The Right to Appear Unbought: Conspicuous Non-Commerciality as a Class Filter in Creative Fields

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Abstract

In creative fields, low pay and anti-commercial rhetoric read as proof of devotion, but the same surface, negligible art income and a claim to be doing it for the love, is produced by at least five different situations: freedom from commerce, refusal of commerce, exclusion from commerce, dependence concealed as devotion, and hobbyist indifference. Because these are observationally identical at the level of the individual, no quotation or earnings figure can sort them, and the right unit of analysis is not the artist but the field, modelled as a filter. This paper builds that filter as an agent-based model, the Purity and Scene Machine, in which 4,000 artists differ in parental wealth and in talent and scene-value propensity drawn independently of wealth, so the model never assumes the rich are more gifted or more sincere. Wealth supplies a financial buffer and, more importantly, a recurring hidden subsidy that lets a purity posture be sustained rather than merely cushioned; purity forgoes commercial income, and a field that rewards anti-commerciality excludes the visibly commercial through its gatekeepers. Run as a survival filter over ten years, the model reproduces the class gradient the empirical literature reports, a 4.99-fold advantage in survival for artists from the top wealth third over the bottom, out of an economic filter alone with talent held independent. The field's average purity rises from entry to survival, from 0.42 to 0.50, not because survivors are more devoted but because the poor and devoted were filtered out, so observed luxury purity is a survivorship artifact; purity in the model correlates with wealth at 0.58 and with talent at -0.03. Strengthening the field's purity norm amplifies the class gradient 3.2-fold, which is the sense in which a norm that presents as aesthetic operates as a wealth means-test. The field loses about 69 percent of its scene and archival value to dropout, and because platform attention is a weak proxy for cultural value in the model, correlation 0.30, the stewards it starves are precisely its least visible members. Among policy levers, a recurring public income floor closes the class gap most while preserving the most scene value, because it lets low-buffer artists sustain non-commercial work without either commercializing or leaving; a one-off buffer barely moves a recurring shortfall. The model does not show that any wealthy artist is insincere; it shows that wealth changes the price of purity, the probability of surviving it, and the class composition of who remains.

1. The Sentence with Five Meanings

"I do it for the music" is one of the most respected sentences in any creative field, and one of the least informative. A wealthy artist turning down a commercial offer says it. So does an unknown selector who has received no offers to turn down, an organizer keeping a small scene alive for nothing, an aspirant making free promotional work in the hope of a future that may not arrive, and a hobbyist who never wanted the activity to pay in the first place. All five report the same thing to a survey: little or no income from art, and a stated indifference to money. Their bank balances are identical and their situations are opposite.

This is an identification problem, and it does not dissolve with more interviews. The sentence is underidentified because it is compatible with freedom from commerce, where feasible commercial options are declined; refusal of commerce, where particular market forms are rejected on principle;

exclusion from commerce, where no real monetization was ever available; dependence concealed as devotion, where the artist needs payment but has learned that asking for it lowers standing, and so converts necessity into the language of sacrifice; and plain hobbyist indifference. No quotation distinguishes these, because the artist in each case can sincerely speak the same words, and observed earnings distinguish them no better, because all five earn nothing. The compound nature of the thing is exact: an observed purity posture is a sum of an intrinsic disposition, a field convention, a status strategy, a material constraint, and a branding choice, and no single observation recovers the terms.

The usual response is to give up on rigor and reach for anecdote, condemning the trust-fund artist and romanticizing the obscure one. This paper takes the opposite turn. If individuals cannot be sorted, the field can be modelled. The object of study becomes not the sincerity of any artist but the filter the field runs, the rule that decides who can stay in it and who drops out, and the question becomes what that filter selects for. The thesis is that in fields where needing money is coded as vulgar, the filter selects heavily on wealth while presenting itself as selecting on devotion. The rich do not merely buy access to artistic careers. They buy the time, security, and recurring support required to refuse money without leaving the field, and so they acquire the right to appear unbought. The counter-thesis is held with equal weight: the same surface purity that is a status display at the top is, in the long tail, devotion, exploitation, survival, or culturally indispensable scene-maintenance, and the model is built to hold both at once.

2. Conspicuous Non-Commerciality

The theoretical materials are old and well matched to the problem. Bourdieu described restricted cultural production as an inverted economy in which the disavowal of ordinary economic interest is not the absence of strategy but a strategy, because the field converts visible disinterest into symbolic capital; the field does not require anyone to fake indifference, it selects and rewards dispositions that already appear autonomous from calculation (Bourdieu, 1983). Abbing named the paradox that follows: art is treated as a gift, sacred and selflessly motivated, even as it operates in a market, and this denial of economic rationality both attracts a permanent oversupply of labor and makes the resulting low pay feel culturally appropriate rather than scandalous (Abbing, 2002). Veblen supplied the signaling mechanism a century in advance. Conspicuous leisure communicates status precisely because only some people can afford visible exemption from necessity (Veblen, 1899). Conspicuous non-commerciality is its exact analogue in creative fields: visible exemption from the need to monetize is a costly signal, but the cost is not the same for everyone, and that is the whole point.

The empirical backdrop makes the stakes concrete. Low earnings in the arts are not the exception but the condition: the UK Musicians' Census reported average music income around £20,700 with a large minority below £14,000 and a majority relying on income from outside music (Musicians' Union and Help Musicians, 2023), and visual artists report lower medians still (Design and Artists Copyright Society, 2024). Against that, entry is sharply class-graded. People from the highest professional origins enter core creative work at roughly four times the rate of those from working-class origins, an advantage that education narrows but does not erase (Brook, Miles, O'Brien and Taylor, 2023), and the broader pattern of a class ceiling in elite and cultural occupations is well documented (Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2020). The hidden subsidies that make low-paid careers survivable are normal rather than marginal: unpaid work is near-universal in cultural labor and is understood as exploitation by those who cannot afford it and as investment by those who can (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2018), and unpaid internships, disproportionately taken by those receiving parental support, gate access to supposedly open fields (Sutton Trust, 2025). The literature on creative labor has mapped the surrounding machinery: artistic labor markets that transfer risk to individuals (Menger, 2006), the autonomy that firms grant and then capture (Banks, 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011), the aspirational and venture labor that converts hope into unpaid value (Duffy, 2017; Neff, 2012), the free labor that digital platforms harvest (Terranova, 2000), the datafied curation that platformization imposes on cultural producers (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), and the subcultural capital by which even underground scenes police their own exclusions (Thornton, 1995; Hebdige, 1979; McRobbie, 2016). What the literature has not done is put the filter together and run it, to see what a purity norm does to a population over time. That is the gap the model fills.

3. The Purity and Scene Machine

The model is an agent-based field of $4{,}000$ artists. Each has a parental-wealth percentile, and from it two insulations follow. The first is a financial buffer, the months of survival the artist can absorb with no art income, drawn with the heavy right skew of real wealth so that the bottom decile holds a fraction of a month and the top a few years. The second, and the one that matters more, is a recurring hidden subsidy, the inherited housing that lowers rent, the family transfers, the elite-network day job, modelled as a monthly income that rises steeply with wealth. The distinction is load-bearing: a buffer is a stock that depletes, while a subsidy is a flow that does not, and only a flow lets a purity posture be sustained indefinitely rather than merely survived for a while.

Talent, the propensity to produce scene value through curation, archiving, and organizing, and commercial skill are all drawn independently of parental wealth, on purpose, so nothing in the results can come from a hidden assumption that the rich are more gifted, more devoted, or more entrepreneurial. Each artist chooses a public purity posture between zero and one, higher meaning more anti-commercial, and the choice trades the field's symbolic reward for purity against the income that purity forgoes; because wealth lowers the cost of the posture, high-buffer artists optimally choose more of it, but an intrinsic disposition drawn per artist keeps purity from being a mere function of wealth, in keeping with its genuinely compound origin. Art income falls as purity rises and is multiplied by inherited attention. Cultural value is computed separately and is dominated by scene and archival contribution, with mass attention only a small component, so that platform reach and cultural value can come apart.

The field then runs as a survival filter over ten years, with two ways to exit. An artist exits economically when its buffer is exhausted by the monthly shortfall its purity posture creates, after subsidy and any public funding. An artist also exits through gatekeeping: in a field with a strong purity norm, the visibly commercial face an exclusion hazard, because monetizing too openly costs standing. The two exits catch opposite types. The poor artist who chooses purity runs out of money; the poor artist who commercializes to survive is pushed out by the gatekeepers. Only the artist who can afford purity, or the rare one whose inherited attention monetizes without looking commercial, clears both. The wealthy clear both routinely. Everything below is what the filter does.

4. Purity Is a Survivorship Artifact

Run at a strong purity norm, the field produces a class gradient out of nothing but economics. Artists from the top wealth third survive the decade at 0.63, those from the bottom third at 0.13, a ratio of 4.99. The direction of that gap is built in, since wealth buys the buffer and the recurring subsidy that outlast a standing shortfall, and it would be dishonest to present the sign as a discovery. What is not built in is its size, nor any head start in ability or sincerity, because talent and scene value are drawn independently of wealth. The gradient is therefore the pure work of an economic filter, with no difference in merit between classes anywhere in the model, and its magnitude lands beside the empirical figure the model was never fitted to, the roughly fourfold British gap in creative-career entry. A field can reproduce the observed class composition of the arts without any difference in talent between classes at all; an economic filter is sufficient.

The more pointed result is what happens to purity itself. The field's average purity posture rises from 0.42 among everyone who entered to 0.50 among those who survive. The survivors are not more devoted than the entrants were. They are the same people minus the ones the filter removed, and the ones it removed were disproportionately the poor who chose devotion they could not afford. Observed purity at the population level is therefore a survivorship artifact: the field looks pure because it has been thinned of the unbuffered faithful. Inside the model the composition shows directly. Purity correlates with wealth at 0.58, the strength the choice rule builds in by making the posture cheaper for the buffered, and with talent at -0.03, the link the field's own story predicts and the model does not contain. The thing the field reads as a sign of artistic seriousness is, in the aggregate, a sign of a buffer, and the gap in purity between high-buffer and low-buffer artists, a luxury purity index of 0.33 on the unit scale, measures how much of visible devotion is simply affordability.

5. The Norm Is the Filter

If purity is a filter on wealth, then turning up the field's taste for purity should turn up the class exclusion, and it does. Sweeping the purity norm from indifference to strong, the class gradient rises from 2.1 at the bottom to 6.9 at the top, an amplification of 3.2. The mechanism is plain in the model and recognizable outside it. A stronger norm raises the symbolic penalty on visible commerce, which forces the poor artist toward the two exits at once: choosing purity raises the economic exit, and choosing commerce raises the gatekept exit, while the wealthy, whose subsidy makes purity free, are untouched by either. A norm that the field experiences as a purely aesthetic commitment, a refusal to let the market corrupt the work, operates underneath as a means-test, admitting those who can pay the price of appearing not to need payment.

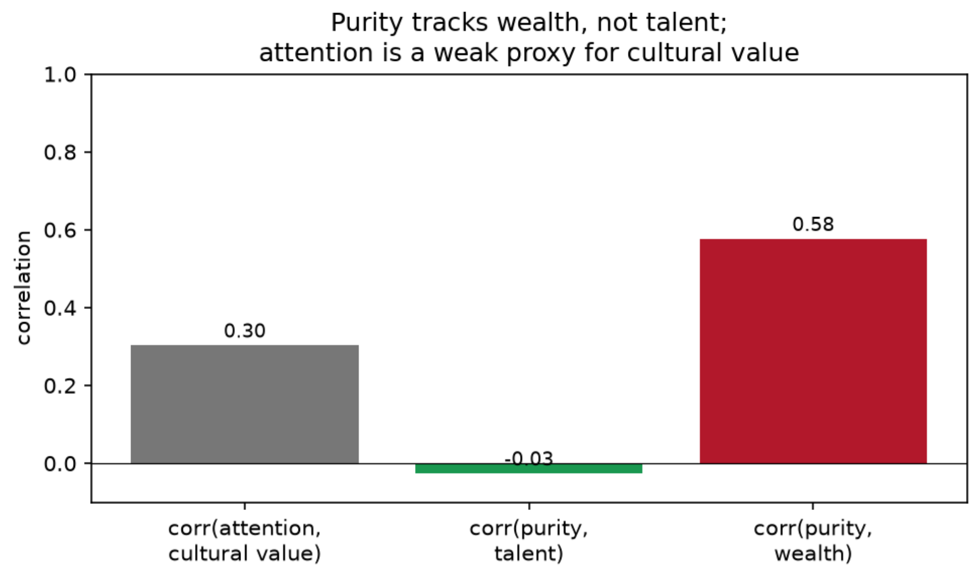

Figure 1: Left: purity tracks wealth (correlation 0.58) and not talent (-0.03), so the posture the field reads as artistic seriousness is, in aggregate, a sign of a financial buffer. Right: mass attention is a weak proxy for cultural value (correlation 0.30), because cultural value in the model is dominated by scene and archival contribution that platform metrics do not see. The two together say the field misreads both of its main signals, treating wealth as devotion and reach as worth.

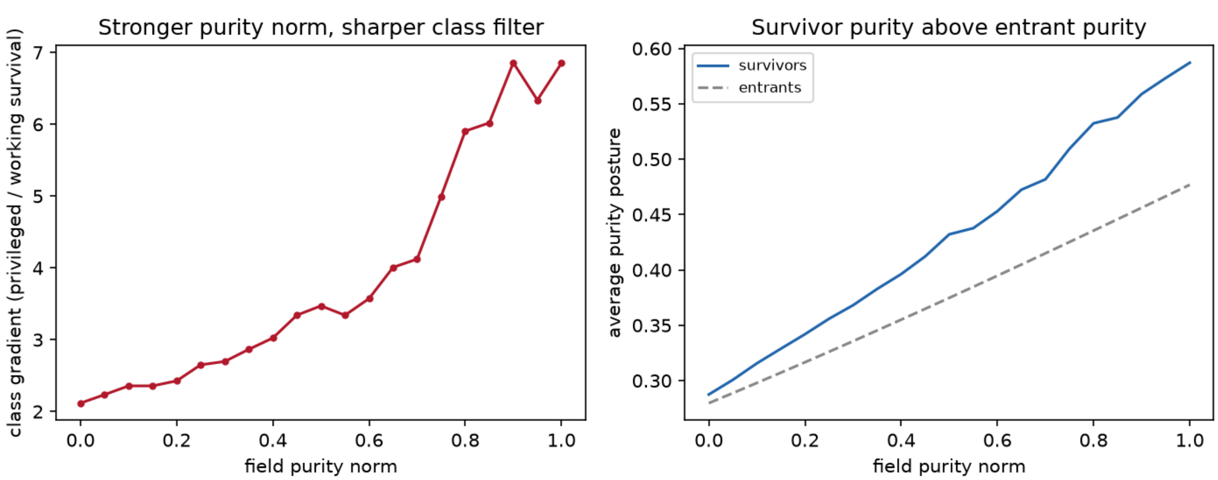

Figure 2: As the field's purity norm strengthens, the class gradient steepens from about 2.1 to about 6.9 (left), so a norm that presents as aesthetic operates as a class filter. The average purity of survivors stays above the average purity of entrants across the whole range (right): at every norm level the field looks more pure than the population that entered it, because the filter keeps removing the faithful who cannot afford the posture.

This is the precise sense in which fields with stronger purity norms should show stronger class exclusion, a prediction the cross-field empirical literature can test directly and that the comparative class-ceiling work already gestures toward (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). It also reframes a familiar complaint. The objection that underground scenes are themselves elitist is correct and is not a refutation, because subcultural capital is another currency that the unbuffered cannot always afford to accumulate (Thornton, 1995); the filter is general, and a scene's purity norm filters its members by who can afford obscurity just as a prestige field's filters by who can afford to refuse a deal.

6. What the Field Throws Away

The filter does not only select on class. Because it removes the artists who cannot sustain unpaid work, and because the propensity to do scene-maintenance, curation, archiving, organizing, the labor that keeps a micro-scene alive, is independent of wealth, the filter discards that labor at the rate it discards the poor. In the model the field loses about 69 percent of its total scene and archival value to dropout over the decade. The artists who hold it are not the visible ones. Cultural value is only weakly tracked by platform attention, correlation 0.30, so the most culturally central but least visible artists, the high-scene-value, low-attention stewards who are about 7 percent of the population, are a group the metrics cannot see and the filter is happy to starve; their dropout rate runs near 0.79. This is platform-indexed invisibility made measurable. A set uploaded to 129 views and a curator's decade of taste-formation register as nothing on the dashboards that decide who looks viable, and the field sheds them first because nothing it measures records what they do.

The contrast with the top of the distribution is the whole argument in one line. The artist the filter keeps is the one who can afford purity; the artist it discards is often the one actually maintaining the scene. The luxury type and the steward type can voice identical anti-commercial sentiments, and the field, reading earnings and reach, cannot tell them apart, so it retains the first and loses the second. The same purity that is a status ornament at the top is, at the bottom, the uncompensated public good the field is least able to replace and most certain to lose.

7. What Preserves It

If non-payment is the filter, then the interventions that matter are the ones that change who can afford it, and the model ranks them in a way that is not obvious in advance. A recurring public income floor, offered to everyone independent of purity, raises the survival of the bottom wealth third from 0.13 to 0.34 and cuts the class survival gap from 0.50 to 0.32, while raising the share of scene value the field retains from 0.31 to 0.49. A minimum fee for paid work closes the survival gap by a similar amount but preserves less scene value, because it helps artists by pushing them toward the commercial work the fee rewards, which is the opposite of what a steward does. A one-off buffer grant, even a generous eighteen months aimed at low-wealth artists, barely moves anything, cutting the gap only from 0.50 to 0.43.

That ranking is the model's engine read back as policy. The wealthy in the model survive on a recurring subsidy, not on a stock, because a stock depletes against a standing shortfall and a flow does not. The remedy therefore has to be a flow as well. A buffer grant buys the poor artist the same eighteen months the model gives a middling family and then leaves them where the wealthy never are, facing a monthly deficit with an empty account, so it fails for exactly the reason the hidden subsidy succeeds. The intervention that works is the one that does for the unbuffered, publicly and on purpose, what inherited wealth does for the buffered quietly and by default: it pays the standing cost of appearing not to need payment.

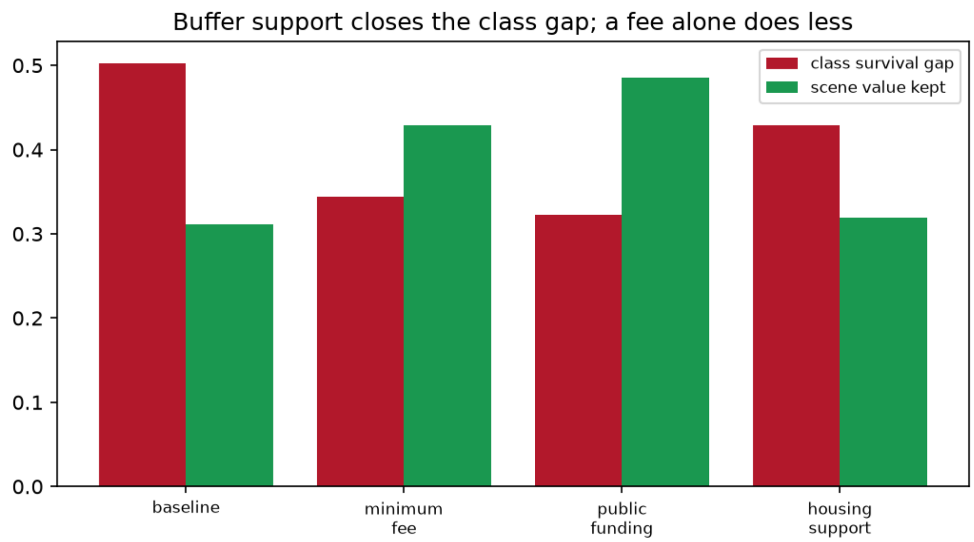

Figure 3: Class survival gap (red) and the share of scene value the field keeps (green) under each policy. A recurring public income floor both closes the gap most and preserves the most scene value; a minimum fee closes the gap but preserves less, because it rewards commercial work rather than scene-maintenance; a one-off buffer grant barely moves the gap, because a stock depletes against a standing shortfall while the recurring hidden subsidy of the wealthy does not.

8. Who Can Afford to Be Pure

The argument is easy to overhear as the rant it was built to replace, so its limits should be stated plainly. The model does not show that any wealthy artist is insincere. Sincerity is not in it, and cannot be, because the identification problem that opened the paper is real: an individual's purity is genuinely compound, and no model run on populations recovers the motive of a person. What the model shows is narrower and firmer. Wealth changes the price of a purity posture, the probability of surviving it, the credibility the field attaches to it, and, through all of these, the class composition of who is left to perform it. A trust-funded artist doing it for the love and an heir doing it for the love may both mean it exactly; the point is that the field would keep them either way, and would lose their unmonied counterpart either way, and that this selection is invisible to everyone inside it because it looks like taste.

Nor does the model say that obscurity is virtue or that the rich are frauds. The counter-thesis held weight throughout: the same low income is luxury at one end of the wealth distribution and exploitation, devotion, or stewardship at the other, and the model's value is that it tracks which, by tracking buffers, subsidies, exits, and the cultural value lost when the unbuffered leave, rather than by reading rhetoric. The magnitudes are illustrative and anchored to public figures, not estimates of any named scene, and the 4.99 and the 0.69 are properties of a stipulated field, not measurements of one. What survives the qualifications is the shape. A field that makes non-payment a condition of belonging is running a means-test it does not know it is running, and the test admits the people who can afford to appear unbought and turns away, disproportionately, the people doing the work that keeps the field alive. The question worth asking of any scene is therefore not who in it is pure. It is who in it can afford to be, and what the scene quietly loses every time it mistakes the one for the other.

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