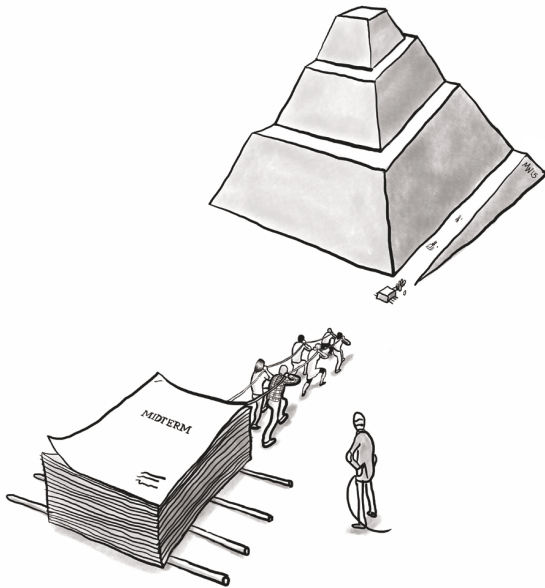


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# STARVING ARTISTS, STARVING STUDENTS

BY NIKKI SHAFEEULLAH



The American painter Robert Henri once said, “I am interested in art as a means of living a life; not as a means of making a living.” This quote captures the essence of the “starving artist” narrative: possessing a drive to create that is so strong it becomes more important than, or at least separate from, the need to sustain oneself in a society driven by capital. But, alas, even for those whose professional practice is to probe society and the human condition in service of collective social growth, a living wage needs to be made, and as such, public investment is necessary to support artists, art workers, and researchers of the arts and humanities.

From the conservative right, we hear the argument that the arts are at best a creative pastime and at worst elitist (who could forget Stephen Harper’s infamous 2008 declaration that “ordinary people” do not care about arts funding), and thus merit little to no public investment. If an artist is to make some or all of a living from their practice, the argument goes, it should be via the free market. In a 2012 article entitled “Is the Canada Council Just Funding Hobbies?”, Peter Worthington, co-founder of the *Toronto*

*Sun*, grumbles: “Why do writers have to be subsidized by taxpayers if they are ‘professional’ and earn a living through their writing? The answer is that many ‘writers’ can’t make a living because people won’t buy their work, hence subsidization.” Such simplistic characterization of public funding in the arts overlooks the many returns on investment, both the economic benefits (multiplier effects of arts funding, the bolstering of tourism and other adjacent industries, etc.) but more importantly the innumerable social benefits relating to community engagement, popular education, political discourse, and mental health. It is these social benefits of arts investment that demonstrate that art should not be limited to commercial production but is in fact a public good.

Voices from the activist left also criticize arts grants, although for very different reasons: the mechanism of grant application writing and reporting can serve to dictate and limit the nature of artistic projects and their potential social benefits, particularly in the case of projects that are explicitly politically charged, socially engaged, and made by historically marginalized communities. As Adjoa Florencia Jones de Almeida

writes in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*:

In theory, foundation funding provides us with the ability to do the work . . . But funding also shapes and dictates our work by forcing us to conceptualize our communities as victims. We are forced to talk about our members as being “disadvantaged” and “at risk,” and to highlight what we are doing to prevent them from getting pregnant or taking drugs—even when this is not, in essence, how we see them or the priority for our work. (186)

Applied theatre scholar and practitioner Judith Ackroyd shares concern about how “success” is measured when the language of grant reporting betrays that funders “are more interested in the number of participants who went on to apply for jobs or upskilling programs rather than how many felt touched by the drama encounter” (5). While public arts bodies in Canada have over the decades become increasingly effective at incorporating artists’ expertise when designing funding models and processes, they are still subject to bureaucratic systems that favour quantifiable, productivity-oriented results.

Despite how good arts workers have had to become at defending the sector in economic terms, its biggest merits simply cannot be articulated in the language of neoliberalism. The arts sector in Canada, overwhelmingly non-profit, and does not define or prioritize “productivity” in ways congruent with free market standards.

As they professionalize, artists learn quickly that resources for their art-making and their own sustenance are hard to come by in these perpetually austere times; and those artists who experience marginalization within the art-making world—by virtue of their personal identities, modes of practice, or artistic content—face disproportionate barriers to access. Shifting our examination from artistic practice to research, it comes as no surprise that when university administrations revisit budgets and assess program priorities along productivity-based metrics, the arts and humanities face the most funding cuts, and the academic employees most affected within the targeted departments are the most precarious

workers: graduate students and contract workers who already face increasingly high tuition fees and low compensation packages.

The recent strike actions by CUPE 3902 and CUPE 3903 (the unions representing contract academic staff at the University of Toronto and York University, respectively) helped put a national spotlight on how these and other academic institutions fail to adequately support their contract workers, who face little to no job security while carrying the lion's share of university instructional duties. The CBC reports that more than half of undergraduate students are taught not by tenured faculty but by contract teachers, and the former make \$80,000 to \$150,000 per year while the latter make a fraction of that at \$28,000 (Basen). One of CUPE 3902's requests was for the university to offer funding packages that at least met the Toronto poverty line—a request that went unmet by the administration.

The “starving artist” trope, which I’ll expand here to include the “starving graduate student,” at its most extreme translation by capitalistic society implies that an artist should be content to toil at their passion-filled work regardless of whether it generates an actual living—even if the artist is trained, recognized by their peers and community, and creating work that enhances civic society and public wellbeing. It is status quo for artists to work for free at some or many points in their careers, especially early on. This is certainly a result of the underfunding of arts and its marginalization in neoliberal society; perhaps for some artists it is also a self-determined way to refuse to have their work depoliticized by the mechanisms of external funding, or validated by capitalism through a pay-check. Mostly, however, working for free as an artist is simply taken as a right of passage in the sector. With graduate students specifically there is a pervading expectation that they will: work unpaid overtime to complete the teaching, marking, and research assisting expected of them; excel in their own research; serve on university committees; and publish and otherwise contribute to their fields. Again, this norm is in part sanctioned by the notion that these roles are a temporary right of passage toward becoming a (living-wage-earning) professional.

While in no case should it be acceptable for institutions to exploit

the labour of their most precarious workers when they have the means to properly compensate them, perhaps the right-of-passage narrative has more traction in some departments—for example, STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematic) fields and business, —where there are many real, field-related work opportunities that graduate students can pursue outside of the academy after graduation. But what of our humanities student—say, the theatre researcher—who relies on the academy to provide a venue for their professional practice after graduation? As the graduate student representatives to Canadian Association of Theatre Research (CATR) said in a statement to the association, the CATR members on strike with CUPE 3902 and CUPE 3903 “represent the future of the association” but also “live below the poverty line, and without the hope for a future that includes job security, decent pay, and proper working conditions.” These problems are compounded for contract workers who do not have other financial support, who have dependents, who are living with disabilities and/or chronic illness, who experience racialization, who experience barriers due to their gender and/or sexual orientation, and who face other barriers. As universities hire less tenure-track faculty and more contract instructors to teach increasingly larger classes, emerging researchers are rightly concerned that the labour exploitation they experience at the graduate level might not be a temporary condition, but demonstrative of what their career in the university will be like for years to come.

I do feel resonance with Henri’s commitment to “art as a means of living a life; not as a means of making a living.” My art-making and worldview are inextricable from one another and that is what motivates me to create. The romantic “starving artist” idea evokes relentless passion, and, as you well know, *alt.theatre* reader, no one gets into the Canadian theatre game for the money. Public funding is carried out through imperfect systems where on one side funders aim to create accountable granting models and on the other recipients struggle to reconcile their own expertise and vision with the constraints of grant streams, applications, and reporting. But ultimately, when society—governments, arts funders, universities—fail to adequately

support work conditions in the arts and academy, they are effectively condoning visible and invisible barriers to access. If all public funding to theatre in Canada were to be cut tomorrow, would theatre artists still make art? The answer is: Yes, most would. Art is a means of living a life. But it would be the theatre artists with the most access to capital and social privilege who would be the most able to dedicate time to and access resources for their craft.

Meaningful investment in the public goods of the arts and academic research means ensuring that those most likely to face barriers can fully participate. This is a matter of justice, but it is also in service of maximizing the quality of these public goods: it is a primary step in creating artistic and intellectual ecologies that are diverse and fertile. If we starve artists and starve students, we starve society.

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