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Creating Artistic from Economic Value

Changing Input Prices and New Art

Michael Hutter

4.1 Introduction

The creation of sources of cultural newness is usually credited to the individuals who wrote, performed, or shaped the artworks. The newness is attributed to their rare "genius"—the painterly genius of Manet and Cézanne, of Pollock and Viola; the filmmaking genius of John Huston; or the musical genius of Jimi Hendrix. The relevance of the personal, mental, and physical contribution of artists is undisputed. This chapter tries to look beyond the personal contribution. Beyond the mental decision and its availability of society at large.

The prices of goods that are relevant to artistic work change relative to the prices of other goods, the artists experience the change as a change in their financial constraints. Some options become affordable; others move out of reach. In either case, the artists, as well as those buying their works and performances, are faced with new choices. The choices lead to the use of new instruments and input materials, to new organizations of labor, and to migrations of entire artistic communities and industries.


2. Statistical evidence is hard to come by. An extensive study of Australian artists, however, indicates that about 50 percent of expenditure across all artists' categories is taken up by materials and equipment (Throsby and Holllister 2003: Table 8.5).

3. The argument has a certain similarity with a hypothesis put forward by Baumol and Bowen (1966). In studying the costs of orchestras in the 1960s they concluded that changes in labor prices in the arts—induced by technical progress that increases labor productivity in other sectors—lead to changes in musical form, in the makeup of performing ensembles, and in the performance of compositions. The focus of this chapter is on nonlabor inputs, but it could be extended to labor inputs.

In the process of searching for alternatives, artists encounter materials that have new properties; these materials are results of innovative competition in other fields that have become available and affordable for artists or for the distributors of artworks.

At a second level, we observe the potential for new meaning and new interpretations that is released by artistic innovation. Such potential is contained in the variations within the existing range of art forms that are tried out in art scenes and picked up or ignored by the participants of such scenes. Innovation can take place in many dimensions: changes of visual formats, or changes of narratives, or changes in the rhythmic structure of songs. In sum, these new works and performances constitute the "richness" and "expressive force" of an art scene.

In consequence, input price changes have the power to shape the historical development of particular art forms. Input commodities for artistic work might be a painter's studio space; her canvases, brushes, and paints; or a film studio's use of electricity or air transport; or a musician's synthesizer. The expenditure on such commodities exhausts a major part of the artist's budget. Therefore, substantial changes in prices for input commodities should lead to changes in artistic formats, styles, and genres.

If one tries to prove this proposition empirically, the available literature is of little help. Economic studies tracing the historical price series of artistic inputs do not exist, and art historical accounts rarely go beyond individual and social circumstances. The prices of, say, pigment or electricity are ignored. Given that situation, this chapter focuses on three cases of artistic change that demonstrate the irritation or trigger effect of changing input prices on artistic innovation. The cases chosen differ in scope and art form. The case from the visual arts is split into three episodes in each of which the prices and qualities of painting media changed drastically. The case in the film industry focuses on one factor, namely, daylight, which made an entire industry migrate to a new location. The case in the music industry concentrates on the cost and performance of guitars in the 1950s.
4.2 Cheap Blues, Home Paints, and Flat Screens

Painters have typically worked in small workshops. During more recent times, customized and ready-to-use materials have allowed them to operate without assistants, on an individual basis. Contemporary visual artists spend more than 50 percent of expenditure incurred in art practice on materials, consumables, and equipment (see note 2). That proportion was probably even higher in earlier periods when canvas had to be cut and mounted, and pigments ground and dissolved in painting media. Again, the hypothesis is that changes in economic conditions have led to the emergence of new artistic value. In particular, the availability of new painting materials at lower prices has triggered variations in formats, styles, and media, leading to the adoption of new formats, styles, and genres in the respective art community. Given the long span of the craft’s history, such effects can be observed in many epochs and places. I will report on three episodes.

4.2.1 Impressionist Style

The first episode involves the use of blue pigments in the work of Impressionist painters. Blue pigments hold a special place in the history of Western painting. Since antiquity, the pigment of choice was ultramarine, because of its intensity of color. Ultramarine was processed from lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone found in Afghanistan and taken “across the waters,” usually by way of Venice. The value of the raw material equalled its weight in gold. Its exorbitant price was scaled according to the quality grade of the pigment extracted from the ground stone powder. In consequence, ultramarine became a signifier of supreme value in European painting. Its use was limited to the most venerated parts of an image, like the garments of Christ or the Virgin Mary, until late in the nineteenth century. Another, less expensive pigment is azurite, a copper carbonate, also known since ancient times. Azurite needs special treatment in order to be used with oily media. Its use declined when Prussian blue, the first synthetic blue, was discovered in 1804. Prussian blue consists of a combination of iron, nitrogen, and carbon. It is inexpensive but varies in reliability. The range of alternatives changed considerably when a binary oxide known as cobalt blue was discovered in 1802, followed in 1826 by French ultramarine, a synthetic complex composition similar to that of lazurite (natural ultramarine): “The attractions of synthetic ultramarine for artists were considerable, and by the 1870s it was a standard blue for oil painting in France, and a great deal cheaper than the cobalt pigments. Its discovery had replaced the most expensive of all artists’ pigments with one of the least costly.” Roughly, the cost of the new pigment was about a tenth that of its predecessor, albeit with better qualities of drying and higher stability.

The literature on the history of painting does not record a vast change in the use of blue pigments for traditional styles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether in history painting, portraits, conversation pieces, landscapes, or still lifes; apparently the rules for executing traditional paintings did not permit large changes in the established color pattern. It took a new approach, experimenting with many components of painting technique, to make use of the new choices. In fact, there are numerous indications that blue pigments have a special role in Impressionist painting. Skies painted in cobalt blue are common; large quantities of cobalt blue in conjunction with artificial ultramarine account for the strongly blue tonality of works like Renoir’s Les Parapluies, Figure 4.1) or the blue shadows in Monet’s Gare Saint-Lazare, or Cézanne’s Provencal landscapes. The impact of synthetic blue pigment on the tonal values of the new art style in the nineteenth century was the most striking. But it was not the only effect of new technological products at low prices. An entire industry of supplying painting materials to amateur painters had sprung up in the early 1800s. Other synthetic pigments were discovered, such as emerald green, chrome yellow, and vermilion. They all delivered vivid, strong hues and better process properties at a fraction of the cost of their natural substitutes. Canvases were sold in a limited number of standardized formats. From the 1840s onward, machine-ground paint that was already dissolved in painting media was sold in tin tubes. Storability and durability were greatly increased, making it possible for outdoor painting to become a popular leisure-time activity. Mats consumption reduced prices even further. The new paints also had new qualities of surface and viscosity, accounting for the thick and visible paint strokes considered typical for late Impressionism.

It is most to try to gauge the relevance of Impressionist and, more importantly, post-Impressionist painting to the self-description of twentieth-century culture. Cézanne’s regular stroke patterns, recognizable in the pasty paint medium and arranged in color sequences straight from the chemical processes, stimulate the heightened visual attraction of raw pigments. It is important to note that these pigments were for the most part not truly ‘new’ but more like emerald green, chrome yellow, and vermilion, or the artificial blues of the seventeenth century. What is new is the way they were used and the impact on the painting of our time. They were not responsible for the brittle, rough, impasto paint surface so characteristic of the painting of our time, a surface not to be found in painting before these manufactured colors came into general use.”

5 Bomford et al. (1990: 58).
6 See Bomford et al. (1990: 57-58).
7 "These new colors are responsible for the brittle, rough, impasto paint surface so characteristic of the painting of our time, a surface not to be found in painting before these manufactured colors came into general use." Grosset (1991: 50).
laboratory, broke the ground for the radically new styles of Modernism—
from Fauvism to Cubism and Expressionism—that defined the image of the
new age.

4.2.2 Cheap Home Paints

"Modern" American painting is stylistically wed to a particular synthetic
paint solvent called acrylic. The development leading up to this canonical
status has similarities with the emergence of "impressionist blue." In the
1940s, the predominant style of museum-rated painting in North America
was still determined by the traditions of European oil painting. Painters in
the New York scene who either emigrated from Europe (Willem de Kooning,
Adolph Gottlieb, Josef Albers) or had begun to paint in variations of Cubist,
Expressionist, or metaphysical style (Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland,
Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko) did not have a market of collectors. While
income related to their art practice was nil, the large scale of the works that
they tried to accomplish increased their total cost of materials. At this point,
the artists discovered house paints, particularly enamel paints.

Oil paints cause severe problems for painters. They react with untreated
canvas, making it necessary to protect the canvas with a coating; they tend
to discolor over time, leaving a brownish tint; and they take weeks to dry,
making it necessary to structure the workflow around the drying periods.
Enamel paints do not need oil as a binder. Instead, they use synthetic resins
as a binder, either in a solution or in an emulsion. Colors can be applied
directly to the canvas; they can be dispersed in very thin layers, as in some
of Helen Frankenthaler's work (Figure 4.2), or, using a higher proportion
of resin, in thick, physical deposits; and they dry extremely fast, leaving a
"dry," cold look as opposed to the "wet," warm look of oil paintings. The new
medium, cheap enough to be bought by the gallon, had another advantage:
It signaled unconventionality. The coldness of the surfaces without signs of
a brush stroke stood for a new system of aesthetic expression. With the help
of interpretations provided by the critics of the New York scene, Abstract
Expressionist works found a market of buyers who never had considered
collecting artworks before.

8 I use the term in the interpretation given by Clement Greenberg, which refers to a style
called Abstract Expressionism; on his transfer of the notion of Modernism from avant-
garde French painting practice to American painting, see Guilbault (1983).

9 "The use of such paints certainly enabled artists like Pollock and Willem de Kooning to
carry out more experimental application techniques than they might have attempted with

Jackson Pollock experimented with Duco enamel, a brand based on the
early resin nitro-pyroxylin. Polyvinyl acetate has the added advantage of
being water-soluble and was used by painters like Burri and Noland. Acrylic
resins, particularly in solution form, became the standard of choice. Since
the mid-sixties, the paint supply firm of Bocour and Golden has dominated
the market for high-end products with a paint called Magna, based on
a resin called Acryloid F-10, dissolved in turpentine. Acrylic emulsions
such as Floplex were introduced for use in exterior house paint in 1953.
They reached the artists' market under several brand names after 1963.
Acrylic emulsions are highly stable; they look "scratchy, tough, modern,
once-removed," and they dry extremely rapidly, making it possible to add
multiple layers in rapid succession.

It should be added that as early as 1912 Picasso began to use a house
paint brand called Ripolin, based on alkyl resin. He continued to use house
and boat paint throughout his career and frequently praised this new type of
paint, but this did not have any impact on forms of painting in Europe. It took
the availability of a cheap medium plus the specific economic conditions of
young American artists in the 1940s to make experiments with new ways of
expression affordable and fashionable. Under such conditions, the very
properties of the nonart medium became the signature of a new style that
soon demanded its execution in that particular medium. Once this state of
recognition was instituted, a predictable pattern of quality improvements
set in: Specialist firms ("colormen") developed custom-made varieties that
catered to the specific needs of art painters, and to the larger budgets now
available both to professionals and to amateurs.

4.2.3 Cheap Flat Screens

The last case takes us to contemporary times. Although we can observe
certain price changes for artists' input commodities today, we are still in the
dark as to the new artistic forms that may be triggered in the future by these
price changes. Still, the available evidence points toward the most probable
changes in cultural value. The first point to be noted is the decrease in the
price index for communication equipment and telecommunication services.
The underlying causes are well known. Visual as well as aural representation

10 When the production of Magna paint was discontinued in the 1990s, the painter Roy
Lichtenstein bought up all the supplies: "I could paint in something else but I'd have to
learn to paint all over again." Crook and Learner (2000: 27).

11 Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in Crook and Learner (2000: 29).
is increasingly processed in digital media, using electronic operations. Most of the cost goes into research, development, and market penetration. The mere reproduction of system components is cheap.

In addition to its cheapness, the new, affordable communication equipment empowers the artist to carry out many processes of image manipulation and reproduction that used to require expert artisanal or industrial assistance. What will be the probable impact on artistic practice? One piece of evidence is from a survey among Australian artists that indicates that 79 percent of all visual artists use a computer and 72 percent use the Internet in their artistic practice. More generally, we can observe the emergence of new fields of visual art based on digital technology.

One of these new fields is the field of digital and digitally altered photography. Large material formats endow the photographic prints of artists like Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky, or Candida Höfer with the physical exclusivity of original paintings. Video artists of the 1980s and 1990s had to rely on the use of conventional television monitors, often sponsored by a hardware manufacturer. Recording techniques were analog; editing used conventional cutting and splicing techniques. Digital technology has opened access to visual resources through the Internet and to the software needed to manipulate these images. Furthermore, flat liquid crystal display screens have become available at prices that make it possible to employ them as standard inputs in the work process of video artists. Bill Viola, one of the pioneers in the field, explains their use in his project "The Passions" (2002): "I always wanted bigger images. One day on the computer I realized I was immersed, the way you are with a book, where you fall into the world of the book. Experimenting with a tiny screen and using it at a reading distance, I found I could achieve a loss of the sense of self... I can make a life-size image with a smooth, creamy texture like oil paint. And it's not a box." (Figure 4.3).

The reference to oil paint makes it clear that we are observing another step in the substitution of painting media. Again, the substitution is driven by changes in relative prices. This time the change did not begin at the margin of the field, among amateurs and newcomers. It was initiated by an established artist. He could have opted for a more expensive conventional medium—a choice that would serve as an entry barrier to other artists. Instead, he opted for a medium that is within the budgetary reach of every art school and most individual artists. To be sure, Viola's use of flat screen devices is as yet only a variation within the artistic scene; it is not an established practice. But it has a good chance of being selected—in technically improved form—as conventional practice for a new digital artistic style, with new cultural meanings.

The link between input prices and artistic form is not limited to the visual arts, a genre that is notorious for its individualized, undercapitalized mode of production. On the contrary, more industrial modes of production tend to exert even more pressure on themes and modes of treatment in other art forms, as we shall see further later.

4.3 Cheap Light

The invention of the first film cameras and projectors occurred in a period when patent protection provided a major motivation for industrial research. Thus the first decades of the film industry were shaped by patent protection. In France, Charles Paté held the rights necessary to monopolize film camera production and use. In the United States, Thomas A. Edison controlled the field. In 1895, Armat and Jenkins patented a film projector that permitted screenings for a larger audience. A year later, Edison bought the patent and thus had exclusive rights to film production as well as performance.

Competition in the film production and distribution market became even more constrained when Edison formed the Motion Pictures Patents Company in 1908. The producers of the Patents Company kept their studios close to the large markets, particularly New York and Chicago. Films were produced in reels with an average of 20 minutes' running time, put out on a weekly basis. They were consumed by a large urban audience that soon developed the habit of attending "motion-pictures" daily. But the time available for shooting new film was severely limited by the scarcity of sufficient light. Studios were equipped with glass ceilings because electrical light was not strong enough to substitute for natural light.

Around 1908, some studios began to experiment with sunnier locations. For a few years, Florida became the winter location for a number of studios. The same search sent production companies to Southern California, and within a few years nearly all the major companies went there for the winter season, "although the majority of them still did not have the intention of staying on indefinitely." However, a rapidly increasing number of companies decided to move permanently. By 1911, ten motion-picture companies

13 Internet art has also sprung up as a new field; see Greene (2004).
and three independent producers were operating in and around Los Angeles, and by 1915 the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce claimed that 80 percent of the country's motion pictures were produced in the area. Southern California offered (1) a stable climate with (2) a steady supply of natural light unspoiled by moisture, (3) a wide variety of landscape settings, and (4) low wages. In addition, the distance from the East provided some degree of shelter for independent companies that violated the patents of the trust. But the major reasons were the first two: the dependable availability of almost continuous, high-quality sunlight.

The migration to Hollywood influenced filmmaking in several ways. It increased the number of outdoor shootings; given the new conditions, cameras were positioned more freely, actors and animals moved deeper into space, and camera movements were split into more and shorter shots in order to catch the shifting action. In addition, the difficulty of communication with home-office company executives encouraged the directors to experiment with new ideas. "By the time the negatives were shipped back by train to the office, it was too late." Furthermore, along with the short shots, extremely long shots came into fashion. Spectacle, readily provided by the California landscape, became a significant quality in establishing longer feature films. The genre that flowered best under the new conditions was the genre of "Wild West drama," which had been invented in the East Coast days of the industry. But now landscape spectacles, chases, and battles could be introduced as part of the visual repertoire. Moreover it was possible to find experienced horsemen at reasonable daily wage rates, lending authenticity to action and setting. The producers usually "took the elements of stock melodrama and comedy and transplanted them to a western setting." Thus "noble and self-sacrificing behavior" was transported into a setting of "fast action, rugged landscape, and swift riding."

In this medium, issues of identity for a rapidly growing nation could be explored. The Western movie that developed over the next few decades became one of the prominent artistic forms of the Hollywood film industry. In the major works of directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks, and John Huston, the Western generated a new mythical history complete with heroes and villains, with conquests and defeats both individual and collective. In the 1950s, the genre was even revitalized when a new generation of directors succeeded in citing and reprocessing Western themes with an appeal to international audiences.

We turn finally to the third case, which moves away from visual artistic forms and explores links between price changes and musical forms.

4.4 Cheap Steel Guitars and Digital Equipment

Two new technologies of reproduction and distribution mark the beginnings of the music industry around 1900: first the phonograph, which reproduced sound vibrations recorded and pressed onto a storage medium, and second the radio receiver, which reproduced sound waves transmitted via electromagnetic fields. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the diffusion of the second technology was by far the greater. Radio programs were recorded live, with large orchestras and extended playing times, and they were distributed to a middle-income audience that could afford the cost of radio receivers. In fact, the manufacturers of the receivers sponsored the programs in order to boost their sales. Phonograph recordings were greatly limited in length and durability, but accessible to a dispersed audience beyond the reach of radio broadcasts. The revenues of the recording industry dwindled severely in the 1930s but began to grow in the 1950s with the introduction of vinyl records. At the same time, cheap radio receivers became available. Radio stations switched their broadcasts from live performances to recorded music, providing potential buyers with demonstration versions of newly issued music, and thus boosting the sales of records.

The shift in the relevance of the reproduction medium from radio to record was accompanied by a change in the instruments chosen by young experimental musicians. Traditional orchestras mainly featured string instruments and pianos. Jazz ensembles featured wind instruments, like clarinet, trumpet, and saxophone. Guitars added a new dimension. Their playing tradition derived from banjos played in black folk music and guitars played in white Western music, with the guitar less costly than the banjo to produce. In a large musical ensemble, guitars were not loud enough; however, electric amplification ended the restriction to low volume, and it ended the dependence on handcrafted wood bodies. Industrially manufactured steel frames plus amplifying equipment made an instrument available that was cheap, was easy to play without instruction, and produced a sound as

17 Ibid.
19 Bowser (1990: 171).
loud as desired. The effect was the ubiquitous formation of small bands, usually consisting of lead guitar, bass guitar, voice, and drums. This lineup became paradigmatic for the emerging genre of rock music.

Three decades later, the music industry experienced yet another change in input prices: The technology of digitization made a new recording medium possible, the compact disk. The initial effect was a dramatic increase in revenues of recording companies as an entire market migrated to the new carrier medium. But as the technology progressed, digitization led to further effects. Producers exploited the cost advantages of digitally available electronic sound samples and programs that transform them into new patterns. By the 1990s, prices had declined to a level that made digital equipment affordable for individual musicians and small studios. Today, music tracks can be composed and performed without musicians able to play any instrument. The price decline benefited consumers as well. They have gained access to performances composed and performed without musicians able to play any instrument. The price decline benefited consumers as well. They have gained access to any source material.

The probable outcome of these changes is musical recordings with a new combination of "digital" and "analog" sounds and consumption patterns that move from combined tracks (albums) to personal compilations of single tracks. Since changes in artistic valuation progress slowly, the effects will be first noted on the periphery of the market, in the niches of the experimental music scene.

4.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, cases from the fields of painting, film production, and music recording were discussed. The results confirm the hypothesis that price and quality changes for input commodities of artists are a relevant trigger for variations in style, content, and modes of expression in art fields.

In the episodes discussed, economic valuations remained quite distinct from the aesthetic valuations in the artistic circles of Paris, New York, or Hollywood. This issue did not concern high prices for outputs, which might have induced artists to change their work as a result of such external objectives. In all cases, the internal values remained intact: Excellence was sought in expressing color values of atmosphere, or in reducing theatrical movement to a digital panel, or in making the music as loud as possible. The issue concerned low prices for new inputs. The new alternatives were selected on an experimental basis. The experiments were successful once the new input could be connected with an internal, aesthetic meaning, like the thinness of cobalt blue, or the roughness of acrylic on raw canvas, or the endlessness of Western landscapes.

Such successful aesthetic changes are not causal in a strict sense. A change of price ratios due to the appearance of new input products changes the probabilities for new work that irritates and fascinates the valuation system employed by artists, art critics, dealers, publishers, music producers, film directors, and all those who make up their audience and pay for their products.

Economic and aesthetic valuations are distinct processes. Their very distinctiveness demands their interdependence. Artistic activities depend on economic transactions; changes in input prices are just one dimension of that dependence. Conversely, economic activities depend on artworks and artistic activity in their environment. The new meanings discovered have many applications in markets, either as attributes of the agents or as content of products. The scope of the impact of artistic productivity on the development of today’s information-centered economies is yet to be explored.

References


22 Apart from some of the chapters in this book, see Hutter (1992) and Hutter (2001).
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