

# **EVERYONE IS AN ARTIST**

**On Authenticity,  
the Position of the Artist,  
and the  
Creative Industries**

**Ruben Jacobs**

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## Preface

Writing about art and artists is a tricky undertaking. It's all too easy to lose oneself in an impossibly complex swamp of opinions, perceptions, theories, contradictions and present-day practices, and despair and intellectual reprimand are the likely results. "You can only kind of dance around it," wrote the Dutch writer Gerrit Komrij in his 1996 essay "Hoe over kunst te schrijven" (How to write about art). And that is how this work often felt: like a dance. You can never stand totally still.

Nevertheless, I have taken up V2\_'s challenge to say something about modern art and being an artist – not as an art critic (for I simply am not one) nor as a philosopher (I lack the abstraction skills) but as a sociologist, because that is the way I was socialized and because I consider being an artist, in the first place, a social phenomenon and a social position. But that doesn't mean I don't consider the content of the artist's work. On the contrary: the commitment of artists and their creative attitude and aspirations are central to this book.

To get a grip on the subject, I had to look beyond sociology and explore the field of the humanities. Instead of simply *explaining* the artist's work, I also want to *interpret* it. And, more importantly, I want to look not just for the *reasons* for certain artistic attitudes but also for the deeper *motivations* underlying them. I have permitted myself to take a relaxed attitude towards problems around definitions and sources, since what matters to me is not so much the construction of a theoretical framework but conducting a broader analysis of what it means to be an artist in modern culture, where authenticity is one of the highest values.

This idea, by the way, comes not from a sociologist but from the philosopher and ethicist Charles Taylor. More than anyone else, he has placed the importance of "being yourself" – that is, authenticity – at the center of present-day culture. And he put me on the trail of an idea that I initially suspected intuitively: today we

consider artists to be paradigms of a more general cultural value of self-definition. In other words, many of us try to turn our lives into works of art, in different ways and styles. Taylor, as a pioneer of the genesis of the “self,” provides a starting point for this essay. What follows is a sociological search for the position and role of the artist in a capitalist culture that has made the Romantic principle of authenticity (or self-expression) one of its main principles of production and consumption.

After a long detour, my sociological quest seems to have become the subject of its own analysis. It appears that contemporary art and sociology have more in common than one would suppose. Some artists today have a striking amount in common with sociological researchers: they investigate social reality or reflect on art’s social function in society. And social scientists, for their part, are also pushing the boundaries of their own science. This development is not entirely devoid of problems, of course, but it is yielding exciting new intellectual and artistic opportunities.

Of course, I wouldn’t be worthy the title of sociologist if I didn’t also reveal that writing this essay has been more than a solo affair. I would especially like to thank Arjen Mulder, Johan Kolsteeg and Joke Brouwer for their critical reading and comments on the manuscript. I would also like to thank Tonnie Jobse for our animated conversations about the essay’s themes, Ben Jacobs for his numerous linguistic corrections, and my students for all their questions and struggles with the concept of authenticity. And finally, I thank Puck van Dijk for her inspiring questions and her love.

Amsterdam, September 2014

# I. The Ideal of Authenticity

*We think of people who have achieved originality in their lives as “creative.” And that we describe the lives of non-artists in artistic terms matches our tendency to consider artists as somehow paradigm achievers of self-definition.*

– Charles Taylor

## The Romantic Spirit Is Still Around

In his 1798 novel *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen*, the young German poet and novelist Ludwig Tieck describes the life of the painter Franz Sternbald. The artist undertakes a long, difficult quest through a romantic landscape of monasteries, castles and woods, and through his own inner being. His objective: to return as a master artist to his home city of Nuremberg. During his journey, Sternbald meets several accomplished colleagues, and they talk a lot about what it means to be an artist. The question of what art, and therefore also artists, are for is one that exercises many minds. The tormented painter is confronted repeatedly with “smug considerations of usefulness” – because what is the use of art, really, in the bourgeois world? When his mother asks whether he shouldn’t become a farmer, Sternbald answers: “When I practice my art I never think about my livelihood.”<sup>1</sup>

Immediately the tone is set. From that point on, Sternbald mainly talks in a negative sense about “the unwashed” – the bourgeois. He, the artist, withdraws from his immediate environment with the objective of thinking about the world as an outsider. The artist is the measure of all things; nothing else will determine his identity from now on. He absolutely does not understand how it could be possible for the bourgeois to live without art. When he is confronted for the umpteenth time with the suggestion that artists

are useless – this time by a businessman – he loses his patience and puts the man in his place:

What do you mean by the word “use”? Does everything have to come down to eating, drinking and dressing yourself? Or that I can learn to better steer a ship and invent machines that make things easier for me, again only to eat better? I am going to say this to you again: what is really high-minded cannot and should not be of any use. This being useful is at odds with divine nature, and to demand it means to rob sublimity of its nobility and to place it at the commonplace level of the vulgar needs of mankind. Because although man needs much, he should not lower his spirit to be the servant of his servant (the body): he should be a good master of the house and take care that everything goes well, but concern for maintaining these things should not constitute his whole life. I see art as a guarantee for immortality.<sup>2</sup>

It is a familiar image: the poor, lonely artist, without any social duties, withering away in his own emotional life. It is also an image that is eroding: the Romantic vision of the artist’s life has come under heavy criticism from within the art world and from without (e.g., in politics). In keeping with the *zeitgeist*, the social, political and economic realities of our time ask the artist again, as they did Franz Sternbald: what is your purpose? The old theodical problem emerges again: in the words of the German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski, how can you justify the importance of art when people are hungry and live in poverty? Or, to put it in more poetic terms, are the muses allowed to sing when the world is on fire?

The answer to this question is probably ambiguous, but what is perfectly clear is that the position of the artist, as it has been defined since the Romantic period, has had its day. The present-day artist is a cultural entrepreneur, a creative professional, a *social de-*

*signer*, and according to some, even the “model employee of the new work ethic”<sup>3</sup> of the creative industries. In this economic sector, which is fed by concepts like creativity, flexibility and communication skills, the “artistic attitude” is a central value – not in its autonomous, self-defining and introspective form, as before, but in an adapted, capitalized form.<sup>4</sup> According to the French sociologists Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy in 2013, we are now living in the age of “artistic capitalism.”

The concept of *authenticity*, or the validity of aesthetic expression in the arts, has earned a place in modern Western capitalist hearts. The creative industries – a modern economic interpretation of the idea, steered by the authorities – have placed these romantic ideals of authenticity in a central position. What began as a romantic counterculture against the technocratic order – and saw its most recent peak in the rebellious 1960s and 1970s (with calls to let the imagination rule) – has in recent decades increasingly become part of the cultural mainstream.<sup>5</sup> We live in an authenticity culture, according to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor.

How did this come about? And what does it mean for the autonomous artist as we have known him or her for so long? Has the artist’s day ended? As the artist’s classic competencies, like creativity, self-development and authenticity, are becoming central in the modern labor market, which social function does he or she still have? Is the new situation a blessing, or does it make the position of the artist even more complicated? How can the artist distinguish him- or herself when everyone is supposed to be creative and authentic in work and in life? In other words, what is the relationship between the artist and a capitalist culture that has made an important characteristic of the romantic artistic existence – authenticity – one of its central values?

To answer these questions, we should return to the time of Franz Sternbald: the Romantic era. The movement that flowered at the end of the eighteenth century in the humanities, especially in Germany, is to this day still indelibly present in our consciousness, ac-

cording to many. “We have never been so Romantic,” the philosopher Hans Kennepohl writes in a 2014 book on our obsession with phenomena such as self-realization, crafts and nationalism.<sup>6</sup> It will be useful to take a small journey through the genesis of this national identity.

## **Replacing God?**

If we are to get a grip on the phenomenon of “the artist,” we cannot escape talking about God. This may sound a bit farfetched, but it is not. The way in which we talk about the position of the artist (or the fact that we do not) is rooted in Western secularized society’s distance from the notion of God. We are not talking about secularization as such but about a deeper human turn inwards that commenced in premodern Christianity and really took off in the Romantic period. Strangely enough, it was not a German but a Frenchman who left perhaps the biggest mark on the development of the Romantic spirit. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who protested against modern social life with all its calculation, exploitation and oppression, showed modern human beings the way to the interior, to emotional life. In his educational pamphlet *Emile, or On Education* (1762), he describes in depth the essence of the phenomenon of feeling:

Conscience! Conscience! Divine instinct, immortal voice from heaven; sure guide for the ignorant and finite indeed, yet intelligent and free, infallible judge of good and evil, making man like God!<sup>7</sup>

Rousseau and many of the Romantics who followed him replaced God, as it were, with human nature. It was not the outside world or our rational capacity (reason) but the “voice of nature” (inner feeling, instinct) that would lead human beings in the right direction.

Rousseau saw life as an archaeological excavation, an act of restoring our own nature to a premodern unity, not as an end in itself but as an intermediate step toward reaching “spiritual autonomy.”

The range and impact of Rousseau’s plea for “natural man,” which takes the emotional life as central (and therefore allows “man” to “be himself”), should not be underestimated. You only have to read any lifestyle magazine or look at the range of spiritually oriented courses available today to see that Rousseau and his spirit are still present everywhere. Several modern thinkers (Rüdiger Safranski, Charles Taylor, Maarten Doorman) have pointed out that Romantic notions are still alive and kicking in Western society.<sup>8</sup> I will discuss this more extensively later in this essay. It is important to mention that Rousseau saw “culture” (social existence) as artificial and enforced – an outside world that only alienated man from himself. The Romantic Franz Sternbald struggled with this antithesis individual-society, and so do we.

“When I give to the ordinary a lofty sense, to the commonplace a mysterious semblance, to what is known the dignity of the unknown, to the finite an infinite appearance, then I romanticize it,”<sup>9</sup> the eighteenth-century German writer/poet Novalis writes. It is a salient expression of the Romantic. Novalis wanted to romanticize the world, to elevate its quality and, in doing so, to recover that which was *original*. We could deduce from Novalis’ quote above that Romanticism has a hidden relationship to religion. After all, the Romantic spirit is oriented toward the imaginary, the intangible. Even two hundred years later, this quest for a counterpart to our magicless, secularized world and Enlightenment rationalism is still present. “Romanticism is also, among many other things, a sequel to religion by aesthetic means,” Safranski concludes in his book on Romanticism.

The Dutch philosopher Jos de Mul draws a similar conclusion in his classic *Het romantische verlangen* (Romantic longing, 1990), in which he describes how art, from Romanticism on, was seen as capable of creating unity. The human desire to give life meaning and

harmony had to find another foundation to replace the “evidences of faith.” According to many Romantic artists and philosophers, only “making life aesthetic” would create such harmony. The aesthetic revolution, which sought to liberate fantasy and feeling, found realization in the work of Friedrich Schiller, who pled for “aesthetic education” and a central place for art and literature in life. *Bildung*, artistic autonomy, the significance of play, sublime uselessness, and the promise of a “totality of the small”<sup>10</sup> characterized the revolutionary aims of the Romantic school. In fact, Romanticists replaced the position of God, in the traditional scheme of God-Nature-Man, with the “creative imagination of man.”<sup>11</sup> From there, it was only a small step to picturing the artist as the Romantic personification of human imagination, as a sorcerer, seer, priest and, in his ultimate consequence, indeed as God.

But this line of thought is not without consequences; along with revolutionary enthusiasm, Romantic longing was accompanied by “a tragic sense of the ultimate unfulfillment of the longing for unity.”<sup>12</sup> De Mul realizes that the Romantic experience of the eighteenth century excels at postmodern doubt and irony about whether worldly harmony can be realized.

## **Express Yourself!**

The philosophy of human nature as an inner voice or impulse (and a moral source), which became central in the Romantic era, is only half the story. Charles Taylor shows clearly in *Sources of the Self* (1989) that human nature can be made complete only through linking this to another crucial aspect: expression. Inevitably, the realization of everyone’s original nature will at the same time constitute a form of expression. A person makes something “manifest” (by means of a certain medium); he or she expresses something and defines it at the same time. Creation is an independent thing, an essential part of someone’s originality. For Rousseau, it meant

that every man, by means of self-exploration and self-realization (“making the self in the course of the search”), could arrive at a subjective truth. According to Rousseau, this truth was more fundamental than objective reality (the outside) and was, in its ultimate form, an “artistic creation.” In fact, he said in the eighteenth century that everyone could be the creator of his or her own life.

Taylor calls this the “expressivist turn” in the genesis of our modern identity. It is not unimportant to mention that the idea of every person being unique and original was not new. Ideas about vocation and a diversity of talents among humans already existed in Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

What the Romantics added to this idea was the notion of the originality of individual expression: every human being was his own original and unrepeatable criterion and must live accordingly. The implications of these utterly radical and influential thoughts about the nature of man should not be underestimated, according to Taylor. He stated:

Expressive individuation has become one of the cornerstones of modern culture. So much so that we barely notice it, and we find it hard to accept that it is such a recent idea in human history and would have been incomprehensible in earlier times.<sup>14</sup>

A similar new and radical “individualist” interpretation of human existence can be seen in connection with the emergence of expressivism in art. More than that, it is one of its fundamental sources. When man defines himself as the expression of his inner self, artistic expression is the ultimate form of that. The interpretation of the artist as the creator of genius (or, in extreme form, God) was only a logical consequence. In the course of the nineteenth century, attention slowly shifted from the work of art to the life of the great artist. The *Künstlerroman* – or “artist novel” – was one of the first examples of this, as Ludwig Tieck wrote. In this literary genre, the

theme of the artist as a creator and genius was developed further into the idea of a person who did not imitate nature (mimesis) but rather imitated nature's creator. So there was no "reproductive imaginative power" that called upon variation and the remembrance of everything previously experienced (creativity-as-variation); creative imaginative power (inner expression) became a central point. As a consequence, from then on, artists had to meet incredibly high expectations, such as they never had before.<sup>15</sup>

Now, more than two hundred years later, this mixture of the personal and the creative no longer raises eyebrows. Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Marina Abramović – they are all famous artists who have linked their personalities inextricably to their work. What is important is what the artist wants to say, what he or she wants from a creation. Since the Romantic era, authenticity and originality have become fundamental values. The title of the recent documentary *Genius Within: The Inner Life of Glenn Gould* (2009), about the life and work of the famous Canadian pianist, shows that this image of the artist as author is alive and well in artistic circles. And in postmodern art, even the deconstructionist attitude that sees everything in relative terms and has declared the author dead cannot escape the Romantic-inspired ideal of expressive autonomy. "Even the postmodern artist, who is not commonly regarded as an author," sociologist Rude Laerman observes pointedly, "will most probably only be validated as an artist insofar as he deconstructs his role as an author in an original way."<sup>16</sup> This way of looking at the artist – as someone who becomes original and creative on the basis of his own sensitivity – has become, in its deepest essence, a central value in the modern liberal imagination.<sup>17</sup> "Express yourself / Express yourself / You don't never need help from nobody else / All you got to do now / Express yourself," Charles Wright sang in 1971 with the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band, giving voice to the post-Romantic revolution of the 1968 generation. Forty years later, the song can be heard in the background of a TV commercial for the latest Windows operating sys-

tem, announcing its biggest makeover in 25 years. Windows 8's introduction of a touchscreen constitutes a first step toward giving users the experience of a painter with his or her palette. New apps like Fresh Paint, Particle Art and Designs give users a "real" artistic experience in the comfort of their living rooms. The computer has become a modern artist's canvas. Our romantic longing to be faithful to ourselves and to express this in an individual manner in every possible way is deeply interwoven with the idea of being an artist.

What was epitomized by the artist in the eighteenth century is today the central value for us all. Expressive autonomy is the way to achieve a meaningful modern existence. And that brings us to the second main subject of this essay: the present-day culture of authenticity.

## **Authenticity as a Modern Obsession**

One of the most recent program acquisitions of the Dutch commercial TV company RTL is the dating show *Adam zoekt Eva* (Adam seeks Eve). In every episode, two young single people meet on an inhabited island – not wearing swimwear but stark naked. The idea is apparently a simple one: without clothes, human beings reveal their true nature. They're no longer able to hide. To expose oneself on television has become a virtue. Or, as the broadcasting company states on its website:

Without materialist things like branded clothing and smart-phones and devoid of distracting stimuli like make-up, aftershave and disco decibels, the candidates have only their natural looks, charm and character with which to make an impression.

After one episode, though, it became clear that something else was going on. After three days of naked dating on the island, Kathy

chose Jorrit Pieter, and the new couple continued their new acquaintance at a luxurious resort, this time fully clothed. When they saw each other in their clothing with their hair styled, Kathy confessed that Jorrit Pieter's student-like dress sense was a bit disappointing. "In *real life*, he looks a bit like a frat boy," Kathy told the television crew.

After seeing this episode, one wonders in what ways the pair's naked escapades really brought them together. The idea that human beings, as true creatures of nature, stripped of materialistic attachments and cultural references, can recover their original, natural and unspoiled existence is not as easy as one might have thought (not that this was the real intention of the show, but that's beside the point). The opposite seems to be the case: when Jorrit Pieter and Kathy return to the everyday world, their naked bodies are no longer enough. Once the clothes are back on, the gel rubbed into the hair and the eye makeup put where it belongs, they get back their own visual and social identities. References to cultural backgrounds, emotions, politics, attitudes, etc. – they can all be read in our clothes. Without clothes, there is nothing more than a naked and imperfect body.

It can be a bit embarrassing and rude, but the program still says a lot about modern culture. *Adam Zoekt Eva* is, after all, illustrative of society's ongoing cultural obsession with authenticity. It is the new extreme in the hunger for genuineness, purity and originality. Many other examples could be mentioned, but the extremeness of this one shows how far the desire has been pushed and how commercial parties have jumped on it. Consumers, tourists and citizens – they are all, more than ever before, looking for "authenticity and real, not mediated, experiences."<sup>18</sup> Ironically, however, forced attempts to be "genuine" and have "real experiences" lead only to artificiality. Politicians who try to prove their integrity before the cameras in every possible way, *hipsters* in big cities who try to go back to a nostalgic past, the enormous number of ads that evoke ideas of originality and genuineness: in every aspect of everyday

life, the hunger for authenticity is expressly visible. Look and you'll see it everywhere.

Doorman (2012) sometimes calls this the "original sin of authenticity," to indicate that an insatiable desire for authenticity has a stranglehold on us. Whatever we try, it seems to be an ideal we can never attain. In other words, to attempt to be authentic, as Rousseau once proposed we should, appears in practice to lead only to deception. But still the desire lingers. It is like a dog who ceaselessly chases his own tail but will never catch it.

## **Art as Self-Realization**

To understand our extreme longing to "be authentic" and have "authentic experiences" against the background of the modern artistic vocation, we must take a closer look at its social-critical dimension. The desire for an authenticity that the modern rationalist world apparently cannot offer is, ultimately, an expression of dissatisfaction. As mentioned above, the source of this cultural obsession is the Romantic movement. In the late eighteenth century, there emerged for the first time a fierce resistance to the alienating and unnatural effects of the ascending urban and industrial order, along with a decline in belief in the authority of the church. Franz Sternbald, on his journey through the picturesque villages where he deems life to be cozy, healthy and peaceful, illustrates the quest for exoticism and untouched nature. The influence of the eighteenth-century *Künstlerroman* on today's tourism industry – which is full of similar anti-industrial rhetoric – should not be underestimated.<sup>19</sup> Look, for example, at the enormous popularity of the *Lonely Planet* travel guides (six million copies are sold every year). Traveling around the world finding unspoiled and out-of-the-way places is a commonplace thing to do, especially among young people. Backpackers go on quests for places on earth where the pristine, the primitive and the natural still can be found, and where

community spirit and tradition (the prerational religious unity) seem unaffected by the prevailing forces of modernity. "Real life is elsewhere," the philosopher Ruud Welten concludes sarcastically, discussing the implicit principles of modern tourism. Nevertheless, this notion of authenticity in relation to tourism is not only geared to the physical world but also concerns a deeper quest for the authentic self. After all, the drive to discover unspoiled locations tells us that the authentic is defined as that which has been seen by the fewest people. Authenticity in tourism doesn't just have to do with tradition and noncommercialism but also with individuality and exclusivity. We want this for ourselves alone.

"Being authentic" today means that you do not walk along with the *mainstream* but that you – along with six million other *Lonely Planet* readers – develop your own perspective on life. From Romanticism on, holding your own views on things and not going along with the herd reflex has been the prevailing standard of authenticity.<sup>20</sup> Guignon (2004) expressed this in a striking way:

To be an artist, one must become authentic. The artist learns to let the unconscious creative process work itself out in its own way within him, without imposing the assumptions derived from social expectations and reinforced by the intellect. But the converse is also true: to be authentic is to become an artist.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, this comes around to the following: since the Romantic era, the life of the artist has been a clear example of the investigation of the question: "Who am I, as a human being, myself?"<sup>22</sup> In various ways, the artist works to express his or her own emotional and spiritual life, and this is true of twentieth-century modern artists too. The artist tries to increase the potency of everyday existence by means of self-investigation, to make the unknown recognizable and the known mysterious.<sup>23</sup> He or she makes operas, novels, films, and so on in order to show the audience the increasing prolifera-

tion of possibilities and ways of seeing that is so characteristic of modern culture. As a result, at a later stage, with the aid of the reproductive force of mass media, nations can experiment with these new possibilities in life.<sup>24</sup> The existential question quoted above (“Who am I, as a human being, myself?”) has not disappeared from the stage since the Romantic era, and according to the cultural philosopher Kees Vuyk, it is the leading theme of art.

Some will respond that “art for art’s sake,” with its Romantic notions of genius, self-expression and authenticity, has been thoroughly criticized and enfeebled. Marcel Duchamp’s famous urinal, Arnold Schönberg’s formalist approach to music, postmodern literature from France and America, the Marxism-inspired art movements of the 1960s and 1970s – the twentieth-century arts are full of examples of the self-criticism of the Romantic view of the artist’s calling. Nevertheless, according to Doorman (2012), this has not led to an enfeeblement of the Romantic order. On the contrary, it has only made that order more stubborn and more complicated:

Whereas the artist seems to disappear from the work of art thanks to the traditional art discourse that was fed by Romanticism, he returns through the back door, carrying statements of intent and personal anecdotes that are indirectly integrated into the work.<sup>25</sup>

The more abstract an artist’s work, the more attention the artist him- or herself gets; this is true for the likes of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst but also for Dutch artists such as Wim T. Schippers. Through interviews, reviews and biographies, the mysticism of being an artist is taken beyond the work of art. Denying, exposing or enfeebling the artistic calling by emphasizing its “inauthenticity” in various ways essentially formulates it as something inherently containing “grandness” and “genius.” Using examples from the modern arts, like Jeff Koons, Mike Bidlo and Dave Eggers,

Doorman shows that the contemporary ironic tendency to contextualize the absolute claims of the Romantic artistic calling is, paradoxically, necessary for the continued practice of that calling. Modern art is in fact “an ironic ripping apart of the imagination with the aid of imagination.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Everyone Is an Artist**

This brings us back to the central question: in Vuyk’s words, “Who am I, as a human being, myself?” Artists, as researchers of this modern question on the essence of the individual, have for the past two centuries formulated an unprecedented diversity of answers, sometimes unwillingly and often highly critically or ominously, but always with the same central focus: man as an individual and a creator of his own existence. What is relevant to the artist is not the exterior, one’s sociocultural identity, but the interior, one’s creative self. Human dignity, in all its multifarious forms of expression, is always the first matter of importance.<sup>27</sup>

We can say that the artist can be considered the modern ideal of self-realization, as its principal caretaker and in many cases also an example of it. The ability to model personal ideas and feelings, or in other words, to be and express oneself, has become more and more central to Western culture in the course of the twentieth century. What started with the nineteenth- psychological novel century (Franz Sternbald’s world) slowly trickled into other art forms and finally was disseminated through popular culture (pop music, film, fashion, design, etc.) to become part of general culture. In the striking words of Vuyk (2003), “nowadays, art is everything people do to realize themselves.”<sup>28</sup>

“[C]ouldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?” the French philosopher Michel Foucault said on his deathbed in 1984. With this question, he put the aesthetics of existence of Greek antiquity

back on the philosophical agenda. Today, the “art of living” is a concept that covers a wide range of courses, therapies and philosophical self-help books that are all, in their own ways, oriented to the individual attainment of a meaningful and good life. This is the practical result of the ideal of authenticity.

Nevertheless, Foucault was not the first to call for a democratization of the artistic and the creative (the authentic). More than a decade before, the German artist Joseph Beuys had made the famous statement “Everyone is an artist,” promoting creativity as a central value in everyday life. And now, more than forty years later, it is the motto of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, the Netherlands; governments try to build creative economies; and “creative” is the most common descriptor in profiles on the business social network LinkedIn. Thus, Beuys’ and Foucault’s mission has, in a certain sense, become reality. What’s more, it’s a key concept of present-day capitalism. Authenticity and creativity have become products. Another visionary statement of Beuys’ has also come true. “The creativity of people – that is the real capital,”<sup>29</sup> he said in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, although he wasn’t talking about financial capital.

## II. The Idiom of the Creative Industries

*Competition among consumers  
is the turbine of capitalism.*

– David McRaney

### Artistic Capitalism

On Staalstraat in the center of Amsterdam, there is a small old-fashioned candy shop named Papabubble. In a neat retro-inspired interior – which, in a way, calls to mind a modern art gallery – the staff practices the “art” of candy making. Behind the counter, a “candy master” produces homemade sweets in different shapes, colors and flavors. Meanwhile, he or she explains the process to the customers and interacts with them as they admiringly watch the three-hundred-year-old craft being performed. Papabubble does not make ordinary candy but – in its own words – “artisanal” candy. The consumer gets an extensive choice of “experimental” sweets in the most exotic flavors – eucalyptus, passion fruit, bergamot. They can also order “personalized” candy for weddings, birthdays and births. The shop’s website says, “Papabubble is a working factory where the entire process, from start to finish, is on show. It is part theatre, part art, and part small-scale open factory.”

Theater, art, factory: this is modern capitalism in microcosm. Using feelings, sensibilities and expressions has become part of the DNA of present-day capitalist culture. We not only buy a product but also a feeling – even with something as trivial as a piece of candy. Papabubble, as an exponent of this capitalist culture, appears to be a part of a broader social trend that seems to be dominating modern consumers’ lives more and more: one of smallness of scale, boldness, craftsmanship and authenticity. Those who

walk down Staalstraat are likely to assume the shop is part of the local context of central Amsterdam, but nothing could be further from the truth: consult the Internet and you'll quickly discover that Papabubble is a franchise concept. The first shop opened in Barcelona, and others can now be found in Tokyo, New York, Seoul, Lisbon and Taipei. What looks like a local project is in fact a world-wide phenomenon.

The French sociologists Lipovetsky and Serroy talk about "artistic capitalism," a modern variant that promotes the "aesthetic" as its foundation. The continuous stream of stimuli that typifies modern capitalist culture consequently appeals to various worlds of experience. Apple offers not only a nicely designed computer or mobile telephone but also a creative lifestyle. A supermarket not only sells candy but "authentic" tom kha gai soup. Style, beauty and good taste are nowadays adopted and propagated by all kinds of brands, leading, according to Lipovetsky and Serroy, to an inflation of the concept of the "aesthetic." What does the aesthetic mean in a world where everyday products like toothbrushes, vacuum cleaners and even toilet paper make appeals to our feelings and sensibilities? The "aesthetic" is as such no longer the domain of high culture but an important tool for big multinational companies with enormous economic power. According to Lipovetsky and Serroy, this kind of capitalism changes the meaning of art. In an interview with the French newspaper *Libération*, Lipovetsky said:

Capitalism has created an art without precedent: the art of mass consumption (movies, advertising), which doesn't require any cultural prerequisites; an art that doesn't seek to elevate but mixes in with sports, brands, fashion and entertainment. In this context, we can observe aesthetic-mercantile empires. Where once art and industry were clearly separated, today they've been hybridized.<sup>1</sup>

Lipovetsky and Serroy formulate in a provocative, pointed way a development that has caught the eye of a number of sociologists and economists since the 1990s: the far-reaching *culturalization* of the economy. They state that we live in a postmodern economy with a fundamentally different character from the previous modern industrial economy. The new postmodern economy has in fact adopted the logic and thus the values of art, focusing on concepts, ideas and views.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the economy has become “artistic.” A popular book on marketing, Pine and Gilmore’s 1998 *The Experience Economy*, which propagates the highlighting not of a product or service but the experience associated with it, illustrates the popularization of this line of thought. Nowadays, the book is a marketing and management classic. Even the art sector sometimes works with this experience concept. The marketing gurus Pine and Gilmore are reacting to a development that has long been at work in Western culture and was characterized early on by the German cultural anthropologist Gerhard Schulze as a transition from survival to experience. *Abundance* instead of *scarcity* determines human behavior now. We live in an experience society, in which people try to transform their lives into experiential projects: everything is done for “the good life.” According to Schulze, this orientation toward experience is predominantly marked by self-expression and self-realization. The environment of the market, with all its products and services, is mainly judged on how it affects one’s own inner existence.<sup>3</sup> Modern humans not only derive pleasure from what is directly delivered from *the outside* (for instance, food, drink and sex) but are increasingly motivated *from inside* as they make their purchases. The Italian sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato puts it in a striking way:

Consumption cannot simply be reduced to buying or consuming (“destroying”) a service or product, as political economy and its critique would have it, but above every-

thing it involves belonging to a world, adhering to a certain universe.<sup>4</sup>

Emotional experience is a matter of survival. Thou shalt experience! The inevitable consequence: an inflation of the concept of experience. The marketing guru Philip Kotler coined the term Marketing 3.0 to indicate the transition from consumer-centric to human-centric marketing. According to Kotler, Marketing 3.0 is “values-driven” and involves transforming people’s lives. Through co-creation, community formation, development of a brand’s character, and horizontal marketing for and by consumers, marketers must speak to consumers’ minds (reason), hearts (emotion) and souls, with the ultimate objective of letting them take ownership of the brand and work together to improve the world.<sup>5</sup> It is a consequence of what the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called “the most closely guarded secret of the society of consumers”<sup>6</sup> – the radical development in which individuals are on the one hand sellers and purchasers of consumer goods and on the other hand consumer goods themselves. Products and people have started to share the same social space: the space of the market.<sup>7</sup>

## **Authenticity as Raw Material**

To get a better understanding of capitalist culture, it is useful to zoom in further on both the production and the consumption sides. On consumption, the sociologist Colin Campbell offers an intriguing and illuminating thesis that is connected to Schulze’s ideas on “experience orientation.” Campbell, too, sees consumer culture as rooted not in “materialism” (a general inclination toward material possessions) but in something he calls “Romantic ethics”: consumption is a means of self-realization that represents a Romantic attitude to life and originated in the Romantic era. People fantasize about holidays and daydream at work about things that could

make their lives perfect. There are innumerable products and services in the world onto which they can project their desires. A dress, for instance, is bought not only to wear but because of the associations and daydreams it evokes. The desire to lead an authentic existence, to “be oneself,” shines through modern consumer culture, and it is also steered by it. Of course, people differ according to class, age and sex, but increasingly, consumption is a “creation of subjectivity.”<sup>8</sup> The result is that many products are put on the shelf soon after purchase, since they can never totally live up to the *imagined* complexity the purchaser expects. “The gap between the real and the imagined can never actually be closed,”<sup>9</sup> according to Campbell. It is not Adam Smith, the so-called founder of modern capitalism, but Rousseau who is the spiritual father of current consumer society. In modern consumerism, it is not products’ use value that is central but the continual feeding of a feeling of lack.

Romantic ethics play an important role not just on the demand side of modern capitalism but also on the supply side, the production side. What is important is no longer the products themselves but the people who make them. Anyone who studies the labor logic of artistic capitalism will realize that here, too, the Romantic spirit has had a powerful effect. Labor in the West is no longer a matter of impersonal production-line work but is now surrounded by mantras like flexible hours, personal autonomy and even creativity. In simple terms, the East produces (toys, furniture, clothes, etc.), and the West creates (fashion, design, media). Of course, this is putting things in black-and-white terms, but nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to say this dichotomy roughly characterizes the global economy at the present moment. The West strives to design original, authentic products; the East produces them and is geared toward standardized mass production.<sup>10</sup>

According to the French philosophers Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, this Western attitude is the consequence of the 1960s “artistic criticism” of the standardized, rationalized production and massification of the capitalism of that time. In their 2007 book

*The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello show that the 1960s countercultural demand for more autonomy, self-determination and authenticity has been answered in the new spirit of the modern network economy. A view once held mainly in small critical artistic and intellectual circles was slowly embraced by the market in the early 1990s. The economy became “post-Fordist”<sup>11</sup> (this scholarly term describes the transition within the economic system from material to immaterial labor). In the post-Fordist system, labor is no longer something that happens within a strict framework (fixed working hours and procedures) but is more often characterized by dynamism, creativity and flexibility. There is no longer any such thing as a job for life, but the ideal job still exists. Work is supposed to be fun, challenging and experience-rich. The labor ethos has made way for an ethos of self-development.<sup>12</sup> Work is an opportunity to cultivate the self, to grow and to learn. It is an opportunity to work on inner psychological development.<sup>13</sup> Work, like consumption, has become a project of the modern pursuit of authenticity. Employers offer workers the possibility of experiencing inspiration at home or in cafés, ask them to formulate personal development plans, and offer them resources such as mental health training and personality profiling tests. In return, they expect a high level of autonomy, creativity and responsibility.<sup>14</sup> The consequence is that the boundary between private and work time is getting vaguer and vaguer. The social demand for creativity has penetrated the shop floor. Increasing physical and mental mobility (no fixed workplace, lots of commuting, taking work home) are expected. But this “immaterial” labor can lead to increasing work stress and even depression and burnout.<sup>15</sup>

For the time being, this mainly affects those with permanent jobs. But there is also a fast-growing legion of freelancers who participate in various creative networks, centers and *hubs* and incorporate the old artist’s ideals of autonomy, self-development and authenticity, by choice or out of necessity. They are architects, artists, web designers, app developers, filmmakers, and they fit

perfectly into the work ethic of artistic capitalism. The research report *De hybride kunstenaar* (The hybrid artist) (Van Winkel et al., 2012) goes a step further: the artist is in fact the model worker for the new work ethic. Artists have supposedly internalized working attitudes that suit the current creative economy: they are inquisitive, revelatory, flexible and oriented to working on a project basis. Conversely, the artist is implicitly a role model for anyone wishing to be creative and authentic. People with strong ambitions in that direction (and there are more and more of them) can best work in the “creative industries,” reputedly one of the fastest-growing sectors in Europe and at the moment a focal point for many governments.<sup>16</sup> It is no secret that it is high on many policymakers’ agendas nowadays, though in what way and to what degree differs from country to country. The European Commission is well aware of this: in 2010, it published the report “Unlocking the Potential of Cultural and Creative Industries.” The conclusion was as follows:

[...] non-technological innovation, including design, innovation in services as well as culture-based creativity, is an important tool for competitiveness, growth and quality of life for citizens.<sup>17</sup>

So it is clear: the creative industries are *booming*. In light of the broader social developments described above, it is not an exaggeration to say that the creative industries comprise the heart and the laboratory of artistic capitalism. They play and experiment with new kinds of products and services, network constructions, labor conditions, etc. One could also see the creative industries as the first attempt to make concrete and institutionalize the Western ambition of developing a “creative economy.” To better understand the internal logic of the creative industries and the artist’s place within it, a brief historical analysis is appropriate.

## **The Emergence of the Creative Industries**

Nobody knows exactly what the creative industries are. Its definition, size, social classification and position and the measurability of its impact on the economy and society have been under discussion for more than ten years. The concept of the “creative industries” is a tricky one. In the first instance, this is because it is an oxymoron, a combination of two words whose literal, “authentic” meanings contradict each other. Creativity is a *qualitative* concept, industry a *quantitative* one. At any rate, this is how the Romantics – and, in their wake, we ourselves – have long seen things. Now that the term “creative industries” has found a place in political discourse, this antithesis seems outdated. What the creative industries ultimately promise us is to marry these two entities, to abolish the antithesis culture-economy or art-commerce. Whether this can truly be achieved is questionable, but we will return to that later.

The term “creative industry” originated in the 1990s and was derived directly from “the culture industry,” a term coined in 1947 by the *Frankfurt School* philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their critique of the standardization of cultural products and the consolidation of art and culture. Unintentionally, through their social criticism they made the cultural industry a topic for policymakers and a field for serious academic research. After all, the culture industry was a system with its own symbolism, culture of production and distribution, cooperative structures (networks), values and norms. What started out as a somewhat loose and undefined network structure of creative people working in the arts – a field that did not have a substantial relationship to the economy – eventually became an industry to reckon with. It had major consequences for the way people started looking at the relationship between art, creativity and society.<sup>18</sup> If “culture” had previously been marginal and served mainly as decoration or to enhance social status, in the course of the 1990s it gradually took

on a central role in government policymaking as an important potential source of economic growth.<sup>19</sup>

The term “creative industry” later became broader, and fields other than the traditional arts also came into view. To understand the concept of the creative industries, one must look at it in the first instance as a political concept. After all, the term was invented by policymakers – not in Europe but in Australia. In 1994, Prime Minister Paul Keating talked for the first time about a “creative nation” in his pioneering *Commonwealth Cultural Policy*. “Culture creates wealth ... culture employs ... culture adds value,” he said, placing art and culture high on the social agenda. Soon after, Britain, under the direction of Tony Blair, brought this way of thinking to Europe, where it spread like wildfire. For “pragmatic reasons” (to get the plan through the House of Commons faster), Blair’s government referred to “the creative industry” rather than “culture.” The new term could more easily be linked to economic aspects, but it also broadened the scope of the information and knowledge economy. The word “culture” was too easily confined to art.<sup>20</sup>

With the introduction of the term “creative industry,” another crucial step could be taken: a further broadening of the exploitation of intellectual property. The new term’s impact should not be underestimated. Along with cultural fields like dance, sculpture and music, it could be applied to artisanal professions like jewelry, fashion and furniture design, and to software design. This meant people were able to link subsidized sectors to commercial fields like the software business and therefore justify the overall interests of the creative industries in relation to the rest of the economy. According to Nicholas Garnham in 2005, the use of the term “creative” created new possibilities for British politics and industry. It allowed software manufacturers, big publishers and media conglomerates to form an alliance with a diverse group of cultural workers and small-scale cultural entrepreneurs to make a greater claim on intellectual property rights. The software industry had an interest in

*expanding* intellectual property protection, the media industry mainly in *extending* it. By using “the moral prestige of the ‘creative artist’”<sup>21</sup> to defend their intellectual property, these industries could extend their economic reach in inventive ways. Garnham could only conclude that creative industries discourse, especially in Britain, had functioned as a Trojan horse: it had covertly smuggled technological and economic thought into the relatively autonomous field of art and cultural practice.<sup>22</sup>

The creative-industries success story trumpeted by the British government in the late 1990s aroused the interest of other countries. They rapidly embraced “the UK model” and adapted it to local contexts. The economist Richard Florida’s 2002 bestseller, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, in which he argues that people in creative professions are crucial to the development of urban environments, further increased interest in the concept, and a growing number of cities and countries seized this new postindustrial opportunity. The idea eventually spread to all of Europe as well as to countries like Brazil, Russia, Canada and China. The enormous number of *mapping* and *development documents* since created worldwide at the regional and national levels illustrates the popularity of the concept. The creative industries are becoming a global phenomenon.

According to recent numbers, an estimated seven percent of worldwide GNI comes from the creative industries. *The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development* determined that the export of creative goods and services in 2008 was worth around \$892 billion, fourteen percent higher than in 2000. It is worth mentioning that in the run-up to the worldwide crisis of 2008–9 the export of creative products continued to grow by around twelve percent a year. These numbers suggest that the creative industries are not only part of the growing world economy but are developing with a dynamic of their own. It is seen as a precondition for what is increasingly being called the “creative economy.” Creativity is coming to be seen as an integral factor in the general economic growth

of cities, regions, nations and global communities. It should come as no surprise that those two 1990s capitalist icons, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, made an earnest plea for a form of “creative capitalism” at the World Economic Forum in 2008. *Creativity has gone viral!*

## **Creativity as an Ideology**

It would be too easy to view the creative industries simply as a “neoliberal” government invention that is spreading slowly across the globe, or as a general reaction to capitalism’s need to constantly reinvent itself. The appeal to “be creative” is already deeply anchored in our culture. The sociologist Thomas Osborne rightly observes that the human aspiration to “be creative” has become a guiding and coercive force in ever more aspects of daily life. “In psychological vocabularies, in economic life, in education and beyond, the values of creativity have taken on the forces of a moral agenda,” he writes. Creativity is not a neutral concept; it is morally loaded. Creativity is ideology, a set of intellectual and normative ideas about human existence, human relationships and the emerging organization of society.

To understand the powerful attraction of the creative industries, one must look at them on a deeper cultural level. Which values and normative frameworks do the creative industries represent? How is “creativity” interpreted within this discourse? As indicated earlier in this section, the ideal of authenticity (self-realization) has become a central part of the capitalist system, which has slowly but surely embraced the 1960s anticapitalist critique and made it part of its own DNA. The creative industry, as the provisional apotheosis of capitalist culture, is a place where Romantic ideals like “authenticity” are put into practice on the shop floor. To explore this conception of the creative industries in more depth, I will critically evaluate a number of implicit and explicit values and dominant

conceptions about creativity within this intellectual and political discourse. Of course, I do not deny that creativity is an important human trait and that it is obviously necessary for overcoming a number of fundamental problems in Western society. What concerns me is the moralistic and dogmatic forms that the modern obsession with creativity carries with it. To bring clarity to the obscure, sometimes confusing discourse on the creative industries, I will analyze five dominant views relating to creativity.

### **1. Creativity Is Good**

The modern use of the word “creative” implies a positive valuation. A creative idea, a creative result, a creative cooperation – these are all hopeful expressions. *A creative life is a healthy life!* But people tend to forget that behind the familiar concept of creativity, a world of good and evil is hidden. “Creativity is all about positive morality,” Gielen (2013) keenly observes. “We expect nothing but good from it.” But creativity for creativity’s sake can be problematic. What happens when someone refuses to be creative? Is he or she then an inferior person? The idea that creativity is inherently good implies that anything not creative should be judged negatively. Another point is the question of whether creativity is always desirable. A recent Harvard University study showed that creativity has its dark side: “Creative sparks may lead individuals to take unethical routes when searching for solutions to problems and tasks,”<sup>23</sup> according to the researchers. After a number of experiments, they found that creatively oriented people had an inclination to cheat and were able to justify it in original ways. While the research may not be representative of all creative people, it does indicate that people with a creative orientation may be more inclined to egocentrism, recklessness and short-term thinking. The collective encouragement of “creativity” is not at all innocent: it comes at the expense of many other human traits.

With the rise of creative-industries discourse, the concept of creativity has become even more central to conversations about soci-

ety and economics. The human trait of creativity has received an enormous boost, and the positive impact of this should not be underestimated. But there is another side to our devotion to creativity. In regarding it as a morally neutral category, we tend to ignore the ethical values and implications of new ideas and products: that is, whether they are desirable for society or not. For instance, think of the recent phenomenon of *serious gaming* – otherwise known as *persuasive technology* – in which games and their principles are used to encourage certain moral behaviors, like using fuel efficiently while driving, and to publicly reward children online for leading healthy lifestyles. Regardless of the good intentions of *serious gaming*, the technology can have unintended side effects. Fuel efficiency can equate to dangerously fast driving, and publicly rewarding children for good eating habits can lead to an exaggerated need for social recognition and achievement.<sup>24</sup> Creative ideas and products do not just present new possibilities and foster certain behaviors; they also carry with them certain attitudes to life, and this fact is sometimes overlooked.

## **2. Creativity Is Self-Expression**

An important motivating force for creative workers is the possibility of self-expression. This is closely related to the idea that working in the creative industries is not just working but a “way of living.”<sup>25</sup> In building a “portfolio career,” the creative worker expresses a personal identity throughout his or her working life. As indicated previously, this is a generalization of the modern artistic ethos of self-actualization: “becoming oneself” is the main motive for working. The ethical consideration is as follows: it is good to show and develop one’s emotional life and emotions through work because it is the most appropriate, honest way of expressing oneself. “Do your own thing” isn’t just a cliché. As Laermans cogently puts it:

Creative workers do not work regular hours and surf on the waves of inspiration. They are flexible and unbound and

have no fixed set of tasks but move from project to project. They prefer to work in informal surroundings, and most of all, they work in changing team relationships in which others can inspire them.<sup>26</sup>

More than in other fields of employment, the physical, emotional and social expressions of the creative worker are an integral part of his or her work. In fact, one *is* one's work. Sociologists refer to this as *aesthetic labor*. A creative worker is preeminently someone who finds his or her way in the world of projects and flexible work by means of his or her physical competencies and traits. Labor is paired with a great amount of networking. The scene in which the creative worker moves is a type of social organization that has its own rules, norms and codes and is marked by relative freedom and flexible relationships. In a world where individuality and authenticity are prized, "the scene" is an important environment. You have to be "seen 'on the scene.'"<sup>27</sup> If not, the chances are high that the creative worker will not succeed.

In their study of the London fashion industry, the researchers Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (2006) conclude that the "freelance aesthetic laborer cannot walk away from the product which is their entire embodied self."<sup>28</sup> The fashion world may be an extreme example, but it is an undeniable fact that the creative worker is "always on." This aestheticized ethics of self-activation is coupled with an increasing entanglement of work and leisure time: in fact, one's work is never finished. This situation demands great self-discipline and involves uncertain working and living conditions. Self-exploitation (being prepared to work long hours for a "higher" objective) is far from rare in the creative industries, not to mention that creative workers rely disproportionately on social benefits.

### 3. Creativity Is Design

"*Dasein* is design," the Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling somewhat provocatively states. *Dasein*, or "being there," is a philosophi-

cal term borrowed from the philosopher Martin Heidegger that refers to the human condition, the empirical presentness of human beings. Today, Oosterling writes, “every *Dasein* is styled through the consumption of design. Without design, *Dasein* is meaningless.”<sup>29</sup> In simpler terms, our lives are almost entirely “designed”; living nowadays is not a matter of surviving but of designing. We shape our lives by means of design. Glance at the layout of a modern living room and it is obvious: virtually nothing escapes the overwhelming power of design. A chair, a sofa, a lampshade: they are all objects that serve to express personal identity.

“Everything has become design, and design is everywhere,” the design critic Lucas Verweij said in 2014 at *What Design Can Do*, Europe’s biggest multidisciplinary design conference. With sponsors like the Dutch Creative Council and the Creative Industries Fund NL, the Amsterdam conference is one of the Dutch creative industry’s new showpieces. It clearly illustrates that the scope of design has long since ceased to be limited to living room interiors and computer exteriors and plays an ever-wider role in everyday life. *Design thinking, social design, food design, bio design, interaction design, transition design* – the term “design” is used in a growing number of fields. Not only finished products but creative processes, distribution chains, and the general organization of things can be designed.<sup>30</sup> And that’s not all: increasingly, the problems of the world are viewed as design issues. Design can be defined as *problem-solving*. The *What Design Can Do* organization “calls on designers to take responsibility and consider how their work can impact the wider society.”<sup>31</sup>

What does design’s unstoppable momentum tell us about our notions of creativity? Has design become the equivalent of creativity? Have artists been replaced by designers? Or, inversely, are designers becoming artists? It seems to be a chicken-and-egg problem. But perhaps all these questions are outdated. Didn’t the distinction between design and art blur long ago? Design objects are far from rare in museums these days. In this sense, the utopian

mission of the historical avant-garde (Dadaism, expressionism, constructivism, etc.), which set out to unify art with life a century ago, now seems to have been realized. The general aestheticization of contemporary life has placed design at the center of modern capitalist culture. The designer-artist role fits the ideals of industrial creative discourse, because it links perfectly to a rationalist interpretation of creativity: it is applicable, steerable and controllable. It therefore makes sense that Jon Elster's interpretation of creativity as being about "maximizing aesthetic value under constraints" is influential.

Irony compels me to point out that this strongly goes against the nineteenth-century British Arts and Crafts movement's belief in the importance of design. Members of the movement believed they could resist the uniformity of industrial design through the use of applied arts and craftsmanship. The Arts and Crafts movement's socialist, romantic, anticapitalist project was founded on the belief that applied arts could improve the world.<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, however, in the present-day embrace of design, which seeks harmony between practicality and beauty, once-hated capitalism has become not an obstacle but an ally. Oosterling is relentless with regard to this modern design discourse: "Under hyperconsumerism, product design positions itself precisely at the threshold between abundance and scarcity. Though in practice the discipline depends on abundance (mass production), ideologically it feeds on scarcity (uniqueness)."

#### **4. Creativity Is Active**

Another normative view on creativity that appears in industry discourse is that it is "active" in character. Creativity is a matter of doing, of *enterprise*; it arises because people are actively searching for solutions (i.e., engaging in *creative problem-solving and design thinking*) or frequenting various creative work environments that stimulate an orientation toward problem-solving. The powerful recent concept of cultural or creative entrepreneurship confirms this

view of creativity as active. Since the economic crisis, many governments have placed their bets on “entrepreneurship” within the traditional cultural sectors, encouraging self-reliance, self-governance and personal responsibility in various ways. In its quest for economic growth, the European Commission, in the policy document “Creative Europe 2014–2020,” heavily promotes the boosting of entrepreneurship. It is clear that this new school of thought is mainly inspired by competitive economic motives, but the success with which it has spread to various creative sectors (resistance remains small-scale) shows that there is more to it than that. The present popularity of the belief in creativity’s economic potential is indisputably related to the worldwide economic crisis. When people are thrown into self-reliance, the optimistic philosophy of entrepreneurship becomes attractive. This is not a new thought but part of a long tradition, with it has social, political, philosophical and even religious roots. According to the Danish philosopher Bent Meier Sørensen, beneath the modern belief in the entrepreneur as a *savior* in times of crisis lurks a deeply religious idea: “The entrepreneur today is to come as a savior with no less God-like qualities than earlier saviors. [...] [W]e see that the entrepreneur is in fact a messiah, heralded by the high priests of what, with Saint Simon and Auguste Comte, we can call the Church of Humanity.”<sup>33</sup>

Quoting the 2000 report “The Creative Potential of Denmark,” Sørensen shows that there is a direct link between the modern era and Greek mythology. A crisis, a savior (the cultural entrepreneur), and a monster (globalization and advancing monopolies) all play a role in the Danish report, with “national prosperity” as the general objective. The Greeks made use of gods; in present-day society, that transcendental idea is replaced by an “infinite creative subjectivity.” This is no longer embodied by the artist but by the cultural (or creative) entrepreneur. The act of *salvation* is the act of *creation*, according to Sørensen. “The strategy of injecting creativity into business by means of the cultural entrepreneur embodies a myth of a demiurge, a quasi-god.”<sup>34</sup>

This may sound grotesque and abstract, but it is in no way far-fetched. The Romantics, after all, replaced God with the “creative imagination of man” in the premodern God-nature-humanity scheme.<sup>35</sup> Two centuries later, the present-day romantic spirit still sees the divine in human creativity. The promise of entrepreneurship is directly linked to this fact. It appeals to our need for self-expression and gives us a feeling of independence and individual autonomy. The individual-entrepreneur actively imparts meaning to his or her own life and career. Entrepreneurship emphasizes traits such as faith in one’s own ability to do things; a certain amount of personal control; proactivity; the urge for achievement; and, most of all, self-reliance and consequently independence.<sup>36</sup> These values fit seamlessly into the modernist belief that we can design the world, which, to a considerable extent, is moving from the social level to the individual (entrepreneurial) level. It is something from which national and international governments can benefit. The *agents of change* are the creative entrepreneurs, who seize the opportunities of the day.

Entrepreneurship is not only a new reality but also a powerful idea. The sociologists Campbell Jones and Anna-Maria Murtola argue that this idea (or ideology) is not neutral or descriptive but functions as a “sublime object” to which various kinds of positivity can be ascribed. Our celebration of modern entrepreneurship (i.e., human creativity) is dogmatic and one-sided and ignores the negative aspects. According to Jones and Murtola, it creates the illusion that entrepreneurship is detached from or even opposes the capitalist system, that it is a depoliticized, liberating “act of rebellion.” This is achieved in two ways: 1) by neutralizing the capitalist economy by looking at it as “the economy,” which functions as an unbiased, universal background for entrepreneurship, and 2) by seeing entrepreneurship as a generic form of human creativity and a universal basis for human interaction. Through these two strategies, entrepreneurship expands the scope of capitalist logic to present itself as “the ultimate foundation of human life in society.”<sup>37</sup>

The emergence of variations such as “social entrepreneurship,” “creative entrepreneurship” (*hippies with business plans*) and “moral entrepreneurship,” according to Jones and Murtola, is not about withdrawing from capitalism but about integrating economic views with domains that were previously almost totally separate from them. “In doing so, we are using economic, and specifically capitalist categories to organize social life,” they write. “This has significant repercussions for how we live and how we think about life today.” Their criticism is severe. It is not aimed at individual entrepreneurs, however, but at a particular idea of entrepreneurship born of a blind collective imagination that refuses to face that idea’s dark sides and fundamental power structures. By viewing entrepreneurship as an innocent, positive concept, people ignore the fact that it is not an isolated category but is essentially linked to larger social shifts with their own normative frameworks.

## **5. Creativity Is Innovation**

This last notion about creativity is deeply intertwined with the previous one. An active interpretation of creativity, after all, implies a concrete, usable and innovative outcome. “Innovation” is one of the central terms in current discussions surrounding the creative industries. Creativity and innovation nowadays appear to be two sides of the same coin. Often, the two terms seem to be interchangeable. “Being creative,” in modern parlance, means “being innovative.” Of course, the reality is more complicated than that. Creativity as such has no direction or purpose; innovation is a concrete striving to create something new. Innovating means effecting change, and for that, creativity is needed. In this sense, innovation is, as the economist Richard Caves puts it, “the visible tip of the iceberg of everyday creativity.”<sup>38</sup> In the context of the creative industries, creativity seems to wholly serve innovation. With the shift from culture to the creative industries, increasing emphasis is being placed on innovation. This is mainly due to the fact that the idea of the creative industries is so strongly related to the idea of

change and transformation. “Creative destruction” is a term frequently used in economics, usually with reference to the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter’s theory of innovation. He interpreted creative imagination as a process of innovation, but in contrast to Karl Marx, who had previously used the term, Schumpeter saw the process of “creative destruction” not as a threat but as a confirmation of a successful capitalist system. The successful application of new technologies, such as the MP3 and online video streaming, destroys old ones, such as the cassette tape. In present-day global politics and economics, this idea of innovation is becoming increasingly dominant.

And things have even gone further than that. In what is referred to as “disruptive destruction,” one technological service replaces another overnight. The aim is not strategy for the *purpose* of innovation; rather, innovation *is* the strategy. This Silicon Valley mentality is typical of startup companies and entrepreneurs who are searching for continuous innovation through digital technologies such as apps, open data and virtual reality. A senior executive of Netflix, when asked recently whether he employed an innovation strategy, simply replied, “No.” Innovation, he implied, was such an integral part of the company that such a strategy would be superfluous.<sup>39</sup>

The enthusiasm that accompanies this strategy calls to mind the permanent drive for renewal that modern art evinced at the beginning of the previous century. Like the early modernists, contemporary designer-artists such as the Dutchman Daan Roosegaarde speak of an “old” world and a “new” one and argue that innovation will improve the world. In a way, the parallels between the present-day belief in innovation and the utopianism of the twentieth-century avant-garde demonstrate the enduring presence of the modernist belief in progress, but now with a specific focus on the consumer market. As ironic as it sounds, Silicon Valley can be seen as the present-day avant-garde.

Garnham (2005) points to the fact that within the domain of the creative industries, such radical technological innovation is not really relevant for many fields, such as theatre, dance and sculpture. Artistic renewal is essentially different from the continuous change that the present-day culture of innovation implies. Nevertheless, the dominant mantra is: More innovation is better! After all, who could be against progress?

Is this really that desirable? Could too much innovation be harmful? The first problem is one of measurability. It is less problematic with technological innovation, but in the case of aesthetically and artistically oriented cultural expressions, determining the value of the new is difficult, to say the least. Whether the work of someone like Gustav Mahler represents progress can be determined only afterwards, many years later. A second, more fundamental problem is the basic modernist assumption that renewal, driven by the creative industries or economy, can get us out of social and economic crises. The implicit assumption is that the current crisis has to do with a failure to adequately and rapidly respond to changing circumstances (by being rigid, lagging behind and such).<sup>40</sup> The question arises of how far this is the true reason for the crisis. According to the German philosopher Herman Lübbe, we should be talking about a more fundamental crisis: one of orientation. He posits that progress does not always give us a means of solving the problems it causes. In fact, the rapid acceleration of change has the paradoxical consequence of decreasing rather than increasing human problem-solving skills. Unintended side effects pile up faster and faster, and we feel at a loss as to how to deal with the future. The result is that people experience the fundamental limits of human adaptation to processes of change in both the individual and the social arenas. In other words: seeking to innovate all at once leads to chaos, not structure.<sup>41</sup>

## In Conclusion

What can reasonably be deduced from the dominant views on creativity described above? Apart from their inevitable overlap and mutual dependency, we can say that roughly two ethical positions can be drawn from this pool of interpretations: 1) economic *utility* is the highest good, and bringing *satisfaction* to as many people as possible is crucial (we can call this *economic utilitarianism*), and 2) individuals should express themselves and develop their talents in a way that does justice to their own *unique* essence (we can call this romantic expressivism). These initially apparently incompatible assumptions in fact go hand in hand. In this context, authenticity is no longer defined as introspection and intimacy with oneself (“know thyself”) – this would imply that the capitalist outside world should be rejected – but as self-creation, as outside appearance (“be yourself”). This second view, which is performative in nature (things must be shown), fits perfectly within a capitalist culture that relies on permanent renewal in both life and work. In this context, authenticity is synonymous with *difference* or *distinction*. Those who are able to present themselves as different from others are the successful ones. And this is where commerce creeps in. Witness the slogans “Design your own life” (Ikea), “Be original” (Nike), “Drive your way” (Hyundai), “Dare to be different” (ElleGirl), and, of course, “Think different” (Apple). We can call this ethos a kind of *romantic utilitarianism*, and we can connect it to the history of the creative industries.

## The Artist: A Model Creative Employee?

Now that I have given a rough sketch of the dominant views on creativity that guide the discourse of the industry, it is time to weigh the pros and cons. How does the artist fit into the social, political, moral and economic space of the creative industries? Is he or she the dreamed-of model employee, or has the antithesis culture–

economy been resolved in favor of the economy? Is art a superfluous category if, as Paolo Virno argues, its function in society has dissolved into everyday economics like an effervescent tablet in a glass of water? And if that is the case, what relationship to these developments should contemporary artists have? Is an outside position still possible? Is an artist still able to be effective and subversive in an era in which self-development, creativity and authenticity have become central values? These questions are not irrelevant, and in my view, they imply two assumptions:

- 1) "The artist" is *not* a demarcated category with a clear position and function in society but must be seen as the embodiment of social values that are subject to change over time.
- 2) Being an artist implies a form of social detachment, a mode of (relative and temporary) independence from the usual cultural conventions.

To develop my argument further, I will elaborate on these two assumptions.

In contemporary society, nothing seems harder to define than what exactly an artist is. Now that Joseph Beuys' statement "Everyone is an artist" has become a commonplace, the concept of the artist seems quite vague. The extensive range of attempts to define what it means to be an artist has yielded a collection of idealized images and a complex system of interpretations. These interpretations have grown out of a range of opinions that often contradict each other: the artistic calling is a natural phenomenon, being an artist means taking a certain position, being an artist is a skill, being an artist is entrepreneurship, and so on. The art world itself has not made the process of definition any easier. Recent decades have seen the emergence of many different types of artist who use a range of professional practices and strategies and operate within a range of social contexts. In their research, Van Winkel

et al. (2012) conclude that the practice of artists has become increasingly hybridized: artists today often operate within different regimes of social value, for example in the worlds of inspiration (the bizarre, the uncommon and the ethereal) and industry (efficient, performative and oriented towards the future). The contemporary artist works both autonomously and as applied artistic labor, meaning in fact that he or she is constantly diversifying; alongside his or her unprofitable autonomous artistic practice, the artist spends much of the working week doing different jobs. According to the researchers, “art” is nowadays more or less “a posh word for a practice of plodding away, moonlighting, small jobs and small assignments.”<sup>42</sup>

The hybrid character of the artist’s existence is of course not an independent phenomenon but a reflection of what has for some time been important at the collective and institutional level: a far-reaching blurring of borders between various regimes of social value. Following the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapelle, whom I quoted above, Van Winkel et al. conclude that in the current post-Fordist labor market the classical competencies of the artist, such as creativity, authenticity, self-development, independence and ingenuity, have taken center stage. In the creative industries but also in an increasing number of other fields, people with higher education are expected to have these competencies.<sup>43</sup> The ideal of authenticity or expressive individualism implies not only a cultural but also an economic logic.

Two different conclusions can be drawn from this: 1) the artist, as keeper of the ideal of expressive individualism (or authenticity), occupies a central position in the current creative economy, and conversely, 2) the social position of the artist is fragile, for it is no longer clear how he or she differs from other creative and self-developing professionals. Whichever conclusion is drawn – and both are valid – the concept of what it means to be an artist does not become much clearer. Where in the first conclusion the separate category of artist seems to dissolve into a more general “creative

class,” in the second, it appears to be a historical category that has fallen from grace. Is “the myth of being an artist,”<sup>44</sup> which is reproduced, dismantled and recharged again and again, definitely over? Are we ready for the so-called *post-artist* – the artist who has broken with all the mythical connotations previously assigned to him but cannot let go of the museums and social privileges that went with them?<sup>45</sup> Or is this “myth” itself a myth that does not do justice to what is really happening in artistic practice?

To answer the questions raised before, I do not consider being an artist to be a clearly defined position; that would do an injustice to the great diversity of artistic practices, disciplines and individual strategies that exists today. Rather, I see art and the position of the artist as embodiments of values, in that I see that practicing art is not morally or politically neutral but rather a value-laden activity that potentially transcends subjectivity. Artistic expressions are not only aesthetic expressions but are also embedded in existential and moral contexts.<sup>46</sup> In light of this, “pure art” is hard to imagine; even in its most minimal and sober form, art has a moral orientation. The Kantian philosophy of the *selflessness of art* is ultimately difficult to maintain when we see that, viewed critically, the art world is full of various interests (status, commerce, distinction, etc.).

In Part I of this essay, I explained how since the Romantic era art has been dominated in different ways and at different levels by values such as self-realization, autonomy and authenticity. Artists were important keepers of the contemporary ideal of giving form to personal ideas and feelings (expressive autonomy).<sup>47</sup> In this project of the self, art, with its central question – “Who am I, as a human being, myself?” – became self-realization, the ultimate expression of human individuality. For the sake of convenience, I will call this development the *primacy of the unique*. I am referring to the artist’s *deeply* rooted contemporary duty of demonstrating the ideal of personal authenticity in various ways – or, as the Dutch poet Willem Kloos put it so clearly at the beginning of the last cen-

tury, “the most individual expression of the most individual emotion.”<sup>48</sup>

This artistic ethos is utterly in line with the contemporary ideals of individual freedom and personal autonomy that characterize contemporary Western culture. Modern-day consumer culture is its capitalist exponent and is characterized by the continuous pressure to be someone else. The creative industries, as a generator of new desires and needs, play an increasingly important and supporting role in capitalist culture. Things that are in the first instance thought up, developed or propagated as small-scale projects often become part of the standardized production processes of big companies. In fact, the creative industries seem to be becoming an essential engine for the continuation and expansion of consumer society. Creating lifestyles, cultural experiences, fantasies, views, opinions and emotions out of a “desire to be different” serves to accomplish the opposite of what is intended, accelerating consumerism on a large scale.<sup>49</sup> Contemporary hipster culture is a good example. The urge to be different that characterizes this “counterculture” is, paradoxically enough, a generator of contemporary consumer culture. In his provocative book *You Are Not So Smart*, the journalist David McRaney gives a striking example to illustrate the mechanism:

[S]ay there is this awesome band no one knows about except you and a few others. They don’t have a record contract or an album. [...] You tell everyone about them as they build a decent fan base. They make an album that sells enough copies to allow them to quit their day jobs. [...] Soon they have a huge fan base and get a record contract and get on the radio and play on the Tonight Show. Now they’ve sold out, so you hate them [...] This brings us to a point. Competition among consumers is the turbine of capitalism.<sup>50</sup>

This quote illustrates how artistic capitalism is reinforced by diversity, by continual competition and by competition between consumers who are all working on the continuous creation and recreation of themselves, each in his or her own way. To put it differently: consumption has increasingly become production. "The consumer becomes the product," Pine and Gilmore state positively, in clarifying their "experience model."

What's a contemporary artists to do? Is it possible for art to play a role in a society in which the boundary between art and commerce seems to be completely blurred and where creative workers are central actors in post-Fordist production? Taking stock of two centuries of romantic and modernist artistic practice, one can conclude that the struggle for individualism, the *primacy of the unique* and the corresponding ideal of expressive autonomy have been highly successful. In Western societies, individuals' personal freedom has increased considerably, and this has created new opportunities for the personal assignment of meaning and individual development. Let's be honest: this can be seen as progress. "Art nowadays is anything people do to achieve self-actualization," Vuyk concludes.

But as these values have become central in Western society and have led, not unproblematically, to an alarming exaggeration of the importance of the autonomous individual, the question arises of whether there is still space for other visions, opinions and interpretations of human existence or even totally different concepts of society. These alternative visions, or so-called dismeasures, have the potential to show that everything that is could also be entirely different, and so they create a sense of possibility. Every "dismeasure" can become a measure, which conversely means a previous measure can become a dismeasure.<sup>51</sup> Yet the question arises of whether the political and moral reality of the creative industries offers enough space for dismeasures. Are they able to generate cultural products that can justify their own existence without losing their alternative potential? In other words: what is the position of

the present-day artist in the capitalist culture of authenticity?  
Where can we find dismeasures nowadays? These questions are  
highlighted in the final section of this essay.

### III. The Artist and the Sense of the Whole

*If artists still have a pioneering role to play, it lies in expressing the idea that subjectivity is not something one is given at birth.*

– Ine Gevers, curator

#### Individualism, Uniqueness and Consumption

For nineteen years, the Rotterdam photographer Ad Versluis and the stylist Ellie Uyttenbroek have been combing the streets of various cities, taking people's pictures. Rather than concentrating on the heterogeneity and multiculturalism of city life, they are searching for similarities between people. Their long-term series *Exactitudes* – the title is a combination of “exact” and “attitudes” – is an anthropological sketch of a street scene: it consists of numerous subsets of twelve pictures each of passersby posing against a neutral white background in exactly the same way in exactly the same type of clothing. Each outfit seems to correspond to a specific community, lifestyle or subculture, whether that of an eye-catching group like punks or frat boys or one with a less noticeable style of dress: older women in identical raincoats or young men with a particular sweater-vest look.

The series presents an image of human beings as conformists, as members of the flock. At first sight, the urban streets look heterogeneous, but as one looks more closely and at length, one sees a geographical distribution of particular subcultures and fashion tribes. It is simultaneously striking and fascinating that the photographic subjects do not always seem to realize, or want to, that they are part of a social group. They presumably choose their clothing in an attempt to express individuality and personal authenticity, as we all generally do.

It is this discrepancy between the individual imagination and everyday reality, in particular, that Versluis and Uyttenbroek show so beautifully. In their photographs, we see people who are trying to distinguish themselves, who are seeking singularity and *unique-ness*, but who are to a large degree subject to collective urges. Of course, this applies not only to their clothing but also to their opinions, views, holiday destinations, cars, pets, and so on and so on. In this sense, our modern-day concept of individualism is paradoxical: in our minds we are individualists, but in our behavior we are for the most part social and conformist. We can term this phenomenon “individual collectivism.”

In contemporary sociological circles, academics speak of “light communities” or “new majorities” that are developing next to existing traditional “heavy” communities (the village, church and family). To summarize, group behavior has become “lighter.” Social networks, clubs and associations are generally very accessible but are also very easily abandoned.

Nevertheless, dismissing the individualization of society as a myth is too facile. Those who happen to look at Versluis and Uyttenbroek’s images will see that within a specific dress code there are definitely small variations, and some personal appropriation is possible. One must conclude that Versluis and Uyttenbroek’s typological photo series comprises stylized, artificial collections of people and emphasizes conformity over people’s individual choices to conform to something, or to switch now and then between different social dress codes.

In a 2004 meta-analysis whose title translates as “Individualization is all in the mind,” for which he studied years’ worth of empirical data from the Dutch national social and cultural planning agency, sociologist Paul de Beer states that individualization should be interpreted as a change in *input* rather than as the *output* of individual processes of choice. People’s freedom to choose is increasing, but that does not necessarily mean they make truly different choices. De Beer argues:

When restrictions on people's behavior get less pressing, it does not always lead to different behavior or to behavior becoming less predictable. It is possible, for instance, that in their freedom of choice people orient themselves to the choices of others.<sup>1</sup>

He therefore concludes:

Individualization is all in the mind; this is expressed in the fact that more and more people choose on strictly individual grounds to make the same choices.<sup>2</sup>

So we could say that, though they are apparently mutually exclusive, individualism and collectivism can coexist. People consider themselves individuals, but as individuals people often expose themselves as group animals. This point is often forgotten or denied. Is this a problem? In a way, it is. Someone who pays no attention to the collective structures that partly make up his life and who fails to acknowledge the social web (society) of which he is a part jeopardizes his own freedom of movement as an individual.

To get more insight into what is at stake here, I would like to pose the following question: in what direction is present-day individualism – people's freedom to make their own choices – heading now that "traditional" institutions like the family and the church are less and less influential? The Belgian sociologist Mark Elchardus has an answer. In a 2011 article whose title translates as "Free to walk well-trodden paths," he reaches a conclusion in line with what was discussed in Part II of this essay: our present-day individualism is largely influenced by commercials, media, and above all what Elchardus terms the *capitalism of desire*. Elchardus refers to a new *force guiding behavior* that has been given free rein in our highly developed information society since the departure of faith, ideology, strict adherence to doctrine, obedience and tradition: the quest for *uniqueness* (i.e., authenticity). Behavior is no

longer enforced by external pressures but by internal ones (“be creative,” “be yourself,” “be different”). When one believes oneself to be someone who chooses freely and autonomously, according to Elchardus, one is blind to the various forces (schooling, media, commerce) that increasingly direct our ways of thinking, feeling and doing. The contemporary liberal faith in the individual becomes a new form of control, in which at the collective level individuals are asked to maximize their own potential in every area of life at the individual level. A not unimportant side note is that this “individualism” collectively yields profits (instrumental and economic value). Elchardus therefore sees the following split in the culture:

One of the most important characteristics of contemporary culture is the division between people’s increasing belief in their own uniqueness and the decreasing scope for individuality.<sup>3</sup>

Let’s return for a moment to the point made in the previous section about the unofficial marriage between the romantic ideas of autonomy, self-development and self-expression and the capitalist demand for rationalization and instrumentalization. We could say that in this process, the current belief in (subjective) creativity has become increasingly central, and that it has become a kind of capital – creative capital, whose breeding ground are the creative industries. The artist’s life as a modern paradigm of self-definition seems to have lost its relatively autonomous position. With the market as the place where individuals “shop” for self-actualization and self-creation on both the consumption and production sides, we can say that the autonomy of the artist is reflected in the autonomy of the consumer. Both, after all, strive for individual self-determination, and both seem nowadays to be condemned to the market as the only remaining meeting place for individuals wishing

to connect without losing their independence.<sup>4</sup> Maycroft (2004), writing about the myth of lifestyle culture, concludes:

Consumption can [...] be seen increasingly as a form of self-expression and the exercise of individuality of which cultural, creative and artistic expression are core elements.<sup>5</sup>

The autonomy of the artist no longer serves itself (*l'art pour l'art*) but in fact serves autonomy in relation to other domains of life. This is what it boils down to over and over: being yourself and/or becoming yourself is best done in the consumer market of dreams and illusions. And in the competition to get the attention of the “prosumers” (a portmanteau of “consumers” and “producers”), art loses; it has value only when it fits into the consumer’s mode of personal expression.

The idea of the creative industries is closely intertwined with the consumerist quest for personal expression. It operates to a large extent in the *primacy of the unique*. Whether on the side of the consumer or the producer, uniqueness, the primacy of being self-oriented, takes center stage. With the focus on creating innovation and *novelty*, the cultural, symbolic and aesthetic artifacts generated within the creative industries compete in many ways with other products on the consumer market. This was briefly mentioned in the previous section and must be emphasized: the structure and linguistic symbolism of the creative industries contribute to the further promotion of “consumerism as a way of life” and continuously fuel the desire for more – and, more importantly, for the new.<sup>6</sup> The creation of artificial scarcity plays a central role here. In the creative industries, creativity is used to generate scarcity. There is an unavoidable irony, however: while creative-industries discourse is often surrounded by a semblance of social and ecological sustainability, the contrary is often the case. Creating human desires and needs increases pressure on social and ecological processes. Deljana Iossifova, a research fellow working on the

British project *Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment*, concluded in 2013 that these claims of sustainability were, in many cases, simply untenable. Her conclusion is blunt:

Once creative activity takes place following the logics and aiming for the goals of the market, it serves the sole purpose of reproducing the capitalist mode of production from within the system, and no longer works to serve alternative, or original, values.<sup>7</sup>

And this is perhaps the biggest problem of creative-industries discourse: it threatens to undermine precisely that which cannot be transformed into the standards and desires of capitalist logic: everyday social and cultural human relationships.

## **Authenticity as a Social Phenomenon**

Now that the ideal of authenticity has increasingly become part of capitalist logic, one might wonder what remains of that ideal. According to Charles Taylor, the romantic project of self-development and self-expression as such is not exactly exempt from problems. In his 1992 book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor sketches a scenario in which the ideal of authenticity collapses because of its one-sided interpretation. Through overemphasizing the individual and individuality, we in contemporary society seem to have lost our sense of how to live together. Engagement, self-sacrifice, solidarity, empathy, reciprocity: such human traits cannot easily find their way in a consumer society in which competition between self-creating individuals is paramount. In a society in which individuals have turned inward, the ability and motivation to be an active citizen crumbles away. Taylor, using the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, speaks of a “soft tyranny” that starts with the impersonal mechanisms (often political) that rule modern life. As long as

the authorities deliver the necessities for living, people tend to retreat into their private lives when the world around them gets too large-scale and complicated. "Once participation declines, once the lateral associations that were its vehicles wither away, the individual citizen is left alone in the face of the vast bureaucratic state and feels, correctly, powerless,"<sup>8</sup> Taylor states. The loss of active citizenship is in fact the loss of *political* freedom. I will address this more extensively later.

In this process, the moral horizon of modern individual identity, as Taylor formulates it, fades out of view. The individual is not a delimited being but an embodied and dialogical one that cannot define himself without a relationship to what is common in his culture. The self can achieve self-realization only when it is able to orient itself in moral space and has a relationship to normative values that transcend the self (Taylor calls these "hyper-goods"). In sum, authenticity does not imply reclusiveness but contact.<sup>9</sup>

The American philosopher Charles Guignon (2004) draws a similar conclusion in calling authenticity "fundamentally and irreducibly a social virtue"<sup>10</sup> According to Guignon, the current romantic interpretation of authenticity as a purely personal project does not do justice to the social function of the endeavor. It overemphasizes authenticity as a matter of finding and realizing a personal identity, of getting in touch with one's own feelings, longings and convictions in order to express them in the best possible way. The underlying assumption of this current view of authenticity is that there is something fundamentally false and impure about social life, that the world outside the self – to use the Rousseauian term – is inauthentic. The accent is placed entirely on self-realization and self-possession; this extreme concentration on one's own psychological life leads to a form of self-absorption. The American philosopher Somogy Varga, in his well-thought out study *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal* (2012), goes a step further and points to a link between current capitalist demands for authenticity and self-realization on the one hand and the worldwide

epidemic of depression and exhaustion on the other. On the basis of several studies on depression and exhaustion in contemporary societies, he suggests that depression, in large degree, comprises the dark side of the contemporary struggle to achieve authenticity and self-actualization. Continually putting forward one's own personality and emotions at work in order to keep one's job can eventually lead to "exhaustion of the self."<sup>11</sup>

But what is the alternative? In what other ways might we interpret the ideal of authenticity? We could begin by acknowledging that authenticity is not only a personal virtue but also has a social component. The ability to develop one's own ideas, desires, feelings and convictions, even if they go against dominant beliefs, is, after all, a condition of an open and free society. Authenticity not only means having personal integrity and taking responsibility but also implies a duty to create and maintain the sort of society in which that ideal can be realized.<sup>12</sup> It is a double-edged sword.

However, the creative industries, with their underlying dominant normative interpretation of creativity as a form of self-expression, undermine this social aspect in a certain way. After all, the fact that creating and expressing authenticity have become a dominant mode of valorization doesn't mean everyone is successful at it. To be successful, one must know the rules of the game, know and sense how to make an authentic impression. Nowadays, designers and journalists are increasingly judged on the way they express themselves. Showing sincerity is often decisive. But who determines what is sincere and what is not? To do so, one must make use of the normative frameworks at hand, which does not make the symbolic economy of authenticity any less hierarchical or limiting than the authoritarian and professional work cultures of the past. In other words, even within creative-industries discourse, little attention is paid to the underlying social structures (the social and normative rules) that contribute to the joint recognition of authenticity.

As a consequence, the phenomenon of creative or cultural entrepreneurship is rendered even more vague. Putting the individual in the position of having to sell herself continually in the market of work and well-being, to present herself and fight for her place, makes it almost impossible for that individual to pay attention to the underlying collective logic. In relation to this, the most accepted definition of the creative industry does not help, either. It focuses on “individual skills, talents and creativity” and measures itself against other industries with reference to its “expressive value”<sup>13</sup> and “intellectual property.”

The quest for uniqueness (and therefore scarcity) that characterizes contemporary consumer culture, and which is also the essential ingredient for the creative industries, brings us to the issue of the modern artistic calling. What can the artist’s relationship be to a culture that has embraced the artist’s own (romantic) principles of expressive autonomy, the primacy of the self-image, and self-aestheticization? Is there another outside position for the artist to adopt?

It’s said that artists do everything differently than other people. Perhaps so, but this is exactly what current commercial culture excels at. If contemporary artists want to do more than to make a financial contribution to the tourist and leisure industry,<sup>14</sup> maybe they need to stop trying to be different. Nicolas Bourriaud, director of the prestigious *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts* in Paris, advocated precisely this when asked about the social position of the contemporary artist:

I am of the opinion that an attitude based on presenting yourself as “different” no longer works. Being different is something that has to be realized, not something that can be determined beforehand.<sup>15</sup>

## The Social Turn in Contemporary Art

The prominent British art critic Claire Bishop speaks of a “social turn”<sup>16</sup> in contemporary art, the Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling argues for the artist as a “public worker,”<sup>17</sup> and the Dutch sociologist Willem Schinkel observes that at the so-called “end of art,” art has more in common with sociology than with philosophy, as some others have said.<sup>18</sup> What do these statements tell us about today’s art world? Do they represent a paradigm shift within current art practice? Or is that a too extensive claim, and should we instead see them as part of today’s hybrid, pluralistic art practice? Definitive statements are hard to formulate in this case.

What can be established is that a significant contingent in modern art has left behind the *primacy of the unique* and is increasingly interested in collectivism, cooperation and direct involvement with social events. This tendency is not limited to well-known art movements such as *community art* or *relational aesthetics* but also pervades other, more “autonomous” art practices. So perhaps the following maxim of the German Romanticist Ernst Hohenemser (1870–1954) is no longer contradictory:

Art defends the individual against society; morals defend society against the individual.

How should we judge this social turn? What exactly is at stake? Is it a reaction to modern consumer culture, which is supported by the romantic idea of being and becoming oneself? And if this is so, in what way can it serve as an alternative? To formulate an answer, we must take a closer look at the concept of community, from which art has long protected the individual. The work of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy is relevant here; the question of how we should speak about community is a pivotal issue in his work.<sup>19</sup> Nancy queries whether the concept of community can have meaning without slipping into totalitarianism. After all, communi-

ties are characterized on the basis of shared traits, and this implies that someone lacking a specific trait could not belong to a particular group. And it is impossible anyway to find a trait that is shared by everyone. For Nancy, it is therefore important to avoid the two extremes: on the one hand, the opinion that a community consists of a collection of individuals (because then there would no longer be a community) and, on the other hand, the idea that there is a common substance shared by everyone (because then individuality would disappear). The concept of “identity” can be described as that which binds us and at the same time distinguishes us from each other.

In his quest for what community can mean in the modern world, he comes to the conclusion that the “community” or “society” people are currently inclined to idealize never actually existed. Rather, it is an idea, a myth, that people long for, according to Nancy. Of course, he does not dismiss the actual face-to-face existence of communities, even in modern times; that should be made clear. But a community – a nation-state or transnational network rather than a village – cannot exist, he argues, without a mental concept of it. This idea of “imagined communities” was introduced in 1983 by the political scientist Benedict Anderson, in an effort to explain the existence and spread of nationalism in the nineteenth century. The process of the formation of a nation is not only strengthened through the imagining of it but also through the expression of it (rhetoric, tradition, national myths, etc.). And this is a process of ongoing struggle between competing ideas.<sup>20</sup>

But according to Nancy, the idea of the “imagined community” is no longer tenable and often leads to violence and exclusion. He would therefore rather see community not as a “project of fusion” but as an “exposure of singularities, so that each citizen has to ‘expose’ their particular identities to others, through some form of communication and interaction.”<sup>21</sup> To formulate this in a different way, community is for Nancy not a matter of shared identity or harmony but rather a whirlpool of bonds and separations that find

their commonality in “being with and next to each other.” He grounds this idea in the fundamental existential assumption that the human “being” cannot exist without “being-with.” People do not *converge* with each other but are continually *linked* to one another.<sup>22</sup> Nancy succinctly sums up this fundamental social-anthropological view as follows: “To be alone, you need another.”<sup>23</sup>

Nancy’s point of view about community (society) could also be explained as a distinction between “community” and “living together.” In this view, community is a system of inclusion and exclusion, an imagined political construction that has trouble handling the complex interculturalism of modern global society (think of phenomena like xenophobia). According to Schinkel (2012), in several European countries, this is leading to a kind of “neoliberal communitarianism,” in which “personal responsibility” paradoxically seems to go hand in hand with a kind of conservative communitarianism (or nationalism) that emphasizes “community.” In practice, this comes down to “the transfer of governmental tasks to individual citizens, coupled with social rhetoric, meaning that the moral deficiency caused by ‘individual responsibility’ should be solved by the citizens as well.”<sup>24</sup>

This is something different from “living together,” which is best described as a loose potpourri of social relations that essentially cannot form a coherent unity but do reflect human social reality. Society should be understood as the act of living together, with an essential tension between singularity and pluralism. According to Nancy, living together means always being in flux, and consequently, a society or community always “does not work” or is “disrupted” (is an inoperative community).<sup>25</sup> The Dutch cultural philosopher Laurens ten Kate summarizes Nancy’s point:

Society “is” nothing in itself but simply “is.” Its “being” should be interpreted in a dynamic way, as continually going back and forth between a closing and opening of singular and plural identities.<sup>26</sup>

For Nancy, the challenge for modern humans is to cope with this tension. In his book *Being Singular Plural* (1996) – around which the Guggenheim Museum in New York organized an exhibition in 2010 – he makes a passionate plea for “compassion” – not in the form of altruism or sympathy but as “the contact of being with one another in this turmoil.”<sup>27</sup> The modern inability to think in a productive way about society and the decay of public space is essentially caused by the fact that we have forgotten what our existential condition is: namely, that “being” is in the first instance “being-with.”

Keeping this in mind, I would like to return to those modern artists who are engaged with collectivity, relationships, collaboration and so on. One could see their preoccupation with searching for, formulating and organizing alternatives as an attempt to help the existential human condition of “being-with” to flourish again. This mission is not new; it emerged in the 1990s and has precedents far back into the previous century. A splendid example of a socially critical approach in art could be seen in an exhibition held in Amsterdam in 1994, whose title translated as “I + the other”; its curator, Ine Gevers, concludes:

If artists still have a pioneering role to play, it lies in expressing the idea that subjectivity is not something one is given at birth.<sup>28</sup>

She is essentially implying – in agreement with Nancy – that something precedes the birth of the “ego”; human existence is more than a purely subjective matter. Artists can take a leading role if they are willing to discuss “our own ‘subjectivity,’ which doesn’t amount to much anyway.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Willem Schinkel, social commitment is no longer the exception but characterizes a fundamental change in the dominant culture of today’s art world. He states:

In Ecoart, (New) Community Art, Social Work Art, or Relational Aesthetics, and from Beuys' *7000 Oaks* to Hirschhorn's *Hotel Demokratie*, to name only some of the most iconic examples, art has increasingly turned toward what is often called "research" or "investigation" into highly public issues.<sup>30</sup>

According to Schinkel, twentieth-century art was dominated mainly by self-referentiality (with the central question being "What is art?"), but since roughly the beginning of the twenty-first century, art has been moving in the direction of "defamiliarization" ("How can art investigate the social world?"). Art questions the social reality (of which its audience is part). The result is that the naturalness of day-to-day social reality is no longer taken for granted and the observer may experience a form of alienation. The artist uses his outsider position to relate to the everyday world in a defamiliarizing way. In this sense, he can be compared to a sociologist: he is an outsider even when he attempts to say something about outsiders.<sup>31</sup>

To put it differently: an increasingly dominant movement in contemporary art seems to focus on the *primacy of the common*: what is regarded as important is what goes on *between* people, not what happens *inside* the human head (singular). Call it "relationalism," "intersubjectivity" or "inter-esse" (being-between); it all comes down to the same thing: "being-with" is increasingly becoming a central theme for contemporary artists. They take issue with our view of human beings as authentic individuals, in the realization that "individuals" is not an accurate description of what we are.

The central question of contemporary art – formulated by Kees Vuyk in 2002 as "Who am I, as a human being, myself?" – seems to have been replaced by "Where and with whom do I exist?" This is a loose sociological translation of the question the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk poses in his magnum opus, *Spheres* (2011): "Where is man?" For Sloterdijk, man is initially a "builder of

spheres,” making his way in a world that is getting ever bigger and more cluttered, or – to phrase it in his poetic style – going from bubbles to globes to foam.

In a way, this shift of focus in art constitutes a return to the age-old humanist notion of *sensus communis*. The concept took a backseat in the course of modernization and was flattened out into something akin to “common sense.” The idea of *sensus communis* has been elaborated on by many philosophers; Immanuel Kant’s universal theory of taste is probably the best-known case. In the context of contemporary art, we should understand *sensus communis* not as the universal ability to judge on the basis of reason but more as a common sensibility that appeals to shared feelings and emotions. “*Sensus communis*” is best translated as “the sense of the whole.”<sup>32</sup> Because art is directed at the world of the senses, it has the power to contribute to this feeling – which is not the same as creating harmony and consensus but is about paying attention to the whole.

When focusing on the *primacy of the common*, art tries to claim the general sources of creativity that the economy now threatens to hijack. The economy depends more and more on creativity, and this is not without its dangers. Every instrumentalization of creativity also restrains it; it privatizes what is common. And creativity draws its inspiration precisely from that which is common.<sup>33</sup> The art historian Claire Bishop, in her study of socially collaborative projects, establishes that these shared areas are used nowadays by artists “to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life.”<sup>34</sup> In this respect, the intersubjective space created in these art projects serves as a medium for artistic research. Even when these artists’ or groups of artists’ output varies enormously, they share a belief in the “empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas.”<sup>35</sup> In these cases, art possesses the ability to become political, not because it is geared at external politics but because it

seeks to redesign what is visible and what is not. Artists always play some form of politics.

## **The Artist: An Artistic Sociologist?**

In 1973, the British conceptual artist Stephen Willats published a remarkable small book with the revealing title *The Artist as an Investigator of Changes in Social Cognition and Behaviour*. Willats, who at that time still moved in the margins of the British art world, set himself the task of researching and redefining the function of art in society. For Willats, in the first instance this meant a departure from the museum, where, according to the young artist, the relationship between subject and object (the observer and the artwork) had taken on such a mythic quality that all that was possible was the passive consumption of monumental, unassailable institutional art. “An artwork,” Willats writes, “is a product of society – a social phenomenon in which the audience is all-important in giving meaning and validity.”<sup>36</sup> In the decades that followed, in cooperation with various local communities, Willats initiated a wide range of “social research projects” in residential neighborhoods, in apartment buildings, on tennis courts and in nightclubs.

His objective was to investigate the social function of art, looking at both the concept of “authorship” and the relationship between artist and observer. Aided by his knowledge of other disciplines – sociology, systems analysis, cybernetics, cognitive psychology, philosophy – Willats explored self-organizing, nonhierarchical, dynamic and intersubjective forms of cooperation. In projects with titles like *Trying To Forget Where We Came From* (1977) and *Sorting Out Other People’s Lives* (1978), he encouraged participants to look at their surroundings in a different way and to capture them through sound recordings, photography and film.

It should come as no surprise that Willats’ 1973 pamphlet was recently republished and has attracted attention anew. The fact

that Willats is considered a pioneer of site-specific, participatory and conceptual art indicates that the subjects he addressed in the 1970s are gaining notice once more. This was not always the case. From the 1980s on, with the emergence of the era of Thatcher ("There is no such thing as society") and Reagan, such ideas became taboo. Everything with a slight touch of the S-word – socialism – was consigned to the margins. But things have changed since the beginning of this century. As early as 1997, in her essay "Art, Ethnography and Social Change," the journalist and artist Jane Kelly was observing that the British art world was once again making room for questions about art's function and place in society and about the relationship between observer and artist. According to Kelly, Willats, who has worked hard since the 1970s to develop and realize his ideas about art's function in society, was an important pioneer in this area.

Willats is a good example of an artist who broadened his field of work in an earlier era to areas of culture where previously only anthropologists, sociologists and social movements had been involved. One could say that Willats was present at the inception of the "defamiliarization" process in the arts described by the sociologist Willem Schinkel (2010). Schinkel is not the only one who sees a similarity between his field and contemporary art. According to his fellow sociologist Ton Bevers, many socially engaged contemporary artists put themselves in the shoes of social scientists: balancing between distance and commitment (a sociological virtue), they practice fieldwork, participate in social settings and reflect on their outsider position. Bevers (2011), who researched contemporary commitment in the arts in a seminar with students, says:

The words artists repeated over and over in justifying their engagement – asked or unasked – were "ponder," "reflect," "contemplate," "think," "research," and "exchange points of view." It is not about direct activism but "scholarship with commitment," to quote Bourdieu again.<sup>37</sup>

Artists as sociologists? It would be too simplistic to put it that way. After all, there are more differences than similarities between sociologists and artists. Nevertheless, it is interesting to reflect on the way contemporary artistic practice resembles the social sciences on a deeper level. I won't say that artists are slowly becoming sociologists or anthropologists in disguise but rather that contemporary artists foreground a certain *sociological consciousness or imagination* in their artistic practice. By consciousness, I mean the notion that people are largely interdependent and that their lives take place to a large extent within the social connections they form with each other. The German sociologist Norbert Elias formulated this simple basic assumption even more pithily by answering the question "What is sociology?" as follows:

To understand what sociology is all about, one has to look at oneself from a distance, to see oneself as one human being among others.<sup>38</sup>

This position is increasingly becoming familiar in much contemporary art. In this regard, it is important to mention that it is a truism in sociology that in times of social crisis, when social relations are shaken up, sociological consciousness will be awakened.

This sociological consciousness is formulated more deliberately by some artists than by others. To give an example, the Dutch artist Melle Smets worked with a sociologist, Joost van Onna, on his art project *Turtle 1*. For this noted project, they travelled together to Ghana's Suame Magazine area, the heart of the West African recycling industry for scrap cars from Europe. They worked closely with local engineers to answer the research question "What happens when you build a car in Ghana and bring it back to the West?" and in three months they designed and built a brand-new car, the Turtle 1. By going through the manufacturing process as a kind of hands-on research, they not only sought to gain insight into the work, creativity and self-reliance of this informal economy

but also created opportunities for movement and change within the local community.<sup>39</sup>

This blend of art and social science does not just originate with artists but can also start from the other side. In his renowned essay “Sociology as Literature” (2010), the famous and influential American sociologist Richard Sennett (once a cellist) argues for a revaluation of narrative in the social sciences. He is talking about more than just clear writing, as he explained in a 2010 lecture in Amsterdam. The point, he said, was to put the feeling of lived experience – *Erlebnis* – on paper.<sup>40</sup>

Sennett is not the first to formulate this position, though. In 1973, the American sociologist Robert Nisbet wrote in his provocative work *Sociology as an Art Form* that sociology was more related to art than to the earlier methods of the natural sciences. He cited similarities between the way nineteenth-century social thinkers like Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim created new landscapes of imagination – for instance, by observing the differences between rural and urban living – and the efforts of the great impressionists of the era to capture the same phenomena just as insistently and expressively.

*Lived experience* is often pivotal in the works of artists who give the sociological imagination a prominent place in their work. I will discuss some examples that give further insight into this. I could have mentioned many artists or art projects, but I have limited myself to three. The choice is somewhat arbitrary, but I have tried to choose varied artists and artistic practices.

The internationally operating artist **Jeanne van Heeswijk** (b. 1965) has said:

From within the realm of art I try to create platforms where people can meet. It may seem easy to intervene in this way, but during my career I have discovered how difficult it can be to achieve this in collaboration with the community

you focus on. It is vital that I am inside the community, become a part of it, and develop the ability to “listen.”<sup>41</sup>

Since 1993, Van Heeswijk has worked on social art projects that take place in public space. In her interventions, which range from public dinners to large-scale neighborhood projects, she tries to create a setting in which human interaction (meeting face-to-face) is crucial. The underlying idea is that communication and cultural exchange can help to improve quality of life and the environment. This results in tangible work and, often, the emergence of networks or organizations that form during the process (Heeswijk’s projects usually go on for some time). Sometimes she works in installation form: in *Works, Typologies and Capacities 1993–2007* (2007), she used 2,000 potatoes to visualize the network of people and organizations involved in her projects in the period from 1993 to 2007.

Van Heeswijk’s work is often called “community art.” However, she rejects this term, saying it overemphasizes the educational role of art made with residents of a neighborhood and makes the artist the primary active agent. She prefers to describe her work as “contemplation that gets your hands dirty”<sup>42</sup>: here, the artist is not an outsider but a committed observer who, in cooperation with a selected community, tries to expose the complexity of the way humans live together. “The interesting thing about the visual arts is that they are still in a relatively autonomous position with space to develop new ideas,” Van Heeswijk has said. “From this position I hand people tools with which they can influence their own surroundings. Giving people access to cultural capital, that is what I call politics.”<sup>43</sup>

It is important to point out that her commitment does not seem to be based on an ideological worldview or a desire to disrupt “the system” but rather on a general notion of communication, individual contact and participation in everyday life.<sup>44</sup> This approach suggests a view of reality that sociologists call *social-constructivist*: people construct their own reality through interacting with others.



*Works, Typologies and Capacities 1993–2004,*  
Jeanne van Heeswijk and Maurits de Bruijn (Berlin, 2004). Photo: Jeanne van Heeswijk

Learning, in the broadest sense of the word, should be interpreted as a social process that is realized through interaction with the environment. What Van Heeswijk aims to do is create alternative realities.

I mold reality. You could call me a contemporary portrait painter. I create portraits of reality – of society – in cooperation with others, but they're three-dimensional and restricted in time.<sup>45</sup>

The British artist **Rory Pilgrim** (b. 1988) has stated:

As an artist, I want to communicate and connect with people by opening dialogue with others. Questions became a fundamental starting point for me because I could communicate with other people openly, instead of making statements or insisting that I have answers. In the works of mine that are titled with questions, questions are used to create a collective and individual experience of reflection.<sup>46</sup>

In Pilgrim's work, the pendulum swings between distance and commitment, and mostly in the direction of the latter. Starting from the feminist maxim "The personal is the political," he addresses social issues like injustice and discrimination. Through engineering group activities, happenings and events, he seeks to create the temporary conditions for shared experience. A striking example is *Can We Leave Things As They Are?* (2010), a combination of social sculpture and performance, which calls on the elderly to participate in a conversation about society and their role in it. In an empty room, Pilgrim installed a circle of chairs around a bonsai tree and hung a simple bulletin board, like the ones found in community centers and churches. After the conversation, the participants were presented with three possible conclusions: "We cannot decide," "We can leave things as they are," and "We cannot leave things as they



*Can We Leave Things As They Are?* (2010), Rory Pilgrim. Photo: Rory Pilgrim

are.” Pilgrim had composed a special piece of music, with three possible endings; which one was ultimately used when the piece was played in public depended on the participants’ decision.

Like Van Heeswijk, Pilgrim seems interested in how people try to give meaning to their own and others’ existence through their interactions. The difference is that Pilgrim has a poetic and spiritual streak: in his work, the ritual is often more important than the result. Nevertheless, Pilgrim’s view of humanity rests on a sociological assumption. The American social psychologist Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) called it the “looking-glass self”: we see ourselves through the eyes of others, as in a mirror.<sup>47</sup>

Pilgrim’s activist commitment is paired with an open-ended, non-judgmental attitude in which he tries to avoid unequivocal statements about positions that are critical of society. He is highly committed but does not try to spur the audience into action by means of agitation or propaganda. Pilgrim thus resembles a participating field researcher who becomes engaged in the communities in which he temporarily immerses himself. Pilgrim’s fascination with “the practices of ritual, music, prayer and being together”<sup>48</sup> emerges from spiritual and religious values like compassion and self-sacrifice, which play an important background role for him. The Dutch curator Xander Karskens observed recently that while at first sight Pilgrim’s work shows a similarity to what today we call *relational aesthetics*, careful consideration makes it clear that it belongs in “the critical tradition of the more radical American activist art of the 1970s and 1980s, which focused attention on the emancipation of vulnerable groups in society.”<sup>49</sup>

The Dutch visual artist and theater maker **Dries Verhoeven** (b. 1976) has said:

[I’d] like to talk about the need for community, which we lost when we left the church. Family ties have weakened,

and we travel often and farther from home. But the new individualized world still bears traces of collectiveness in unexpected places. Everyone gets the Ikea catalog in the mail. It's corny, but at the same time I find it really moving. The theater, along with the football stadium and the nightclub, may be one of the few places where we can still experience a feeling of togetherness.<sup>50</sup>

In his work, Verhoeven looks for ways of addressing his audience directly. His productions are not theater in the traditional sense of the word but strongly tend toward installations and performances. The audience is often part of the production or installation and has personal contact with the actors. Many critics praise Verhoeven for the intimacy he is able to create in these productions. Pivotal in his work is that which is strange, "other." In a usually poetic, confusing and intriguing way, Verhoeven raises questions like "Who is the other?" "What is my relationship to the other?" and "Where is the limit of myself and where does the space of the other start?" In the large-scale 2007 project *U bevindt zich hier* (You are here), Verhoeven built a labyrinthine hotel, in which every visitor gets a small room with a bed and a mirrored ceiling. When all the visitors are lying on their beds, Verhoeven raises the mirrored ceiling so that they can all see each other in their respective rooms. It is a visible representation of urban loneliness. Verhoeven has described it as follows:

[My neighbor and I] spend eight hours [close to each other] every night. But we don't know each other. The installation functions as a model of the world. You need a certain sensitivity to get that. In a sense, my productions provide sensitivity training. By giving people a gratifying experience, I hope to communicate something about the absence of such experiences in our everyday lives.<sup>51</sup>



*U bevindt zich hier* (You are here, 2007), Dries Verhoeven. Photo: Anna van Kooij

Verhoeven tries to make people more sensitive, to help them develop a “sense of the whole.” He seems to want to show people that they do not live in a vacuum but are constantly, deliberately and consciously connected with others and dependent on them. And Verhoeven’s work does another interesting thing: it places such an emphasis on looking at the other that one could say it turns the viewer into an anthropologist.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have tried to define the relationship of the contemporary artist to capitalist culture and show how capitalism has embraced the ideal of authenticity (expressive autonomy) for which artists fought for so long. To begin with, I used a historical analysis to try to show the roots of the contemporary obsession with authenticity. Those roots sprouted mainly in the Romantic era, as for the first time in human history a spiritual movement discovered and sought to maximize the potential of the individual. The central question in the Romantic movement was “Who am I, as a human being, myself?” In the past two centuries, artists have occupied themselves with exploring this question in numerous ways. This has led to great artistic vitality, renewal and insight, and ultimately to a Western culture that has spread around the globe.

But as we have seen, there is also another side to the story. In the end, the ideal of authenticity turned out not to be as free of obligations as we had thought. “Being and becoming oneself” was not, and could not be, solely an individual matter but finally became a social and economic duty. Those who do not develop themselves, do not creatively realize, aestheticize and express their “inner lives,” and thus do not consume, will be impeded in their social functioning. With the emergence of this capitalist culture, many artists have lost their countercultural position, because their own principles of independence (self-development, self-realization, autonomy) have become mainstream principles of economic production.

This brings me to the question of how art and artists can still have anything to say in capitalist culture, whose main target is the exploitation of everything that possesses potential as an object of trade. Our consumerist world lives off the human desire for self-development and self-aestheticization, but also off the need for meaning-making and bonding. But can these values really be bought and sold? The creative industries, as concretizations of this culture of self-development and self-aestheticization, seek to privatize and instrumentalize something that in fact belongs to everyone: creativity. Instead of investigating this consumerist way of life in a useful manner or offering an alternative to it, the creative industries in many cases stimulate it and in fact produce artificial scarcity. This does not mean that creative-industries discourse has brought artists nothing but trouble. We must also acknowledge its greatest merit: creativity, a fundamental human trait, has been placed high on the social, academic and political agendas.

This does not alter the fact that the contemporary obsession with creativity is gradually starting to look ideological. Creativity is no longer simply an inherent human trait but has become a capitalist obligation, one based mainly on individuals' need for self-development and self-realization. It is problematic that creativity is presented as a morally neutral concept instead of a human trait that in the end always serves the creation or redefinition of social values. To put it simply, creativity is and always will be a means to an end and not an objective in itself (of course I do not mean that it must always serve an external objective, merely that it is rooted in human emotion and not bound to any particular intention, even having fun). If it is treated as such and the maxim "creativity for creativity's sake" is taken as a basic principle, there is a danger that there will be a regressive effect: creativity will go out of fashion because the concept will have become bankrupt.

The socially critical attitude in contemporary art can be seen as an attempt to provide an alternative to the currently prevalent concept of creativity, however counterintuitive that may sound

(creativity against creativity). The Dutch cultural philosopher René Boomkens comes to almost the same conclusion, as he describes an increasing number of contemporary artists:

Under the present circumstances, they are most interesting when they operate as handymen, as tinkers and collectors of the fragments of all those cultural identities that have been turned over and torn asunder in the process of globalization.<sup>52</sup>

But this does not mean artists have entirely abandoned the ideal of artistic autonomy. Even critical art needs to be made in the most original, authentic and honest way possible. Two things are expected of contemporary artists: 1) they have to be original, and 2) they have to have a socially critical intention. According to Rudi Laermans (2013), the ideal of artistic autonomy has been replaced by critical autonomy; the direct connection with expressive individualism has been lost and only a loose link to artistry remains. This makes contemporary art practice, which deals with the common, stubborn, because it is measured according to artistic *and* social standards. Bishop (2006) warns against the danger of viewing the artist as a social worker. It is in fact the continuous tension that emerges from his autonomous attitude and social intervention that the artist nourishes. The socio-artist should not just reference the notion of community-as-togetherness but, on the contrary, should create a social space for friction, confrontation, uneasiness and confusion. Bishop calls this “relational antagonism.”

This brings me to the following conclusion: the socio-artist has not entirely left behind the *primacy of the unique* but is searching for spaces, areas and ideas where the unique (the singular) meets the general and the two form an alliance. This in-between place serves as a space where people can reflect on individuality, creativity, community and participation. But the essential point is that this socially critical art is an attempt to save the ideal from the

greedy claws of capitalism (which has corrupted it into a project of self-aestheticization) by linking it to its old emphasis on the common and therefore reconciling authenticity (being or becoming yourself) with ethics (what is the best thing to do?). This puts the famous observation by the British philosopher Bernard Williams at the heart of socially critical art: “[W]e need each other in order to be anybody.”<sup>53</sup>

## Notes

### I. The Ideal of Authenticity

1. Ludwig Tieck, *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen. Eine altdeutsche Geschichte*. Munich, 1964, 11.
2. Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantiek. Een Duitse affaire*. Amsterdam, 2009, 104.
3. Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne (eds.), *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*. Rotterdam, 2009, 8.
4. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. New York, 2005, 6.
5. Stef Aupers, Dick Houtman and Johan Roeland, "Authenticiteit. De culturele obsessie met echt en onecht," in: *Sociologie* (6), 2010-2, 3-5.
6. Hans Kennepohl, *We zijn nog nooit zo romantisch geweest*. Rotterdam, 2014.
7. Quote freely translated and taken from Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic (Thinking in Action)*. New York, 2004, 58.
8. Maarten Doorman, *De romantische orde*. Amsterdam, 2004, 11.
9. Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantiek. Een Duitse affaire*. Amsterdam, 2009, 3.
10. Ibid., 46.
11. Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic (Thinking in Action)*. New York, 2004, 64.
12. Jos de Mul, *Het romantische verlangen in (post)moderne kunst en filosofie*. Kampen, 1990, 219.
13. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA, 1989, 499.
14. Ibid., 499-500.
15. Ibid.
16. Rudi Laermans, "Artistieke autonomie als waarde en praktijk," in: Marie-Josée Corsten et al. (eds.), *Autonomie als waarde*. Amsterdam, 2014, 82-3.
17. Ibid.
18. Stef Aupers, Dick Houtman and Johan Roeland, "Authenticiteit: De culturele obsessie met echt en onecht," in: *Sociologie* (6), 2010-2, 3-5.
19. Sue Beeton, *Film-Induced Tourism*. Clevedon, 2005, 5.
20. Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic (Thinking in Action)*. New York, 2004, 74.
21. Ibid.
22. Kees Vuyk, *Het menselijk teveel. Over de kunst van het leven en de waarde van de kunst*. Kampen, 2002, 199.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Maarten Doorman, *De romantische orde*. Amsterdam, 2004, 143.
26. Ibid., 144.
27. Kees Vuyk, *De esthetisering van het wereldbeeld. Essays over filosofie en kunst*. Kampen, 1992, 199-201.
28. Kees Vuyk, *Het menselijk teveel. Over de kunst van het leven en de waarde van de kunst*. Kampen, 2002, 187.

29. Interview with Joseph Beuys in *Der Spiegel*, 1984, reprinted (in Dutch translation) in BRES 20.

## II. The Idiom of the Creative Industries

1. [www.liberation.fr/economie/2013/04/25/le-capitalisme-artiste-ne-fait-pas-le-bonheur\\_899049](http://www.liberation.fr/economie/2013/04/25/le-capitalisme-artiste-ne-fait-pas-le-bonheur_899049), accessed in March 2014.
2. Olav Velthuis, *De imaginaire economie. De hedendaagse kunstenaar en de wereld van het grote geld*. Rotterdam, 2005, 45.
3. Susanne Piët, *De emotiemarkt. De toekomst van de beleveniseconomie*. Amsterdam, 2003, 43.
4. Maurizio Lazzarato, "From Capital-Labour to Capital-Life," in: *Ephemera* 4(3), 2004, 187–208. [www.ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/4-3ephemera-aug04.pdf](http://www.ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/4-3ephemera-aug04.pdf), accessed in March 2014.
5. Philip Kotler, *Marketing 3.0: From Products to Customers to The Human Spirit*. Hoboken, NJ, 2010.
6. Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*. Cambridge, 2007, 31.
7. Jan Mertens, "Zygmunt Bauman over de maatschappij van consumenten," in: *Oikos* 2009, 46–7.
8. Rudi Laermans, "Creatieve economie. Contradicties in innovatie," in: *De Helling* (25), 2012–1.
9. Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Oxford, 1987, 38.
10. Rudi Laermans, "Creatieve economie. Contradicties in innovatie," in: *De Helling* (25), 2012–1.
11. Fordism refers to the organization of production and labor made famous by the carmaker Henry Ford and, more broadly, to twentieth-century consumer society.
12. See Timon Ramaker, "Op zoek naar fun en magic. Een schets van de belevingscultuur," in: Jan van der Stoep, Roel Kuiper and Timon Ramaker (eds.), *Alles wat je hart begeert? Christelijke oriëntatie in een op beleving gerichte cultuur*. Amsterdam, 2007.
13. Paul du Gay, *Consumption and Identity at Work*. London, 1996, 36.
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Personal authenticity was once the primary domain of the arts. Artistic expression was seen as “the most individual expression of the most individual emotion,” in the words of the poet Willem Kloos. Today, a century later, authenticity – “being yourself” – has become a societal ideal. It has also become an economic good, something we buy and sell. The creative industries play a central role in this commercial context. As a generator of artificial scarcity, it creates the desire for unique products, experiences and lifestyles, and promotes the permanent renewal of our living and working environment. What does all this mean for contemporary art? Is it a blessing, or does it merely make the artist’s role more complicated? And how can artists distinguish themselves when everyone is expected to be creative and authentic in work and in life?

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