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As an artist I am often asked: Where does your money come from? The question comes in two variations. The first is largely innocent and occurs whenever my relatives or members of the non-art public, having in my presence come across an artwork I have made, genuinely wonder how it can be possible to get paid for having made it. When I explain that there are many people who like to look at artworks and compare them to other ones over time, and a few in that group who are even willing to pay extraordinary amounts of money (relative to materials and labor) for what they feel are the most interesting examples, my non-art friends squint their eyes a little and cock their heads at me, as if something nefarious was going on. When I resort by way of example to the goings on at craft fairs or The Antiques Road Show they brighten, because they all know someone who earns a living making handbags or whose Star Wars paraphernalia was appraised at fifty thousand dollars. After they tell me about someone who has been similarly fortunate, I nod and say, 'Yeah, art's just like that.' Unfailingly, their heads straighten and their squints dissolve. They still don't know anything about art, but at least they understand how it works, and how something works is always a more nagging question than what something means.

The second variant of the question about my money is usually posed by graduate students or architects, and is much more angry and troubling. It is intended to undermine my authority as an invited speaker or to expose a conceit I clearly have, a brickbat hurled from behind the stanchions of real-life drudgery that is the domain of architects and graduate students. That doesn't bother me. My veins are already coursing with the homeopathic toxins of commerce, so I'm immune to such naive humiliations.

What does bother me about total strangers being concerned with my

money, though, is the presumption that making a living is not an acceptable motivation for an artist. To me, for better or worse, all art is nothing if not a proposal for how the current situation might be altered at a profit. That that profit is often not immediately apparent to us is nothing against an artwork or its maker, and I, for one, refuse to live in a society where skilled individuals cannot earn a living however they please. If my best chance at making a living entails drawing snowflakes with a compass and gouache, then I can only hope that a liberal capitalist democracy such as ours will afford a niche in which to ply my trade; otherwise, the philosophical pillars of our society would be revealed to be not as liberal or democratic as they seem. For this reason, nothing is more impressive or politically reaffirming than an artist who is gainfully self-employed.

The confluence of energies that have produced this romantic, earnest climate are complex and quite unintended. Scholars and commentators tend to assert that digital technology is responsible for making our atomized world of independent contractors more viable than are old-fashioned, centralized workplaces. That may be true, but it doesn't explain how such a broad appreciation for being self-employed came about in the first place. Having grown up near Niagara Falls, New York, a region of the country that is only now recovering from the recession of 1991 and embracing the infotainment casino economy, the current spate of self-reliance is the natural fallout of four decades of corporate merging, downsizing, and outsourcing. The initial shock of so many people losing their jobs and having their livelihoods disrupted has been more than offset by our bedrock mistrust of any institution or corporation that promises to look out for our well-being when profits are at stake.

During my youth, many of my parents' friends had no choice but to cap-



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italize on whatever they were good at as a means of making a living, turning their avocations for crocheting Afghans or restoring cars into legitimate business enterprises. Over time, self-pity evolved into self-survival evolved into self-actualization as entrepreneur. Today, entrepreneurship is a state of mind that is ideally suited (if not in material then in spirit) to the cottage industry that is the Internet. Recent IRS statistics report that one in every five working Americans is an independent contractor, and some economists, counting people like commissioned salespersons who are technically employed but whose livelihood is self-generated, put the ratio as high as one in three. Thus, the more the necessity of having a unique and profitable skill permeates our culture, the more the business of being an artist is appreciated, and the more young people can aspire to be like John Cage or Vija Celmins when choosing a livelihood.

Now, if you are like my relatives and non-art friends, at this point you will be completely satisfied with the legitimacy of my profession, and even go so far as to wish me well at it since, given our shared belief in the aforementioned principles, it would be unpatriotic not to do so. Of course, if you share the same chemistry as graduate students and architects, you will first need to square my philosophy with that of a figure from history in order to bring it under control. Which usually means you will cite Warhol.

It may surprise you to learn that when I say artists are the epitome of independent contracting, I do not have Andy Warhol in mind. I admire Warhol's enterprise, it was impressive in its day and all, but there is very little about his methods or his oeuvre that is of use to independent-minded artists now. The idea of art being made in a factory might have been a radical concept in the nineteen sixties, but we do well to remember that

corporations at that time were already in the process of rendering Warhol-type factories obsolete. Factories mean overhead, and if art and independent contracting share anything it is the desire to minimize overhead costs. Even if I were to assume that Warhol's Factory was important in some absolute sense, the fact remains that Warhol still didn't make anything of greater intrinsic interest or better quality than what could be found in the non-art world of his time. And that may have been his point. Indeed, that lack of distinction was perhaps Warhol's most important contribution to the then broad (and earnest) assault on art and life. Warhol meant to rely on the category of Art to distinguish his sameness from the sameness of the rest of the world.

Naturally, that category no longer holds once we begin to lump artists in with all other people in trade. Except, of course, when the activity of an artist is truly unrivaled by anyone else in the world, at which point it doesn't matter whether that person is an artist at all. He or she is simply 'the best,' and it is on the basis of that often highly profitable status that the value of any activity rests.

Take Agnes Martin. Now in her nineties, she still dominates the market for imperfectly ruled pencil lines on unprimed canvas, even though her materials are inexpensive and her technique can be performed by anyone with work surface and yardstick. No one does. Martin has so thoroughly woven her endeavor into herself as to make it seem physically impossible to impede on the terrain of her invention. In fact, her paintings—stripes and grids of graphite on canvas whose interstices are sometimes filled in with thin washes of color—can be seen as poetic evocations of the absolute distinction that her work itself has come to represent. Despite her best efforts (or perhaps because of them), every line, space, and

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intersection that she delineates is different from every other, due to the weave of canvas, the pencils dragged across it, and the fact that Martin herself pulses and breathes. The sublime residue of precise imperfection that results is unmatched by anyone, in any field.

The lesson, of course, is that it's much easier to be the best at doing something if there are as few other people as possible also doing it. Where Warhol's thousands of imitators continue to burn money and resources slavishly mocking a mainstream culture with which they can never compete, the real growth opportunities are in obscure enterprises where competition is low and materials cheap.

Fourteen years ago, David Hammons announced that he was the world's leading authority on the architectural properties of afro hair. It was not then, nor is it now, a widely requested expertise. Nonetheless, Hammons has done just fine managing that and other sundry skills, the most profitable of which may be his ability to draw attention from a herd of international curators simply through the refined art of ignoring them. Competitive as he is parsimonious, Hammons refuses to commit himself in any endeavor unless he believes he can be the best at it. Like Martin, his genius lies in his ability to invent a need for desires that no one else thought to exist.

For example, kicking the bucket. Hammons' 1997 video *Phat Free*—a pun on both black culture's love of largeness and white culture's obsession with losing weight—is also a protracted play on the fact that no matter what you choose to do in life you are in some way killing yourself, so you might as well be good at it, enjoy it, and not give a damn what anyone else might think. When you first encounter the video, the visuals are blacked out and the audio plays alone. When the visuals do appear, about half

way through, what sounded like a Gregg Bendian percussion solo or a clothes dryer tumbling a crescent wrench is in fact the sound of Hammons kicking a bucket down the street. It's interesting. The sound of the metal bucket coming into contact with the uneven sidewalk is joyfully calamitous, and Hammons is quite adept at keeping the eccentrically shaped vessel on a fairly straight course. That passersby pay him no mind is only a testament to his skill. After crossing the street and heading back in the other direction, the camera zooms in, and Hammons ups the ante. Having allowed the bucket to loll to a dead stop, he places his foot on the rim, presses down firmly, and then flips the bucket into the air, where it turns over once before he catches like a top hat of Fred Astaire's. Then the screen goes black, the audio comes back to life, and Hammons kicks the bucket all over again.

It's likely Hammons stumbled onto his bucket-kicking skills while on the way to doing something else—making an artwork by more usual methods, perhaps—but smart people allow themselves to be inspired by those in between moments when they are not making art at all. John Cage built an admirable existence out of his desire not to make a sound, and On Kawara's *Date Paintings* are as impressive for all the days he doesn't make them as they are for the few days that he does. In such a state of mind, the avoidance of convention and the accidents of living can become a kind of rock and a hard place, a fissure of profound procrastination capable of squeezing out some pretty impressive work.

No artist exploits the space of ritualized avoidance to greater effect than Tom Friedman, whose very name is synonymous with the creative potential of obsessive compulsiveness. For Friedman, every thought, act, and menial distraction is a mole hill waiting to become a work of art. *Untitled*



(1992) is a pencil shaving coaxed to the awesome length of 21 inches, the byproduct of an artist incapable of focusing his energies on normally productive tasks, instead choosing (at least symbolically) to squander them on the rigmarole of getting ready to make a work of art. *Untitled's* companion piece, then, is *1,000 Hours of Staring* (1992-97), a 32 x 32 inch-square sheet of paper that Friedman rendered with the patient application of his gaze. It is the only artwork I know of that tacitly acknowledges its makers hourly wage. Better still are the materials listed for the work ('stare on paper'); the notion that Friedman started staring at it in the same year (and we can presume, immediately after) he sharpened the pencil for *Untitled* (1992); and the fact that, 1,000 hours later, there's still no evidence of his labor save for the dim, dull intensity of a job exceptionally well done. Like a woodworker using progressively finer grits of sandpaper until no trace of the hand remains, Friedman has crafted the surface of *1,000 Hours of Staring* to a finish unrivaled by human touch.

Just as Marshall MacLuhan once observed that people didn't know they wanted automobiles until automobiles were invented, how can the audience for art know what it wants until we, as artists, invent it for them? And, given that opportunity, how can any of us believe it's in our long-range interest to go on appropriating and rearranging products (such as popular culture) that our customers already know and have? In the end, and quite ironically, so-called 'difficult' artists like Martin and Hammons have turned out to be much better business models for us than their more celebrated counterparts could ever be. Their arcane interests, unique skills and often restrained production methods epitomize such concepts as personal branding, value adding and inventory velocity, state-of-the-art business innovations that they and other artists have never gotten credit for.

Until now. The avant garde lives! Not because it's more meaningful or radical than any other activity, but because it fills a legitimate market niche.

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Steve 'Canal' Jones is a registered trademark of Store A. His most recent project was Post-structuralism in Country and Western Music, a CD compilation that was issue 3 of commerce magazine. He lives in Hamden, Ct.

Notes

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1 ca. 1820's. Silver hand-wrought medals are typical of those used as part of a monitorial educational system developed in England by Joseph Lancaster.

2-3 Small Rewards of Merit like these two were given frequently and in some cases could be traded for a larger, more fanciful certificate; these examples are circa 1815 through 1815.