

# HOW TO THRIVE

Ellen Mara De Wachter

'All young artists are fierce and would not promise well if they were otherwise.'<sup>1</sup>

To talk of an artist being at a 'key moment in her career' has become something of a cliché. Prizes are devoted to these significant turning points, articles report on the crucial stages in the development of an artist, and there is a consensus on the existence and importance of these pivotal moments. But what do these 'key moments' actually consist of, what are the determining factors in an artist's development? And to what extent are these rites of passage imposed by an art industry keen to shape the artist to its own ends, to determine the behaviour and role of an artist, rather than respond to her or his unpredictable forms of expression and unplanned needs? This essay will explore the stages of development encapsulated in a broad consideration of 'emerging' and examine what they entail in terms of the development of an individual within the sphere of art production and in relation to its consumption on a cultural and economic level. It will consider the challenges facing emerging artists in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'social ageing' and with an eye on Sarah Schulman's characterisation of the 'gentrification of the mind'. It will seek to accurately represent some of the ideological and practical choices facing emerging artists today. The latter part of the essay will offer an account of the artist Andrea Fraser's recent writings about art production and consumption in reference to the art world's participation in a global economic system. It will consider Fraser's radical career decisions, which are based on her findings, taking them to their logical conclusion. Finally, it will seek to anchor the discussion in the pragmatics of artists' lives with two case studies, paying particular attention to the ideological, emotional and financial attitudes that can contribute to a sustainable life as an artist.

The term 'emerging' is fuzzy. Although people who use it may know what they mean, it is useful to identify some of the visible signs that determine and characterise an emerging artist. While it's true that the status of emerging is not necessarily related to age, the overwhelming majority of emerging artists do fit in the 25–45 age bracket. An artist's status as emerging is usually accompanied by a number of features, which can include some or all of the following: their work has sold, curators are interested in them, they have been written about in art-related publications and exhibited their work in public, they can communicate about their work in an articulate manner, and they are socially or personally involved in a group of creative professionals at a similar or more advanced career level. This is not an exhaustive list of characteristics, and artists are also adept at creating innovative opportunities to gain professional and artistic recognition in line with their art-making strategies, for example the recent boom of Instagram art, which conflates the ostensibly secondary task of marketing with the primary one of art production.

ZABLUDOWICZ  
COLLECTION  
20 YEARS

The first in a series of three commissioned essays to accompany the exhibition *Zabludowicz Collection: 20 Years*.

Essays by Timotheus Vermeulen and JJ Charlesworth will be available to download from [zabludowiczcollection.com](http://zabludowiczcollection.com) from 20th July and 3rd August respectively.

All three essays will be included in a new publication available in August 2015.

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Thornton, *The Diary of an Art Student of the Nineties*, Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd, London, 1938, p. 3

It's also helpful to note how the term is used by the media. The £5,000 Converse x Dazed Emerging Artists Award is defined largely in relation to artists' monetary needs, as 'an art competition held annually in the UK since 2010. It is a prize established with the aim of supporting artists at a time when they need it most.'<sup>2</sup> Five entrants are shortlisted to produce new work to be shown at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. The criteria for entry are standard: entrants cannot be students and must not be currently represented by a commercial gallery.

This collection of outward symptoms of the condition of emerging is connected to the many decisive events that lead an artist towards or away from the status of emerging, or indeed any other rung on the career ladder. The wide-ranging determining factors that can facilitate or hinder an artist's career progression include education, social class, race, gender, independent wealth, family status, health, geographic location, chosen artistic media, personality and fame. Life events, choosing and being chosen by collaborators and colleagues, and passive resistance can also influence an artist's development. It would seem that, far from being endowed with a special freedom, artists keen on participating in an art world that would recognise them as emerging or established are subject to an array of strictures and expectations, which inevitably have a range of associated effects on the kind of work they make. Artists also need money to make work, money that comes either from their earnings for jobs done and services rendered, or from patrons, in which case funds are generally intended for the making of work or personal subsistence.

Because the stage of emerging usually occurs in early to mid-adulthood, it is a stage at which many life choices and allegiances are still unfixed, a time which the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu recognised as being characterised by its indeterminacy and proximity to a state of adolescence. In his essay 'The Invention of the Artist's Life', Bourdieu analyses the social and creative evolution of Frédéric Moreau, the young protagonist of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Sentimental Education* (1869). As an heir whose invested capital generates a fluctuating income, and as a man with similarly fluctuating interests, Moreau is able to delay his commitment to a specific career. This passive refusal casts him as a dilettante, the model of the indeterminate life that resists – for a time at least – the fate of social ageing, a phenomenon Bourdieu defines thus:

'Social ageing is nothing other than the slow renunciation or disinvestment (socially assisted and encouraged) which leads agents to adjust their aspirations to their objective chances, to espouse their condition, become what they are and make do with what they have, even if this entails deceiving themselves as to what they are and what they have, with collective complicity, and accepting bereavement of all the "lateral possibles" they have abandoned along the way.'<sup>3</sup>

Bourdieu imagines this process as a tree with bifurcating branches, some dead and some alive, representing the trajectory of a career or 'retrospectively, a curriculum vitae'.<sup>4</sup> Most artists making work today do not benefit from anything like Moreau's privileged financial position; in many ways he is a cliché of 19th century bourgeoisie whose inheritance distinguished him from those 'whose only capital is the will to succeed'.<sup>5</sup> In Flaubert's time, social ageing involved the transformation from a state of indeterminacy associated with adolescence to one of mature and fully fledged bourgeoisie. Today, and on a personal level, social ageing involves the unintentional narrowing of one's options for free expression by taking a job, buying a house, having children – all those choices that tend to restrict an artist's ability to spontaneously

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from the Converse x Dazed finalists exhibition wall text

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu quoted in Chris Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño: An Expanding Universe*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014, p. 194

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Invention of the Artist's Life' (translated by Erec R. Koch) in *Yale French Studies*, No. 73, *Everyday Life*, 1987, p. 87

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88

act on ideas and inspirations, travel, learn and fail. On the level of industry, gaining commercial representation, accepting private commissions, taking on teaching and public engagements can open some doors while closing others.

As artists get older, it's natural that they desire and require an increasing level of stability and security. Yet, in our culture there is still a deeply entrenched and perhaps idealistic expectation, frequently supported and condoned by artists themselves, that it is incumbent on the artist to resist social ageing and maintain a state of perpetual indeterminacy. So: how might one resist social ageing and the over-determination of one's creative expression while fostering a modicum of stability and financial security in one's life?

Moreover, how might artists do so in a world in which gentrification – another seemingly inexorable drive towards middle-class ideals – restricts the options for stability, for example by making housing unaffordable to anyone not earning a large salary? In *The Gentrification of the Mind – Witness to a Lost Imagination*, American author Sarah Schulman retraces the process of gentrification that started when landlords took advantage of the consequences of the AIDS crisis in Lower Manhattan in the 1980s and early 1990s. AIDS deaths left apartments empty and leases hanging, a situation landlords lost no time in exploiting by raising rents, and rapidly moving out a mixed and creative community of low-income earners by making it unaffordable for them to stay.

Schulman explains that in '1964 the British sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term *gentrification* to denote the influx of middle-class people to cities and neighbourhoods, displacing the lower-class worker resident; the example was London and its working-class districts, such as Islington.'<sup>6</sup> Schulman gives a poignant account of the social, material and economic transformations of various neighbourhoods that resulted from an influx of wealthy middle-class residents and property investors, and the related disappearance of immigrants, 'noninstitutionalized artists, ... socially marginalized'<sup>7</sup> and financially disadvantaged groups from that space. She constructs a compelling argument about the relationship between this process of urban gentrification, and the concurrent gentrification of ideas circulating around the neighbourhood.

With the disappearance of those who think and behave differently comes the homogenisation of ideas and the dwindling of options for divergent or radical thought. This gentrification of the mind affects creativity, politics, literature and human interactions. In its espousal of middle-class expectations and ideals, gentrification complements and even enhances the phenomenon of social ageing. Both sketch a trajectory from diversity to homogeneity: the arc of a person's biography and professional development from eclectic youth to stable maturity; or the ethnic, economic, political or ideological smoothing of a neighbourhood.

To put it another way, Schulman's characterisation of gentrification of the mind is akin to a process of difference transforming into sameness. Life in what was once a mixed urban environment turns into an experience of consistent normality. This process of replacing an eclectic and accidented landscape with a homogeneous one echoes the way in which some artists, stuck in a repetitious mode of production, put out the same work with minor variations, normalising their oeuvre into a market and – if they are especially good at selling the same thing over and over again – an art history. While some artists may thrive in such circumstances, producing versions

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind – Witness to a Lost Imagination*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012, p. 24

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

of works for sale to collectors, most become atrophied by expectations to re make the same works again and again in different colours and sizes. How might artists resist such a 'gentrification of the work' and, for the countless artists working in metropolitan areas, how might they do so without sacrificing their place in an urban environment that is increasingly unaffordable?

Compounding the trouble with gentrification, Schulman points out that the ease enjoyed by gentrifiers or their heirs comes at a significant cost, and is usually accompanied by a blinkered perspective: 'Gentrified happiness is often available to us in return for collusion with injustice.'<sup>8</sup> This point has been taken up and developed by the artist Andrea Fraser, famous for performances such as *Official Welcome* and her work in developing the field of institutional critique. In a paper delivered at a symposium in Berlin in 2010, Fraser states: 'The glaring, persistent and seemingly ever-growing misalignment between legitimizing discourses [of the institution of art] – above all in their critical claims – and the social conditions of art have appeared to me as profoundly and often painfully contradictory, even fraudulent.'<sup>9</sup> She goes on to list some of the factors in this misalignment, including the cultural prevalence of celebrity and spectacle and the relationship between the increasing wealth of the richest minority of society at the expense of the vast majority. In powerful terms, Fraser expresses her disturbance at the way the discourse surrounding contemporary art contributes to creating a false meaning for art, identifying the 'almost total disconnect ... between what art works are under these historical and economic conditions, and what artists, curators, critics and historians say that those art works – especially works they support – do and mean.'<sup>10</sup>

This sobering indictment of the legitimising discourse around contemporary art invites us to pause and evaluate our role in the system. In a second article entitled 'L'1%, c'est moi',<sup>11</sup> Fraser puts forward a detailed economic analysis of the relationship between art market prices and the wealth gap. She demonstrates that 'the greater the discrepancy between the rich and the poor, the higher prices in this market rise.'<sup>12</sup> And since 2011, when Fraser wrote this article, the situation has become even more extreme. The April issue of *The Art Newspaper* reported that the 'market is becoming increasingly top-heavy: there are fewer sales happening, but at higher prices. Almost half the total spend last year was on a handful of objects: 48% comes from 1,530-or-so lots which sold for more than €1m at auction.'<sup>13</sup>

Fraser's stark reality check concludes: 'Any claim that we represent a progressive social force while our activities are directly subsidized by the engines of inequality can only contribute to the justification of that inequality – the (not so) new legitimization function of art museums.'<sup>14</sup> And later: 'At the very least we must begin to evaluate whether art works fulfil, or fail to fulfil, political or critical claims on the level of their social and economic conditions. We must insist that what art works *are* economically centrally determines what they *mean* socially and also artistically.' For Fraser, this calls for a radical solution: 'a long overdue splitting off of the market-dominated sub-field of galleries, auction houses, and art fairs.'<sup>15</sup>

It also determined a strict career choice for Fraser, as the writer Sarah Thornton relates in a footnote in a chapter on Fraser in her book *33 Artists in 3 Acts*. 'In January 2012, Fraser left her New York dealer, Friedrich Petzel, because she did not want to be involved in the "commercial art economy of sales to ultra-high-net-worth private collectors." She continues to be represented by Galerie Nagel Draxler in Cologne, which sells her works only to museums.'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 166

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Fraser, *Speaking of the Social World...*, 'Where do you stand, colleague', *Texte zur Kunst*, Issue No. 81, March 2011, p. 153

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Fraser, 'L'1%, c'est moi', first published in *Texte zur Kunst*, Issue No. 83, September 2011, pp. 114–127. Available at [http://whitney.org/file\\_collection/0002/9848/andreafraser\\_1\\_2012whitneybiennial.pdf](http://whitney.org/file_collection/0002/9848/andreafraser_1_2012whitneybiennial.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> 'Top-heavy art market continues to boom', *The Art Newspaper*, April 2015

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Fraser, 'L'1%, c'est moi', op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Thornton, *33 Artists in 3 Acts*, Granta, London, 2014, p. 299

To some, Fraser's stand may seem radical; to others it appears risky or idealistic. In any case, it carries significant consequences in terms of relinquished income. In her portrait of Fraser, Thornton mentions the artist's interest in Bourdieu's idea of social ageing, and quotes her as saying: 'Artists don't have to settle on a station of status, a clear position or a national identity ... We can be children forever.' Yet, Fraser's own decisions have strongly determined and narrowed the future course of her career as an artist.

One response to the pressures associated with making work while resisting social ageing, which can also alleviate the twin pressures of making work and making a living, is to share the burden of at least some of the many activities involved in maintaining a career. Collective art production is an ideological and aesthetic choice that involves the challenges of collaborating privately and communicating to an audience. Many artists working in collectives maintain a separate practice under their own name, juggling the multiple identities of sole creator and collaborator/member of a group. By working together, the common investment of time, energy, mutual support and creativity can, for a time at least, lessen the threat of poverty and inertia.

However, while practices of collective living, sharing and DIY activities might enable artists and their close ones to survive on a lower income than they would need if living alone, the seduction of a gift economy recalls the trap of neoliberal ideologies such as the Conservative Party's Big Society campaign. In 2010, in pre-austerity, pre-election Britain, David Cameron set out his fantasy for civil society by saying 'There is no "them" and "us" – there is us. We are all in this together.' As Patrick Butler, the *Guardian's* social policy editor recently wrote: 'Now big society has disappeared entirely, like an embarrassing fashion item, worn once and pushed to the back of the cupboard. The PM last mentioned it at Christmas 2013. The phrase has been erased from official government discourse ... the big society hashtag is used wryly to signify coalition hypocrisy and spending cuts.'<sup>17</sup> Using utopian, poetic or romantic rhetoric to mask a wider policy that imposes spending cuts on charities, arts organisations and education, and which directly affects low-income workers like artists by drying up grants, artist wages and teaching opportunities is not a new strategy. Fraser tells of George H.W. Bush's 1989 election campaign, in which he 'envisioned volunteers and community organizations spreading like "a thousand points of light" in the wake of his rollback in public spending.'<sup>18</sup>

In one sense, the romanticism of politicians' propaganda and Fraser's ideals of childlike indeterminacy are alike: they both suffer from their idealism, which renders them impractical. The reality is that artists live and work within specific conditions. In order to thrive, they must adapt and respond to their surroundings.

This year, the six members of the Japanese collective Chim↑Pom celebrate their tenth anniversary working together, and they continue to make thought-provoking work in various media, addressing current events across the globe through formalist aesthetics, performance and interaction with a wide range of publics. As one might expect, with such a diversity of opinions coexisting under one name, the theme of 'paradox' has been central to Chim↑Pom's practice ever since they made their first work, *Super Rat*, in Tokyo in 2006. Exterminators coined the term 'Super Rat' to refer to a strain of rat, whose resistance to poison and proliferation in the main streets of the popular Tokyo district of Shibuya rendered them seemingly invincible. Chim↑Pom have described the rats' coexistence with the fashionable

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Butler, 'Why the "big society" is now just a hashtag for coalition hypocrisy', *Guardian*, 20 January 2015

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Fraser, 'L'1%, c'est moi', op. cit.



and arty teenagers who frequent the area, noting that both groups dine on the same McDonald's: the teenagers eating in the restaurant, the rats in the rubbish just outside. Chim↑Pom have on three separate occasions captured rats in Shibuya using a net purchased at a local hardware store. These rats were then stuffed and painted in the colours of Pikachu, the popular Pokémon comic character, and staged in dioramas of Shibuya, exhibited with a video documenting their capture. For Chim↑Pom, Super Rats are 'the main theme behind all our activities because we have to survive. We identify with the Super Rat. We have sympathy for them and respect them as peers.'<sup>19</sup> Their affinity with the rats carries through to the effects of participation in the art market; when the first 'Super Rat' work was bought by a Japanese collector, the group was amused at the value the rats had achieved by becoming a desirable commodity, a success they understood as 'flattening society and annihilating class and financial divisions'.<sup>20</sup>

As individuals with a collective identity, as artists who cultivate a sense of indeterminacy, avoid social ageing and resist the gentrification of their work while maintaining a realist and even sceptical view of the market, Chim↑Pom are one example of how to thrive in challenging conditions, transforming economic, social and political difficulties into opportunities to create. But, as a recent article about the collective made clear: 'Chim-Pom do not live off their art: ... three members ... have other jobs, including teaching and design work. For the moment, at least, forming a collective will not make you rich.'<sup>21</sup>

Like everyone, artists need stability in order to continue living and working healthily. Whenever I meet or work with a collective, I ask them how they started working together. 'We studied together.' 'We were friends.' 'We were lovers.' The emphasis in these statements is on people and personal relationships: they imply time spent together, catalysed by feelings of loyalty, devotion and love into the performance and production of creative acts. The process of identifying as an artist can be a lengthy and complex one, involving forays into other professions with greater or lesser success, and always the return to the state of indeterminacy necessary for creativity; a state in which courage plays an essential part.

The artist duo Samuel Levack and Jennifer Lewandowski, who met and started working together while studying the BA Critical Fine Art Practice at Brighton University in 1998, have more than 15 years of experience collaborating. Over the years, they have frequently invited artists and creative practitioners to produce work together, often adopting the role of commissioners or curators for elaborate projects they have conceived. In February 2011, they concretised their collaborative ethos by inaugurating French Riviera, an exhibition space in their studio, a former shop on the busy Bethnal Green Road in London, which provides an eclectic and energetic programme to the local community, made up of East Enders, second and third generation Bangladeshi families, as well as a significant number of creative practitioners. French Riviera benefits from the support of the artists' families and large network of friends and collaborators, as well as occasional grants from public sources such as Arts Council England. However, what has so far been a precarious enterprise now faces the threat of increased living costs and further swingeing cuts in public funding under the renewed Conservative government. So how can artists avoid a situation in which the condition of emerging becomes one of emergency?

The multifaceted investment Levack and Lewandowski make in creating work and showing the work of other artists, fostering a community of interested participants

<sup>19</sup> From a conversation with the author

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Griselda Murray-Brown, 'Collectives: artists who get it together', *Financial Times Weekend*, 9–10 May 2015

and inviting people to benefit from art is seldom returned to them in any financial way. They – and many other artist-run spaces and collectives – are what Sarah Thelwall, in her report ‘Size Matters’, has characterised as research and development units for culture at large.<sup>22</sup> Their continuing practice relies on their adaptation to the context in which they work, and their acceptance of a modest lifestyle. They are not in denial; they are lucid about their condition and the many challenges it continues to present. This lucidity is in itself a form of thriving – the decision and dedication to make work in full cognisance of the obstacles and, to a certain extent, in response to these very obstacles. As Levack and Lewandowski explained in a recent talk, ‘Figuring out our own beliefs, realising that we already have an alternative lifestyle – a retro idealism that makes sense today, through commitment to our art and ourselves – helps us understand how to exist in our modern world, how to thrive with an alternative lifestyle in London right now.’<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The full report can be downloaded here: <http://www.common-practice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Common-Practice-London-Size-Matters.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Levack and Jennifer Lewandowski, transcript of a talk delivered at ‘Ways of Living’, TEDx Courtauld Institute, 15 March 2015

**Ellen Mara De Wachter** is an independent curator and writer based in London. After working at the British Museum and the Barbican Art Gallery, she joined the Zabłudowicz Collection as Curator, developing a programme of exhibitions, and initiating the Invites programme for unrepresented artists. In 2013–15 she was Curator of Public Collection Development at the Contemporary Art Society. Her writing has been published in exhibition catalogues and magazines including *Frieze*, *Artforum.com* and *Flash Art*. She has taught at various institutions including the Royal Academy Schools, the Royal College of Art and Newcastle University. She is curator of *By the mountain path*, an exhibition of contemporary Japanese art currently at White Rainbow, London, until 20 June 2015, and forthcoming curatorial projects include *Alien Sex Club* by John Walter, at Ambika P3, London from 23 July–13 August 2015 and the *Homotopia Festival*, Liverpool from 30 October–1 December 2015.