

Your Torch is Burning Brightly

I wanted to gain access to some students at Chelsea College of Art & Design but without creating too obvious a presence. This decision to work covertly comes partly from my inclination towards the detective story, but it has other benefits too. I wanted to recruit but not to select. My temporary agents, the students who perform for me in 'Your Torch is Burning Brightly...', have become part of this project through their natural curiosity (not through any skills-based selection process) and it is important that throughout the project they remain 'themselves' and bring their own experiences to the work.

Like many Fine Art graduates, I've done my share of voluntary work and my experience of this has been incredibly varied. For the large part I've been lucky – most has been very rewarding, some awful. As I continue to work in the arts sector I encounter more people who have become disenchanted by this strange industry where large groups work for nothing or very little. There are many internships available offering no promise of future or sustained employment, but more worrying is that this is accepted as the status quo. There are also other indications of an unhealthy situation, like the noticeable pecking order between non-uniformed office staff and uniformed gallery attendants.

There seems to be a sizeable underclass in this industry – but what is unusual perhaps is that it is a middle class underclass. There is a kind of 'loss leader' strategy rife in these positions where short term losses are accepted in the hope for longer term gains. "You won't make any money for ten years," we were told at university. This setup has clear consequences: only people from a secure financial background can comfortably spend large portions of their time working for free. A system that supports this actively favours the middle classes who are not on the poverty line and can take bigger risks. For all its talk of social inclusion and community outreach, the art world needs to ask itself some questions here, and lead by example.

Yet this question of exploitation remains an area of some ambivalence for me. Some would say it is a luxury to work in an industry that you enjoy and support. And indeed my good experiences of voluntary work were very rewarding – I have been made to feel valued in ways other than economic. It is this sense of value which is important, and money is just one tool that can be used to display this. To an extent the format of the value is dictated by context – it was particularly galling to me when I was volunteering for a commercial gallery where large sums of money were changing hands and I was not only unpaid but completely dispensable. At other times it has seemed very natural to give my time for free.

Whilst the rules change with circumstance (and different forms of 'payment' are appropriate), I can't help thinking there is something unhealthy in any sector where low paid or voluntary work goes largely unquestioned. The practicalities of life don't vary (we all need to eat), but laws that are in place to protect the workforce are bent or broken when the industry is culturally seen as a luxury. To underpay people who work in the art industry is to undervalue the role of art itself.

For this project I asked my temporary agents to covertly observe the gallery underclasses. This is really just an extension of what we do anyway – though gallery assistants are supposed to be discreet it is hard not to peek at these bored gatekeepers. But whilst artists like Tino Sehgal have used gallery assistants as tools, their normal function is to hover discreetly, to be on hand to shush or direct but otherwise to remain part of the gallery's mechanics and to avoid distracting attention from the artwork.

The observations of my temporary agents (remaining as invisible as possible) were then translated into their very visible role for Temporary Agencies. This is certainly a conscious decision – to openly display this underclass and ask a reaction of the audience. These discussions are particularly pertinent to the students themselves, who in turn will be seeking work at entry level. Under the guise of providing experience, many institutions are taking advantage of people in just this position. My intention with this project, and my message to these students, is not purely to criticise this industry but to raise some questions where I feel there is too much left unsaid.

Emma Leach, April 2008