



“It usually works out, but you never know”. Emotion Work as a Strategy for Coping in the Insecure Artistic Career.

By Sofia Lindström

Abstract

This article explores how contemporary Swedish visual artists manage and make sense of career insecurity through emotion work. The specific emotions discussed in the material are trust, hope and luck. Emotion work is related to coping in an increasingly insecure world of work in late modern capitalism, which has been theorized as relying on the creativity, passion and subjectivity of workers. Through analysing what the artists anticipate of their future careers, the study found the main desire of the artists to be the continuation of their creative endeavour—an endeavour not necessarily related to professional success but rather to identity formation. This understanding of success forms part of two overarching discourses found in the material: art as non-work discourse and the art world as arbitrary discourse, which both relate to certain emotional work when failing/succeeding to uphold the artistic creation. The prestigious arts education of the respondents is analysed as part of sustaining hope of continuation when future career prospects seem grim. Trust and luck are analysed as emotion work in relation to having experiences of success, even though the art world is discursively framed as arbitrary. The concluding argument of the article is that understanding emotion work in relation to the insecure or even failed career can shed light on resources related to social position rather than properties of the individual psyche.

Keywords: creative work, emotion work, art, trust, hope, luck, subjectivity.

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Aim and Introduction

Previous research shows how creative work is characterized by insecurity: many times freelance, short-term work with little or no pay, which often results in periods of long work hours and periods of no work (Banks 2014; Menger 1999; Gill & Pratt 2008; Oakley 2009; Taylor & Littleton, 2012). Even so, many still attempt to achieve an artistic career (Bain 2005). There has been a sustained growth in numbers of artists across many sectors since the 1970's, a trend that is similar in most advanced countries (Menger 1999). In Sweden, the sector of higher artistic education has expanded from 2400 students in 1986 to 17200 students in 2009 (Melldahl 2012). The proportion of artists in the Swedish population has also doubled from 1960 to 1990¹. This situation has been said to create an over-recruitment to the artistic field which manifests in an oversupply in these occupations, creating a winner-takes-all market (Menger 1999).

Researchers of cultural work have tried to explain why creative work is so popular, regardless of high risk and low income prospects. Artistic work is above all said to produce large nonmonetary rewards such as the inner satisfaction of creative work or the meaning-making in art (Filer 1986; Gill & Pratt 2008; Taylor & Littleton 2012). Bourdieu (1996) theorized artists as nurturing an ethics of denouncing economic success in favour of reputation in the cultural field. In a similar vein, Throsby (1994) argued that artists accept economic insecurity as they value other aspects of work higher than economic gain, called the work-preference model. The art world has also been compared to a lottery where artists overestimate their chances for success. The psychic gratification of cultural work has been said to be proportional to the uncertainty of success (the more uncertainty, the more gratification when success occurs, Menger 1999). As pointed out by Heian et al. (2008), the Nordic states have a tradition of supporting artists in line with the cultural policy understanding of art as contributing to the public good, which influences the imagined prospects of the possibility to work as an artist.

Through an analysis of trained Swedish visual artists, this article contributes to the study of creative work and its common feature of insecure careers through analysing the kinds of emotional work that is done to make sense of, and to understand occupational success and non-success. As insecurity over success, as well as failure, is a common feature of creative careers (Fürst 2016; Mathieu 2012; McRobbie 2016; Menger 1999²), there is a need for a deeper understanding of coping strategies in the world of creative work (McRobbie 2016). One common strategy to manage career insecurity among artists has been found to be multiple job holding to secure income (Baumol and Bowen 1966; Lindström 2016; Throsby and Zednick 2011). In contrast to such analyses, this article will outline how artists manage vocational insecurity and prospects of (non-)success by using emotional work, specifically through expressions of hope, trust and luck. Following Sara

Ahmed (2004) and Margaret Wetherell (2014), the article also aims to discuss the social consequences of the respondents' emotion work and their relation to discourses on creative work found in the material.

Emotional Labour and Emotion Work in Contemporary Capitalist Markets

The study of emotion and affect became increasingly popular in the social sciences around the turn of the millennia—a popularity that has been termed the “affective turn” (Blackman and Venn 2010; Leys 2011; Seyfert 2012; Turner and Stets 2005; Wetherell 2014; Wharton 2009). This kind of research has resonated with a new interest in the interconnections between bodies, materiality, the social and the cultural (Wetherell 2013). In the field of sociology, Arlie Hochschild (2003) sparked attention of emotion in work and labour, and coined the term “emotional labour” to explore how reactions can be turned into commodities with exchange value. The term has mainly been used to analyse how service employees need to manage their emotions in relation to organizational guidelines (Wharton 2009).

In the same vein as Hochschild, Illouz (2007) has written on the importance of emotional competence in modern labour markets, named “emotional capitalism”. Capitalism can be understood to animate emotions such as hope, as markets are essentially uncertain (Miyazaki 2006). Emotion work in capitalist production is also an important theme in the work of Hardt and Negri (2000), who claim that the transformation of capitalism to our late modern version lies in the reliance on immaterial labour, such as ideas, creativity, knowledge and affect. This has taken the form of a “social factory”, as it relies on the whole lives and subjectivities of workers. This transformation of the economy is often described in negative terms, as work is becoming more uncertain, with rising project-led employment and temporary work and with the worker bearing more of the cost of his/her securities that used to be part of the welfare state responsibility (such as insurance, benefits, sick- and maternity leave, Gill and Pratt 2008). In her critical study of modern knowledge work, Ekman (2010) claims that a norm of passion and progression has made security and predictability in work tabooed or non-legitimate (c.f. McRobbie 2016). However, although new forms of work in late modern capitalism indeed form opportunities of exploitation and opportunism, it also offers forms of meaning, pleasure and plays of power for employees (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Ekman 2012; Illouz 2007). In relation to the emergence of the creative economy, where cultural goods such as art, media and design form important parts of contemporary capitalist value-making, artists are interesting as their position as creative individuals with insecure career prospects can function as a litmus paper when exploring trends in work and employment (Gill and Pratt 2008; Lingo and

Tepper 2013; McRobbie 2016). Artists have been theorized as the model for the autonomous, self-realizing, passionate worker, controlling their own time and work in a flexible work situation (Lingo and Tepper 2013; Throsby and Zednick 2011). As such, artists arguably fit into the model of *homo ludens*, the playing man, as separate from *homo faber*, the working man (Huizinga 1955). There is thus a need to understand creative and artistic work in relation to the field of the sociology of work and emotions. This attention is not only of interest to artists and cultural workers but to any work category facing insecure and provisional working conditions.

Theoretical Frame of the Present Study

In her study of the cultural politics of emotion, Ahmed (2004) theorizes an economy of affect, as emotions accumulate through its movement between figures such as the asylum seeker or the nation. Her work on emotion is important for this study as it can be read as a theory of subjectification. According to Ahmed (2004), subjects of emotion and affect are constituted through emotional performances. These performances tend to fixate the nature and boundaries between subjects and objects and give the emoter a subjectivity such as a moral agent (Wetherell 2014). Ahmed's (2004) work is a reminder of how emotions can be understood as cultural practices with political implications, rather than psychological states. They can position subjects in a structure where value is assigned to certain emotions and bodies. In a critique against Ahmed's (2004) theory of affect as "diffuse", Wetherell (2014:158; c.f. Wetherell 2012) instead calls for a focus on affective practice, i.e. affect as human action, to see the connections between emotion and other constituents. In this study, that constituent is occupational insecurity. As the focus of this study is on a particular labour situation, the concept of *affective practice* will be translated into the sociological notion of emotion work (Hochschild 2003). The concept emotion relates to the emotional strategies used to manage insecurities over a situation that may or may not turn into a successful work context.

Returning to the analysis of subjectification, this study understands subjectivity as the processes by which a self becomes constituted (Wetherell (2008). The concept is used to explore a "relation between the sense of self and the social context in which subjectivity is an ongoing process of becoming" (Staunæs 2003: 103). Subjectivity is analysed in relation to discourses around work. Discourse as a concept denotes normative understandings shaped by speech, which relate to historical and cultural conditions that affect what is considered as understandable, acceptable or desirable, or conversely, unacceptable or undesirable in a social context (e.g. Foucault 1983). Discourses are analysed as meaning-making speech acts-our ways of speaking (language, symbols) regarding certain matters (such as

the artistic career) have consequences: they are constructing, enabling and limiting our ways of knowing these matters (Wetherell 2008). In this way, discourses are performative - they shape subjectivities, thoughts and actions (e.g. Ahmed 2004).

Art colleges constitute a particularly important social context for the formation of artist subjectivities. This study explores the experience of a specific art college as an important site for the sensation of “being chosen” (cf. Lindström 2015). Creative work is often associated with meaning, personal fulfilment and play, and the role of the artist has been associated with romantic ideas of genius, endowment and talent (Røyseng et. al. 2007; Taylor and Littleton 2012). Artists often view art as having benefits not only for themselves but for the wider public (Oakley 2009; Stenberg 2002). In Ekman’s (2010) study of contemporary knowledge work, wanting to be unique relied on a strong faith in agency – the ability to steer and manage one’s life. This made employees willing to accept individual responsibility of circumstances in work that were structural, such as stress due to lack of guidelines. This understanding of “being chosen” is thus found in types of work that require high emotional investment, and is part of the social psychology theory of a “fantasmatic logic” (Ekman 2010). The concept of a fantasmatic logic was developed by Glynos and Howard (2007; in Ekman 2010: 59) to understand the interconnection between emotion and practise in a social context. The fantasmatic logic “concerns the zones and degrees of emotional investment, intensity and stakes, and how they interact with the existing cultural norms” (Ekman 2010: 59). The fantasmatic logic of being special and having agency had an important temporal quality—the respondents focused on “future possibilities rather than present realities” (Ekman 2010: 202). In her work on Swedish visual artists, Flisbäck (2006) observed how the artists created a certain temporal relation to work where the future of one’s career always mattered more than the present. The artists shared an understanding of the future as a space where their efforts would hopefully pay off, which explains their undertakings in the field. This temporal aspect of “bracketing” the present in favour of the future, or understanding the future as idealized, creates tolerance for anxieties and ambiguities in the present. The temporal aspect of the fantasmatic logic can thus contain different discourses and employ emotion work to preserve the sensation of “being chosen”, and to cope with insecurities and failures which may threaten the individuals’ sense of self.

Thus, the article explores creative work as work that offers meaning and joy to individuals, but also insecurity such as short-term contracts, low pay and free-lance work. This kind of work relates to certain developments towards increased autonomy, creativity and meaning-making in the capitalist economy and the labour market. These aspects constitute part of the attraction for workers, but they also involve insecurity and individual responsibility. Creative work is

understood to rely on the subject formation and emotional intensity of workers. The concept of a fantasmatic logic relates to the attempt to understand the formation of a subjectivity in relation to emotional-intensive work, as well as strategies for managing insecurities in the present.

Methods and Data

The study is based on interview material of 20 artists-11 women and 9 men who have graduated with a Masters in Fine Arts from the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm (popularly called “Mejan”) from 1995 to 2010. Until 1977, Mejan was the only higher educational institute for the visual arts in Sweden, and has retained its position as the most prestigious arts education in regards to economic resources, prestigious professor positions and famous alumni until this day (Edling 2010; Gustavsson et. al. 2012). The competition for the five-year program in visual arts is fierce; only about 3 per cent of the applicants are accepted. Research on the art world in Sweden has shown a correlation between having been a student at Mejan and having a successful artistic career (Ericsson 1988; Gustavsson et. al. 2012). Thus, my respondents belong to a group of artists who should have excellent career prospects, which in the analysis will be discussed in relation to “being chosen” and how it relates to emotion work towards the insecure career. However, their occupational course is generally marked with ups- and downs and all the respondents have experiences of considerable financial stress³. None stated that they could be sure that they would still be part of the art world in ten years.

Considerations in the selection process of the interviews were made to ensure a heterogeneous age and gender constellation. The respondents’ ages vary from 31 to 52 years at the time of the interviews in 2011-2013. The interviews were typically one hour long, and took place in the studios or workplaces of my respondents, or in public spaces such as cafés. The extracts from the transcription of the interviews have been translated into English. In the text, the respondents have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. My material is skewed towards the alumni who have continued their artistic production and careers, with its ups- and downs. However, four respondents did not work as artists anymore, providing interesting accounts of “non-success”. The respondents typically worked with different art techniques depending on the theme of, for example, planned exhibitions, such as photo, painting, sculpture, video art, handicraft and graphic art. Using a semi-structured interview technique, the intention was to capture my respondents’ life histories, understanding their path from childhood to where they were at the time of the interview, as well as understanding their views of their futures.

From a discursive perspective, I analysed what the artists expected from their professional situation, to answer my question of how they managed the inherent insecurity of their chosen field. The analysis was employed to understand the

central themes of my respondents, and to understand the meaning-making of these themes, understood as forming part of larger discourses. Concretely, this was done through several readings of the material to find patterns and common narratives in the interviews. The analysis sought to form understandings of how people managed insecurity and (non-)success through looking for patterns of emotional utterances in the interview material regarding these matters (c.f. Wetherell 2013). Below, I will outline the general findings of discourses and patterns in emotional meaning-making of the artistic work in the material.

The Desire for Continuation

In the analysis, I found two overarching discourses relating to the artists' understanding of the artistic career, namely *the art world as arbitrary* and *art as non-work*. These discourses shape the subjectivity of the artists and their emotional response in certain ways. Firstly, I will outline how the artists define success—what they form emotional work for—to answer my question regarding what they desire in relation to their careers and lives as artists.

The main understanding of success for my respondents was the ability to work artistically in the future, labelled the desire for *continuation*. This is a general theme of the interviews, and the pursuit of continuation is made sensible through both of the overarching discourses mentioned above. The desire for the continuation of the creative activity was connected to an identity as being creative, often formed during their childhood (c.f. Hausmann 2010; Taylor & Littleton 2012). The connection to their childhood activities and their current activities was made in relation to their separation between creative activities as work and creative activities in a more “innocent” perspective; unrelated to aspects of economy or use value (Bain 2005; Oakley 2009). This is what I label the *art as non-work discourse*. This discourse could be expressed as a rejection of career goals, why the category “artist” was related to identity rather than occupation (c.f. Lindström 2015).

I remember as a child, I used to draw a lot and it felt natural to do so and it was the most fun thing to do like... and then one thing leads to another and then you are supposed to study and then perhaps you turn in, I tried to turn in work to, applications to the Royal Institute of Arts among others. I applied mostly for preparatory schools but I managed to be accepted straight away so... “well then, let's do this then, I can paint full time there”. You know, it was very... it's never been anything like “now I'm going to be an artist and get an education”, you know [laughter], it never felt like that (Robert, 38).

In relation to the discourse of art as non-work, the respondents' motivation for continuation generally did not lie in monetary rewards beyond their ability to "survive" (pay rent, provide for their families). Income was important as a sign of career success, relating to their status as professional rather than lay artists, although the quest for quality, self-expression and innovation always took precedence over any desire for money (c.f. Lindström 2016; Taylor & Littleton 2012). When being rewarded bursaries or income from sales of art works, the artists often invested any excess into the facilitation of their creative production, such as studios, material, and travels, or in one case, hiring personnel to handle administration. These non-economic aims mark the difference between the artist and the typical entrepreneur or manager, aiming to acquire monetary success (Hausmann 2010; Miyazaki 2006). Although not expressing a desire for monetary success, some of my respondents claimed that the need to earn enough money for sustaining their living motivated them to continue producing work, as in the "chasing the carrot" metaphor.

I think that, to be a little commercial, that is: to have to sell in order to survive, if you need that, then it actually functions as a carrot (...) I mean if you had a fortune and didn't have to work for money, perhaps you wouldn't had "pulled the ass out of the wagon" at all.. (Gustav, 45).

This kind of motivation related to "outer" or external aspects of the artist, such as the need to make a living and was contrasted to the "inner" motivation that relates to expressions of the intrinsic value, or motivation of, or desire for, art making.

The artist's desire for his/her creative activities was not always easily articulated by my respondents.

Why did you want to become an artist? (SL)

I don't know. I studied to become a civil engineer, but it was a kind of typical wrong choice you do when you are... (...) I wanted something else, simply put. It was something you couldn't control [laughter] (Josef, 46).

However, the respondents often narrated their work as pleasurable, fun and inspirational, and they wished to continue experiencing this pleasure in their life (c.f. Huizinga 1955). The attraction to the artistic work was related to freedom, authenticity and meaning-making, similar to the attraction to modern media- and knowledge work described by Ekman (2010). The respondents described

their work as inspiring, stimulating, satisfying and interesting. They linked their desire for continuation to the ability to control their time, and in accordance to their “true ideas and dreams” (Peter, 31). The pleasure was mostly described as coming from the inner satisfaction of being immersed in work, what Banks (2014) has labelled “being in the zone”, in contrast to the external satisfaction of acknowledgement from others (Banks 2014).

You think that you are going to get a kick from affirmation, but it's not so much that part at all, sure if you would get some super... but that's not what drives you really, what you might think will be your driving force, it feels more like it's this other, when you are totally immersed in what you are doing (Maria, 46).

I'm happy to have been able to work, I find my work so interesting, and the whole time I've kept it up (...) and then, of course, you hang a bit loose if you don't exhibit your work, there are a few reasons why I haven't done that in recent years, but ... I have come to a personal understanding that work is most important for me, working with painting, seeking something specific there, and then this “to show what I do” has been put aside for a variety of reasons... (Lisa, 48).

Continuation was thus framed in two different meanings for my respondents. The most common was that of sustaining a creative activity preferably throughout the entirety of their lifetime. Another was momentary, that of the ability of concentration and immersion in work without interruption from other activities, notably breadwinning work, strategies for marketing or networking, and family obligations.

To know that continuation formed part of the respondents' desire and understanding of success, I asked questions about what they feared regarding their careers. The most common fear among my respondents was to lose the capability or desire to produce art, a desire intimately linked to their identity as creative. Hanna, 31, describes her situation after graduating from Mejan as a “chock”, and she decided to move abroad for a year to get back on her feet:

...but I found it quite difficult to focus, and didn't produce that much that year, it was all about me trying to sort out my private life... no, it was, for me it was tough, I was very afraid I would “lose” the art, that I would not find my way back, but then I moved back to Stockholm, and ...well began to take hold of things, began to produce work again (Helena, 32).

This fear of losing the desire for art making is a theme in the interviews labelled *interruption*. The loss of desire or inspiration also formed the reasons for why one of my respondents had interrupted his production of visual art works, and turned to other creative activities, such as music. It could be expressed in the inability to change careers although suffering from economic insecurity.

Have you ever considered changing careers? (SL)

I think about it all the time, I should change careers, but I can't, it's impossible, I think It would make me deeply depressed (Ulrika, 40).

However, the lack of material resources, notably financial resources as well as long-term illness or parental leave, were also reasons for being unable to sustain the production of art works. The artists thus discursively frame art work as distinct from other kinds of work which is deemed less creative, free and authentic. This is what I label the discourse of art as non-work, which relates to the desire for continuation of the artistic work as something freer and more meaningful than “normal” work.

As a free artist, well, the idea is that you work with, you are not controlled by someone else, you are not subject to a workplace or manager, mindset or work or anything (...) (Isabella, 32).

Thus continuation, in contrast to interruption or termination of their artistic activity, was what my respondents framed as success, and this desire related to issues of freedom and authenticity that formed part of the discourse of art as being non-work or more than work. The art as non-work discourse blurred the relation between the artistic career and the self, as being an artist was enmeshed into the identity of the individual, something one *is* as well as something one *does* (Ekman 2010; Lindström 2015). This kind of blurring between self and occupational role was a theme that came up in the interviews regarding the art college of the artists.

The Higher Arts Education—Forming the Fantasmatic Logic of “being chosen”.

The nearly unattainable status and prestige of their educational background formed part of the alumni's understanding that the acceptance to The Royal Institute of Fine Arts was as a goal in itself—not as part of an interpretation of the prerequisites for having an artistic career (at least not initially):

Then I was accepted to Mejan after a year in Stockholm, surprisingly. Or, it was planned of course; I had applied for it, but at that time it was an unattainable goal, nearly... (Hannes, 33).

They talk about those accepted to Mejan in a certain way.. ”she was accepted to Mejan!” So you get a picture of it as, it’s going to be very difficult (to be accepted). And then, I made it! [laughter] (Louise, 33).

Most of my respondents had completed 2-3 years of preparatory art schools before being accepted to Mejan. The Stockholm preparatory art schools are known to encourage their students to apply to the very same institute (Ericson 1988), to the extent where it became “tough and pressuring”, and taking “unimaginable proportions” in the lives of the students (Vera, 41). When accepted to the Institute, my respondents speak of feelings of near make-belief, relief and euphoria. “You felt chosen, special” (Kajsa, 38). This feeling of achievement often lasted for a couple of years into the program:

Five years to do what I enjoy, it was an incredible journey, I was euphoric, at least the first four years, then you started to realize, this is somewhat a dream, there is no functioning reality, such a small world (Lars, 52).

The “unrealism” of being part of the Institute is often described by my respondents as “stepping into a bubble”, which figuratively describes a situation of being temporarily protected or shielded from reality. In my previous analysis (Lindström 2015) of the possibility of the formation of a professional subjectivity after having undergone five years at an arts institute, art students were found to be encouraged to employ the category artist primarily in relation to their identity, not as a chosen profession (c.f. Singerman 1999). This was primarily done in relation to active silences surrounding aspects of “surviving” as an artist. The artist subjectivity was discursively framed at the Institute as self-reliant, which regarded a certain responsabilization of the student in maximizing his or her own potential. This first and foremost related to the individual’s freedom to choose in a space of seemingly infinite choice (c.f. Rose 1999). At the same time, norms and values surrounding “right” or “interesting” art made the students question the norm of free choice at the institute. The fantasmatic logic of being chosen also resulted in expressions of having no alternatives: “This is the life I’ve chosen, and I can’t just give it up, because then I have nothing” (Helena, 32). When I asked the respondents what made them hold on despite their experiences of ups-and-downs in their

career, I got answers such as “It’s fun and worthwhile, still, even if it’s hard too, and what would you do otherwise, you know? [laughter] (Louise, 32); “I don’t know, either you don’t know how to do anything else, or you actually want to do this... (Maria, 46). The respondents long and exclusive educational investment resulted in a feeling of having exhausted all other options of possible alternative activities and careers. Thus, the alumni were left with an understanding that their educational background, although prestigious and exclusive, could not function as a “passport” to a successful career after graduation. This formed part of their discursive formation of the art world as arbitrary, which, in turn, related to the emotional work of hope, to which the analysis will turn.

Hope as Emotion Work in Response to Non-success in Relation to the Art World as Arbitrary Discourse

My respondents could express an understanding of the impossibility of the higher arts education to provide them with means to form strategies for establishing an artistic career as they viewed the art world as highly arbitrary and unpredictable:

Some may complain over the education, that they were not prepared for the harsh reality, but you can’t, because things are the way they are, there is no formula that will make you a successful artist, if there were, there would be more of us (Isabella, 32).

However, due to the prestige and inaccessibility of the institute, the respondents could not help to still hope that their MFA would benefit their achieving an artistic career.

I thought, ok, because it felt so difficult, but then I just thought: if you have managed to get in, it would open doors afterwards. And maybe I knew before graduating from Mejan that this would not be the case, but maybe you want to hope that things will work out (Maria, 46).

Thus, the art world as arbitrary discourse, forming part of the fantasmatic logic of being chosen, encourages hope as emotional work to cope with career insecurity. Maria continues her statement by describing her understanding of success in the art world as dependent on two aspects; marketing skills and artistic skill, which forms part of her own interpretation of why her career is not successful – she lacks skills in marketing and networking. Thus, the emotion work of hope can be understood to constitute an understanding of the correlation or even causation between one’s shortcomings or lack in skill and one’s current, unwanted situation.

Hope is understood as the combination of a negative interpretation of one's chances to success - and still doing emotional work towards the expectation of the continuation of the artistic activity. Thus, the fantasmatic logic of being chosen as a result of having a prestigious educational background meant that my respondents did not do the emotion work of blind hope, but expressed a more "justified" form of hope. Interestingly, the artists do the same emotion work of hope in relation to starting a family:

I didn't think before I had children. I would have figured out that it was impossible, but... you know, I longed so much, for children, I yearned so strongly I felt I could die (...) no, I had no choice, I had to have them! [laughter] (Ulrika, 40).

As the prospect of being able to provide for a family is rather grim, the choice of having children seem irrational. Two of my respondents have chosen not to have children because of the pervasive insecurity and the fluctuation of their income. However, others perform emotion work of hope when having children in the same manner as when embarking on an artistic career: their interpretation is negative, but due to their desire, as well as a perceived lack of alternatives, they perform hope to be able to achieve a family life.

Trust and Luck as Emotion Work in Response to Success in Relation to the Art World as Arbitrary Discourse

When having had experience of continuation, that is, having been able to sustain their creative activity (professionally or privately), my respondents exercised trust as emotion work: "Usually, it has gone well, most of the time, most of the time, it's gone well" (Robert, 38). The experience of "things having gone well" (i.e. their ability to continue) allowed them to bracket the insecurity of the unknowable aspect of their future possibilities to work artistically, and they thus formed favourable expectations of their own ability to continue to be creative. These artists typically worked with more "sellable" art forms, such as paintings, photography, or temporary works of graphic art (albeit considered having low status). These art forms contrasted to less sellable art forms such as installations. Below are listed some of the expressions of trust extracted from the interviews:

You don't know what the future holds, and I've learned to accept it.
(Robert, 38)

(After graduation) you didn't think much about how difficult it would

be, you just did your thing” (Josef, 46)

I feel that I have gone into this, that I have accepted that, that life is like this, this is how it’s going to be, sometimes you’re rich and sometimes you’re poor, it goes up and down all the time, I think you just have to adjust to this and realize that it always works out, somehow (Helena, 32)

You just struggle on, somehow. (Fredrik, 41)

It usually works out, but you never know (Vera, 40).

I think, things will always work out. And it does so because somehow, you worry and make sure you have work, but... but I’m surprised it always works out somehow (Markus, 40).

As the reader might interpret, the extracts are ordered so that they can be read as from “strong” (accepting insecurity) to “weak” (acknowledging insecurity) trust. Again, through making the future a space that had more importance than the present, my respondents could do trust as emotion work. Interestingly, my respondents which may be understood as “successful” in the definition of having achieved their desire of continuation, also did emotion work of *luck* when understanding favourable aspects of their career that had enhanced their ability of the desired continuation: “It went pretty well, I must say, I had new beginners luck or...” (Per). Other examples were:

I was very lucky because directly I... I got a public commission almost immediately. And I had a gallery already when I graduated, too, or was in contact with, so, I had, yes. (Robert, 38)

I was lucky to get a, to rent a good studio in the city, it helped quite a lot, I could go to galleries, and, then you were like, part of the art world. So that was favourable. (Josef, 46)

My respondents did not deny the need for skill or talent for success, but as they understood the art world as full of skilful and talented people, luck explained why a few “made it” where others, seemingly equally skilled and talented, did not. The explanation of luck thus filled the gap of ignorance regarding why certain individuals lacked success despite having the right requirements. The respondents gave different meanings to luck, notably: being lucky in meeting the right people,

being lucky as in “having the right personality” and being lucky while creating. The aspects of luck, such as the ability to be part of the art world, are thus interpreted in this analysis as part of the respondents’ understanding of what was required to achieve continuation in creation.

How can we understand the artists’ turn to luck as emotion work? Two lines of explanation are possible. Either, the (Swedish) art world is truly arbitrary, why chance and luck play a significant role in who achieves success. The artists using luck as an emotional strategy could truly lack knowledge and understanding of the outlines of the art world and consequently the necessary strategies to achieve success (as for example outlined by Becker 2008). Luck then became the logical explanation of success in an arbitrary art world. However, this perspective is countered by researchers such as Gustavsson et. al. (2012) who, in their analysis of the Swedish art world, found patterns of structural inequalities regarding class and gender forming part of the understanding of who reaches top artistic positions. If luck truly mattered, success would statistically be less clustered among persons of male gender, for example. As such, notions of luck would belong to a discursive resource of a privileged group’s refusal of accepting responsibility for its own power (Skeggs 2004). Critical research on the creative industries also argues against the idea of creative work as meritocratic, but shows how inequalities in this sector are distributed per categories of class, gender and race (Dex et. al. 2000; Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; Gill 2014).

Another understanding would be that artists need to do luck as emotion work to preserve a position of disinterestedness and unwillingness to adopt calculative strategies to achieve success, as it would clash against the given artist role (Bourdieu 1980; c.f. Banks 2014). However, luck is also related to the exercise of emotion work such as trust and hope. In a career where luck is understood to play a part in who makes it or not, the exercise of trust and hope becomes important for endurance in an insecure and seemingly arbitrary art world.

The Individualization of Emotion Work

When interpreting data, it is interesting not only to understand how respondents form discourses regarding their social world, (which risks stopping at the level of descriptivism) but also to discuss how we can understand the result or effect these discourses might have in relation to the social structures they inhabit and partake in (Ahmed 2004). I argue that the formation of a certain composure of the self because of the emotion work of hope and trust forms a certain subjectivity – the enduring artist (c.f. Ahmed 2004). This position becomes a moral category as the ability to endure becomes the “sign” of the artists proving themselves worthy, relating to strength of will of the individual (c.f. Flisbäck 2006). In individualized

cultures, failure is not necessarily regarded as related to structural opportunities and constraints (Menger 1999). Endurance remained the primary strategy of the artists in their endeavour towards the continuation of work (c.f. Flisbäck 2006).

Sometimes it goes up and sometimes it goes down, in this line of profession especially [laughter] and you just have to endure, you know, because the advantages outnumber the disadvantages, because I get to be my own, I get to do exactly what I want to do (Helena, 32).

Endurance gave my respondents a sense of power (or at least allowed them to overcome a sense of having no power) in relation to their ability of continuation of work. Above all, as I have discussed in this article, trust and hope allowed the subjects to prevent a loss of investment in identity. To understand why artists form strategies for enduring despite little or no chances of being successful, we must understand their investment in a life choice. The category, 'artist', runs so deep into the individuals' identity formation that a loss of career is equated with a loss of self (Bain 2005; Oakley 2009). The irrationality in chasing the eluding white rabbit of the artistic career is rational in relation to the logics of being chosen by a prestigious art college, but emotion work is still needed, as that logic contains discourses of the art world as arbitrary and of art as non-work. However, trust becomes a moral category; it includes judgments about who is fit to be an artist, and individuals are distinguished by their ability to demonstrate endurance. The art world becomes a site where not everyone has the resources to formulate a self that is valued as enduring (Ahmed 2004; c.f. Skeggs 2004) and discourses regarding trust become the technique for constituting oneself as the enduring subject.

On a more aggregated level, my respondent's efforts to form trust and faith can be argued to have an ideological function: it obscured the limited power these individuals had to change or better their situation. To do emotion work towards the individual enduring subject position in order to cope with the uncertainty of the art world does not change the conditions of their field (c.f. Banks 2014). It also functioned to obscure their reliance on others, such as receiving economic support from their families. Although the respondents acknowledged this reliance, they were less reflexive regarding their construction of the enduring subject position as a prerequisite for being an artist and thus shaping certain discourses regarding the art world. In line with Ahmed (2004), I argue that emotions such as trust and endurance should not primarily be understood as categories of the individual psyche but analysed in relation to the structural and social possibilities certain groups have to employ them as emotion work or affective practise (Wetherell 2014).

Conclusion

Occupational insecurity and dealing with failure is part of creative work, as well as part of the social condition of late modern capitalism (McRobbie 2016). In a working life fraught with insecurity and inherent inequality, it is important for social research to continue to form understandings of how people form strategies towards the closing of the distance of a desired life and actual life.

This study explored the emotion work artists do to cope with an insecure work situation. It was found that artists define success as the ability to uphold the artistic activity. This was not necessarily related to professional success as in monetary reward, but above all related to the innate ability to be creative. This formed part of the “art as non-work” discourse, as artists are motivated to pursue an artistic career in contrast to understandings of “normal work” as mundane, uncreative and unfree, as well as incorporating the category of ‘artist’ into their identities. Previous experiences of success (upholding the artistic activity) form the basis for trust as emotion work in relation to their future scenarios. Trust has been analysed as visible in sound bites such as “it usually works out” or “you just struggle on”. The respondents were also found to express luck as part of the explanation of their success, which forms part of another discourse; the art world as arbitrary discourse. The fantasmatic logic of “being chosen” was analysed in relation to the respondents’ prestigious arts training, which related to the emotion work of hope, which was analysed as the “struggling on” despite lacking experiences of success, a less secure and positive form of emotion work. The logic of “being chosen” was found to contain both discourses discussed, and to function through the temporal aspect of making the future more important than the present. This finding differs somewhat from the knowledge workers in Ekmans (2010) study: instead of helping my respondents overcome difficulties in the present by projecting a fantasy of the successful future, the aspect of being chosen helped my respondents endure in the present, although forming a more pessimistic interpretation of their future success (due to the art world as arbitrary discourse).

It was also argued that the meaning of trust and hope was to prevent loss of investment in identity formation. Hope and trust can be understood as techniques for producing a self that is enduring, obscuring certain social resources such as relying on others to sustain a living. Although personal relationships certainly form the emotional grounding for enduring, this article argues that the ability to trust is not so much a psychosocial resource such as self-confidence but, rather, an asset to material security, thus related to social position such as class, which shapes more unconscious expressions of trust (Ahmed 2004). Considering the results of this study, it would be interesting for future research to understand the failed career, which could shed light on emotion work in relation to any structural condition affecting non-success, such as having terminated the artistic career.

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Notes

¹In a large study on Swedish artists' income and work from 2016 by the Swedish arts grants committee, the total amount of professional artist was appreciated to approximately 29 k individuals, sorted into the categories of visual art and design, dance, film, music, musical, theatre, word and literature. Approximately 12500 of these worked in visual arts, illustration or arts and craft (Konstnärsnämnden 2016).

²One exception is the analysis of how artists manage underemployment by holding multiple jobs, see Lindström 2016; Throsby and Zednick 2011.

³Visual artists are, as occupational category, particularly exposed to occupational risk. Although the distribution of income is varied in the group, visual artists have the lowest income among the general artists group. Their median income has been found to be about 68 percent of that of the total population (Swedish arts grants committee 2010; 2016). Financial support from family and relatives to compensate for meagre income has been found important for at least a fourth of visual artists (Swedish arts grants committee 2011). Visual artists are predominantly self-employed, which has economic consequences as Sweden has an employment-based social security system. This makes self-employed individuals more exposed to occupational risks.

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