

Artists and the Economy Survey Conducted by Artist Trust :: Spring 2009

From March 15 to April 15, 2009, Artist Trust distributed an online survey to its constituents of individual artists throughout Washington State to assess how they are weathering the current economic downturn. The informal yet informative survey was not scientific; rather, we wanted to hear what is on artists' minds and to consider what programmatic solutions Artist Trust might offer. The questions were phrased to be more qualitative than quantitative. The survey was emailed to the approximately 1,200 members of Artist Trust, and posted in our bi-weekly e-newsletter, *(re)Source* (with over 8,000 subscribers).

The answers from the almost 700 respondents indicated that, as one artist stated, the economic downturn is "positively motivating for some, negatively discouraging for others." Although artists are certainly feeling the negative effects of the unsteady economy, many are well-versed in surviving economic hardship and are persevering creatively.

Below are comments from Claudia Bach, Principal at AdvisArts Consulting, on some of the broader trends that she gleaned from her review of the survey responses, followed by selected graphs and quotes from the survey.



Artist Trust's Artists and the Economy Survey

A perspective on artists' responses to a survey designed and administered by Artist Trust, March-April 2009
Claudia Bach, AdvisArts Consulting

Artist Trust's *Artists and the Economy Survey* received a large and rapid response as soon as it was posted online. It provided a way for Washington State artists to share their experiences in this time of economic challenge. Clearly there was an interest in participating. The nearly 700 responses offer a picture of the impact of the economic recession on artists. The information reflects general trends across the country, and around the globe, as well as issues and concerns more specific to working artists.

More than two-thirds of the respondents (68%) identified their primary artistic discipline as visual art. This proportion of visual artists to artists practicing other arts disciplines is higher than that indicated in other research in Washington State¹ and nationally. This is important to note as it frames our understanding of many of the survey responses.

The survey was not designed by Artist Trust to collect data for statistical analysis but rather to capture a snapshot of artists' response to the current situation. The comments here do not reflect quantitative analysis but seek to synthesize the range of responses, including the abundant narrative answers supplied by many of the respondents. The fact that this was a self-selected group of respondents (rather than a statistical sampling of artists) also needs to be kept in mind.

The current economy and its impact on artists

As one might imagine, the overall picture that emerges is one of decreased or limited economic opportunity. Nearly half of respondents (47%) note "Fewer arts sales/bookings/opportunities" with slightly fewer (44%) noting "Decreased demand for your work." Approximately one-third (34%) indicated "Less time to make art." There are artists who report little or no change in their situation, and a few that are experiencing increasing opportunities. The greatest number of respondents, however, is experiencing increased challenges.

¹ The *Washington Artists Health Insurance Project 2005 Survey Report on Artists and Arts Workers*, conducted by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University, found that fifty-seven percent of Washington State artists were visual artists.

Narrative survey answers provide a picture of two interrelated threads of change that artists attribute to the economic downturn:

- Changes in external economic conditions: Changes in the economy have constricted artists' options beyond the studio. This includes a reduction in sales venues and opportunities such as galleries closing, exhibitions or performances being canceled or delayed, and publishers decreasing or shutting down their operations. Teaching opportunities are also reported to be diminishing as enrollment drops for many classes or workshops. Many also note the loss, diminishment, uncertainty or unavailability of "day jobs."
- Changes in personal economic conditions and outlook: External conditions are driving shifts in personal economic conditions but are also creating changes in artists' reported outlook or behavior. A number note a reprioritization of time, often at the expense of time for art making. Some mention a shifting balance in household roles and tensions. A recurrent, though not consistent, refrain is of the emotional toll external conditions have on motivation, depression and anxiety—and therefore on artistic output. For some the economy is seen as liberating: a decrease in earning potential offers an opportunity to focus and deepen creative endeavors without expectations of external reward.

Key issues are revealed through the survey reflecting these two threads. These issues can be seen as representing four areas of change:

- A. Changes in art marketing, promotion and funding
- B. Changes in artwork or art practice
- C. Changes in living and working conditions
- D. Changes in attitude and community

These four areas are not discrete and many have overlapping concerns. Recurrent themes found in the responses are the basis of this summary. They are organized here to provide a sense of the impact that the economy is having on artists in Washington State.

A. Changes in art marketing, promotion and funding

Internet and online: Many respondents indicate a proactive response to marketplace changes. The most noted is an increased focus on the internet as a tool. Nearly three quarters of all respondents say they use the internet to promote their work, and 38% say that they have increased this use with the economic downturn. Comments throughout the survey underscore this with references to web pages, online sales venues and social networking sites. Various internet tools and vehicles are seen as options for reaching audiences, buyers and opportunities. The frequency with which the web is mentioned suggests that many respondents believe this is a critical avenue. Some artists note that they have had some success with internet marketing while others are more exploratory or hopeful about their intent to use the internet more broadly and deeply.

Grants, funding and residencies: Respondents indicate a current or intended increase in the number and type of applications they are submitting. These include grants, public art commissions, artists' residencies and other competitive processes offering money and/or time. This is likely to result in increased competition at a time when such opportunities may also be diminishing. Applications for juried shows or programs that would not generate funds, or that would require costly shipping or travel, are being avoided.

Pricing: Frequent mention is made of lowering prices for artwork and reducing fees for performing or teaching. Some respondents note that this is not resulting in increased sales and may not be a good technique, while others find that it has been helpful or essential. Other ways of creating price flexibility that are noted include payment plans, discounts and partial donations/volunteering. Some found that it was their mid-range work that was not selling, while lowest or highest priced pieces were still being purchased.

Networking and collaboration: Many respondents are being more intentional and active in using existing networks and building new networking opportunities. The focus is on connecting with possible revenue sources but also includes staying connected to various personal and professional circles. Contact with other artists is noted as being an important tool for stimulating activity in the marketplace of ideas and earnings. Some artists note their collaborative efforts to replace or augment other sales, such as cooperative galleries or projects. For others, such efforts are such a drain on their limited time or funds and they are cutting back on those commitments.

Venue consideration or relationship: Many artists are expanding their outlook on where they will reach audiences and markets. More individuals are considering alternative commercial and business sites or self-generated presentation modes. Offices, retail spaces, studios, artwalks and one-time opportunities are all being considered with new attention. Reconsideration regarding licensing agreements and other contractual relationships is also noted. Some artists are offering to share expenses with galleries or presenters. Artists are aware that galleries, publishers and others are also working in a new economic environment and they appear to be open to new arrangements that can help keep doors open. A number of respondents noted they are looking to new geographic areas either in-state, nationally or abroad, for opportunities. Artists are seeking venues or situations that permit direct sales and reduce commissions or other costs to try and offset reduced earnings.

B. Changes in artwork or art practice

Working smaller: A frequent response to shrinking sales for visual artists is to produce smaller scale works of art. This justifies selling work at a lower price which many hope will be more affordable in the current market. Some artists appear to have success with this, while others feel it is not working. In some cases this is a cost-saving approach since less material is used. For writers and performers there is also an indication that shorter works are being created in the hopes that there is a lower barrier to purchase or presentation.

Using less expensive materials or processes: Artists are exploring alternatives to their usual materials and supplies or media when they believe it may help their budget. For some that means recycling or reuse of materials. For others it is exploring new, cheaper options. In some cases artists are looking at creating multiples, such as prints or production work, which can be made more inexpensively than their previous work. Artists whose working methods use fuel (such as kilns) are looking at reductions or efficiencies wherever possible. More than a third (38%) of respondents indicated that supplies are a personal challenge as a result of current economic circumstances.

Creating new events or formats: Some artists are creating new events that are tailored to current issues and circumstances. This may be via topical content, but more often it is cited as works that can be presented in a different setting or for lower cost.

Shifting towards more functional art forms: Artists indicate a belief that functional objects may be more resilient to reduced consumer spending. Respondents working in relevant art forms note an inclination to focus on more functional works of art.

More willingness to teach: There is a reported increase in teaching efforts, especially in formats accommodating short-term or low-cost opportunities. Many artists who had stopped teaching are reconsidering that as a source of income, and artists who have not previously taught are considering the possibility. This willingness to teach may prove to be a frustration since other respondents note diminishing teaching opportunities.

C. Changes in living and working conditions

Reducing expenses: Many respondents note ways they are reducing their expenses. This includes cutting rental and mortgage payments through moving, sharing or refinancing. For some this means eliminating studio or rehearsal space. Various living expenses are affected: discretionary income is scarce, and some have had to reduce food costs. A number of artists note the issue of health care costs and health insurance, and the inability to pay for those expenses. The issue of living expenses is often examined in relationship to the cost of art supplies.

Access to non-art jobs: It is not surprising that artists, like the larger work force, are experiencing difficulties regarding employment. Artists note losing "day jobs," having hours cut, working harder in the hopes of retaining their job, and finding it hard to locate job opportunities. Teaching jobs are less secure or being eliminated. Some artists are adding hours or taking new or additional non-art jobs to make up for diminished art-related income. Others are working more to compensate for jobs lost by spouses or partners.

Relying on others: A number of artists note that their income has always been modest but that the current situation has made that more dire. In some cases, this is tipping a delicate economic balance of support by spouses, partners or others, creating a sense that it is harder to justify their art career. For others, there has been a rallying of shared resources and a sense of increased community in support of their lives as artists. Some artists note an increased reliance on safety net resources from unemployment insurance to food banks.

The resource of time: The need to generate income has pushed some artists to reduce the time they can allocate to their art. All artistic disciplines require time and respondents indicate any diminishment or deferment of time as a frustration. For some this is seen as a necessary but short-term frustration while others despair, and some have found creative new ways to try and carve out time. Some individuals note that they are unwilling to sacrifice time for their art, even if it means sleeping less. A few note that the decrease in time for their art making has had the effect of increasing their productive use of the time they are able to dedicate to their art.

D. Changes in attitude and community

States of mind: Morale is a challenge noted by 52% of respondents. Some artists attribute stress and anxiety, or even depression that they are experiencing to the economy. Those artists who note debt or health issues appear to be experiencing the greatest stress. Many others, however, appear to be navigating their situation in more positive ways. For some, the economic situation is a challenge to cultivate a more “fearless” attitude and to focus on creating and improving their art beyond the pressures of the market – a time for developing and honing artistic skills and ideas, and for rededicating themselves to their art. A number note that they are being more focused and productive.

Valuing community: There is a recurrent theme of community as an asset throughout the responses. In some cases this is about a close knit community of friends, family or fellow artists. For others it is about the art community at some level. And for some it is about their geographic neighborhood or community, or a community of shared beliefs or interests. A number of respondents see the weak economy as building stronger bonds and bridges among people. For some, the economic situation is spurring action on behalf of fellow artists or other constituencies through new efforts to share information, resources or ideas. Some artists are making specific efforts to help other artists market their work, others are lobbying and advocating for artists and the arts or for political causes, and others are taking on community volunteering at new levels.

What would help?

Artists were asked what resources would be helpful during this tough economy. The majority of respondents (59%) indicated that small grants were the most important resource. This was followed by business counseling at 32%. Loans were not seen as being particularly helpful, with only 10% indicating an interest in them.

The interest in small grants aligns with past studies of artists that indicate that even small amounts of funding can serve to sustain and encourage artistic commitment and output. Such grants are a source of both financial and moral support.

Survey responses suggest additional types of help that would be of value specifically to artists. Mechanisms for providing low-cost access to supplies or materials would be a welcome help. Artists’ support networks and ways for resources to be shared among artists are also useful forms of assistance. Opportunities that increase access to use of affordable space is likely to support artistic capacity. Efforts to strengthen morale for artists during this time is worth consideration. All of these are relatively small steps against a larger economic backdrop, but can bolster artists’ ability to weather the economic downturn.

Conclusion

The survey indicates that artists are feeling the impact of the economic downturn in their professional and personal lives. There is fear and anxiety and hardship apparent in the responses. But there is also great resilience and creativity in evidence. The survey suggests that many artists take strength from fellow artists and the shared resources within that community. It also suggests how the funding and support community can play a role in making sure that artists continue to create during this period, and ensure that Washington State will continue to have a strong and vibrant artistic community in the future.



SELECTED GRAPHS AND QUOTES FROM 2009 ARTISTS AND THE ECONOMY SURVEY

What is your primary discipline?

Answer	0%	100%	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Performing Arts			80	11.5 %
Visual Arts			469	67.8 %
Media Arts			15	2.1 %
Literary Arts			55	7.9 %
Other			35	5.0 %
No Response(s)			37	5.3 %
Totals			691	100%

With regards to your art career have you experienced any of the following changes since the economic downturn?

Answer	0%	100%	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Fewer grant opportunities			114	16.4 %
More grant opportunities			5	<1 %
No change in grant opportunities			141	20.4 %
Smaller grant awards			76	10.9 %
Larger grant awards			1	<1 %
No change in grant awards			69	9.9 %
Delayed receipt of grant monies			13	1.8 %
No change in receipt of grant monies			45	6.5 %
Fewer ticket sales			73	10.5 %
Increased ticket sales			3	<1 %
No change in ticket sales			29	4.1 %
Fewer art sales/bookings/opportunities			334	48.3 %
More art sales/bookings/opportunities			35	5.0 %
No change in art sales/bookings/opportunities			58	8.3 %
Decreased demand for your work			302	43.7 %
Increased demand for your work			51	7.3 %
No change in demand for your work			113	16.3 %
Less time to make art			235	34.0 %
More time to make work			95	13.7 %
No change in art-making time			140	20.2 %
Other			96	13.8 %
Totals			691	100%

Examples of “Other” responses to question above:

Clients unable to pay what they owe me.

Fewer agents and publishers willing to take risks.

Lost a pending book deal for first novel when stock market crashed.

How does your current art-related income compare to this time last year?

Answer	0%	100%	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Increase			72	10.4 %
Decrease			365	52.8 %
Same			185	26.7 %
No Response(s)			69	9.9 %
Totals			691	100%

What personal challenges do you face as a result of these economic circumstances? You may pick more than one.

Answer	0%	100%	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Housing			118	17.0 %
Supplies			261	37.7 %
Transportation			117	16.9 %
Debt			257	37.1 %
Morale			358	51.8 %
Other			155	22.4 %
Totals			691	100%

Examples of “Other” responses to question above:

- Harder to get and pay for health insurance.*
- My time is invested in job hunting instead of making work.*
- Difficulty keeping my studio assistants employed.*
- The possibility of my wife losing her job and our health benefits.*
- Fewer reviews in newspapers, fewer newspapers!*
- Depression and lack of inspiration.*
- Feeling that the art I make must be sellable.*

What resources would be helpful for you as an artist during this tough economy? You may pick more than one.

Answer	0%	100%	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Training			138	19.9 %
Technical assistance			122	17.6 %
Loans			66	9.5 %
Small grants			403	58.3 %
Business counseling			219	31.6 %
Other			144	20.8 %
Totals			691	100%

Examples of “Other” responses to question above:

- Camaraderie and exchange of ideas.*
- Affordable health insurance.*
- Publicize the value of art in community.*
- Low-cost advertising. Most ads are too expensive!*
- Fairs and festivals could lower the exhibition fees.*
- Large grants. Medium grants. Artist housing.*
- Tax incentives for businesses to buy art, especially functional art.*
- What about microloans to slowly grow art business?*
- Business plan writing and coaching and follow-up on training to keep on track.*

Have you noticed the economic downturn having an effect on your fellow artists? If so, is this a positive or negative effect?

Answer	0%	100%	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Positive			12	1.7 %
Negative			379	54.8 %
Haven't noticed a change			129	18.6 %
Other			57	8.2 %
No Response(s)			114	16.4 %
Totals			691	100%

Examples of “Other” responses to question above:

- Financially worse, but creativity is increasing, as well as productivity.*
- Positively motivating for some, negatively discouraging for others.*

Representative responses to “Can you briefly describe one or two actions you have taken to address these changes?”:

- Better exposure. I have a new website and I'm buying some magazine ads to increase my visibility.*
- I had to get a second job to pay for health insurance after my husband was laid off. So my time to create was less. I have set up a scheduled time that is only for making art. I also have started offering my paintings in more sizes to offer a variety of prices. Smaller is less expensive.*
- Continue to present events and concepts and opportunities for people that are people-driven not market-driven.*
- I'm applying for more grants and, as a performer, am planning more self-produced work so I don't have to depend on other organizations creating opportunities for me.*
- I have chosen to focus more on the process, less on the consequences, “success” of my art.*
- Marketing more, which is why I have less time for my work. Entering shows, etc., sending out packets, takes time and money, which reduces what I have left to make art with.*
- With increased time and need to earn income from my art – I research and participate in more exhibit opportunities.*
- My motto these days is, “Demand what you need; take what you can get.” I am doing more performances for less money to try and make more contacts so I can do more performances... for less money.*

1. I have had to lower my rates for out-of-town performing opportunities. 2. I have developed a smaller performing ensemble to tour more easily/less expensively. 3. I have worked harder on my children's shows in order to perform more often in the school and libraries. 4. I have developed more attractive promotional materials.

My regular 40-hour-work-week was shortened to four days. With more time, I'm using it to research a potential market to use my paintings that might be a viable one. It's very exciting. So the economic slowdown is nice in some ways and hard in others, though I'm definitely taking advantage of its time benefit, in my situation.

Opened co-op gallery with other artists so that we #1 always have a venue to show our art and #2 share the risk.

Representative responses to “Can you describe one thing others in your circle of fellow artists are doing differently as a result of the shifting economy?”:

Some are clearly tailoring their work to sell.

All are working hard and are worried.

Advertising more on the internet.

More folks are using websites such as www.etsy.com.

Viral marketing, unusual buzz marketing, shock art.

Working job unrelated to skills/interests/degree.

More artists seeking work outside their discipline.

More flexibility with compensation (bad thing!).



About the survey: Artist Trust staff designed the survey using Constant Contact standard formats. Responses were tabulated using Constant Contact tools. Respondents were entered into a lottery for receipt of two free Artist Trust memberships and two copies of *Business of Art: An Artist's Guide to Profitable Self-Employment*. All answers were confidential.



Artist Trust supports art at its source—the creative individual.

Artist Trust provides artists the time and resources necessary to prosper. We deliver vital professional development information to thousands of artists each year, and have distributed over \$3.5 million in direct support to more than 1,736 of Washington State's most promising and respected musicians, visual artists, writers, dancers, craft artists, filmmakers, cross-disciplinary artists, and more. **Find out more at www.artisttrust.org.**

