

BOOK REVIEW

The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech by
William Deresiewicz

Jonathan Kuuskoski
University of Michigan

ABSTRACT: Jonathan Kuuskoski reviews William Deresiewicz's *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech*.
DOI: doi.org/artivate.10.2.159

Critics speak for themselves, but they also speak, or try to speak, for something larger than themselves: for the values and ideals, the past and the future, of the art itself (p. 258).

Over the last decade, criticism against arts entrepreneurship education has been brewing. This criticism is driven by trepidation based on the assumption that the integration of business-school models and practice within arts training (ostensibly to more effectively prepare our students for professional realities) would subvert artmaking towards calculated, utilitarian ends. At worst, the critics say, our efforts feed into the digital age's arch-capitalist agendas. One of the most acidic critiques of arts entrepreneurship came from William Deresiewicz, in his essay in *The Atlantic* entitled "The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur" (January/February 2015). He posited that the identity of the artist—which he defined as having evolved over time from artisan to bohemian to professional—was on the precipice of transformation into something altogether new. The fourth paradigm was upon us, and it

demanded that artists become entrepreneurs. This shift, he believed, signaled the dismantling (intentional or not) of artistic identities and practices as we knew them.

I had the chance to see Deresiewicz speak on the subject at the Three Million Stories Conference hosted by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) and Arizona State University in March 2016. As part of the keynote panel, he was undoubtedly selected to provide counterpoint to the inspirational undertones of the gathering, which brought together hundreds of thought leaders from across the country to discuss and analyze best practices surrounding career development for arts graduates. I'll never forget that conversation, not only because Deresiewicz was publicly called to task for his views, but also because he hinted then that his own next steps on the subject would be to turn his polarizing think piece into a book. It was a courageous act to participate in public dialogue with a large group of vocal detractors; one had a sense then that he took these questions seriously, that he wanted to go deeper, and that he was committed to getting to the truth about whether building a life as an artist today was as viable as was being touted. And, at that time, I had a nagging feeling that he was onto something.

So, it was with great anticipation, nearly five years later, that I picked up a copy of Deresiewicz's follow up book: *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech* (Henry Holt & Company, 2020). Would he double down on what many had perceived as cynicism, or would he reply in a constructive way to the reflexive criticism he had witnessed firsthand? I was pleasantly surprised to find that, as Deresiewicz expanded his inquiry, his commitment to truth-telling only deepened. The book's timing is prescient, of course, having dropped in the middle of what is likely the arts' greatest multidimensional crisis of the last century.

But this book does much more than simply interrogate the myths of artistic career-building in a twenty-first century context. It actually pits two contemporary philosophies against one another. In one corner sits the techno-positivist mantra that more (and cheaper and more convenient) content is better, which is espoused by the modern forces of artistic distribution (mostly, but not exclusively, tech companies). Everyone can be an artist, so it goes, and thus everyone has a chance to find their audience. Democratizing creativity is essential to unlocking the full economic potential of the digital age.

In the other corner sits the collected voices of artists themselves. Can everyone really become an artist? If so, then what does that inevitably mean for the business of artmaking, and of training artists to that end? And how has the rise of digitization, along with its partner-in-crime neoliberalism, changed the actual realities of those who are seriously trying to make a living through their creative work? The book explores these questions through a multitude of personal stories—representing a cross section of well over one hundred formal and informal interviews with visual, literary, musical, dance, theater, film, and television professionals—embellished by richly detailed commentary from the author.

Explicating the philosophical disconnect between cultural production and late-stage capitalism is nothing new; what sets this book apart is its focus on the individual experiences of those on the frontlines of that dichotomy. Yet those narratives aren't centered around debunking entrepreneurship as an educational trope, either. Instead, they investigate something

more sophisticated, the question of “how to keep your soul intact and still make a living as an artist” (p. 285). And, for those profiled, it is clear that the cornerstone rules of today’s economy—maximizing utility to crush the competition—just don’t translate.

Structured across five sections, made up of sixteen chapters in total, Deresiewicz assesses the problems at hand from a variety of interrelated angles. The first section explores “The Basic Issues,” namely the troubling relationship between art and money today, and the way arts workers experience the digital economy as emboldening extreme pressure. The next section, “The Big Picture,” delves into the resultant economic and societal forces that undercut the potential for professional artmaking in every way—gentrification, the demonetization of artistic content, and the proliferation of prosumerist creatives all fighting for a slice of the pie. Part three, “Arts and Artists,” tackles these travails in more detail by profiling twenty-five musical, visual, literary, and film and television artists. The fourth section, “What is Art Becoming?,” frames the predicament in historical context, and the final section, “What is To Be Done?,” focuses on the imperative to advance training paradigms, update intellectual property doctrine, and spur public action (in particular, stronger unionization and lobbying efforts) as prospective responses to today’s status quo.

This book is not for the faint of heart. Nowhere else in recent memory has the mythology of equal opportunity in the arts been vanquished so cogently. It’s hard not to imagine that the artists profiled throughout could be our neighbors, our colleagues, our friends—individuals driven by incredible creative energy, yet socially discouraged from voicing any complaints about their unbearable day-to-day realities. The choice to use this documentarian journalistic writing style, wherein one can almost hear Deresiewicz’s voice narrating off the page, inevitably also reveals our culpability in espousing unrealistic expectations for success, while unpacking the complexity of what it actually means to survive in the arts today. Spoiler alert: it takes tremendous struggle in the face of dwindling upsides. In the midst of this paradigm shift, artists seem to feel pressured to value a killer instinct over a collaborative spirit. What a shame.

The sixth chapter (located in section two), “Space and Time,” is a standout that really hits home the compounding effects of these forces on artists’ daily lives. By now it is clear that gentrification is symptomatic of capitalism, but that force has had a particularly depreciating impact on artists. The author does not mince words in describing the ways money (and, naturally, moneymaking) has emerged as the defining feature of the dominant cultural identity in America. That is a by-product, after all, of purely economic aspiration—to buy the best house, in the right neighborhood, preferably in an artsy part of town. Unfortunately, as a result, artists can’t afford to live, let alone create, there. How ironic. And why? Because, by and large, artists now have to hustle, at all costs, just to survive. And if you have to stay busy to make it to next month, that mentality transforms your existence—with no time to mull, play, experiment, or even meet new people, creativity itself is eroding from former cultural centers. For anyone who has served to prepare eager, idealistic artists for a career in their field, these are raw, sobering observations.

At some points, though, it feels as though Deresiewicz is biting off more than he can chew, relying occasionally on sweeping generalizations about market conditions in order to hit home

the larger points that he wants to emphasize from his interviews. For example, while the push and pull of major arts hubs is a thread that permeates much of the narrative, one wishes that the potential of other, more midsized urban centers was more closely inspected. One might take away from this book that artists nowadays cannot survive outside of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, even as they are squeezed out of those very metro areas. To a degree, that obviously rings true. But in order for such an analysis to be productive, one needs to account for the inherent paradox. Artists will have to live somewhere, after all. It would have been an intriguing counterpoint to discuss more incisively how efforts within cities like Minneapolis and Atlanta (among others) have—through combinations of public policy changes, lobbying, and grassroots community action—found ways to develop thriving arts scenes despite national trends. Certainly, the housing market is a concern across the country, and artists are having a tough time in most if not all urban centers. Yet not every artist who develops in a scene outside the two or three major hubs feels their only choice is to sacrifice a professional future if they cannot afford to relocate somewhere larger.

More importantly, if we want the arts to permeate our society, we need to foster some degree of opportunity for a sustainable artistic life beyond the biggest markets. Acknowledging the potential hidden within some of these other cities could have strengthened Deresiewicz's astute observations around the need to reassess what success and sustainability should mean in a more localized context (one reminiscent, as the author suggests, of homegrown artist communities such as Greenwich Village in the mid-twentieth century). It would have also reinforced his final conclusions, which center on social action as perhaps the only viable way to stem the converging tides of gentrification, commodification, and cultural erosion. In today's America, any salient cultural response will need to be locally mobilized, driven by communities that believe in their arts scenes and are committed to preserving the character of their place. In the book's concluding chapter, he provides numerous examples of arts collectives who are doing just that: banding together, pushing back against market forces, and fostering more tenable employment and consumption models (in one case, moving beyond the market through a barter-based system). Why not include some concrete, forward-thinking public policy models that already exist, which the author readily admits should be a part of the very call to action he holds us to in his conclusions?

Similarly, by the time we get to the twenty-five case studies profiled in the third section, we already get the point that artists are struggling. The narrative here feels labored primarily because the first two sections are also framed around innumerable, expertly curated anecdotes pulled directly from dozens of interviews and other primary sources. That said, each chapter in this section could suffice as deep-dive, case-study analyses relevant to discipline-specific professional development courses. And the introductory portions that frame the (sometimes divergent) problems plaguing specific arts subsectors are important; they quantify the personal while capturing the real consequences of aggregate market behavior.

Perhaps this is Deresiewicz's overarching intent: we are all responsible, as consumers of cultural content, to interrogate our habits and their impact on the creative pipeline. Even more so as educators preparing artists to create content for the markets of tomorrow. Reiterating the

common issues that traverse individual artist stories does position those stakes in a tangible, humanistic way. The reader is called to understand that it is not enough to want access to culture simply because it makes us feel good. We have to believe artmaking means something more, something elemental that fuels how humanity interprets the world. And with that understanding comes a responsibility to change a system that keeps artists down. In this regard, Deresiewicz proposes ideas that are very relevant to our work in the field of arts entrepreneurship pedagogy. It seems imperative that change requires us to get, somehow, to a place where we are collectively willing to give something up—unlimited accessibility, our subservience to immediate gratification, perhaps more—to rebalance the equation. Can art survive? That may only be possible if we can motivate consumers to participate more actively in their arts ecosystems, which means paying for quality over quantity, spending more locally, and understanding the consequences of our choices. Our training programs are already on the frontlines of those advocacy efforts.

The narrative ultimately drives toward some inevitable conclusions about the need to socially organize around workers' rights, dismantle big tech's monopolistic power, and advance a significant wealth redistribution agenda. But what stands out most prominently, as we approach the final chapters, is the way Deresiewicz articulates the evolution of his own criticism. Upon further consideration, it turns out, the challenges presented by the fourth paradigm of the artist aren't so symptomatic of entrepreneurship, after all. This is a conclusion he came to, at least partially, thanks to interviews with noted arts entrepreneurship practitioners Linda Essig and Susan Solt. Instead, here he has latched onto Sharon Louden's notion of the artist as "culture producer," precisely because it "relieves us of the need to choose between the poles of labor and capital . . ." (p. 273). Powerful moralistic messaging aside, unpacking the tactics of how we leverage this new paradigm, specifically in ways that circumvent our economy's existing fault lines, remains largely a task for another volume.

Overall, this book is exceptionally detailed in its research, and generally spares no expense in unpacking every nuance of its dense and complex subject matter. That said, two intermingling points percolate up from Deresiewicz's final analysis. First, the democratization of creativity has watered down artistic output to the point of oversupply, ultimately diminishing the rigor with which we evaluate artistic intent and quality. At the same time, that democratization has exponentially fed our hunger for disposable, low-cost content, which has subsequently driven creators into the ground. We cannot afford to look away as the world continues to position artmaking as a nearly impossible profession. We have to work together to rethink our priorities as a society. Maybe it's not just myths about artists that have to go. This conversation harkens to the critical, dual role of arts entrepreneurship training today—that of reframing what professional development should be while also shaping larger dialogues around what we must do to live in a thriving, equitable, and progressive democracy. "To fix the arts economy," he writes, "we need to fix the whole economy" (p. 308).

It is hard to remove the memory of Deresiewicz sitting alone at a circular conference table immediately after his conference keynote appearance back in 2016, eating his post-debate hors d'oeuvres in silence. One hopes more people will join him at the table this time, because we all

ARTIVATE 10.2

deserve a wake-up call. *The Death of the Artist* is an unflinching look at the realities—scars and all—of making one’s way in today’s arts world. It is also a vital piece of criticism that should be on the shelves of every aspiring arts practitioner, educator, administrator, and cultural advocate.