

# Creative Capital

## The Bohemian Life

After leaving graduate school I spent a few idyllic years living the bohemian lifestyle. My girlfriend and I slept late, drank coffee and read books until the afternoon. Living in Baltimore was inexpensive and easy. We had time to look at art, make art, and banter about art with other artists who frequented Fells Point bars. Baltimore had been in a long steady decline since the riots. Which made it a perfect haven for artists, writers, musicians, and other creatives. Creative capital was plentiful.

What is creative capital? Each of us carries the potential to participate in creative acts. Some fail to recognize or nurture that potential but it's there nonetheless. The logistics of living, work for income to house and feed ourselves, take time and energy depleting creative reserves. The creative well must also be fed through thoughtful observation, research, listening, and ideas sent through the crucible of discussion and critique. And most of all there must be time. Creative capital is hard to measure but easily recognized after the fact in the ideas that are spawned and made manifest whether through the making of objects, the recording and sharing of ideas, or by a novel solution to a problem. It exists in all endeavors but it's essential to the artist who must always pursue and carefully allocate their creative capital.

Things changed. It started with helping with a fundraiser for a fellow artist who was in the hospital. An actor and model who played Santa Claus every holiday season. When he died before the fundraiser we turned it into a celebration of his life and donated the money we raised to an experimental theater who named their art gallery after him. That experience led to running a gallery above a cafe with the owner and a promoter with connections to writers and performers. For me the gallery was a vehicle for growing a creative community reminiscent of my art school days and a fertile place to grow creative capital. We did a lot more than exhibit art at the gallery. The gallery hosted poetry readings and performances. We collaborated with other art venues and theaters in the neighborhood to promote the area and grow audiences. It quickly became apparent that we should form a nonprofit organization.

And so I spent much of the capital of my youth pouring my energy into forming an art nonprofit. Building a community of artists. Trying to recapture the energy and dynamics of art school. After seven years frantically trying to convince the world that our nonprofit was legit, viable, and worthy of funding we were on the verge of tremendous success.

## Nonprofit

Sometimes decisions we make, along with the timing of external events cause unexpected opportunities to present themselves. Like many young artists I dreamt of an ideal garrot for my art practice. In the mid nineties I bought an old Moose Lodge with room for multiple studios and an exhibition space. I rented a few spaces to artists and the nonprofit held events in the old hall. New activity in a building that had been empty for over eight years did not go unnoticed. Community members working on neighborhood revitalization reached out. I found myself presenting a list of ideas which were met with enthusiasm. The nonprofit became a key piece of neighborhood revitalization efforts that had already been going on for decades. We found ourselves in the midst of a real estate deal in spite of the fact that we had no assets. Not only was I spending my creative capital I was also leveraging my real estate assets.

The real estate deal would move our nonprofit out of the tiny space above the cafe into a defunct movie theater that we would renovate. We were on our way to getting an incredible space. One with live-in studios, gallery, theater, offices, and a restaurant. It was an unbelievable accomplishment that a young nonprofit with an annual budget of around 30 thousand dollars could end up spearheading a 4 million dollar renovation project. All on selling the vision of using the arts to save a neighborhood from urban decay caused by suburban sprawl and shopping malls. I spent seven years helping to build the nonprofit, laying the groundwork for the deal, engaging the right people, and crafting the pitch. Generously donating creative capital.

We grew from a borrowed room to hang art, made manifest with press releases and mailing lists to an organization about to make a multi-million dollar deal. Now there was something of value, something to be gained and something to lose. Then through the machinations of securing funding and the ensuing politics I was shuffled out of the deck. No explanation was offered and what explanation I can surmise is speculative.

Finding myself on the outs I decided that as difficult as it was I should embrace the change. Rather than fight and risk injuring the project. I moved on.

In the midst of all this I was bouncing around Baltimore working six jobs. The strain showed. At one point I suffered a bout of depression. Not only was I spending my creative capital but I had put at risk my mental well being. On the flip side I had my hands in many different endeavors that offered a path out of the toxic hole I found myself in.

## Community Happenings

One way I supported myself was as a freelance IT consultant. The Internet boom was happening and in the midst of this maelstrom I built the first state online artist registry for the Maryland State Art Council. I would now focus on building an IT career while making art. It was absurd. I would have telephone technical interviews with books on my lap trying to answer questions. While this wasn't a successful tactic I did learn what I needed to study and launched a career in web development that sustains me and my family to this day. Meanwhile, I continued my work in the studio. But again the desire for community pulled me in.

Back in XXXX a friend invited me to be a juror at the Maryland Film Festival for the non-fiction documentary category. We watched an array of experimental documentaries covering a range of topics. One of these was by an artist in Provincetown. The documentary took us on a journey through a series of community art happenings they created. As the film progressed the events grew in vision and scope. They were ridiculous. Yet had a tremendous impact on the community. I saw how creative practice can be directed outside the studio with great impact. Serendipity had presented new ideas for spending creative capital.

Looking out my studio window one day I saw one of my neighbors moving crates of grapes to a garage behind a row house. Like many of the Italian men in the neighborhood every fall he made wine. I had connections with the Italian community. I'm of Italian descent and ended up as the organist at the neighborhood Catholic Church. The owner of the local Italian deli became a friend. We made an odd couple. The over-educated artist and the third generation deli man. As I looked out the window all the pieces came together for a neighborhood event that would be a lot of

fun, would pull together disparate community members, and raise money for the community association. So once again I redirected my creative capital to the community instead of my art practice.

The home made wine festival that I envisioned while looking out my studio window ended up tremendously successful. It's now been held annually for 23 years with a break over the pandemic. The event brought together the community association, the Italian parish, Italian Americans who lived around or grew up in the parish, and younger people who had begun moving into the neighborhood. After a few years we filled the coffers at our community association enabling them to fund other community projects. We even spun off another event, a basement bar tour that was soon overwhelmed by a stream of visitors to our offbeat part of Baltimore City. But once again I'd find myself estranged from my creation.

In 2013 my wife and I with our two young sons were hit head on while driving down route 83, the highway that leads into downtown through the middle of Baltimore. The crash was devastating for many reasons but especially because my wife was permanently handicapped by the incident. Perhaps people thought they were being kind by no longer including me in organizing the events. Saving me the trouble. But since I wasn't consulted on the decision it felt like a slight. At first I tried to shrug it off and even continued to attend the events. But this proved to be difficult and so once again I moved on.

I don't regret how I've spent my creative capital over the years. As you can see from the examples laid out here the impacts have been exponential. Over a dozen people now work at the nonprofit, hundreds of lives have been impacted, and art programs have had a tremendous impact on the neighborhood. The wine festival and basement bar tour have become a part of the fabric of the neighborhood. There are more people visiting and moving into the neighborhood and the money that has been raised has spawned numerous events and community projects. But as artists we need to be careful spending their creative capital. Recognize that when we spend our capital outside of the studio we are susceptible to the swirl of events out of our control. The ideas take a life of their own and we give up our authorship rights. That's a good thing. Because in the realm of community creative actions ideas are empowered when others possess them.

## Being An Artist

What is an artist? What is creativity? How do we measure success? Who values what we do? The audience for my paintings and drawings has never been great in Baltimore. As an artist I don't necessarily fit into the local zeitgeist. My work was received better in Tucson Arizona where I did my graduate work. Yet Baltimore allowed me the space for my work until I dedicated that space to other things.

For most artists it's a struggle to get studio time. When you're young it's easier. You squat in a warehouse or take up residence in a rough neighborhood. You take odd jobs for necessities. But the world chips away at that time, you get into a relationship, maybe start a family, take on a full time job.

Previous generations often divorced or worse abandoned women and families with the justification that all their resources had to be allocated to their art. I witnessed similar behavior by faculty while attending art school in the 80s. While art practice can be intense it does not require destructive behavior. It's a conceit that any profession demands complete focus with no room for personal life, family, or grace for others. There can be time for all the things.

Even artists who end up teaching at colleges don't dedicate an exceptionally large amount of time to the studio. Like the rest of us they have other obligations. Besides teaching they have office hours and administrative meetings. Perhaps the small percentage of artists living off their work clock in 40 hours a week in the studio. But I doubt that most do. To maintain sales and interest creative capital has to be siphoned off to promote their work. Artists who live off their work aren't just creating work, they're running a small business.

How does an artist thoughtfully spend their creative capital? With a family and a career my output of visual art is low. In more productive times I would participate in multiple group exhibitions in a year and have a solo exhibition every other year. I would get reviews in regional newspapers and magazines. I would write reviews of other artist's work for regional art magazines. Now I play music, some writing and make small drawings and an occasional painting.

My life is full of creative activity. My family is my artistic community. It's the greatest gift. I've been blessed with two sons who are intensely curious, who focus their energy

on multiple creative endeavors. Their music fills our house. They both perform in concerts and the eldest creates sophisticated artwork that's miles ahead of what I was capable of at his age. Not to mention all the other activities around our house. We don't always recognize how special our lives are until we describe our day to day activities to others. Whether our children will be artists or not, they are full of creative capital, spending it in marvelous ways.

Children are rich in creativity. Fan the flames. We need creativity in all fields, science, engineering, all the STEM fields benefit from the creative skills. On my daily zoom calls the programmers I work with are surrounded by musical instruments and art. The ability to think creatively is incredibly valuable. Which makes it odd that I hear so many parents discouraging their children from studying the arts, steering them to "practical" subjects, though the evidence doesn't support this. There is time enough to thrive. The workforce need curious life long learners not cookie cutter worker bees. Learn to see with child eyes, it will serve you well in future endeavors.

As a society we ask artists to serve our causes. We ask them to donate work to raise money for charities. We shower them with accolades for addressing society's ills. It's rare that an artist grant doesn't have strings attached. Educate our youth, fix our city, address the issue of the day, we ask artists constantly to serve others. The art is not enough. ~~You might find yourself forming a nonprofit. Beholden to a board of directors.~~ I wrote an article about how public funding can send creative energy astray some years ago. In the midst of the culture wars the piece did not add to my popularity. But the years have convinced me that I was onto something. Money has an influence. We've seen it in our institutions and a depraved international art scene where art serves many worthy causes while enabling oligarchs and elites. If spending your creative capital on a cause fulfills you great. But be cautious creatives. The world wants your creative capital for its own purposes. Set limits. Plan for the next step. Spend it mindfully.

I gravitate towards other creatives. With more years behind than ahead I find myself seeking out more intensely an aesthetic life. I desire to be surrounded by and engulfed in creative energy. My role models include octogenarians wise in music and art, and quirky creatives closer to my age with laser beam focus on spending their creative capital in exceptional and often private ways. I seek their light. They have no need or interest in building an "art career". You'll rarely read about them. They don't spend

capital on entering the limelight. Their creative capital is spent on creations and living beautiful lives.

Life can be rich in thought and creativity. Your creative capital is your own. Life can be beautiful if you spend it wisely.