of an approach in which the reflex is to share individual success with your neighbours, to operate as a crew of honest pirates, pooling the rewards of your moments of individual good fortune.

What if – for some of us – there's a move beyond scene-making, into building cultural infrastructure? Not the large-scale infrastructure of public or commercial projects, but something closer to the ground.

When Stewart Lee returned to stand-up comedy, he wanted to play to "smaller crowds composed of people that would get it and come back next time with a friend". What made this viable was a new generation of small comedy clubs, which had emerged while he was absent from the circuit, run by dedicated enthusiasts in the back rooms of pubs and similar locations.

The solo bass player Steve Lawson spent the first part of his career playing gigs in music venues, but by the time I met him in 2009, he had largely given this up in favour of concerts in the living rooms of his fans. If someone who loved his music could get twenty or thirty of their friends and neighbours to pay to see him, he could make a better living than he used to when playing to larger crowds, and connect more closely to the people to whom his music matters. The fact that this took him outside the game of music business success was neither here nor there: fame isn't the aim of art, he says; it's a toxic side-effect.

The disruption brought by the pandemic has combined with online platforms to produce new examples of improvised infrastructure. Among the most impressive examples is the Artist Support Pledge launched on Instagram by the artist Matthew Burrows on 16 March 2020. Artists and makers post images of their work using the #artistsupportpledge hashtag, selling work for no more than £200 (or equivalent), with a pledge that for every £1000 of work sold, they will spend £200 on another artist's work. The aim is to foster "a generous culture for artists and makers". Within the first month, this had generated an estimated £15 million in sales.

The spaces in which art happens and the platforms by which it reaches people get recreated and reinvented, over and over. It's needed, partly just as a generational renewal, and partly as a response to changing social and economic circumstances. Everyone doesn't need to be involved in building and sustaining cultural infrastructure, but like other forms of maintenance work, it underpins the viability of culture, and it can be art in its own right.

What if – for some of us – making an artistic livelihood that's sustainable for the long-term meant taking up residence? Not going on residencies, but *residing* in the original sense of the word: 'to remain behind'. What if this meant getting claimed by a place and committed to a community?

I'm thinking now of the theatre company Slung Low in the Holbeck area of Leeds. I don't know of an arts organisation that is more committed to the community in which it is grounded, or that takes the privilege of receiving public funding

"THE REFLEX IS TO SHARE INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS WITH YOUR NEIGHBOURS, TO OPERATE AS A CREW OF HONEST PIRATES, POOLING THE REWARDS OF YOUR MOMENTS OF INDIVIDUAL GOOD FORTUNE."

more seriously. The company's artistic director, Alan Lane, speaks about "using the privilege of being able to operate beyond the market to come up with new models and forms of thought." This starts with making their space and the tools and equipment they have acquired through public funding available to loan, free of charge, and offering all tickets to their shows on a 'pay-what-you-decide' basis.

I think too of the Access Space media lab in Sheffield, which grew out of the practice of the artist James Wallbank. As a new media artist in the late 1990s, Wallbank wrote the "Lowtech Manifesto", declaring an intention to make art with machines and software that could be had for free. When he made an appeal for old computers to recycle, he thought getting enough useful equipment would be the hard part, but within six months he was having to rent a warehouse to store all the donations. The hard part, he says, was finding enough creativity to use all the resources he now had access to. So he opened a space where anyone could drop in and learn and make things alongside him, on the condition that they made time to pass on what they were learning to others, as the community around the space grew.

I've wandered over a lot of ground here, but if there's a thread that runs through all of this, it leads back to the question of the long-term sustainability of our current systems. If the pandemic is only "the warning shots", if there are harder times ahead for all of our societies, what does that mean for the activities that go under the name of art? What kinds of relationship, what ways of organising and what forms of interdependence are likely to prove resilient in times of multiple and deepening crises? My hunch is that they have something in common with the examples we have touched on here, the spirit of mutual support and involvement in communities that care about each other and about the work itself, whether connected over distance or grounded in place. Institutions come and go, entire artforms can be reliant on the social and economic infrastructure of a passing historical moment, but humans have been finding ways of making art for as long as we have been human, even in the most unpromising of circumstances. The surprising resilience of culture, so often treated as a luxury or a soft surface layer over the harder realities of existence, may yet have a role to play in how the crises of the decades ahead play out.

Participants in the Roundtable

Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Ansuman Biswas

(b. 1965) was born in Calcutta, India and is based in the UK. He has an international creative practice encompassing music, film, live art, installation, writing and theatre. He is interested in hybridity and interdisciplinarity – often working between science, art and industry, for instance, or between music, dance and visual art. His projects have included directing Shakespeare in America, translating Tagore's poetry from the Bengali, designing underwater sculptures in the Red Sea, travelling with shamans in the Gobi Desert, being employed as an ornamental hermit in the English countryside, touring with Björk, co-ordinating grassroots activists in Soweto, being sealed in a box for ten days with no food or light, and even flying on a real magic carpet in Star City, Moscow. He is co-chair of the UK's Live Art Development Agency and a Trustee of *Longplayer*.

Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Monica L Edmondson

(b. 1963) was born in Gällivare, Sweden. After four years of studying at Canberra School of Art, Australia, Monica returned to Tärnaby in the north of Sweden in 2002. Since then, she has worked full-time as an artist specialising in kiln-formed, hot-worked and wheel-cut glass. Monica's profession as an artist is built around four elements. First, the unique studio made glass pieces mainly presented and sold through exhibitions. Second, large-scale public artwork and extensive conceptual art projects and installations. Third, she offers consultancy services within architecture and design, specialising in facades, canopies and ceilings. Finally, she gives speeches at national and international conferences, seminars and workshops. The vast white winter space, as well as Monica's Sami heritage, are important in her works, large and small.

Photo: Wang Jingxue

Torsten Jurell

(b. 1951) is a multimedia artist who divides his time between Sweden and China. Initially, from 2007 to 2009, he worked in the Suojiacun Art Village on the outskirts of Beijing; since 2011, he has Jingdezhen as his base with a permanent studio in Changhong. His solo exhibition at CAFA Art Museum, the most extensive survey of his work to date in China, built on the success of well-received shows in Sweden and Europe in recent years. The digitally controlled mechanical marionette theatre that formed the focal point of that exhibition was made as a metaphor for the world and has been exhibited at Röhsska Museum in Gothenburg (2014-15) and Dansmuseet (the Museum of Movement) in Stockholm (2016). This work was also shown in the major international group exhibition "Ready for the Stage, Act 1" at the Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck in Germany (2016-17), conceived and curated to celebrate the centenary of the Dada movement.

Photo: Zenitha Göthe

Gittan Jönsson

(b. 1948) studied at the University College of Arts, Craft and Design in Stockholm between 1967–1972 and had her first solo exhibition in 1978 at Galleri Händer in Stockholm and Malmö. Her work has been shown in many places in Sweden including Galleri Leger in Malmö, Bohusläns konsthall, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Liljevalchs konsthall in Stockholm, Skövde konsthall, Ystad Museum of Art, Gothenburg Museum of Art and Dunkers Kulturhus. Gittan has made several commissioned works and authored publications including *Historieboken* (*The History Book*, 1970), *Prinsessor utan panik* (*Princesses Without Panic*, 2009) with Kristina Abelli Elander and *Dammsugerskans fyrtiotvå uppdrag* (*The 42 Missions of the Hooverer*, 2011).

Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Caroline Ross

(b. early 1970s) is an artist and maker living on a boat on an island in the River Thames. Using what nature provides and repurposing what humans discard form a large part of her practice. She also makes paints from foraged earth pigments, and art tools and inks from natural, wild and found materials such as oak galls, rusty nails and cherry tree gum. She teaches workshops on drawing as well as how to make all these wild-crafted things. Her drawings, paintings and illustrations can be found in books, journals such as *Dark Mountain*, online periodicals and private collections. Instagram has become the social media platform through which she develops an international audience, leading to collaborations as well as sales.

Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Ida Isak Westerberg

(b. 1986) grew up in Sunderbyn, outside of Luleå, and has strong connections to the regions of Tornedalen and Jämtland. After eleven years in Stockholm, they were drawn back to the north of Sweden, which led to the purchase of an old shop in Korsträsk. There, in a village outside of Älvsbyn in Norrbotten, they are building up a queer, artistic venue, a space where it is possible to take a rest from norms and oppressions. As a textile artist, Ida Isak seeks new and unexpected forms of expression. The work is often inspired by Norrbotten and always starts from a queer perspective. They want to break out of expectations as to how a technique should look and be used and, by this means, to raise questions in the viewer that may not have been there before.

The Hosts

Dougald Hine

is a social thinker, writer and creator of a series of projects, events and organisations, including the Dark Mountain Project, Spacemakers agency, Uncivilisation festival and a school called HOME. He has worked as leader of artistic development at Riksteatern, Sweden's touring national theatre, and collaborated on books with various artists, most recently *Walking in the Void* (Glasmuseet Ebeltoft, 2020) with Baldwin & Guggisberg.

Geska Helena Brečević

is an artist, film-maker, writer and researcher working in Sweden, Mexico and Croatia. Since 2004, she has been one half of the artist duo Performing Pictures. She has initiated and directed several international cultural projects and has worked with Konstnärernas Riksorganisation for more than ten years.

The Roundtable

On a Monday afternoon in April 2021, we sat down to speak: six artists and two hosts, meeting for the first time in the small boxes of a Zoom window.

This text is based on a recording of the conversation that followed, edited to clarify the intentions of the speakers and the flow of the language.

Dougald

I want to start by asking you each about this phrase that we're gathered around this afternoon. What does it mean to you when we talk about "sustainable artistic livelihoods"?

Ansuman

"Livelihood" and "sustainable" seems to be the same thing to me. Having a livelihood is about staying alive from moment to moment, in an extended way. One wants to sustain one's life for as long as possible, ideally! As for "artistic livelihoods", the word artistic seems kind of redundant. For me, I want to be alive and for that to feel good, and that feels like art to me. Beauty, I guess: to have a beautiful life for as long as possible. That's what that phrase means to me.

Monica

To live as we do, as I do, working as an artist, it's not work in the ordinary sense, it's kind of a way of living. We work, but we don't always know if we'll get paid. It's a connection between life and work.

Caroline

I've been an artist in two very different phases of my life. I came out in the artworld after my Masters, and I didn't like that environment, and it wouldn't have been sustainable for someone like me. So, I went into collaborative music for ten years.

Now, many years later, being primarily an artist again, realise that the first time around, I was strip-mining myself. If I was the Earth and I was digging the ore that we all get our art from our core, then I was just strip-mining it like any capitalist. And I was using up all my energy for other people and for what I thought I *should* be doing. So, sustainability now looks like not ripping the top off my Earth and digging all my core out! Finding ways to make art that don't deplete my ore, so that my art can continue, so that it's like life.

Gittan

The answer is not so easy. For me, it's a balance between many parts of life: family, love, health, social life, economy and my own creativity. Everything must be there.

I am old, a grandmother. I care a lot about my children and grandchildren. They have been incorporated into my creative life, the family life. It's important, and it gives me ideas and inspiration. It's complicated, but it's a beautiful system if it works. I feel privileged to go on living like this, but I miss all the social things in this pandemic situation. There's a loneliness here.

Ida Isak

I agree with Gittan that it's a balance between making money and making everything in life work together. I have just been living and working as an artist for two and a half years, so I'm quite new to the game. I'm still trying to find a balance and make it sustainable for me to work like this, and it's quite exciting. It feels like I'm finding whole new ways of being right now. It's very important, very giving and very hard at the same time.

"I DO CALL MYSELF AN ARTIST, BUT I THINK OF IT AS CAMOUFLAGE OR A MASK OR A DRESS TO BE ACCEPTABLE IN CERTAIN SITUATIONS."

Torsten

For me, the question about sustainability is about how to make this way of living possible.

I used to call myself a "one-man rock'n'roll band". It's always about trying to find an audience for what I do that are willing to pay for what I deliver, whatever it is.

I work with all kinds of different material; I always want to play. I had a solo show in Sichuan. The gallery was supposed to be four square metres, but actually, it was only three. I renamed the gallery "Almost Four", and it was possible to make quite a big show in this three square metre space!

So it's about making everything possible. The struggle with passion is always to find a space. And that is the contradiction between the art scene as a marketplace for investment, and a marketplace for being an artist, to show what art really is about.

Dougald

Many of you have had the experience of making a living by doing something other than art. I'm interested in whether anyone has anything to add about the difference between an artistic livelihood and your experience of other ways of making a living – whether in other artistic forms, like Caroline's music career, or working in entirely different sectors?

Ansuman

So, I want to resist that definition of an artistic career. I do call myself an artist, but I think of it as camouflage or a mask or a dress to be acceptable in certain situations or a tool to get funding from people who want to give money to artists. But actually, I don't feel like I am an artist. I try to bring my full attention to whatever I'm doing. That might be things that don't fall into the sector of art. You mention music: is that an artform? Is teaching music an art? Is listening to music an art? The definition of art expands, and I want to be able to recognise the artistry in many activities that other people and I do. The definition of art changes over time. To different people in different places and times, the word either hasn't existed, or it's meant different things. So I prefer to think about beauty or harmony or meaning. Those can be present whether I'm cooking or changing a nappy or putting shelves up.

Geska

Coming back to what Torsten said about being a one-person show – in my case, we're more of a family business, as we are two artists sharing a life and practice. We are not able to support ourselves solely through selling our artworks, so we do many different things. The strategy we have employed is to look at everything we do as art; it doesn't matter if it's the bookkeeping or website maintenance. While doing video documentation of other people's performances and getting paid to do that, we develop skills we use for creating our artworks, and it means we can invest in new equipment. So I don't separate the other gigs or teaching or research I do from the creative work. Also, because I work and live with my partner, and our kids are involved in the work we do, there's really no border, no skin, between work and art. There's no weekend, and there's no going to work or coming home from work.

Dougald

I recognise that difficulty in drawing a clear line between working time and everything else. I'm curious if any of you experience that as a danger zone, as well? Is it part of how artistic life can become unsustainable, precisely because it's not work that you can just leave behind when it gets to five o'clock?

Caroline

That's such a good question. It can be a problem if you're constantly on, and I think when I was younger, that might have been a problem. But the way I feel now, it's like we're homesteading. So as opposed to the art career of the famous art genius, in his house, with his wife doing the childrearing – who doesn't get to make her paintings anymore! – that's like the Le Corbusier apartment. But what we're all describing homesteading our art and life, all together. So on a homestead, in the spring and summer, there's lots of work to do, and that might be any time of the year for an artist. But you're hoping to budget in a down period, a month, hopefully when your friends and family are quiet. So I think of it as there's seeding to be done, there's weeding to be done – that's the website, the Instagram, the funding applications and Zoom meetings – that's when I'm in the field getting sunburned. If I think of it like that, I don't mind because there will be a yield, a crop to share. Otherwise, I would be exhausted.

Ida Isak

I just realised – I need a schedule to work from. I need to have on- and off-time.

Maybe after a while, I can do what I feel like, but for now, I need structure in order to have energy. Otherwise, I burn out way too quickly. I worked as a preschool teacher for four years. I got really tired each day, getting up and being at work at seven o'clock and coming home at five. Following someone else's schedule made me really tired. Now I find a true sense of freedom in making my own schedule. That is a luxury.

Monica

I've been fortunate enough to work for almost 20 years full-time as an

The Prank Project (2012–). A fictional marionette theatre tours the world, appearing in Torsten Jurell's exhibitions. Its sculpture-performers are digitally controlled and the theatre has everything an audience might expect from a professional stage, from the curtains to the stage lighting and sound system.

artist. I received some good advice as a student in Australia. One of the Master's students said the only thing you have to do is to keep working, keep exploring and keep making your art, whatever happens. Then one day, it may be a person, a gallery or someone you don't know who ask about your work. You will see your name on a poster, and you don't know how it happened. Of course, there are moments of doubt during months without income. But the best way for me has always been to come back to why do I do this. Do I work as an artist for money? Then I'm much better off taking another job. I try to never get drawn into making art only for the money. When we talk about what art is, as Ansuman said, for me, everything is an act of art. Art is also the way we move, the way we hold something in our hands. How that can be transformed into tangible art is the most interesting thing about working as we do.

Photo: The Prank project, courtesy of the artist.

Gittan

I worked at the Swedish Film Institute as an assistant scenographer – a set designer – and that was enormously inspirational to me, that was why I started to paint. I was educated as a graphic designer. The world inside the studio, the fantasy, the combination of fiction and real life was mind-opening for me. It became a model for my ideas and my images, and I got tools for making pictures. I love the theatre and film world – you can see it in my paintings. The film jobs were a way of earning money, but also for many years, I made illustrations for newspapers and books. I liked it. I liked the work of drawing. I still like it. I knew that I would earn money from it, and that was a source of security.

Dougald

Monica was speaking about this piece of advice that she had early on, at art school. I wonder what things they don't teach you at art school, when it comes to making a life around your art and making a living from it? What things do you wish someone had told you earlier?

Torsten

Well, I think there's a contrast between popular art, where you get a big audience, and the elite – the artists who get an incredible amount of money for one art piece – which is so very strange to me.

For example, I had a show in a

museum in Beijing. If I can, I stay in my exhibition every day to meet the audience; that's part of the art, as well. So, I had made a digitally controlled, mechanical theatre , and I showed this in Sweden and in China, and it was so interesting to hear the different ways that people related to it. The piece itself has no background, no story at all, but the Chinese audience related it to their sagas, their old stories. In China, for example, the colour white is related to scary things, to death, whereas in Sweden, that's black. I went to this stunning bookshop in Beijing where they had all kinds of art books and art theory, and I asked if they had anything about Chinese shadow puppets. Nothing. Do they have anything about paper cuts? Nothing. Folk art? Nothing. And that's the same all over the world.

There's this contrast between fine art and what is called folk art, what people relate to – and I think that's my answer to what you're not taught. Art school is all about the secret of becoming a posh artist, being 'the one', because that is what the art scene and the art market needs.

Ansuman

It feels to me that something I do for money is almost by definition not art. What's really art is what I do for its own reward. If I do something with an expectation of a future reward, it might have a lot of artistry and skill in it. To make a pop song, for example, with the right kind of structure – a hook, a bridge, the right length, the right mix – takes a lot of skill. If I write the right song, I could make a lot of money. Or I could write a play that would be very popular or a picture for someone to buy and put on their wall. I can see the skill in making something that will survive in a marketplace and that will earn money. And I do those kinds of things; I've developed skills that allow me to survive. But when I think of what really sustains me, it's the pleasure of exercising a skill in itself. It's something inherent, the reward is already in the activity, not in some future reward.

Dougald

Caroline, you mentioned these two chapters of your life as an artist, one when you came out of art school, then you walked away from it, and then you returned to this identity. If you could talk to your younger self, is there anything you wish you had known the first time around?

Caroline

Well, you asked what they didn't tell you at art school? Every single thing that would have been useful for being an artist! Every single thing. The only place I learned something useful was on my foundation course: this was a thing we used to have in England, where you spent two years preparing for going to art school. I learned skills there, but it was nothing about the artworld. The artworld needs "geniuses" to sell products at high value to make money for the market. That's a thing, it's the thing we were shown at art school. They don't tell you that everyone else doesn't make a living from their art, or has a day-job they get really depressed about, or becomes a teacher and gets depressed because they spend all

“I HAVE A SUSTAINABLE LIFE NOW, BUT I DON’T KNOW HOW MUCH OF THAT IS DUE TO LUCK, OR FALLING IN LOVE, OR AMICABLE DIVORCES. NO ONE TALKS ABOUT IT. WE SHOULD.”

energy on their students. So that’s the reality I came out into – and the reality I left. But it’s not the only reality.

Because at art college, they don’t tell you that there’s such a thing as solidarity. They don’t tell you that there’s such a thing as not-failure-and-not-success, but just living and living well. They don’t tell you all the things we’re talking about. They don’t tell you that almost everybody in the British art scene has rich parents, and will not mention it, and went to a private school, and will not mention it… They don’t tell you that some of us survive on divorce money – me! I wouldn’t have the time to dedicate to my art if I hadn’t got divorced many years ago from someone who had more money than me. We don’t talk about these things. I mean, I have a sustainable life now, but I don’t know how much of that is due to luck, or falling in love, or amicable divorces. No one talks about it. We should.

But I’d like to tell people now, now that everything is collapsing… If I were teaching now, I would say you need to start making work that you’d still make, even if everything is falling apart. You have to make art that you would have to make, even if you were living in a shack. Anything else, what’s the point right now?

Monica

When I started my business, it was important to not take another part-time job. It’s so easy to get used to that income flow, to get stuck. That helped me to slowly build up my business. I didn’t know early on how important it would be to know where to apply for grants and awards, how to write contracts, make a realistic budget. I think art schools need to teach students art-specific knowledge your local accountant doesn’t know, as well as encourage students to take care of each other and share knowledge instead of competing. We should lift each other, and by doing that, we lift the whole profession.

Gittan

When I was studying in ’68, we just wanted to change the world. We didn’t care so much about art; we wanted to change everything that was wrong, including the education system. We formed a group inside the school, four of us, and worked with political themes: Angola, Mozambique, colonialism. We made an exhibition, and then a book, *The History Book*. We

had permission to work independently inside the school system, using every tool in the school, for one year, working day and night. The book came out very well and it was translated into seven languages. We had this freedom to work as we pleased and I think it's not so much about what the teachers are saying, you must want to do something yourself. Then building groups is very, very important. After art school, I've always gone on making collaborations and groups.

Dougald

I know you've also spoken about building relationships with younger artists and how important that is to you now?

Gittan

We're isolated between generations, the older ones. I was very active in the feminist movement in Stockholm in the seventies. We discovered that all the great women artists were forgotten, they didn't get shown in museums, you know. So we worked with the Women's Cultural Festival and with different exhibitions in groups. That was very interesting and I think we did something important to change the balance between male and female artists in history. Just recently, I got in contact with a 90-year-old artist living in Stockholm, from New York. We were talking about this, that we don't know each other; the younger generations don't know us, and we don't know them. We should really try to change this! We must be together, we have so much to give to each other. I also made this film, *Parallel Lines – a file on women's history*. I wanted to pass on our experiences, what we did.

Stills from *Parallel Lines*. Photo: Marie Nilsson (top) and Anna Intemann (bottom).

It should not be forgotten, we must give this to the younger generations, so they don't have to reinvent the wheel. We must help each other.

Geska

In the beginning of *Parallel Lines* you say that when you were 22 and became a mother, you were no longer seen as an activist or an artist, you were "reduced" to being a mother. This was the moment you realised that you don't need to go to the other side of the world to find inequalities and injustice – they are all around you. In the film, you meet a younger generation of Berlin-based female artists and you see the difference between Germany and Sweden, when it comes to the situation of the female

Parallel Lines – a file on women's history

(2018). Gittan Jönsson's film is a personal search for traces of the 1970s feminist movement in today's art. Surprised by the male dominance of the German art scene, she speaks with women artists in Berlin and Stockholm to share experiences and strategies.

artist. So you try to make this transfer of your knowledge. I think that really comes back to what others have said about being a community and giving back. We need more of this kind of meeting across generations.

Gittan
Thank you very much!

Dougald
This touches on the next question, because I wanted to ask about the conditions of possibility of an artistic life and how they change as we move into different stages of life. Which parts of that don't get talked about? You've mentioned age and parenthood, and no doubt there are other factors.

Ansuman
Can I relate that back to the previous question? I don't think it's the job of art schools to teach us anything. If I want to learn, I can learn from anywhere. The job of the school is to make tools and space available, where one can make mistakes: to have a tantrum, to invent the wheel again, to keep going back to the first principles. That seems to me the greatest job of a school. I went to Dartington College of Arts, which was an amazing place and gave me precisely that non-competitive atmosphere. I felt that Dartington created that space. The college is gone now, but that life carries on: I keep coming across people that I find an affinity with, and we realise later that we both went to Dartington. If I spoke to my younger self, I would just want to give space, and not any advice actually. I feel I did have that at Dartington.

Now, with my own children, it's interesting the idea of motherhood being a reduction in some way. I felt becoming a father is the most creative thing I have ever done. Creating a consciousness, something that goes on way beyond me. I consider that part of my artwork, being a parent. Also, I consider part of my artwork that I'm a co-chair of the Live Art Development Agency, which nurtures and creates a space for voices that haven't been heard – black voices, disabled, feminist voices, so many different aspects of our society that haven't been heard. The agency gives a space to that. At the moment, we're engaging in a process looking for a new leader; after 21 years the founding director is stepping away, and we're looking for a radical way of making space for younger artists. So I consider that as much as a part of my artwork as any of the more conventional forms. That's something I can do as an older person. I'm not creating paintings and music the way I was when I was 16 or 20 or even 30 and they were just pouring out of me. Now, in my fifties, I want to create space to watch my children and other people's children run around and invent the wheel.

Torsten
What strikes me during this pandemic is that I'm an older man. I'm quite isolated. When I was an art student, my real school was the workshop of the theatre in Gothenburg. The way you work is that the stage designer comes and asks for a 16th-century crucifix, by Monday! You just do it and learn by doing it. Then I was a project student at the Royal Institute of Art in

“I am able to make a living on my artwork, but I wouldn’t be able to do so if I sold all my work through galleries.”

“WITH ALL RESPECT TO THE GALLERIES, WE NEED THEM AND THEY NEED US, BUT WITH MY TIME-CONSUMING WORK, I CAN’T WORK WITH A GALLERY ALL THE TIME AND PAY THEM 50 PER CENT IN COMMISSION.”

Stockholm – and probably the oldest in the school. I was at some parties and I needed to go home, because I felt like the grandfather.

In China, I’m surrounded by people of many ages. In Asian societies, age is experience. Actually, if you are an old artist and continue to develop, then you’re a young artist. When you are young, you don’t have the experience to express everything. What we need are spaces in society that are open for all kind of possibilities of meeting. That is what art is really about. But, in a country like Sweden, it’s really tough to be an old artist. It is young art that is seen as desirable. What gallery owners tell clients is that it’s investing in the work of young artists that can make your money grow! That is something different from what art is about.

Dougald

Ida Isak, you’re probably the youngest among us; how does this sound from where you are sitting? And you were in Stockholm before, now in a small place in the north of Sweden, where the age balance might be different…

Ida Isak

I feel it’s a luxury to live in a county where the art scene is really alive and ongoing with interesting projects and new museums. I feel that every artist I’ve met here is a colleague, everyone has greeted me and I love to collaborate, and the opportunities are never-ending in this county, and there are people of a lot of different ages. Of course, I’m trying to develop my practice in many ways, but I also feel that spaces are very important. Spaces to be in, to rest in. If you have the space, you have the possibility to find new ways. That’s something I want to do here in this old store, as well; to have a space for other artists who want to come and – maybe use a loom, or take a hike up the mountains, or anything. As a queer person, I realise that the queer spaces in Norrbotten – and almost everywhere in Sweden – are disappearing. Right now, there are almost no meeting places. I also experienced that here in Norrbotten, you live where you want to live, you have a place that you feel connected to, so you live in that place, which means that the queer community is very separated in terms of the geographical distance between each other. So I also hope that this can be a meeting place, outside of Pride festivals and clubs where you need to drink alcohol and party. There

Photo: Ida Isak Westerberg

aren't a lot of places to just meet each other. And having a place where you can meet each other, making stuff together, can be very rewarding.

Dougald

So something I'm wondering about is this balance or tension between doing work that's not driven by a consideration of an audience, but driven by a passion – "the work I can't not do" – and on the other hand, the conditions of possibility for that work being dependent on it mattering to other people, whether that's funders or buyers or an audience. I'm curious about your experience of living that balance, the choices you make about the different relationships on which your ability to do your work depends.

Monica

I'll give you an example of something that happened to me once and made me question what I was doing. I work with very time-consuming techniques, especially when I work with glass. It takes me a year to get together the work for one solo show. Once I had this exhibition in Stockholm, and on the opening night, there were lots of people. More and more red dots were appearing on the gallery walls as the works were selling. But the more we sold, the more upset I felt, and at first, I didn't understand why.

'What is a queer space?' (2016–) Ida Isak Westerberg put this question on social media after the attack on an LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida in 2016. The answers they received have formed the basis for a series of textile works and for the space they are creating in a former shop in Korsträsk.

Grave Goods, work in progess (2014–), mixed materials, courtesy of the artist.

Grave Goods (2014–). For seven years, Caroline Ross has been working on a collection of objects including a sword, garments, baskets, knives, cups, footwear, jewellery and ritual items intended to be buried with the artist on her death. The work can be shown, but never sold or given away.

I realised afterwards, after this almost sell-out show, that I needed to sell a certain amount of work myself. With all respect to the galleries, we need them and they need us, but with my time-consuming work, I can't work with a gallery all the time and pay them 50 per cent in commission. The market within art and glass is not prepared to pay the price for that. Yet.

Another good piece of advice from art school was to always have the same "out price" on your work. It doesn't matter if I sell it directly from myself or through a gallery. That is also out of respect to the final customer.

We live in a society where it doesn't matter how much art we want to make, how much we burn for it, we need to make a living to be able to do it.

Geska

So what are your channels for selling your work directly? How do you find your buyers?

Monica

It has slowly built up through the years. Of course, I've had help through the galleries and through word of mouth. I have a webpage, and I'm starting to get better at utilising Instagram. I don't have an online shop, but on my website, I explain the concept of the artwork and the techniques. I am able to make a living on my artwork, but I wouldn't be able to do so if I sold all my work through galleries.

Geska

Torsten, you also sell a lot directly? What are your experiences?

Torsten

I totally agree with Monica; it's important to have the same price. I think about the audience. I need the galleries, and you have to pay to have a space in the city. It is expensive to run a gallery. So for me, it's about adding another zero to the price of the work, whichever way I sell it. I can explain this to the audience: it's free to look at, but if you want to take it home, you have to pay the price. If you want to see the elephant, you can go to the circus, but if you want to bring the elephant home with you, it's going to cost a lot. Actually, I just talked to colleagues that make prints. Today, I make potato prints. People will laugh

and say, "I did that as a child!" And I charge three times more than my skilful artist colleagues, but I can't join a group show with prints, because they are selling them extremely cheap. If you have a really good exhibition and sell a lot, you don't make the salary of a midwife, after the gallery has taken its 50 per cent.

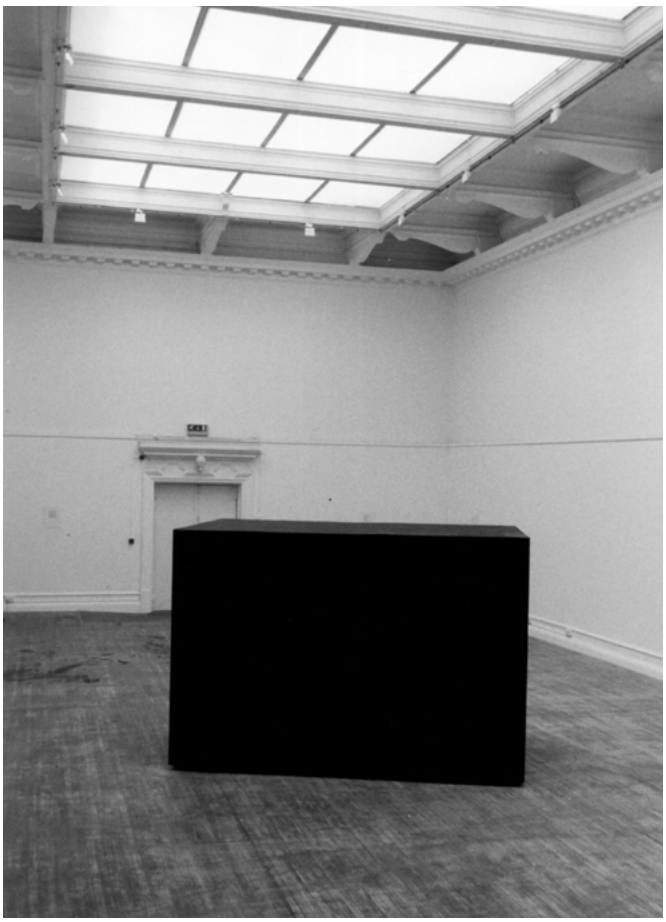
So you need to set a realistic price, and then the job is to make that possible. I don't have the rich people buying from me, I have the person who saves up for a second-hand motorbike that costs 60,000 SEK. And people know that you don't get a good motorbike for 60,000, but if you buy a sculpture for 60,000, how can you afford that? But there are so many passionate art lovers. So for me, I always try to make it possible to get connected with my art. Then, if you want to buy it, you have to pay the price. That's it!

Caroline

This is so interesting for me because the gallery system just wouldn't work for my art, in this country anyway. I guess I could be in a group show. I had solo shows back when I was a painter, but that's another universe. The work that I make that is for me is *Grave Goods*, which I will be buried with, so I can't sell them anyway. So my actual sculpture that is ongoing for eight years, I can show it, but I can't sell it. My context is work in reproduction, and I have to do the opposite of what Torsten and Monica said, I have to change the price depending on the context. Lots of my stuff is in the Dark Mountain books, and I barely get paid for it, it's just £30 or £40, but then people see that work and say can you do this work for my book, or I'd like to buy one of your drawings. So a small drawing about the size of your screen would be £300, but if a friend who didn't have much money wanted to buy it, I would charge less, because I want to have it in their home. But if a rich collector wanted to buy it, I would charge £500, and it would be framed. Sometimes my work is in materials that won't last, just a day or two then the rain takes it away. So then my work is photographed. The context in which I show that work is very different, maybe a website, a book, and they pay me according to that world – the publishing world, or the musical world for album covers.

But for me, the money doesn't make it not my work, even if I follow their brief, it still feels – that's weird,

"I LOVE TO SHOW MY WORK. BUT WHEN IT COMES TO MAKING BUSINESS, THEY HAVE TO PAY THE PRICE OF THE LIFE I'VE PUT INTO THAT PIECE OF WORK."



CAT at the South London Art Gallery, 1998, courtesy of the artist.

CAT (1997). Ansuman Biswas spent ten days and nights in a black box in the South London Gallery, engaged in Vipassana meditation. Invoking the image of Schrödinger's Cat, a thought experiment from quantum physics, the performance was intended to invoke an image of a possible future science.

how can I say… I met Dark Mountain and found a context for my work, and I really like the restrictions, I don't feel squashed. It doesn't feel bad to do commissions, it feels really wonderful. I thought I would be more egoistic, but actually, I don't mind at all.

Torsten

I don't see the audience as buyers. Never. I see them as an audience and I love to show my work. But when it comes to making business, they have to pay the price of the life I've put into that piece of work. That is the thing.

Geska

I think it is essential to keep in mind that the 'audience' in the art world is somewhat different from other cultural professions. For example, in the music industry, your audience is also your buyer—someone who pays for a ticket for your concert, stream, CD, album. In the artworld, you also create your work for an audience, but they are not necessarily those who directly pay for it. So you sometimes need to think about your buyers/funders and your audience as separate – they might be the same, but quite often, they are different.

Dougald

I'm curious Ansuman about your experience working with live art, which, almost by definition, is work that you can't put in a gallery and have a red sticker appear on. How do these conversations sound, coming from that kind of practice?

Ansuman

There's a very live debate in live art about how to sell it and whether the documentation of the work is the one thing that can be exchanged and lasts beyond the ephemeral moment. I guess I must be coming from that live art world, if I think about how I feel about this question, because I don't see a dichotomy between doing it for the passion and doing it for reward or recognition. I don't think there's a one-to-one relationship between what I get and what I create. It's partly because of what Caroline hinted at, this notion that you might do something for £30 or £40, but it leads somewhere else. It's mysterious

actually how things come back and how we get sustained. It comes from unexpected quarters, my funding and my livelihood.

I was thinking also that there isn't a dichotomy for another reason, because my passion *is* to connect. The form of the work varies constantly, depending on who I'm connecting with. That may be other persons or non-people, it might be a piece of clay that I'm connecting with, or the weather, but in some way I'm part of a network, part of a system, and my passion is to find the language which we can speak and where there can be some commerce between me and whatever is not me. For instance, now I'm very aware that I'm speaking English, and if we spoke Swedish, I wouldn't be able to connect so much. We can connect in a way we couldn't if we spoke Swedish, but sometimes the language is music, or it's touch.

I think of a work I made called *CAT* where I lived in a box for ten days. I wanted to connect with physicists, I wanted to speak about a problem that was familiar to physicists so I tried to use whatever I could bring in a conversation to cross the border between practices and communities. That's where my passion is, it's necessarily in an engagement between communities. What I get back in terms of money and livelihood, I never know where that's going to come from. It may come from that particular community or it may come about in a more nebulous way, from somewhere I can't quite identify.

Ida Isak

I don't want to make a living by depending on selling my artwork. I want to make art, but I don't want to be dependent on people buying it. I want to find a way of making that possible, and right now, I find that being a participant in different projects and finding funding through that, then being able to write your own project proposals and get funding becomes possible because of the other projects. So I'm trying to find some way of making art without having to sell. Of course, I sell a bit as well, but I don't want to be dependent on it. I also see possibilities in community, in workshops, in other ways of sharing art.

Geska

Ansuman, you said before that if you get money for it, it's not art. I recognise that feeling, and I find it interesting in this context because, on the one hand, we could be talking about how to sustain ourselves *through*

"I WANT TO MAKE ART, BUT I DON'T WANT TO BE DEPENDENT ON PEOPLE BUYING IT."

“For me, it’s a balance between many parts of life: family, love, health, social life, economy and my own creativity.”

our artistic work, and on the other hand, simply about *how* to maintain our creative practice. Is it sometimes better to have another, unrelated way of making a living to pay your bills than being dependent on public or commercial funding structures? What kind of money do we want to make it possible to do our art?

Gittan

I have been working for 50 years now with art-making. I'm privileged that I've managed to do so and to sell my things. I think galleries are essential – they do a lot for the art scene in Sweden and elsewhere, but times are very hard, especially now. The buyers don't come anymore. I also sell works directly from my studio, but I often feel a little sad because then only *one* person can see this work, not a larger audience as in an exhibition. But it's worth it, sometimes. For example, for my film *Parallel Lines*, I got funding, but it was not enough, so I sold some porcelain figurines to finance it. It's very expensive to make a film, but I managed to do it.

When I'm working with figurines or paintings, it's not a conscious thing that I should sell it, but as you said, Ansuman, it's also my passion to connect and communicate. I'm longing for people's reactions when they see it. I wonder how they will interpret my forms, my signs. I think it's a lot on an unconscious level of how I try to connect. It's very, very exciting. Then, when at last I open the exhibition, I love to see people coming and watch their reactions, and I love to hear if they talk to each other about what they see.

Monica

Reflecting on what Gittan said, I sometimes feel really sad when people love my artwork and want to hold it and have it at home, but they can't afford it. While other people might buy expensive art for investment. I really wish there was a fund for people who love artwork but couldn't afford it.

Now with this pandemic, I think we all have to change the way we think about the economy and such, and hopefully, we'll find new ways that will make us all grow, so we can continue to do what we do and communicate about what we are doing.

Dougald

Something that strikes me, listening to these stories and experiences is, there's a certain kind of cunning, a trickster quality often, to the way in which we make lives around art. It involves trusting things that don't seem to make sense by normal economic logic, that end up working by surprising routes, sometimes without you ever knowing quite what the chain of cause and effect was, to create the possibility of going on doing your work.

It's a hard thing to define what an artist is, but one definition I've used is that an artist is someone who, when given a black-and-white choice, will always find a third option. So I've been setting up these questions around binaries, but it's obvious that the way we actually operate tends to involve slipping around the edges or the outside, finding possibilities that are missing from these binary ways of framing things.

I was thinking of another binary that I know is significant for many of

"BEING IN NORRBOTTEN FEELS LIKE AN EDGE BECAUSE IT'S SO FAR AWAY, BUT I FEEL LIKE THIS IS THE CENTRE. THERE'S SO MUCH CULTURE."

you – the relationship of the centre and the edges, the big cities and the smaller places, the centres which have the cultural capital and the places which might be taken less seriously within the artworld. So I'm curious about your experiences of moving between the centres and the edges.

Caroline

Something that was really important for me was moving away from London to Aberdeenshire, which is rather like the landscape north of Gothenburg. In the art scene in London, it was like you didn't matter; there was always another and another person coming along. But in Aberdeenshire, where it was quite rural, there was an amazing art scene around Deveron Projects. We built recording studios and artists' studios and had residencies, and because we were so geographically isolated, we were right at the edge, but we brought the centre to us. It was incredibly liberating. If I'm in a rural place again, I will never feel I'm in the middle of nowhere. As soon as you can make this space we talk about, and you get one or two people coming, even if you just provide food and bed, the artists will make their own art, and immediately the place will blossom.

I wish they had told me that at art college. I thought you had to be in the city, but you don't.

Gittan

When I moved from Stockholm to this small village in the south of Sweden, it was not so easy. I had the feeling that I was forgotten. Stockholm is such a special place; Stockholmers only know other Stockholmers! My feeling was, wow! I'm not unknown, I did a lot of things before I moved here but now, I really have to take the initiative and this is a new situation. I contacted an old friend, a colleague, and we planned a touring exhibition in northern and southern Sweden. This was a project called *Princesses Without Panic*. It was very nice to work together and it was necessary: I felt that now I must be much more active in these social things. But when I moved to Berlin, it was quite another thing. I hadn't managed to find a gallery; I was not known in Germany. So, I worked in my studio, found many interesting colleagues and saw a lot of fantastic culture, but I make work to exhibit in Sweden. It's very complicated with transport… My dream is to exhibit in Berlin. Next year!

Torsten

I speak with a Gothenburg accent and have lived in Stockholm, from one edge of Sweden to the other. But to live in China is to go to another edge. There are 200,000 artists in Beijing. You can imagine the shops for selling artist's equipment! And in Sweden I always get the question, "How is it to be an artist in China? Is it a concrete prison?"

When Trump and his wife, the first lady, came to Beijing, it was the first time in a long time an American president mentioned Taiwan, it was a tense issue. The first thing President Xi did was to bring Trump to the National Gallery. In front of the media, they were mounting prints. Imagine if the Swedish prime minister was having a meeting with Merkel and they began by discussing Selma Lagerlöf?

To travel like I can, you get another perspective on Sweden as well. So to leave Sweden is also a way of going from the edges to the big city.

Ida Isak

Being in Norrbotten feels like an edge because it's so far away, but I feel like this is the centre. There's so much culture. The Sami, the Tornedalians, there are so many cultures meeting every day in every place and so much going on, so I'm not thinking about anywhere else right now! It's so interesting just to be here. I feel that it is quite liberating to be outside of what everyone is supposed to think or talk about.

Monica

I moved to Australia and attended art school there. When I came back to Sweden, I knew I didn't have a Swedish network within art; I didn't belong to the art community here. For me, it wasn't that important, as my centre of the world is here in Tärnaby, in Sápmi, and the rest is periphery. It's like there are different communities within the community, within the society, within the world, and however far apart they might be, they are still connected. In my world, I can find all I need in order to make a sustainable living. For me living here, I am part of the Sami art community, which is part of the artworld. I think many artists living in remote areas feel we are fortunate to live where we are.

Ansuman

So my edge is not a geographical edge, and Monica, you've hinted at which dimension my edge is in. I grew up in London, the big city, but the edge was my front door. One side was London. The other side was Bengali culture. I grew up immersed in the arts. My mother is a singer, and I learned songs, and my father is a published poet, but completely Bengali and nothing to do with what was the centre. I'm struggling to find the word for that centre: maybe white-ness? Or the mainstream, hegemony? I always felt on the edge of it. I grew up with Tagore, not Shakespeare, Picasso or Beethoven. My project has been the movement between the circle and the edge, and for me to find a way for the circle to expand. I feel what I'm doing now is becoming the centre myself that can merge with the other centres. Certainly, my edge is not a geographical one.

Torsten
You describe it better than me. If you're in Gothenburg, you think it's a big city compared with the villages outside. In Beijing, there are 200,000 of us artists and people wonder whether you can create there?

Dougald
So I have one more question. When you look around at the ways that art is being made just now, what parts of that feel like they might be sustainable for the long-term and what looks least likely to still be around? I was thinking, Ansuman, about a project that you've been involved in, *Longplayer*, which is an ongoing performance that began in the year 2000 and is intended to continue for a thousand years. The kind of questions about long-term sustainability of artistic practice which that opens up kind of blow my mind!

Ansuman
Yeah, it's mind-blowing to think on such a large scale. What it forces one to do is to acknowledge change. Everything changes. Including economic systems. You know, 1000 years is long enough for the economic system to change completely, so to think of something being viable over that length of time means that one has to find a general principle for how things live and continue. I think one of the answers that is becoming clearer thinking through *Longplayer*, is that what's an essential feature of nature and of life is interdependency. The network, actually. It's no particular form that the network might take, whether that's a mushroom, a tree, the Roman Empire, a painting. Many different forms might appear over the course of time, but in fact, it's the network itself or the system of relationships, the harmony, even if it's only a temporary harmony. If one pays attention to the harmony itself, the forms can change. So *Longplayer* is a way to galvanise, to offer space for networks to form. No one can predict what the network might look like in a thousand years, but there has to be some kind of a network. That's what I see, everywhere I look at nature, that there are complex systems of interdependency. Recognising that is the first step to longevity, it seems.

Caroline
For me, the longevity aspect is really important. I see myself in the middle of a timeline, not at the beginning and definitely not at the end. I have my art training, but also I've been doing tai chi since I was 13, and we have a lineage. The way we're taught is that there's a real living culture that goes through. That has taught me a lot about how I want things in art to continue. So teaching and learning are a really big part of my practice. So I do my art, but I also teach people to make traditional materials like oak-gall ink. There's something wonderful, like *Longplayer*, because I see my tai chi students teaching their students, and you see these things going down and down to the new people. And you can see how it goes back and forward in time, because I know who my masters and grandmasters were. It's the same with these materials. A lot of the materials I use were used in Europe for illuminated manuscripts, a thousand years ago or more. When I look back,

“The longevity aspect is really important.
I see myself in the middle of a timeline, not at the beginning and definitely not at the end.”

100 MIGRATORY. Workprocess in Ulldevis. Photo: Carl-Johan Utsi, 2012.

100 Migratory (2011–2014). A hundred of Monica L Edmondson's glass vessels set out from her home in the wintry mountains of Sápmi. Each piece made its individual journey to be shown in different parts of the world, acquiring its own history, returning to be exhibited together at the culmination of the project.

I see what I'm making, and when I look forward, I think of what my nieces' children will be drawing, because they know how to make this ink now. The living culture is really important to me.

So the way I see that network, the growing medium is time as well as place. I'm desperate one day to have a place where I can teach, and I hope that will happen, rather than hiring places. But I think the medium this mushroom is growing in is time. There's mycelia growing back to my masters, the people who learned it first, and going forward into the unknown. That's why I feel secure, not in terms of money or status, but I'm sitting in time as an artist. When I was at art college, they just talked about individual people; they didn't tell us that we sat in time and history and place and networks of friendship. All these growing cultures, I had no idea! Like not knowing that yoghurt exists, not knowing there's such a thing as cheese!

Dougald

I'm hearing this language of networks, and I'm seeing the looms behind you in your shop, Ida Isak, and I'm noticing the way that the metaphor of these very old crafts helps us think bigger and longer.

Ida Isak

When I learned to weave, I realised I had so much new knowledge sitting with me, just to be able to make my own fabric whenever I need to. That's

a skill that we need to continue to have, and we need to bring with us. It feels very important and grounded to have that kind of craft behind me, or in me. Even glass or ceramics, all of these old crafts – now it's quite trendy, everything goes up and down – but to continue to have this is knowledge and bring it forward, it's something important.

Monica

The work of the hand is not appreciated as it should be in our society, and I think it's really up to us to lift the work of the hand and the importance of it in the future. That is one thing I tried to express in my art project *100 Migratory* in which I worked with glass and the form of a vessel. After I graduated from art school, I made similar kinds of glass vessels, and I sold them way too cheap. Then I started to raise awareness of why I use that form, why I use glass and how I made them. I made hundreds of the vessels in this art project resulting in a solo exhibition, a book and a dance performance at Västerbotten's Museum 2014. Finally, it was possible to charge what they were worth, so I could keep working as an artist and keep exploring and making. I think we have to help each other to raise awareness of the work of the hand and tell the story of our art.

Ansuman

I have to agree and go further even. I've been becoming more and more convinced that it's not just the hand but the whole of your skin. It's touch! It's important in the network. My awareness of that has been really sharpened by Zoom, or the touch screen of my phone. It's called a touch screen, but there's the barrier. I feel this barrier now – we feel like we're connected to one another, but I do feel the absence of our skin-to-skin contact, or simply breathing the same air. I think that's an important ingredient of a network, this material commerce. Something I'm feeling as touch, more and more.

Torsten

We touched upon this earlier in the conversation, the contradiction about the ages. Art and craft is something that we bring with us as human beings from the past to the future. But at the same time, the art scene wants *new* creation. It wants what has never been done before, a new form, rather than something personal, where what is unique is that it is a personal voice. We have what you said Caroline, the connection, the line to the past, and to add some new experience to that and bring it to the future.

Gittan

For me this is also about my interest in history. I like to make paraphrases and put parts of old pictures into new ones. For example, I took Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* and put my hoover ladies on top of the mountain instead of his man. It makes me aware of what we all come from. All those before us, we have to keep them alive, and we have to continue to make connections, to communicate. It is very exciting! ●

Konstnärernas Riksorganisation
(the Swedish Artists' Association) is an organisation for professional visual artists, craft artists and designers. Its role is to represent artists in policy issues concerning art and strengthen artists' financial and social situation. Founded in 1937, the association currently has 3,400 members. Building on the many gains it has made for artists, the current focus includes increasing the number of job opportunities in the arts sector, strengthening the protection of artists' rights and their position in society, reaching agreements on recommendations for fees and working conditions, and increasing the influence of artists within the artworld.

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