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Thought Experiments in Agency

Artists'

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Personal Impacts Survey

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Review

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Christine Wong Yap

Inter/dependence:

Artists' Personal Impacts Survey Review

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New York, NY, USA

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Inter/dependence was developed as part of Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's *Process Space* artist residency program in 2015.

CHRISTINEWONGYAP.COM

Introduction

Inter/dependence is a summary of findings from the Artists' Personal Impacts Survey.

The survey and 'zine comprise the first parts of my project, *Thought Experiments in Agency*,* an outgrowth of my long-standing interest in shaping an art world that I would like to participate in.

I envision this world as one that empowers hardworking, thoughtful artist-peers, and is abundant with mutual support and agency. I'm fascinated with how artists' DIY activities involve and affect other people, improve our conditions, and signal more possibilities. *Thought Experiments* draws upon positive psychology—an empirical field studying human flourishing.

I designed and conducted the survey in September 2015. There were forty questions, which pertained to artists':

- Current attitudes about the art world
- Support of other artists
- Experiences with socially-engaged practices
- Outlook on strengthening a more desirable art world

My goals were to investigate:

1. The positive psychological impacts of art practice on artists
2. Self-organization: artist-initiated and -run activities that benefit other artists
3. How self-organized activities nurture self-organizers in return

I propose that self-organizers use generosity and collective solidarity to form viable, self-empowering alternatives to existing, hierarchical art worlds, and that in the process they find plentiful personal rewards.

1. The Personal Impacts of Art Practice

Relatedness: Other People Matter

Respondents emphasized the importance of collaboration, community, and connection. This focus on interaction recalls psychologist Chris Peterson's

*I am an artist; not a psychologist nor statistician.

thesis that “Other people matter.” “It is through character strengths that connect us with others,” he writes, “that many of us find satisfaction and meaning in life.”

Connection is essential for Ranu Mukherjee: “All the activities I do as an artist are about relatedness. From exhibitions to collaborative projects to teaching, they all connect me with other people—and hopefully, not only other artists. This is the way I speak in the world.”

Interdependence

Respondents brought up interdependence—“that sweet spot between independence and dependence shared with generous collaborators,” describes Steven Barich—as essential to their practices. One respondent notes, “I feel most in control when I can feel comfortable being interdependent, which is to say out of control and held in support by, of, and for my friends, family, and community.”

Simply put by Cal Cullen, “Artists need each other.”

Interdependence might be considered the intersection of autonomy and relatedness, which, along with competence,

are the core needs at the heart of Edward Deci’s and Richard Ryan’s self-determination theory. Relatedness and autonomy may seem contradictory, but Deci—like respondents—insists that individuals can be autonomously dependent.

Studio, Professional Practices, Teaching, and Jobs

In studio practice, respondents felt creative control (autonomy) and technical mastery (competence). They found satisfaction in exhibiting work, attaining opportunities, and receiving validation. Respondents also enjoyed using professional practice skills, such as documenting artwork, updating websites, and preparing applications. While artists typically resent competitions’ onerous requirements and poor odds of success, Lauren Frances Adams’ perspective is one of agency: “Applying... allows me to choose where and how I engage as an artist.”

Respondents felt connected and competent while teaching; mentoring students was especially rewarding. Other day jobs led to personal growth, too: one respondent comments, “As a gallery manager and art installer, I learned from helping

others how to be a ‘better’ artist—i.e., more competent, humble, honest, aware, patient, etc.”

Clarifications

Some respondents were uncertain of how to answer a few questions. I should have provided clearer definitions when I asked how participation, collaboration, generosity, and redistribution increased the following:

- ♦ **Optimism.** A selection of respondents replied that they’re optimists or pessimists; they were unclear how activities could increase what seemed like fixed dispositions. According to psychologist Martin Seligman, optimism is an attitude that shapes how people respond to setbacks; it can be learned and therefore measurably increased.
- ♦ **Achievement.** Seligman also writes that some people pursue achievement because it’s intrinsically rewarding—they enjoy the pursuit for its own sake. Yet many respondents felt ambivalent because they associated achievement with personal gains and extrinsic indicators. They deemed it egocentric, or they couldn’t see how it related to socially engaged practices that lack measureable outcomes.

♦ **Authenticity.** Similarly, respondents felt ambivalent or confused by authenticity. My definition, “self-congruent,” was too obscure. Self-congruence is being true to your core self. Recognizing it “takes a bit of self-awareness and emotional intelligence. If you understand your guiding values and have a clear sense of your preferences and desires, you will likely instantly recognize when there’s a match between you and a particular activity,” explains psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky.

Some respondents were unfamiliar with the tactic of **non-participation**. I should have defined it. Non-participation is a form of resistance which includes organized actions like strikes, boycotts, walkouts, and shutdowns, as well as personal gestures like declining projects or choosing not to apply to opportunities.

However, other respondents did opt for non-participation, and it was correlated with a strong sense of authenticity. Kathleen Granados explains, “I try to ... conduct myself with a set of personal beliefs and integrity when it comes to my work/how I work/participate... Sometimes saying ‘no’ is necessary.” Kirsten Lund offers, “The projects I’ve

been involved in make me feel like I'm on the right path and making connections that are meaningful to me. ... I am no longer applying to shows that ... do a disservice to artists even in a small way."

Opposing a poor choice can increase personal and group empowerment. One respondent says, "Refusing to do a workshop because of poor payment is a position in standing up for artists' rights." She appreciates "having the confidence as an authentic artist to do that."

2. Self-Organization

In reviewing responses, I identified a subset of 26 out of 112 artists engaged in self-organized activities.

DEFINITION. I use the phrase "self-organizers" to refer to artists who proactively create or strengthen an art world in which they would like to participate. They do this by making conditions more favorable for artists and less deferential to hierarchical value systems of power, money, and prestige, whose artificial scarcity model necessarily marginalizes the majority of artists as vulnerable, precarious, and dependent. (Sholette) Self-organizers manifest art worlds that affirm our agency and potential,

according to self-determined terms and relations.

TERMINOLOGY. The term "self-organizer" is a tactical, contingent phrase. Its limitation is that it suggests individualistic action, which belies the interdependence of self-organizers' activities, which are often collective, collaborative, relational, community-oriented, and generous.

EXAMPLES. Self-organized activities range from informal events to new institutions, such as:

- ♦ Periodic art salons with dinner for 15 guests in South Brooklyn
- ♦ *Congratulations Pine Tree*, a weekly San Francisco Bay Area art podcast
- ♦ *Temporary Art Review*, an online journal founded in St. Louis, MO
- ♦ DEMO, an alternative exhibition space in a home in Springfield, IL
- ♦ Wave Pool, a Cincinnati-based gallery, studio, and residency space
- ♦ Moinhos do Dão, a residency in the Portuguese countryside

Data comparisons

When I compared self-organizers' responses against those from the remaining 86 respondents, I found

that self-organizers are more engaged, optimistic, active, and more likely to stay active across many (though not all) metrics. They hold stronger (more positive and negative) attitudes about art world sectors (page 9). They support artists more frequently in a dozen ways (page 12). They are more active in participation, collaboration, generosity, exchange, and redistribution (page 13). They report higher increases in dimensions of subjective wellbeing (page 14). And they're more likely to create or strengthen a more desirable art world (page 15).

3. How Self-Organizing Nurtures Organizers

Activating Core Values

For Allison Lacher, co-founder of DEMO Project, a core value is relatedness: "I try to create relationships because that's how I'm wired—I like to make new friends and create opportunities for artists," which includes personally hosting new artists as houseguests several times per year. Kate Ann Rhoades, who co-hosts the *Congratulations Pine Tree* podcast, says that strengthening a more desirable art world "is one of my main pursuits in life."

Artistic and Personal Development

Self-organizers benefit from the enriching environment they cultivate. Barich, co-founder of Moinhos do Dão, writes in a follow-up email, "We're trying to set up a certain feedback here... [I've] experienced change in myself and my own art practice." Dana Hemenway writes, "Having deeper conversations about people's artwork offers growth for myself as a person and for my art practice."

Becoming Part of the Field

By becoming self-organizers, artists assume a position within a larger field of practice. Gioia Fonda observes, "By becoming an organizer and leader in this art community, I ... see that I'm piggybacking on work that took place long before me to create an art community here. I'm modeling behaviors, laying foundations, educating others and looking for likely people to pass the baton to and continue the work."

When Adams notes, "I'm steeped in my field and that field is shaped by my personal contributions," she expresses a powerful sense of personal agency.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi observes that creative individuals enter

their domain by having their creations accepted by the field. I propose that through their activities, self-organizers *expand* the field and potentially change it to make it more egalitarian, diverse, and artist-centered.

Critical Engagement

For some respondents, self-organizing can be an expression of critical engagement.

Curator Kuba Szreder's concept of radical opportunism may be a useful parallel. Szreder writes, "Instead of competing for individual ... opportunities, [radical opportunists] utilize project-related apparatuses to foster temporary yet tangible collectives, clusters, and networks based on principles of solidarity and equity." This idea is comparable to Weston Teruya's vision to create "opportunities to support folks ... (rather than solely ... individual projects)" through his collective and to "direct the burden of work toward institutions rather than individuals and community organizers."

Radical opportunism also shares commonalities with Sarrita Hunn's essay, "Artists for Artists' Sake," in which she writes: "members and allies of this

[alternative, artist-run] 'field' must leverage [our power] within ... commercial, academic, ... and civic spheres... to position ourselves outside, and in resistance to, these hegemonic power structures... using radical forms of participation to forefront self-organized, inclusive, and equitable structures."

Empathy and Gratitude

Self-organizers are passionate about providing the kinds of support that they would want. Cullen co-founded Wave Pool "to activate [her] empathy... towards artists in very real, positive ways."

This passion arises from gratitude: one respondent wrote, "If I have resources, clout, or opportunities that are shareable, I want to share them. Every opportunity I've ever gotten has been from somebody else sharing something with me, and if I'm in the position to do that, that's what I want to do." To Adams, the best part of supporting artists is "Paying it forward—honoring what those before me have done to help me by helping those around me." Self-organizers see themselves as links in a continuous chain of cooperation.

Giving Feels Good

Providing opportunities is an act of generosity that can be rewarding to givers. Lyubomirsky connects generosity with several concepts explored in the survey (emphases added):

“Being generous and willing to share makes people happy. [It] leads you to perceive others more positively ... and fosters a heightened sense of **interdependence** and cooperation in your social community... you may begin to view yourself as an altruistic and compassionate person... [which] can promote a sense of confidence, **optimism**, and usefulness. Helping others highlights your abilities [**competence**], resources, expertise, and gives you a sense of control of your life [**autonomy**]. You may learn skills or discover hidden talents ... [which can confer] a sense of efficacy and accomplishment [**achievement**].”

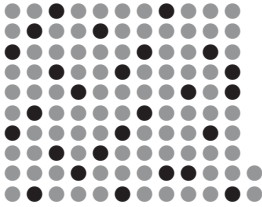
Conclusion

By taking steps to create an art world they would like to participate in, self-organizers experience rewarding personal impacts. Because they're grounded in core values and interdependently entangled with friends, family, and esteemed colleagues, self-organizers' activities can engender relatedness, agency, growth, empathy, gratitude, and positive emotion.

Self-organization
can publically,
tangibly affirm one's
impact on other
artists and the com-
munity—making
visible how other
people matter and
how we matter to
other people.

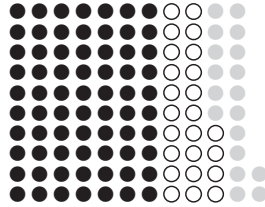
Who took the survey?

112 VISUAL ARTISTS



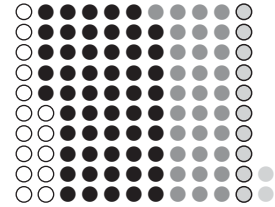
including 26 self-organizers

63% FEMALE



● female ○ male ● didn't say

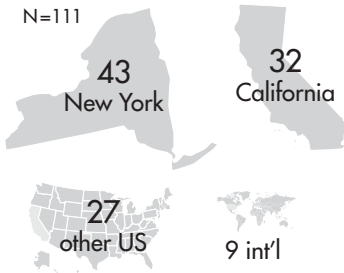
48% AGE 30-39



○ 18-29 ● 30-39 ● 40-49
○ 50-69 ● didn't say

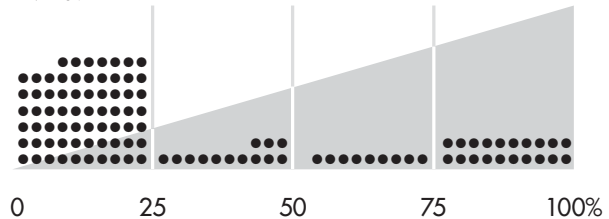
RESIDENCE

N=111



INCOME FROM ART

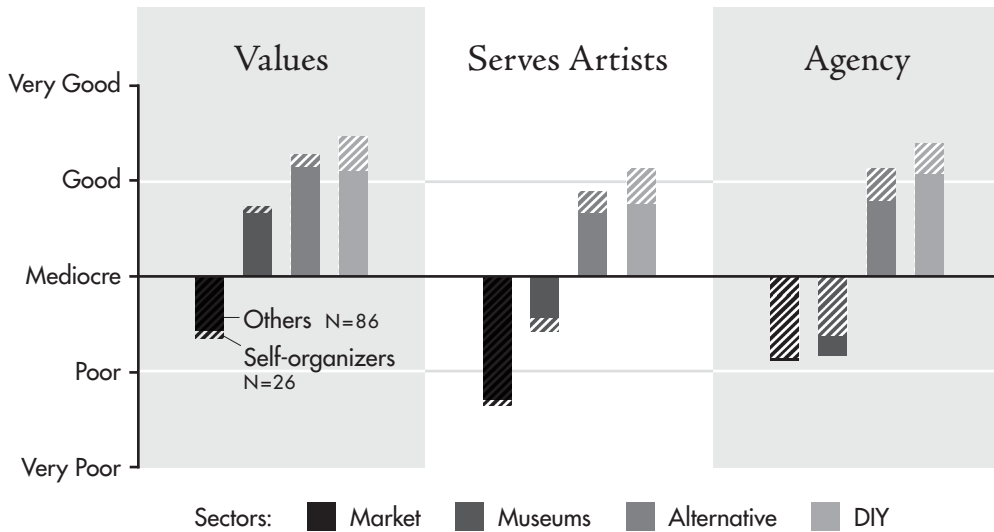
N=109



A typical respondent was a female in her thirties or forties, whose art accounts for less than one-quarter of her income. She likely resided in New York or California (reflecting the biases of my network).

A subset of artists engaged in self-organized activities, such as starting an exhibition space or residency program, were compared against the remaining respondents.

Attitudes about art world sectors



In the first section, respondents rated four sectors of the art world:

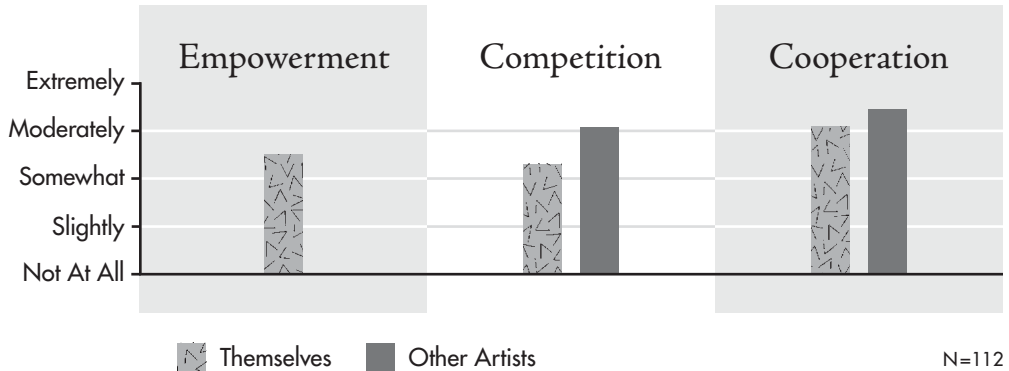
- the art market (auctions, fairs, commercial galleries)
- museums
- alternative spaces
- DIY artist activities (informal, independent, artist-initiated projects)

For each sector, respondents ranked:

- its values
- how it serves the majority of artists
- their ability to take action in that sector

Self-organizers were slightly more negative about the market's values and how it serves artists. They saw their own agency in the market and museums less favorably. They were much more positive about alternative and particularly DIY sectors across all three metrics.

Perceptions of artists



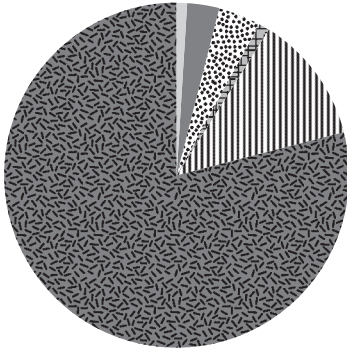
On average, respondents felt somewhat to moderately empowered.

They saw other artists as moderately competitive, and themselves a bit less so. Both groups' responses averaged slightly more cooperative than competitive. This

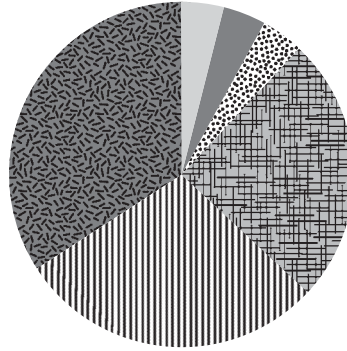
may be a result of self-selection; artists who are naturally cooperative may have more readily volunteered to take the survey.

The results for self-organized artists did not differ significantly.

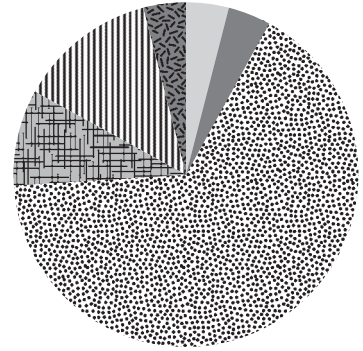
Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness



Autonomy



Competence



Relatedness

Domains:  Studio  Professional Practice  Job  Community  Other  N/A

Next, respondents were asked in which domains they experienced three core needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

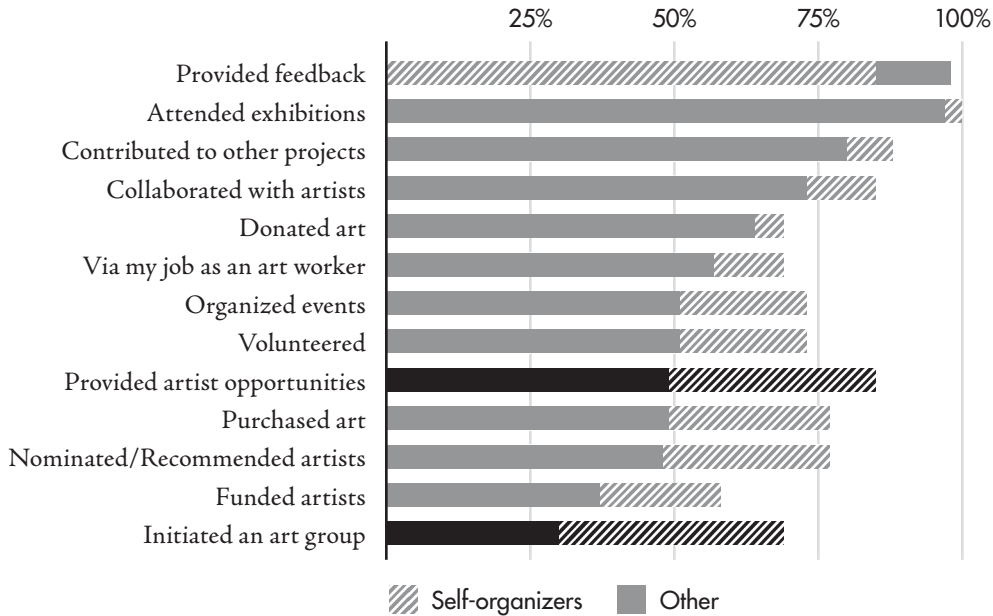
They reported feeling autonomy in the domain of the studio, followed by professional practices, such as writing applications.

The studio and professional practices were also domains where respondents felt competence. A quarter of

respondents said they experienced competence at their jobs, which included being teachers and art workers. Two-thirds of respondents felt relatedness in the domain of the community; professional practices and jobs were additional sources.

Respondents explained that they needed to balance the solitude of the studio with the conviviality of art events.

Supporting Artists



When respondents identified how they supported artists over the past twelve months, self-organizers averaged 20% higher levels of support in twelve out of thirteen metrics.

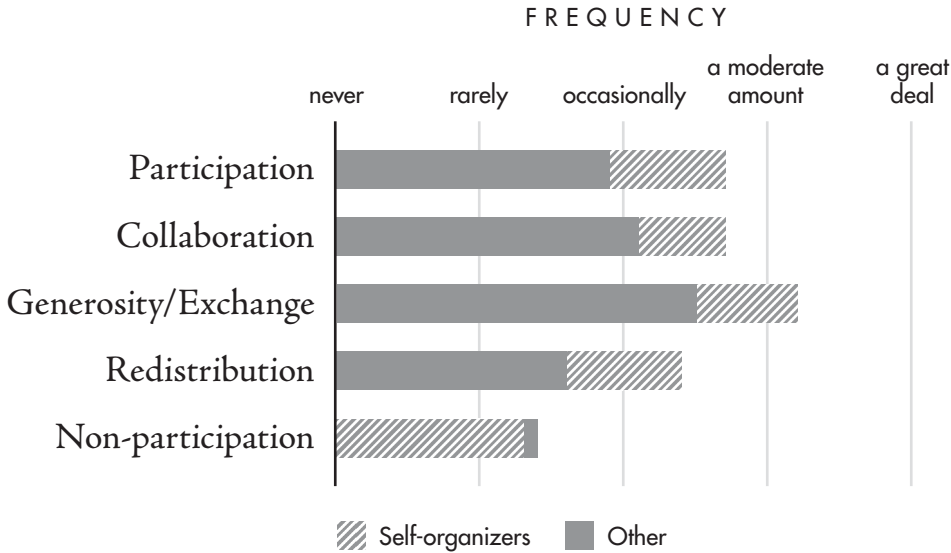
Notably, self-organizers were over twice as likely to initiate an art group. Self-organizers also reported providing artist opportunities at a rate 36% higher than others.

In one metric, self-organizers reported less activity than others. Though 85% of self-organizers provided feedback, it fell short of the 98% of others who did.

In both groups, funding artists was one of the two least popular means of support, though over half of all respondents purchased art.

The majority of respondents supported other artists in multiple ways, suggesting that most artists already practice some form of interdependence.

The Expanded Field



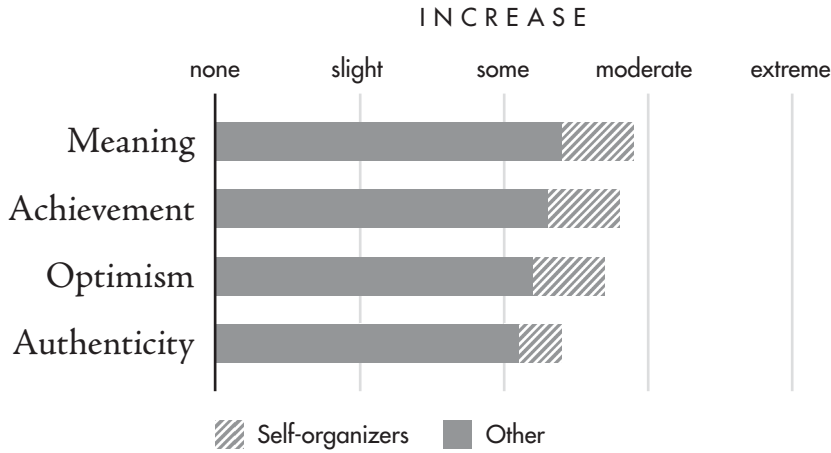
Respondents estimated how often, over the past twelve months, they:

- engaged in participatory projects
- collaborated with others on art projects
- freely gave or exchanged an art-related service, product, or experience
- contributed to an art-related redistribution of resources
- chose non-participation or active refusal due to principles or ethics

The first four metrics could be considered socially engaged practices, and self-organizers averaged 18% higher in this area.

Relative to those metrics, all respondents reported lower rates of non-participation. Some were unfamiliar with non-participation as a tactic, and saw only negative connotations. Other respondents correlated non-participation with feelings of agency and authenticity.

Increases in Subjective Wellbeing



Following up with the earlier questions, respondents indicated how much these experiences of participation, collaboration, generosity, exchange, redistribution, or non-participation increased their personal sense of:

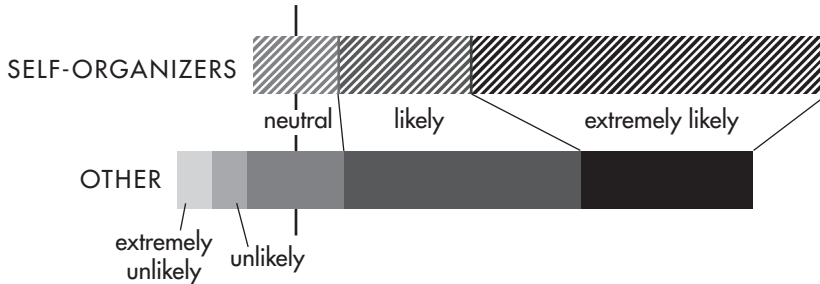
- meaning (purpose; feeling connected to something greater than yourself)
- achievement (a sense of accomplishment or fulfillment)
- optimism
- authenticity (feeling self-congruent)

Self-organizers averaged 11% higher increases in these metrics.

However, some respondents felt ambivalent about these terms, due to the difference between common and positive psychological definitions.

Outlook

Likelihood of working towards a more desirable art world



Finally, respondents expressed how likely, over the next six months, they were to take steps to create or strengthen an art world in which they would like to participate.

Twelve percent of non-self-organizers indicated they would probably not take any steps, while none of the self-organizers felt similarly.

Self-organizers selected “extremely likely” twice as often as others.

Respondents interpreted this question in many ways. For some, a more desirable art world is one in which they make strong work and find support. Others wrote about continuing or initiating self-organized activities, such as a limited edition print program or a book about artists’ finances. Many described upcoming projects, collaborations, and efforts to cultivate community with eager anticipation, readily welcoming the future.

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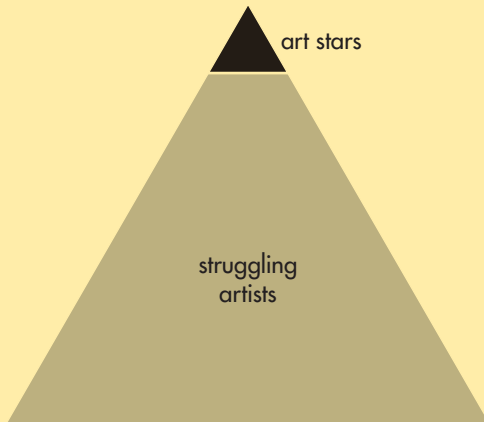
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Models of Two Art Worlds



Mainstream, vertical, hierarchical;
characterized by extremes of excess and scarcity



Alternative, peer-oriented, artist-affirming;
abundant with mutual support and agency

