

Artist's Salary Now!

Karin Hansson

Additional contribution by Shiva Anoushirvani, Åsa Andersson Broms, Nils Claesson, George Kentros, Per Hasselberg



Artist Salary Now, campaign work 2018, Karin Hansson

“Should we spend our time filling out forms or making art?” was the rhetorical question that acted as a starting point for “Konsnärlön nu!”, a series of events at Gallery Tegen2 in Stockholm in September 2018. Over a period of a month, a group of artists performed a think tank and set up a campaign headquarters as a means to provoke discussion. The exhibition also provided space for a series of semi-public talks in which the question of a possible basic income for artists was further developed. The talks engaged activists from the universal basic income movement, politicians, researchers and artists. In this report we describe the ideas behind the project and the discussions as they evolved in the talks and interviews with artists. As a result of the project we propose an artist’s salary as a pilot for a future basic income, a salary that eventually will be for everyone, not only artists: a salary to allow for time to take care of our commons and existential issues. A modest salary based on the modest needs of artists. Unlike a universal basic income, it is intended for a specific purpose: our shared society. And, since we claim that society is art, it is up to each one of us to define what society is.

Introduction to the Project

The context of the project is our artistic research group *Work a Work* at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, consisting of five visual artists and one musician, who since 2017 have met to explore the notion of work from different perspectives regularly in seminars and workshops, and in relation to our own artistic practice. Previously we have collaborated in different constellations, most recently in “Performing the common”, an

exhibition and seminar series in relation to a research project on participatory methods in city planning.¹

The point of departure for the project “Artist’s Salary Now!” was the government report about Swedish artists’ work conditions, titled *Konstnär—oavsett villkor?* (Artist—regardless of conditions?)² It describes how artists, while they typically spend a long time in education, as a professional group have some of the lowest incomes in Sweden. The most “radical” solution to the problems identified in the report is the suggestion to take SEK 100 million of the SEK 225 million in the arts budget that is earmarked for specific actions, and give the money to The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth³ to support “digitalization”.⁴ According to the proposal, artists would in this way learn to be better at protecting their copyright and get paid for the use of their work online.

From our perspective, this strategy appears both strange and provocative. It implies that arts policy is about supporting the market’s commodification of art as the primary way to get paid for working as an artist. It is unclear how the report came to the conclusion that this should be the purpose of the Culture Ministry’s arts policy, rather than the goal of the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation. We don’t think that culture is something that should exist because of economic reasons, or, as the Swedish Agency for Growth formulates it on their web page:

*We assume that culture and creative practices bring social benefits, as an effect. On the other hand, the individual creative company’s goal is usually something else, such as realizing an artistic idea. Culture is thus useful because it exists, culture does not exist to be useful. When there is free space for people with cultural and creative skills to develop ideas and create, good business and regional policy effects can also occur.*⁵

From this perspective, the goal of an arts policy should be to create room for artists and to support access to art and artists’ work for society as a whole, not converting art into a business.

The author formulates this as a comment on the 2009 report on cultural policy: “Understanding that free research, education and the art of its unique character cannot be managed in structures of goods exchange without depriving much of its potential, is crucial to a society’s future opportunities in the information age.”⁶ In Sweden, the art market is not large enough to sustain a national community of artists. Without different types of support, the local art market would not exist, but be even more dominated by global monopolising actors. Today’s arts policy mostly supports local artists: directly through grants and public art commissions that can be applied for by way of competitions and through studio support programmes, and indirectly through support for institutions that in turn commission artists for special purposes. It is a patchwork of different types of more or less strictly regulated forms of funding, whose bureaucracy takes a considerable amount of time and keeps both the bureaucrats who administer these programmes in employment, and the artists busy feeding the system with information on how to achieve the purpose of the grant they are applying for. Very few of these grant systems consist of more than project support for a limited period—from one month to a couple of years—with the exception of some rare five- and ten-year stipends. In our experience artists therefore spend a considerable amount of their time describing what they have achieved and could possibly achieve; maybe much more than they actually spend focusing on art. Thus, in economic terms, the so-called transaction costs, the costs of enabling the “deal”, are significantly greater than those involved in the actual deal.

In addition, it is difficult to understand either the system as a whole, or the long-term purpose of it, and many talented artists for whom the state has provided a long and expensive education therefore leave the arts for areas in which their eligibility is not continuously questioned and controlled. In particular, artists who do not

come from a family of cultural workers with an existing understanding of the system, or who have a family that can support them financially leave the arts, which increases the problem of the unrepresentative recruitment to the profession.⁷ It is therefore not only the lack of resources and excessive bureaucracy that are a problem for the artists, but also the lack of transparency and the difficulty in understanding how to make a living as an artist, and what formal and informal rules are dictating the terms. We decided to explore these questions further through an artistic provocation suggesting an Artist's Salary as a solution to the problems in the funding system of the arts. Before discussing the actions undertaken and their outcome, we will in the following section give some background to the idea of a basic income for artists and arguments for and against it.



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The Idea of a Basic Income

The idea of a basic income has been around at least since the nineteenth century, and might be seen as a reaction to the extreme inequalities created during the emergence of industrial capitalism.⁸ A basic income is defined as an income unconditionally granted to all individuals, irrespective of their other incomes, and without any work requirements. In the 1960s these ideas appeared to be a logical evolution of welfare economics, and large-scale experiments were conducted in Canada and the US.⁹ Simplified, the aim of an unconditional basic income is partly to equalize income differences, partly to reduce the bureaucracy of the welfare state, and partly to increase the individual's freedom of choice. In short, it can be described as a way to compensate for the shortcomings of a capitalist system. Unlike a negative tax, it should be paid to everyone, not only people with low incomes, similar to the Swedish child support system that supports all children unconditionally.¹⁰

The universal basic income idea has advocates in very different political camps. The arguments most often expressed from a socialist or liberal perspective are that it would lead to a fair sharing of work, a more sustainable society and to individuals getting more time to focus on common social issues and creative activities.¹¹ The major basic income argument that comes from a capitalist or conservative perspective is that it is about the individual's freedom to decide for themselves.¹² People should not be left to starve, but what they choose to eat (or not) should not be up to the authorities to decide. The argument is also about the dismantling of the welfare state in favour of a so-called minimal state, but recognising the defects of capitalism—such as the

lack of equitable sharing of society's resources—by evening out big differences through some form of negative income tax.¹³

The main arguments against basic income in Sweden are related to the work ethic (*arbetslinjen*). From a capitalist or conservative perspective, there is a distrust that important jobs will really be done without justifying them with a salary.¹⁴ It is also considered unfair to force people who work to pay taxes for others who don't. There is also a fear that the "diligent" members of society will abandon the country, and since no one will then be able to finance the system it would eventually collapse.¹⁵ From a socialist or liberal perspective there is a fear of losing the negotiating power versus the capital owners if the workers just avoid wage labour, instead of taking control of the means of production.¹⁶ The risk of wage dumping, in which workers are satisfied with lower wages, is also a concern, with as effect that companies that are badly managed can continue to function in a non-efficient way instead of improving. A basic income reform is also seen as a something that compensates for the shortcomings of a capitalist system that instead should be dissolved altogether.¹⁷

Economic arguments for and against a basic income are also brought forward in the debate, and depending on how you calculate it, a possible basic income in Sweden today could be anything from EUR 800, to EUR 1,254.¹⁸ A counterargument focusing on the economic aspects can be, for example, that these calculations are unrealistic, since the changes in the incentive structures that the basic income creates will rebuild the economic conditions in other areas, thus reducing tax revenues, which in turn reduces the economic base for a basic income. This would lower the basic income, thus leading to a situation in which this would not provide enough support for those in most need, requiring additional support—and thus creating additional cost for the bureaucracy needed to deal with such a system. The counterargument for this is that a basic income would give people more time to conserve resources, repair things instead of buying new ones, buy vintage and do their own household work, and thus would not need as high an income as before—while also having the time to care for the environment.

Feminist arguments are also included in the debate.¹⁹ Not least, it is pointed out that the movement for a basic income tends to grow when men's jobs are under threat, while the care sector, which traditionally employs more women, always needs more labourers. The risk of a basic income could also be that it implies a reduced incentive for women to work outside their home, and thus poses the risk of cementing patriarchal structures in which women are caregivers but still depend on the financial support of men.²⁰ The most successful feminist strategy in economic terms this far have also been to fight for fair wages and the professionalisation of homework.²¹ On the other hand, many examples show that women in particular benefit from a universal basic income in societies where men traditionally have secured a near-monopoly on wage-earning while women are responsible for the unpaid housework.²² It was also due to anti-feminist politics, among other reasons, why an attempt for a universal basic income in the US in the 1970 was stopped.²³ The attempt was quite close to full approval—both Nixon and the White House, as well as the Senate and House supported it—but it was never implemented. One argument against it was the fear of the independence women might have gained in previous basic income attempts.²⁴



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A Basic Income for Artists

Like housework, art is also something that everyone wants, but few want to pay for, which is why it is interesting to take art as a case for formulating a type of basic income. The proposal of an artist's salary is by no means new in a Swedish context. A general artist allowance was already proposed in 1996 in a parliamentary motion from a representative of the Green Party,²⁵ and an investigation was also done to figure how this could be financed.²⁶ The report following the investigation concluded that a small general allowance could be possible to supplement the then current framework of existing forms of grants and stipends, but that the allowance was too small to make a real difference (SEK 800 monthly), and the resistance against the idea was too strong, primarily from the artists' own institutions, where the idea of artists dependent on state support was unpopular. Thus, according to the report, artists would prefer government support to look like payment for work done in competition, and that the allowance instead should go to other institutions such as theatres and museums, with the intention that increased funds to institutions would trickle down to pay artists for commissioned work. This rejection of the artist's wage by artists exemplifies the biggest problem that advocates for a universal base income meet in the Swedish context: namely, the norm of the Swedish work ethic (*arbetslinjen*), indicating that also artist should to compete on a labour market for artists to earn income.

Confirming this, the latest demand for wages for artists can be described as a negative tax.²⁷ It was suggested that artists be allowed an income-related pensionable allowance to be applied annually and to be controlled by non-artists who would base the selection process on some fixed qualities such as: work practice, equipment and studio space, exhibitions and productions.²⁸ However, the idea of the artist simply as a producer of objects, produced in studios and workshops and at display in exhibitions for sale in a market, has long been eroded. Recent discussion has highlighted the participatory or social turn in the arts, emphasising the role of the art as a site for community cohesion and rethinking society,²⁹ and the educational turn that reframes art as a site for contemporary production of public discourse.³⁰ Therefore, in the light of the economic reality for artists in Sweden as underlined in the Government's report, and changing discourses around the manifestation of art, we thought it might be a good idea to re-evaluate the idea of a basic income for artists, what we call an artist's salary.



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Art as a Participatory Methodology and an Aesthetic Negotiation

To develop the idea of an artist's salary further, in this project we created an exhibition as a way of clarifying the arguments and conflicts in our group's discussions about the idea of an artist's salary, and as a mean to engage more people by using the exhibition as a provocation and educational setting.³¹ Political action was at the core of what we did, to actually change a system we found problematic, and the arguments and conflicts that this intervention revealed were used as the basis for our work. As a group we didn't all agree that an artist's salary was a good idea, however, we all looked at it as an interesting topic for discussion.

Our initial argument for an artist's salary was that it could be used as an instrument to reduce the transaction costs of funding the arts and therefore might be a cost-effective method to reform and simplify the art funding system. As a way to develop the proposal further, and to use this as a means to also explore the arts through this project, we constructed a "political campaign headquarters" where we formulated arguments for an artist's salary via simple slogans. The first idea for making an exhibition was aesthetic. As this was during the election campaign in Sweden in 2018, in which the candidates were portrayed as trustworthy and respectable ideal citizens, we wanted a reason to play with the expressions and rhetoric of the unimaginative election posters and replace them with more utopian promises of a world in which art would be at the heart of an alternative way of living. Developing material inspired by the minimalist rhetoric of election campaigns also forced us to capture complex theories in simple statements, and through this aesthetic negotiation the basic premise of the ideas evolved.

The exhibition consisted of two parts: in the outer larger and brighter exhibition room, colourful and cheeky promotional materials were posted on the walls, containing slogans for an artist's salary such as: "Safe and free!", "Food for the imagination", "Because we paint gold and green forests" and "Yes to a medal but first a real pension. Artist's salary now!" In the inner, smaller and darker room, a song of lament was heard, composed of the arguments against basic income that we gathered from different sources, such as: "That some go and roll the thumbs while others struggle to support themselves and their fellow human beings is a mockery of all decency." And "It goes without saying that a system does not work if it leads to inflation, is too expensive and encourages slacking. Proponents believe that people will devote themselves to their own businesses and culture, but most

would of course just watch TV.” And so on. The arguments were culled from both serious newspapers and more obscure anonymous comments in online forums, which together formed a mumble of negative voices. At the core of the installation an image of a grasshopper was projected, as the symbol of the artist in the fable about the grasshopper and the ant.³² The art exhibition thus focused on forms of expression and the aesthetics of political campaigning, and this context was also the starting point for a series of informal seminars we organised using the exhibition as a backdrop.

Over a period of a month we arranged eight closed seminars that brought over 20 invited artists, basic income activists, and politicians together, who discussed and developed the subject with our group. We also conducted individual interviews with artists of different ages and experience. The bureaucrats who produced the government report were also invited, but they were not interested in participating. The seminars were held behind closed doors to create an intimate and trusting environment, in which the subject could be explored without any risk for the participants and where opposing voices could meet. Informal discussions with visitors were also important as a way to develop our arguments. The following section is a summary of these discussions, from the point of view of the authors.



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Discussion

How does the concept of an artist's salary work in relation to the specific problems the government's report about Swedish artist' work conditions wants to solve? What are the paradoxes and conflicts therein? In the following section we have formulated our arguments for an artist's salary and the main conflicts in the discussions.

Arguments for the Introduction of an Artist's Salary

An artist's salary would primarily be a way to improve and rationalise the existing system and is about strengthening the wider artists' community as a collective and raising the average income of this collective without increasing differences within it. Such a basic income would also solve a few important issues, which the

government report identified as follows:

- poor social security of the artists
- uneven recruitment to artistic professions
- older artists often have very low pensions
- difficulty for artists to establish themselves across the whole country
- challenges of digitisation.³³

The *poor social security of artists* is based, among other things, on the fact that social security systems are built around permanent employees with regular income. This rarely applies to artists, who are often self-employed and have a wide variety of clients. Many (large) stipends are neither pensionable, nor count as income. The proposals that the government report suggests favour the artists, but complicate the system further, yet are not sufficient to increase artists' social security. An unconditional basic income in the form of an artist's salary could easily serve as a much needed buffer and reduce the vulnerability and arbitrariness in the current grant-giving system. Not least, it could release resources from all involved—artists and administrators—to make more meaningful services to society than through performing the illusion of the Swedish work ethic, pretending that art is about producing for a market.

An artist's salary could also help reduce *the unequal recruitment to artistic professions*. Artists are much more likely to come from backgrounds where parents are highly educated or are cultural workers with a good foundation in Swedish society, and the government report shows that this unequal recruitment to the profession is increasing. However, the solution to this problem is not what the report suggests—better information and increased presence of artists and art schools in the “suburbs”. The basic problem is not a lack of information or role models, but the lack of security required to invest in an artistic profession. It is hard to invest in an artistic career if you do not have the social security to fall back on in the form of a family that can support you financially and culturally, and provide you with the necessary social capital. An unconditional basic income in the form of an artist's salary would therefore effectively reduce the unequal recruitment to artistic professions, as it specifically helps artists who do not already have a socio-economic buffer through their family. This incentive would directly benefit children from less advantaged groups, who would not dare to invest in such an economically unsafe profession otherwise.

An artist's salary could also improve *the situation for older artists who often have very low pensions*. Overall, artists' pensions are significantly lower than for the corresponding age group across the entire population.³⁴ In addition, most artists lack an occupational pension. A prerequisite for the pension system is to have a long-term working income that provides the basis for the pension. The idea is also that you can work into old age. For artists working in a freelance market, job opportunities decrease when they grow older. Because of their often long education trajectories, artists also start working later in life. The government report proposes that this problem could be remedied by further investigations and training of the artists. However, we would like to point out that artists already are one of the most educated groups in society, and an additional course in how the pension system works will probably not increase their income. On the other hand, a basic income in the form of an artist's salary would, if it were pensionable, raise artists' long-term income. In addition, it would increase their

pension, thus increasing the size of a retired artist's income.

An artist's salary would also strengthen *the possibility for artists to work throughout the country*. Culture and art are central to a democratic platform in which a variety of expressions and experiences from all parts of the country should be celebrated. Therefore it is important that there are good opportunities for artists to work across the country and not just in the big cities. As a counterweight to market thinking, which leads to monopoly formation and increased "Hollywoodisation", we see that an artist's salary would specifically strengthen the establishment of artists in locations outside the metropolitan areas, where the cost of studios and workshops and housing is lower. By not being equally dependent on the art market for their living, the opportunity to work outside of the urban freelance markets would be strengthened.

A general artist's salary would also take advantage of *the possibilities of digitisation*. Digitisation creates enormous opportunities for artistic exchange and development. The accessibility to a variety of expressions and experiences through digital media benefits society as a whole. At the same time, globalisation, combined with one-sided market thinking, means that sub- and minority cultures, as e.g. small language areas such as the Swedish, easily drown in more dominant cultures. In the long run, we risk having a reduced diversity of art and culture. Therefore it is important to understand the market's logic and not be fooled into believing that the market is the paramount norm for building an incentive structure. There are artworks and practices that operate beyond business models, value chains and cash flows. Cultural policy should not be about supporting the market but being its counterweight. Therefore, we suggest a digital strategy that strives to maximise the distribution of all our local artists through open access, not to lock them in in a digital mercantilism of constricting copyrighted structures.

An unconditional basic income in the form of an artist's salary could strengthen Swedish culture globally and give artists the long-term economic stability needed to build global networks and collaborations. Like in academic research, open access should be the primary key term for artists' digital strategies. An artist's salary can in this perspective be seen as a basic infrastructure for art, where the artists provide the network for an open society. It is therefore not primarily about support for individual artists, but about the basis for a strong democracy. However, there are some problems and paradoxes in this vision. The main tensions that were identified in the seminars and informal discussions with exhibition visitors can be summarised as: elitism and competition as norm; extrinsic work motivation; solidarity with the art world or the precariat; and the problem of defining who is an artist.



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Tensions and Paradoxes

Elitism and competition as norm

One of the questions we asked in the talks during the project and in interviews with artists was if and how a campaign for an artist's salary could provide discursive support for the basic income movement, or if there was a risk that a campaign for an artist's salary could be counterproductive or confuse the concept of a universal basic income. Here, democratic, egalitarian ideas about an art for all are set off against more elitist ideas.

The fact that professional artists have been trained in an elitist educational system that is based on appointing the best representatives of a hegemonic art discourse, which they at the same time are supposed to be critical of, is clearly problematic. This elitist tradition is in stark contrast to the idea of art as a critical practice and as

part of a strong democracy in which a multitude of contradictory expressions stand in necessary tension with each other. At the same time, it is precisely the singularity and outsider position that makes the artist stand for something other than the majority society and to be critical.

Art should be something else. I'd rather be on the floor at Åhléns department store and work my shifts. That is, to not make me dependent on the system, where one upgrades the artist's role to a profession in a productive industry. ... Is it really the ideal for a successful artist that it has a high SGI?³⁵ For me, it threatens to erase the essence of what art is. You have to embrace it, you should be in relation to it, but you should stand outside. It is very difficult.

... So what are artists? Aren't they the ones who glorify being on the outside? Isn't that an artist? So not to complain about being an outsider but instead embrace it and use it, this is to be an artist.³⁶

Many of our artist colleagues draw strength from this idea of being special and chosen, that the artist is the bearer of a special gift that should be managed, regardless of what economic and social hardships this can bring. This position is also to be continually proven through competitions and project applications, in which the artist is constantly to be re-elected, and judged according to whatever the quality concept is that is in vogue. Paradoxically, central to education for artists is the pressure to find their own voice and express themselves, and to have a high integrity and cherish the value of being very special. In order to develop such values, one must be able to act without external confirmation, but instead be motivated by internal forces. In order to develop a strong and wayward art, space and time are therefore needed.

There is no clear vision in society, there is no acceptance or respect for the fact that creative activity requires long periods when we are not profitable and that this must be OK. I mean, so that we can experiment and develop. They want a variety of culture, there is much talk about that, but they do not want to pay for it.³⁷

Although most participants in seminars, interviewed artists and visitors to the exhibition were positive about the idea of a basic income for artists and were there to discuss this with like-minded people, some were also provoked by the idea. The very idea that all artists, even though they were "screened" by criteria such as completed college education or an equivalent, would be entitled to a basic income, was difficult for many to reconcile themselves with.

But I see a problem here: who is an artist? That is the problem for me with an artist's salary. Because someone must say "they and they and they and they, they are artists, that is, they are entitled to the artist's salary". How will that happen? That is why I am more for a basic income than for an artist's salary. I would also recommend changing the name basic income. It can be called adult allowance. There are child allowances that all children receive, and we could have adult allowances.³⁸

Extrinsic work motivation as norm

The norm of "work" as something that is extrinsically motivated by a salary or payment in a market is also very strong; an artist's salary can be difficult to implement when it is contrary to society's norms to "earn one's keep" through wage labour. The norm for wage work is strong in all political contexts, which makes it difficult to talk about this in a rational manner. The belief in this "work ethic" is also indicative of how different social and

economic contributions are distributed and formulated among citizens:

*The work and competence ethic means that those who can work and contribute to their own and others' livelihood should also be able to do this. Through this principle, active measures in the form of work, internship or education are prioritised solely for cash payments. The solidarity that the welfare society is based on gives all people the right to safety in the various stages of life. At the same time, it also implies obligations to acquire or develop their workforce, even if it is necessary to change a profession or to work elsewhere or move.*³⁹

Thus, it is more important to provide contributions towards governmental employment projects than direct cash payments to the unemployed, so that it looks as if people are working or studying for payment, even though there is no real demand. This view on the support system has developed in parallel with the Swedish welfare state and can be seen as a fundamental precondition for the system.⁴⁰

In Sweden today there are no political parties in parliament working on proposals for a universal basic income, although there are individual, isolated advocates in different parties. The exceptions are the Enhetspartiet and the Basinkomstpartiet, two small parties outside parliament in which basic income is a central programme point. Single members of parliament who try to question the prevalent work ethic are ignored.

*Promoting basic income and questioning the prevalent work ethic in the Swedish Parliament has been a fascinating and also depressing experience. The opponents' strategy was as simple as effective. We were totally ignored. Well, at first we got some brief and pointless response to our motions: "Basic income is out of the question since it goes against the work ethic". Then I tried to achieve a real debate, writing interpellations to various Ministers, but my efforts were in vain. No matter how hard I tried, all I got were repeated, non-sensical statements that "basic income goes against the work ethic" and thus it need not be considered. End of discussion.*⁴¹

In our discussions and interviews during the exhibition period the opinion from the visiting artists was that this belief in a work ethic is also strong among artists, as is the fear of provoking "the others" by distinguishing themselves even more as a separate group. Taking the role of an artist is already challenging in itself, a way to stand outside society and society's conventions. Maybe that is why some artists like to argue that art can also be like a normal job, emphasising that there is a lot of hard work behind the art that also needs to be recognised. It is also this work ethic that is the strategy behind the artists' organisations' actions; the right to get paid for the work they do at different institutions. The support for artists being paid by institutions—for exhibition fees and expense reimbursement—is not self-evident, but something artists have to demand as a right. There remains in some art institutions the perception that they are doing artists a favour by providing a scene or exhibition space and thus free "advertising", so that artists are able to increase their value in a commercial market or improve their chances of receiving grants.



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Belonging: Solidarity to the Art World or to the Precariat?

Another issue that came up was whether artists should primarily seek solidarity with the art world or should align themselves with the precariat at large. Everyone working for institutions, such as museums or theatres, usually has some sort of regular paid employment agreement, from managers to HR managers to cleaners, except for the artists who only occasionally receive compensation for specific projects. Therefore, artists as a group today may have less in common with the institutions of the art world and more in common with the precariat in wider society.

Apropos whether I believe in the idea of an artist's salary or not, I think as the first step in introducing basic income or start looking at that kind economy, we need to identify the precariat as a class. And I think the idea of an artist's salary would put a spanner in the wheel for that endeavour, for that struggle, because there is already a great suspicion or dislike of artists and highly educated people.⁴²

The precariat marks the passage from the Fordist to the post-Fordist era insofar as this new generation of workers usually lack job security, benefits, and often union protection.⁴³ Their levels of income and education span from sub-minimum-wage illegal migrant work and low-wage retail or service work to highly educated but in contract- and freelance-dependent industries—such as designers, artists, journalists. Unlike the Fordist working classes, the precariat has to put in a high amount of unpaid work. As they are shifting in and out of short-term positions, they spend a lot of time on applying for jobs, updating their CVs, applying for grants or other benefits, and when they do apply for jobs they're often put through lengthy procedures, like doing capability tests, and going to interviews. This is not unlike the conditions for most artists, who over and over again have to prove they are right for the job, and who constantly have to maintain their social networks as a means both to find and organise work. Therefore, solidarity with the precariat might perhaps be more important in the long run than fighting for special conditions for artists. However, the question is where to start. To influence the work conditions for one small group in one small country such as Sweden might be possible: to unite the global precariat less so.



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Being the Artist

An artist's salary represents another dilemma—as the basic income advocates in our discussions pointed out—as it is not unconditional but is for a specific purpose. Someone has to decide who is an artist and who isn't. This is in itself an immense claim to power. When it comes to deciding about who will have a universal basic income, there are usually certain clear constraints, such as national borders. Unlike being a resident in a geographically defined area, it is much more complicated to define an artist.

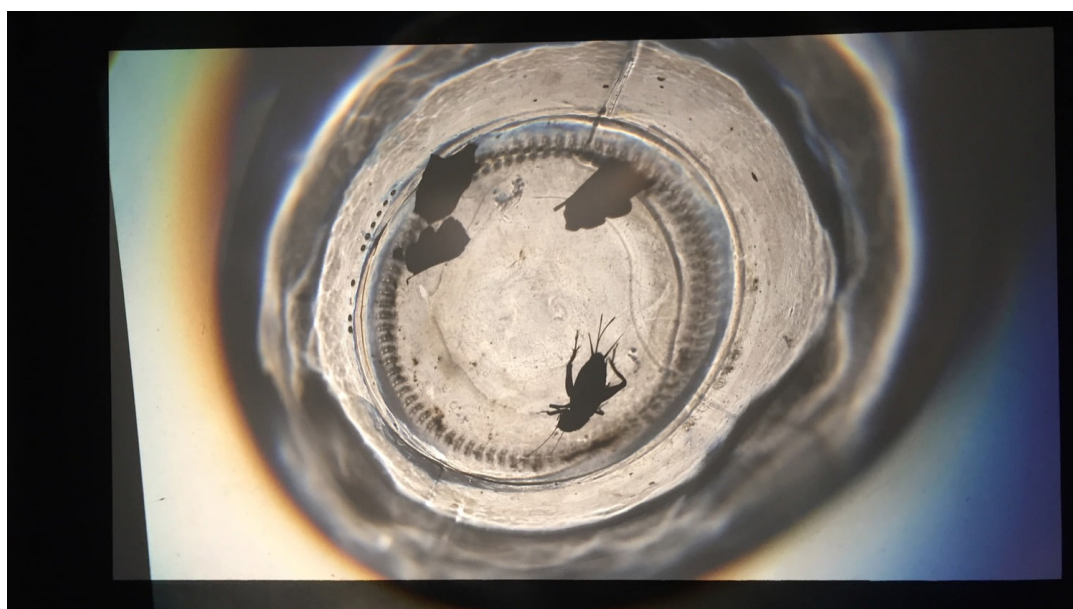
Today there is already a constant redefinition of what an artist is within the institutions of the art system. The profession is performative: an artist is not what you *are* but something you *do*. According to the institutional concept of art, it is about resembling the norm of what an artist is, looking like and speaking like an artist, and making work that is recognised as art within and by the system; that is, recognition especially by the gatekeepers of the system such as museum directors, curators, critics, etc.⁴⁴ Different grant systems take into account the status within the system in terms of recognitions such as projects, exhibitions, reviews, etc., as well as doing their own assessments of the documentation of existing work that are often the basis for the application. An artist's salary would not mean that this kind of assessment should not be done, but it does not have to be done so often. It is also possible to see this as a way to create another type of funding, not governed by external gatekeepers but through peer review, as is more often the case in science, thus to emphasise art's own dynamic bases of assessment instead of following more formal rules or measurements that will always be inappropriate and/or conservative.

Being an artist is perceived by most as professional work, done by someone who produces stuff for a market. However, instead of a producer of commodities, being an artist may also be based on an attitude, embracing a reflective practice, expressed in different kinds of speech acts, such as words, music, gestures or colour.

*There is an important difference, I think, between being an artist and being a paid worker in another way. If you have regular wage work then perhaps you often do the work to get the salary. In contrast, for artists it is often necessary to get a salary in order to do their work. Actually, I am totally uninterested in money... and it is related to that you just want to have more time to be able to work ... or I just want to sit and play guitar.*⁴⁵

The artist's habitus means having great social and cultural freedom, but also financial constraints. These financial constraints are something you not only learn to live with: it becomes a sign of how you live. Material status is not something that is sought after, instead one values having time, and not having to fit into a stressful working life dictated by someone else. The commitment to social and political issues is also something that is part of this lifestyle. This habitus is consistent among the artists we talked to during the course of the project.

To summarise the result from the exhibition and seminars, they gave us more developed arguments for how an artist's salary could solve some of the problems identified in the government's report about Swedish artists' work conditions. But we also got a better understanding of the tensions and paradoxes with an artist's salary, and the nature of these obstacles.



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Concluding Reflections

If the concept of basic income is applied to the art field, several advantages could be the result: reduced bureaucracy; a more transparent contribution system; increased individual freedom of action; a fairer allocation of resources; and more time for the core “business” itself, that of making art. The disadvantages put forward concerning basic income do not apply to the art field. For example, artists are not motivated primarily by extrinsic reasons, but by internal motivation and vanity, so the argument that people would not work without the justification of money does not apply in the same way here.⁴⁶ But the norm of work ethic is still strong, especially among artists.

Another problem is which group artists belong to and should feel solidarity with: the art world and other artists, or the precariat in general? To define and unite the artist or the precariat is another issue, which is possible to overcome. We already have established systems of defining “artists”, however, it can be more complicated to

define and organise the entire precariat, which is why this ambition, although laudable, seems more utopian than feasible. Other disadvantages, such as the injustice of living off the work of others, are already a reality as artists are largely funded through state aid, and this would not change if support was given in the form of a basic income instead of stipends. The same thing goes for the risk of wage dumping: it is already a reality, and no one argues to remove stipends for that reason. The main problem that remains is the norm of the work ethic, the idea that art should be equivalent to other work, and that this work should be recognised through competition against all other artists.

One month's discussions with experts on the universal basic income, politicians, and artists from different fields, gave us a multi-faceted understanding of the resistance against a basic income and opportunities for of an artist's salary. In conclusion, the introduction of an artist's salary could solve a few important issues the government's report about Swedish artists' work conditions identified, such as: artists poor social security; uneven recruitment to artistic professions; low pensions for artists; difficulty to establish across the whole country; the challenges of digitisation. An artist's salary does not contradict a universal basic income, but unlike a universal basic income it would come with some conditions.

Artists in Sweden today are largely financed through different support systems: directly, via stipends, and indirectly, via state-supported arts institutions. In addition they might be able to access other types of social support systems or education systems. An artist's salary could diffuse part of this reality and reduce inequalities and competition within the collective of artists. Stipends and grants are not unconditional, so an artist must be assessed. But bureaucracy would decrease significantly. Greater power can be given to peer-assessment systems as a way of maintaining, but also developing the artist's role.

The most important insight, however, is that artists—and in the long run other professionals—must claim their own worth. This value should not be set by the market, contributing agencies, curators or critics. We must act without external recognition. Here, an artist's salary can reduce the power of these institutions and make the artists be accountable directly to wider society. This practice can inform alternative value systems in other sectors as well.

Finally, the implementation of an artist's basic income could be a step towards a strategy to create greater acceptance for a universal basic income. One of the main obstacles for a basic income in Sweden is the "work ethic", and that people define their value as humans via their work. To create a universal income for anyone to use as they like, goes against this norm. Therefore, a strategy could be to redefine work. This was how the women's movement has (more or less successfully) redefined unpaid housework: by professionalising it, defining it as work. As the "work ethic" is such a dominant norm, we propose that instead of fighting it, we should appropriate it and use it through redefining a universal basic income as a salary for the important but insignificant work without which society is no longer a society. First, we can start with an artist's salary. Then we can introduce an adult allowance or citizen's salary. Not for those who are citizens or artists, but as an incentive to create a strong society and develop meaningful art. A salary for having time and for taking responsibility of the most important things: common social spaces and individual existential issues. Unlike a universal basic income it would be for a certain purpose, building society and creating art, but it is up to everyone to define what this is.



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Footnotes

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2. *Konstnär—oavsett villkor?* SOU 2018.23. Stockholm: Norstedts Juridik. 2018.
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4. According to the report, what digitalisation actually entails needs further investigation, see *Konstnär—oavsett villkor?* However, the discourse in the report indicates that "digital" means that artists might be able to communicate directly to a global market online, and thus be able to sell their goods in an expanded field.

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15. *Ibid.*
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32. Attributed to Aesop, the fable began as a paeon to the work ethic, with a grasshopper whiling away his time during the summers playing the violin while ants worked hard to save for the hard winter ahead. Later versions beginning in France during the early 1700s problematised the role of the ant, changing it from honest worker to unhappy financial speculator. But the roles are classic: the Bohemian wastrel as opposed to the wise worker. These are not classic terms. Bohemianism is modern and European; the happy worker or hard worker is eighteenth-century and also European.
33. Konstnär – oavsett villkor?, *op. cit.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. SGI means income that is sickness-benefit based. The amount is calculated based on how much you worked, if, for example, you become ill or should be on parental leave. If you do not have an SGI, it may be you do not receive compensation or receive less money. It is not uncommon for artists to live on tax-exempt stipends that do not provide SGI.
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