Boundary Work and Early Careers in Design and Media

Matthew S. Rowe

Program in Environmental Design, University of Colorado Boulder, 1060 18th St., 314 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0314, United States

ABSTRACT

This article examines how emerging professionals navigate uncertain conditions in creative fields. Using data from in-depth work history interviews with 55 graphic designers and digital media artists, the findings demonstrate how those doing creative work in commercial settings use boundary work as a narrative strategy that brings order to discordant work experiences. Interviewees engage in two forms of boundary work—segmentation and integration—both of which rely on shared meanings of the value and rewards of creative work. Segmentation refers to rhetorical strategies that combine the competing motivations of work—artistic and commercial—in order to explain combinations of different job types. Integration refers to efforts to merge these motivations, justifying work in a single full-time job that combines artistic and commercial logics. Interviewees in both groups draw on the concept of creativity to evaluate the risks and rewards of work and to justify commercial engagement while bolstering artistic identities. The analysis suggests new directions for sociological research on cultural production, artistic careers, and labor market uncertainty.

1. Introduction

The early stages of careers are formative, uncertain times (Arum & Roksa, 2014; Coleman, 1984). This is particularly true in creative fields, where workers are likely to move across labor market boundaries in search of meaningful and sustaining work (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). Young creative workers must learn how to seek out disparate sources of income and balance the competing motivations of artistic labor (McRobbie, 1998). There is, however, a notable lack sociological research on the early careers of creative workers. The gap is complicated by the development of two related streams of sociological research that have remained largely separate: studies of the meaning of creative work *in situ* (e.g., Fine, 1992; Fine, 1996a; Fine, 1996b) and studies of career progression and occupational hierarchies in fields of cultural production (e.g., Faulkner, 1973; Zuckerman et al., 2003). Both tend to rely on research into the dynamics of a single field, an approach that is out of step with the ways in which most creative workers conduct their careers: by combining disparate sources of income from different job roles and sectors of the economy (Lena, 2014; Lindemann, 2013; Markusen et al., 2006; Throsby & Zednik, 2011). As a result, sociologists are facing an empirical gap regarding the early stages of flexible, entrepreneurial careers and inadequate theorization of how workers understand, make sense of, and orient themselves to these circumstances. In a comprehensive review of trends in artistic labor, Lingo and Tepper (2013, p. 352) call for "a robust theory of artistic identity that takes into account how artists become *professionally socialized* in a world where the definition of professional artist is murky and the locations of socialization are varied and diverse" (emphasis in original).

This article addresses these gaps in the sociology of cultural production by focusing on the early phase of careers that involve disorienting shifts in the meaning and value of work. I find that young creative professionals draw upon the ubiquitous tension between artistry and commerce in their work as a cultural resource, which they use to: (1) orient themselves to job changes that feel

E-mail address: matthew.rowe@colorado.edu.

disorderly using a shared vocabulary of creativity; and (2) justify a range of commercial work experiences and combinations of work roles in ways that reinforce artistic identities. Specifically, I show how graphic designers and digital media artists perform boundary work in the early phases of their careers, deploying the tension between creative expression and market demands as they evaluate work experiences and weigh opportunities. Detailed work history interviews with 55 early- and mid-career workers bring to light several distinct narrative strategies that fall into two broad categories: *segmentation* of jobs or projects based on work's expressive or instrumental value; and *integration* of these competing motivations into a single full-time job.

My analysis builds on Nippert-Eng's (1996a, 1996b) conceptualization of boundary work as the ordering of life's experiential zones using widely shared conceptual distinctions. Whereas Nippert-Eng studies the divide between home and work, I apply this conceptualization to the art-commerce tension found throughout creative labor (Fine, 1992; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Menger, 1999). Just as Nippert-Eng's respondents either seek to separate home from work or to unite the two, the creative workers I interviewed explain and justify their current and former work patterns by separating or merging the artistic and commercial dimensions of their work. Marked variation in the structures of creative work provides numerous ways of practicing both types of boundary work. The analysis provides two contributions to the sociological study of cultural production and artistic labor. First, I fill an empirical gap by examining the early phase of creative careers. Second, I develop the concept of boundary work as a sense-making and orienting device used by workers who experience unpredictable shifts in job role and work environment. I close with a discussion of the article's implications for sociological research on creative work, specifically, the nature and role of occupations in shaping how workers experience artistic labor.

2. Literature review: The meaning of creative work and careers

The tension in creative industries between routinized production and the unpredictable nature of artistic inspiration is well documented. Conflicting status hierarchies based on artistic prestige and economic success shape participation in fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). In commercial fields, this tension informs practices and planning. Innovation must be balanced with genre-based expectations to achieve success with an audience; left unrestricted, artistic production may result in undisciplined and unsuccessful organizations (Hirsch, 1972; Jeffcutt & Pratt, 2009; Lampel et al., 2000). Yet the risk for producers is also the source of the creative sector's powerful draw for workers seeking some measure of personal autonomy and expression in their work (Menger, 1999; Menger, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Conventional wisdom in economics dictates that creative workers suffer poorer than average outcomes, paying a price for seeking desirable work in competitive markets (Alper & Wassall, 2006; Stern, 2005). But artists are resilient; they combine jobs in different roles and move across economic sectors in the search of stable and engaging work (Lena, 2014; Lindemann, 2013; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Markusen et al., 2006; Throsby & Zednik, 2011). Creative work may be risky, but it is also a powerful source of meaning and self-direction (Menger, 1999).

Sociologists have developed impressive streams of research on the meaning of creative work and the structural processes shaping creative careers, but provide little insight into the micro-level experience of career navigation. Fine's formative work (1992, 1996b) shows that on-site negotiations over aesthetic standards and constraints on work—such as limited resources like time and ingredients, as well as customer complaints—define the work experience of restaurant cooks. More recent studies emphasize creative workers' struggles for self-determination and jurisdiction on projects (Elsbach & Flynn, 2013; Koppman, 2014; Wei, 2012), examine the risks and promises of new media work (Neff, 2012; Ross, 2003; Stark, 2009), or explore the conflicts inherent to identification as a "working artist" (Bain, 2005; Gerber, 2017). While these studies provide valuable insights into the meaning and experience of work, they do not shed light on how creative workers navigate across distinct modes of economic engagement. Sociological studies of artistic careers present a related limitation, examining routes to the top rather than mundane experience. Researchers provide important insights into, for example, opportunity structures in Hollywood (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Faulkner & Anderson, 1987; Jones, 1996; Rossman et al., 2010; Zuckerman et al., 2003), social networks in local music scenes (Dowd & Pinheiro, 2013; Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009), and the career trajectories of elite chefs (Leschziner, 2015). This shared focus on success within hierarchical systems neglects the experiences of the large majority of creative workers who do not have access to, or may not aspire to join, the glamorous world of cultural taste-makers. In addition, studies of creative work and careers tend to use a case study approach, focusing on a single occupation or industry. While this is understandable given that logics and processes are structured at the field level (Peterson & Anand, 2004), it is out of step with most artists' disorderly working lives.

In addition, few studies closely examine the early stage of creative careers. Labor market entry is a risky time, as young work-ers—including college graduates—typically lack information and connections that shape later outcomes (Coleman, 1984; Rosenbaum et al., 1990; Krahn et al., 2012; Arum & Roksa, 2014). The few studies that do examine early careers in creative fields (Faulkner, 1973; Faulkner, 1983; McRobbie, 1998; Frenette, 2013) provide useful insight into the frustrations and compromises of early-career experience but repeat the pattern of examining young workers' struggle for access into a single, highly competitive, field. Of these studies, only McRobbie (1998) examines how the art-commerce tension leads workers into unexpected forms of economic partici-pation. McRobbie writes that young British fashion designers make ends meet by combining various strategies, such as temporary moves abroad, small-scale entrepreneurial ventures, and strategic use of "the dole." While she presents a powerful depiction of the dedication and trade-offs of creatives who are "inventing careers for themselves" (1998: 150), McRobbie's enduring contribution to the literature is limited by a small sample size and out-of-date socioeconomic context. The need for a more robust understanding of early creative careers remains.

In addition to the empirical gaps, there are conceptual limitations to the current understanding of micro-level career navigation in creative fields. Faulkner (1983) writes that film and television composers develop an "occupational ethos," reinforced in the stan-dardized stories composers tell of proper and improper practice. Such stories rely on "occupational scripts" to explain one's actions in

relation to the art-commerce conflict. Occupational scripts are formed through practice, in the early stage of trial and error in a career: "The new composer gathers disconnected bits of information as he moves from one assignment to the next, and he gradually pieces together an image of his profession" (ibid.: 90). For Faulkner, occupational scripts provide navigational guidance by helping the composers locate themselves amid the role conflicts and shifting circumstances of media production. But the concept is less useful when applied to studies of flexible, contemporary work. If occupational scripts orient creative workers to a competitive, well-institutionalized field like Hollywood, do they also serve to guide entrants into occupations that involve combinations of jobs and periodic shifts across sectors?

A second, more recent, example faces analysts with a similar dilemma. Leschziner's (2015) nuanced analysis linking the creative process to the social dynamics of culinary fields is often virtuosic, combining Bourdieusian and pragmatist influences to advance conceptualizations of creative action. Her work's detailed exploration of intra-field dynamics, however, continues the sociological tendency to focus on upward mobility among participants who are firmly rooted to an institutional field. As with Faulkner's early work, this study provokes questions about the applicability of these concepts to the majority of creative workers, whose identities and motivations are not necessarily anchored to a single field. Leschziner's book represents a significant advance in studies of cultural production by elegantly combining micro- and meso-level analyses. Yet, given the documented tendency for creative workers to reach beyond creative industries and occupations for meaning and sustenance, I argue that a cultural theory of career navigation must take a broader range of meanings and uncertainties into account.

This article advances the latter agenda, applying the concept of boundary work to understand how artistically-identified workers orient themselves to work in commercial fields that offer myriad working arrangements. Studies of work show how people use symbolic boundaries interactively to demark occupational roles in disputes over jurisdiction and to construct moral hierarchies among colleagues (Gieryn, 1983; Lamont, 1992; Vallas, 2001). Creative workers engage in interactive boundary work to adjudicate between worthy and unworthy products as a way to bolster their authority in interdisciplinary workplaces (Koppman, 2014). Whereas these studies show how symbolic boundaries are used to form and reinforce group identities, boundary work can also refer to practices that people undertake to organize their lives into distinct experiential zones. For example, scholars have used the concept to frame contractors' efforts to construct temporal boundaries that distinguish billable hours from personal time (Evans et al., 2004; Osnowitz & Henson, 2016). Nippert-Eng (1996a, 1996b) is more ambitious, seeking to understand how people approach the spatial and temporal divide between home and work to manage the conduct of relationships in each domain. She distinguishes between integration, in which aspects of home and work merge, and segmentation, in which they are actively separated. Those in different work roles face distinct "realm constraints" that shape how they perform boundary work. Nippert-Eng draws examples from interviews with employees of a single scientific facility; while machinists mark "break time" with a "segmentist" approach based on years of hard-fought union struggles, scientists' professional status affords them the flexibility to move more fluidly between home and office (1996b: 40-42).

In this article, I apply the concept of boundary work as developed by Nippert-Eng to a study of highly mobile creative careers in two occupational groups. As they move across work roles and environments, creative professionals form preferences and adopt strategies that resemble Nippert-Eng's distinction between segmentation and integration. I apply her boundary work framework to understand how the tension between artistry and commerce affects the temporal and spatial organization of working lives. I interpret the use of boundary work seen in these accounts as a narrative strategy through which creative workers assert artistic identities while pursuing a range of personalized career trajectories. Sociologists demonstrate that telling personal stories is a powerful tool for making sense of disparate personal experiences while reinforcing group identity (Fine & Fields, 2008; Somers & Gibson, 1994; Somers, 1994). Indeed, studies of artistic identity also show the importance of narrative in asserting one's self-image as an artist in the face of various forms of economic engagement (Bain, 2005; Taylor & Littleton, 2008). Used in this way, boundary work provides an analytic tool that links the conflicted meanings of creative work with the social practices through which new entrants navigate flexible careers. In contrast to earlier concepts such as occupational scripts, it is a broad and adaptable cultural model of sense-making and orientation that suits the improvisational nature of contemporary creative work.

3. Research methods

This article documents the first-hand work experiences of creative professionals, drawing on 55 in-depth interviews. All interviewees are graduates of one private, four-year art school, Adams College of Art (a pseudonym), specifically its Visual Design (n = 30; 55%) and Media Arts (n = 25; 45%) departments. A small, private college with a broad range of programs, Adams has a strong but not elite reputation among art schools nationally. It is a private institution with a long history that has sought to remain current by staying in touch with media industries, key sources of employment in its region. These interviews are part of a larger study of career preparation in creative fields, for which I also conducted interviews with current Adams College students and faculty. The alumni interviewees featured in this article are in the early and middle stages of their careers, having graduated with a B.F.A. three to fourteen years prior to the time of interview; the average time since graduation is eight years. The analysis presented here focuses on the earliest phase of these careers, the first five years after college graduation. I recruited interviewees through emails sent to alumni in targeted graduation years through the college's alumni office; potential interviewees then contacted me by email. Subsequent peer referrals led to some interviewees being recruited through snowball sampling.

The study's alumni interview sample has a distinctive demographic profile, in that it consists of graduates of an unusually diverse, urban art school. Asian Americans (n = 15; 27%) are overrepresented in relation to the U.S. as a whole, while African Americans are underrepresented (n = 1; 2%). The remainder of the interviewees are white (n = 27; 49%), Latino (n = 6; 11%), Native American (n = 1; 2%), or identify with mixed racial-ethnic ancestry (n = 5; 9%). In terms of gender, 29 (53%) of the interviewees are men, and

26 (47%) are women. Most interviewees are in the late twenties to mid-thirties in age, a typical range for alumni who have been out of school for this amount of time. A minority of interviewees (n = 8; 13%) are older, having worked professionally or received training in another field before attending Adams. The college is distinctive among art schools in that it attracts a disproportionate number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, offering more generous financial aid packages than other art schools in the region. The demographic profile of my interviewees reflects this approach, providing greater-than-expected diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.[1]

All interviews were conducted in 2012 and 2013, in cafes, interviewees' homes or workplaces, or via Skype. They ranged from one to two hours in duration. Interviews included a detailed work history, structured questions about education and other forms of training, and personal background. Discussion of these topics led to more open-ended exchanges related to the multiple, shifting meanings of work. I join Lamont and Swidler (2014: 157) in carrying out an "open-ended and pragmatic approach to interviewing, one where we aim to collect data not only, or primarily, about behavior, but also about representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals, as well as emotional states." The study was designed to document the subjective process of professionalization in uncertain circumstances. Rather than focusing on one occupation or work roles in a particular industry, detailed work histories "follow" interviewees across labor market boundaries. In this regard my approach is novel. Other studies use work histories to study career trajectories in the aggregate, or to track workers' movements within a particular firm, occupation, or field (e.g., Burchell, 1993; Stovel et al., 1996; Paterson, 2001; Damarin, 2006).

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, with all identifying information removed and pseudonyms assigned. I conducted two waves of coding and analysis of interview transcripts using Atlas.ti. The first wave organized sections of text into themes (e.g., creativity-present level, creativity-limitations); the second consisted of recoding certain targeted theme sections using substantive codes that emerged inductively from the data (e.g., affective engagement, genre conventions). Finally, analysis continued in the preparation of a series of memos that synthesized these codes into the specific topics presented in this paper. This process enabled me to synthesize a large amount of work history and other interview data in a primarily inductive fashion. I adopted terms from Nippert-Eng's (1996a, Nippert-Eng, 1996b) study of boundary work in a later stage of analysis, finding in it a useful model of classification in work experience. My analysis here focuses on interviewees' accounts of their working lives rather than seeking to explain their self-reported work patterns or career trajectories.

The interviewees fall into two occupational groups. *Graphic designers* (29 of 55 interviewees; 56%) specialize in print or web applications, including logos, signage, and promotional materials for small business and corporations. Many also specialize in designing mobile applications or web-based user interface platforms. These are creative-services professionals who work across industries and economic sectors; for example, interviewees have worked in toy manufacturing, beauty products marketing, online auto parts retailing, and a public-sector transportation agency. The more than 200,000 graphic designers in the U.S. earn an average annual income of around $50,000, although those living in coastal and metropolitan areas tend to earn higher wages (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015a). *Digital media artists* (20 of 55 interviewees; 36%) include 2D and 3D animators, broadcast graphic artists, video game designers, and visual effects artists. These are primarily technical craftspeople concentrated in media fields, especially the advertising and entertainment industries. This is a smaller and more lucrative occupation, with more than 30,000 "multimedia artists and animators" in the U.S. earning around $70,000 per year on average (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015b). I also include the six interviewees (11%) who had left creative work by the time of the interview.[2] Their early experience within—and transitions away from—these occupations provides complementary data on career flexibility, uncertainty, and identification.

4. Stability and change: Early careers in design and media

Analysis of the detailed work histories I collected from all interviewees demonstrates high levels of mobility across job roles and industries and marked commitment to particular jobs. Looking only at the first five years of their careers after college graduation, my interviewees experience dramatic transitions in work roles and identities. Forty (73%) of the 55 interviewees changed employment arrangements at least once in the first five years of work, such as moving from freelance to full-time employment. Twenty-four (44%) changed the primary application of their skills—such as a graphic designer becoming specialized in packaging design—and twelve of these (22% of the total) changed occupations altogether. Another nineteen (35%) made at least one transition from one industry or economic sector to another, such as a job sequence from transit agency to apparel manufacturer. Despite these disorienting transitions, there is also evidence of commitment to specific jobs: 29 (55%) of those who remained in creative work for five years or more worked in at least one full-time job or long-term contract for a period of two years or more during this early period. The co-presence of mobility and commitment suggests that when they find a suitable job, young creatives are eager to stay put.

A second pattern I observed in my interviewees' work histories is that the disorienting transitions they experience do not seem to be preventing these young creatives from establishing themselves in their fields. Five years after graduating from art school, the majority of interviewees had found a modest level of success, either stably employed in a creative occupation (n = 17; 31%), advancing steadily in their fields (n = 18; 33%), or having already reached highly coveted roles directing creative projects (n = 5; 9%). At the same time, a significant minority of interviewees (n = 13; 24%) struggled to find a secure footing in their new careers,

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[1] The unusual demographic make-up of Adams College—in relation to private art schools generally—and of my interview sample opens doors to novel insights into social inequality and mobility in commercial arts fields. I do not report on these important issues in this paper, however, as I was unable to detect a clear pattern in the interviewees' use of boundary work in relation to their multiple and overlapping forms of social diversity.

[2] After five years of work, only two of the 55 (4%) had left creative work altogether.

Table 1

Forms of boundary work and associated practices among early-career design and media professionals (n = 55)

Form of boundary work	Work experience	Narrative strategy	Cited example
Segmentation	Side projects	Day job is routine, side project is engaging	Video game designer posting online tutorials in his own time
	Freelance exploration	Career phases categorized as either meaningful or lucrative	Graphic designer shifting between freelance projects and a long-term contract
	Strategic alternation	Taking advantage of the variation in clients' demands	Freelance graphic designer seeking quick, easy projects
Integration	Corporate management	Business logic strengthens creative engagement	Creative director, beauty products company
	Entrepreneurship	Autonomy means setting one's own constraints	Founder, video game studio
	Job seekers	Work can have both instrumental and expressive qualities	Unemployed web video producer

experiencing either long-term unemployment or underemployment in this period. Interestingly, I find no clear pattern in the relationship between the frequency of job changes and career advancement. This suggests that the ability to navigate uncertain conditions allows most of these young creatives to cross labor market boundaries without necessarily becoming insecure in the ways commonly associated with precarious work (Kalleberg, 2009).

5. Boundary work in creative careers

Emerging creative professionals navigate through different work roles and environments by evaluating the characteristics of their work in relation to their emerging identities and priorities. To study this complex process systematically, I adopt Nippert-Eng's (1996a, 1996b) conceptualization of boundary work, the practical effort to categorize life's spatial and temporal zones. Through this process, workers draw upon shared definitions of the value of work to bring order and a sense of progress to careers marked by unsettling transitions. The flexible nature of a shared vocabulary of creativity allows this core concept to provide rhetorical justification for a wide range of work experiences. Interviewees who follow a *segmented* approach actively reconstitute the boundary between artistry and commerce by distinguishing routine, commercially motivated aspects of their work from those they find creatively engaging and meaningful. Second, those who follow an *integrated* approach break down the symbolic boundary between artistry and commerce, finding both to be valuable and motivating. Neither approach prescribes a certain course of action, as cited examples of segmentation and integration cover a range of work practices (see Table 1, below, for a summary of the boundary work examples illustrated in this article). In general, segmentation explains the combination of more than one work role either concurrently or sequentially,[3] whereas integration justifies focusing

one's efforts into a single role that draws upon both artistic and commercial logics. In either case, boundary work is a narrative strategy that creative workers use to make sense of confusing situations, justify preferences, and assert priorities.

5.1. Segmentation: Rearticulating the boundary between art and commerce

Creative professionals associate the meaning of work with two types of quality: the quality of the work experience itself and the quality of the products that result from the work. Both are subject to aesthetic evaluations (Fine, 1992: 1292). The predominant use of the term *creative* as it applies to my interviewees' work experiences is a positive feeling of engagement with a project. Cindy (graphic designer) describes the feeling of working with a high level of energy, seemingly without effort: "You tap into this—we used to call it the zone. But it's like your creative sweet spot, and then you can just keep on going and it feels very organic." In Cindy's account, work that is creative simply feels good; it calls upon one's skills, which are intensively applied, and no longer feels like work. Cindy contrasts working in what she calls "the zone" with the more common experience of carrying out marching orders. "Design is extremely organic," she says, "unless you're in a company where there's all the restrictions there, or all the work has already been predetermined. Then it feels a little bit like just picking and choosing, picking and choosing." Creative professionals learn early on in their careers that establishing the look and feel of a complex project is done by those in leadership roles; lower-ranking technical and artistic staff are left to implement these plans using their skills and a trained eye.

The segmented form of boundary work involves separating tasks that are creatively engaging from those that are not, a rhetorical effort to bring order and assert worth in working lives that feel out of balance. Those who work primarily in full-time jobs in the initial phase of their careers—25 of the 55 interviewees (45%)—often express frustration with their work and seek creative engagement in side projects that may be paid or unpaid. For example, freelance work provides a welcome contrast for some full-time workers whose day jobs have become unfulfilling. Denise (graphic designer) works full time as a senior designer at a toy company, but takes on freelance projects in her own time. She mentions wedding invitations and event materials for a non-profit animal shelter as recent examples that provide her with a feeling of engagement that is missing from her day job. Denise explains by first describing

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[3] My thanks go to the *Poetics* reviewer who observed this pattern.

her full-time work:

> You're kind of always under someone's thumb. After a few years, you feel like you have zero creativity. You just come in every day and you just do what you know how to do. And nothing changes. So then you try and find other things. Like, everybody does freelancing. Because you get a little bit more creativity. I have to do freelance or else I'll lose my mind.

"Creativity" in this sense refers to the freedom to call the shots, to first plan and then implement projects according to one's own standards. Not only are these side projects personally meaningful for Denise, but they allow her to direct her own work process. Like Denise, Tim (digital media artist) expresses his frustration with working under a supervisor whose aesthetic judgment differs from his. "But I guess that's what personal projects are for," Tim reasons, "So you can do everything start to finish the way that you want." To this end, Tim develops free, online curriculum for novices in video game design, a task that allows him to use his imagination and expertise by creating entire game worlds from scratch. Tim and Denise use boundary work to justify time-consuming side projects as a way to remain engaged with their work and create goods that meet their own standards of quality. This is one rhetorical strategy that creative workers use to reinforce the boundary between artistry and commerce, allowing them to uphold artistic identities while benefiting from the stability of less rewarding full-time jobs.

A second form of segmentation is freelance exploration, the creation of an autobiographical work history narrative that characterizes projects in ways that rearticulate the art-commerce divide. Alongside the full-time workers, above, 19 of the 55 interviewees[4] (35%) work primarily as freelancers or contractors during their early careers. Just as freelance graphic designers negotiate aesthetic control on a project-by-project basis (Osnowitz, 2010), they evaluate the level of creative engagement they find in certain projects and environments. For example, Julie (graphic designer) looks back on her early career by balancing the advantages of jobs that are rewarding and those that pay well. Early on, she recognized that doing a series of short-term freelance projects provided the opportunity for exploration:

> I was kind of lucky that my first freelance project was with a real estate developer who was about affordable housing... So it was really nice working with them, and after that I kind of felt like, if I pick and choose my clients then I'm doing projects that I like. And also I can pick and choose something that gives me a greater sense of creativity, and also [a] greater sense of control.

Julie learned that freelance gigs could be personally meaningful and that some projects provide more autonomy than others. However, the freedom to choose meaningful, engaging work often does not translate into income security. After several years of freelance work, Julie was having trouble making ends meet and took a one-year contract with an advertising firm. Although it was more lucrative, she faced a new tension in this job: compromised quality. "I was doing really crappy work," Julie says, "but the money was really nice." At the contract's end, Julie returned to freelancing, reasoning: "I, A, am willing to make a little bit less money and, B, be a little bit more satisfied creatively." She indicates that this strategy has paid off in terms of returning to more engaging work: "This past year I really tried to take on things where, you know, they're creative and… not just for the paycheck." In constructing her work history, Julie applies a sequential approach to segmentation, evaluating each period by opposing work's instrumental and expressive rewards. She draws upon, and reestablishes, a boundary between creative work's conflicting dimensions.

A third form of segmented boundary work is strategic alternation between projects with different features. As Julie's example shows, freelancers who experience frequent transitions between projects face heightened uncertainty but may also have the freedom to seek out projects with desired qualities. Thus, another way to reinforce the boundary between art and commerce is to alternate strategically between projects categorized as engaging or routine. Diana (graphic designer) prefers to work on projects that are creatively engaging, but often finds herself pursuing those that are simpler—and more lucrative—in the short term. She explains:

> It all comes down to the client. Because sometimes they're very close-minded, even if I tell them, "Look, I can do something that makes you stand apart or makes it better," they're like, "No, no, no." They're in a safe zone. And they want something a little standard and cliché… When my bank account's not as like healthy as it should be, I will really go after those clients and just be like, "I can do this for you quick. Do you need a new postcard this month? Do you need a new piece?" And I know what they want, so it's easy to execute.

Whereas many creative freelancers are wary of clients who are "in a safe zone" and whose projects do not require imaginative labor, Diana sees this as an opportunity to support her business by turning around a low-stakes project quickly. Her use of segmentation is pragmatic in that it justifies an approach that extends her career by making it more sustainable. This is a short-term sacrifice in both engagement and quality that enables Diana to pursue more creative projects later on.

These accounts demonstrate that some creative professionals feel the need to separate their working lives into distinct experiential zones and that they use boundary work to separate tasks that feel engaging from those that are more constrained. Each of these examples involves crafting a narrative to explain how to remain artistically expressive despite the imposition of market-based constraints on one's work. Denise and Tim—who work at a toy company and a video game studio, respectively—contradict the often-noted appeal of creative workplaces (Florida, 2004; Neff et al., 2005; Ross, 2003) by expressing frustrations with jobs that deprive them of the feeling of engagement they expected to find in their work. Whereas taking side projects involves combining distinct forms

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[4] The remainder consists of those who work primarily as self-employed business owners (9%), part-time workers (5%), or are unemployed (including students, 5%). The self-employed include owners of small consulting firms or other creative businesses, such as retail shops or galleries. I distinguish consultants from freelancers—who are also technically self-employed—to indicate their distinct legal status, level of involvement with project management, and differences in the size and complexity of projects.

of work concurrently, those who work primarily as freelancers do so sequentially. Julie applies a form of boundary work I call freelance exploration, crafting a work history narrative that contrasts the more and less meaningful periods of her career. Business-savvy freelancers like Diana also place sequential projects into separate categories: those that are more imaginative and resource-intensive, versus those that are more constrained but easier to implement. Her form of segmentation, strategic alternation, is not driven by a desire for her work to be meaningful but a pragmatic distribution of time and other resources. Each of these accounts illustrates how creative workers draw upon the tension between artistry and commerce as a cultural resource that is used to justify personalized approaches to career navigation.

5.2. Integration: Embracing constraint

Frustration over the constraints that clients and managers place on their work is a common feature of these interviews, as in the sociological literature on artistic labor. However, this feeling is not universal. My interviewees includes several creative professionals who find that constraints foster a good working experience and lead to better quality products. For example, Mike (graphic designer) says the frameworks imposed by clients engage his level of focus and energy in a positive way, such that better work results from within set guidelines. He explains:

When you're given the blank page… your mind sort of wanders to your conventional, safe designs. And you sort of crank out stuff that is never really outstanding. But when there's limitations, you'll always surprise yourself with what you can do with those limitations. And you create stuff you might not have normally thought of.

Thus for Mike, working under constraints has a justification according to an artistic logic, cultivating imagination and facilitating high quality. Paradoxically, the lack of creative autonomy allows him to do better work because it forces him out of his comfort zone, overcoming the force of habit.

The second form of boundary work, integration, applies Mike's embrace of creative constraints to explanations and justifications of work experiences, using narrative strategies that equate work's artistic and commercial logics. Integration represents the collapsing of symbolic boundary between aesthetic quality and routinized production. It is an important construct for self-identified artists who work as corporate managers, who find that the merger of artistic and commercial motivations is a counterintuitive phenomenon that requires explanation. For example, Stella (graphic designer) describes a transitional moment:

At some point in my career, I really wanted to quit this whole thing. I could not deal with people looking at my labor of love, basically… Cutting it, dissecting it, invalidating… But then something told me, I am not a fine artist. This is communication art, this is graphic design. And I realized that this line of business solely exists because there is a client telling you what the hell they don't like… So I start embracing the invalidation and I really start actually loving what [the] business requirements are. Knowing the business, what's the reasoning behind [it], who are the customers… Those things actually [make] you a [more] efficient and smarter creative person.

While Stella initially found the constraints put on her work by supervisors to be emotionally challenging, she learned to embrace them. Her account explains her transition from an early career marked by frustration to later leadership positions in beauty products and toy companies. Stella is one of the few interviewees (four of 55; 7%) who find that working as a corporate manager offers a strategic resolution to the difficult balance between engagement and constraint that is a dominant theme in narratives of creative work. Her account collapses the boundary between artistry and commerce to justify her elevated role in complex, bureaucratic production processes.

Several other interviewees (five of 55; 9%) use a similar form boundary work to justify a different job role, becoming entrepreneurs. Like corporate managers, entrepreneurs merge the opposing motivations of their work, drawing meaning and self-direction from artistic and commercial logics. For example, Andrew (digital media artist) is in the process of establishing an independent video game studio where he will act as co-owner and creative director. He contrasts the innovative projects he wants to create with those of mass-market game developers. "It's not really doing first-person shooter games where you shoot aliens, stuff you've seen a million times," he says, but instead, "trying to take games someplace new." Yet Andrew does not seek unlimited creative autonomy; he still works within genre conventions, technological constraints, and industry standards. As a business owner and manager, Andrew seeks to set the parameters that will constrain his own work and shape the products that his firm creates. Whereas Stella uses integration to justify her promotion into corporate management, Andrew does so to explain his commitment to leading a commercial enterprise dedicated to creating aesthetically innovative products. Both assert that they are still artists despite the commercial nature of their work.

Integration is also an approach adopted by some interviewees who are struggling to find a foothold in competitive fields. For creative professionals who are unemployed,[5] adapting to the goals of firms offers a pragmatic way to maximize employability (Menger, 2006; Smith, 2010). For example, Jacob (digital media artist) seeks full-time commercial work that is also creatively engaging, but has been unable to do so consistently during his eight-year career. He was recently laid off from an ideal job as producer for an online media channel targeting video game fans. Jacob explains the predicament of a skilled specialist in new and

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[5] Long-term unemployment or under-employment is a common feature of my interviewees' early work histories. Eight (15%) experienced six or more months of financial hardship due to underwork during the first five years of their careers. This includes several who took sporadic freelance jobs during slow periods, but excludes those who chose not to work while enrolled in school or other training programs.

shifting terrain: "My realm of experience has gone to web video, YouTube, search [engine optimization]—I'm just of that culture now. It's a new production space [and] it's rare to have as much experience as I do… It's been a little rough." No purist, Jacob's talk of work has a producer's attention to audience metrics, such as when he refers to a website's young, male target audience as "the magic demographic." But he also describes his work in the glowing terms of creative engagement: the firm that laid him off was "awesome" and provided a "super-creative, fun environment." As a job seeker, Jacob desires fun, engaging work that is also driven by the commercial logic of media production. Jacob collapses the boundary between creative engagement and business imperatives in order to justify a job search that is broad and flexible.

The accounts in this section of findings show several ways in which emerging professionals integrate the competing motivations of creative work, embracing work roles that combine artistic and commercial functions. In contrast to those in the first section of findings, these accounts feature a dismantling of the symbolic boundary between artistry and commerce that is a ubiquitous feature of artistic labor. Instead of justifying the separation of work's artistic and commercial dimensions in concurrent or sequential arrangements of projects, integrators use boundary work to justify combining these functions in a single job role. Interestingly, the interviewees featured in this section are among the most and least successful I spoke to.[6] I do not argue that adopting the integrated form of boundary work facilitates career growth or enables creative professionals to take on these kinds of leadership roles. Rather, interviewees use integration to justify their motivation to lead commercial enterprises while upholding aesthetic standards. Those who struggle in their careers may also adopt an integrated approach to boundary work, betting that balancing the competing motivations of commercial art work will maximize their employability in unpredictable economic circumstances.

6. Conclusion

This article addresses empirical and conceptual gaps in the sociology of cultural production using data drawn from in-depth work history interviews with graphic designers and digital media artists. The first section of findings documents the disorienting changes that these creative workers experience in the early phase of their careers: they switch skillsets, move across industries, and transfer into new employment arrangements. The second and main set of findings applies a conceptualization of boundary work developed by Nippert-Eng (1996a, 1996b) to show how creative workers justify different arrangements of working lives within these two occupational clusters. The boundary work comes in two varieties, both of which are used to explain and justify different courses of action. Segmentation refers to strategies that rebuild the boundary between work's artistic and commercial dimensions. Examples include: using additional projects to inject creative engagement into working lives dominated by a routine full-time job; recounting the periods of a freelance career as an alternation between expressive and instrumental rewards; and planning to seek out projects that are less engaging to support a freelance career in the long term. The second form of boundary work is integration, in which the boundary between artistry and commerce dissolves. Workers apply this approach to explain how both sets of motivations can be meaningful and to justify their roles as corporate managers and entrepreneurs who also identify as artists. Job seekers also seek to break down the art-commerce boundary in order to maximize their chances of finding work in unstable media industries.

This study brings a novel empirical focus on early careers that involve frequent and often unexpected transitions. As a result, it addresses the need for research into flexible, improvisational creative work and the early period of careers when workers are adapting to such conditions. When they move into new job roles and environments, creative professionals—like all workers—confront new processes and conventions. Thus, each transition between jobs also marks a cultural transition that demands modifications in how one understands one's contribution and the value of one's work. Sociologists rightfully depict creative work as risky, but even those who are building stable careers often find themselves unsure about how to navigate labor markets when the nature and value of their contribution shifts. By examining how they bring order to disorienting careers, I show some of the ways in which early-career creative professionals adapt to job combinations and sequences and how they balance commitments to business logics and artistic identities.

This article's theoretical contribution is to develop a concept that helps sociologists understand the experience of work in early careers and any phase characterized by combinations of disparate economic activities. Examples throughout the article build the case for a conception of boundary work as a set of rhetorical strategies through which people make sense of and orient themselves to their working conditions. While I believe the concept may prove useful to interpreting other economic domains, I am responding here to a gap in the literature on cultural production, where the tendency to study work that is contained within well-institutionalized fields results in an impoverished understanding of practices that do not fit this pattern. Particularly in the early period of their careers, creative workers are exploring; but research on artistic labor suggests that this exploration becomes a lifelong process for those who routinely combine multiple kinds of cross-sector work. Whether undertaken by choice or necessity, transitions introduce uncertainty into the working lives of those who experience them. The more distant a new work role or environment is from the ones preceding it, the more work the person has to do to manage the transition and contribute meaningfully in the new role (Strauss, 1997). Sociologists in general have not taken up calls (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Arthur et al., 1989; Hall, 2002) to understand the micro-level phenomena involved in new, post-industrial career patterns. The concept of boundary work that I develop here provides a useful tool for interpreting early careers and boundary-spanning work practices, both within creative fields and beyond.

One of the implications of these findings is to question the primary role that cultural production scholars have historically assigned to occupations as anchors of working identities. Drawing on conventional wisdom, I designed this study intending to

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[6] I use a simple metric of occupational status to measure career success, as indicated by self-reported job title. A generic sequence of advancement in commercial art fields would be: junior artist, senior artist, art director, creative director. Five of my interviewees were already creative directors after only five years of work; four reached this stage as entrepreneurs, one as a manager.

compare the experiences of workers in two differently structured occupational fields. Yet my interviewees' tendency to move across labor market boundaries renders occupational identity a problematic construct for these workers. The graphic designers and digital media artists included in this study experience a similar range of work roles and early career transitions, and members of both groups use strategies of integration and segmentation to orient themselves to these conditions. While they do not share a single occupational identity—nor a broader identification with commercial art—these young professionals apply similar rhetorical strategies that draw upon shared understandings of work's risks and rewards. This finding stands in contrast to Faulkner's (1983) focus on occupational scripts as a core meaning-making tool, while also building upon Fine's (1992, 1996b) and Nippert-Eng's (1996a, 1996b) observation that occupants of different work roles articulate and enact the tensions of their work differently.

There is an ongoing debate in the sociology of work about the implications of more flexible work structures, already a common feature in fields of cultural production. As Damarin (2006): 434) notes: "The growth of flexible work organizations appears to have contradictory implications for the future of the occupational form"; she suggests the term "modular occupations" for workers' loose attachments amid "functionally flexible" work structures (2006: 451-2). This line of questioning suggests the utility of continued dialog among scholars of cultural production and of work and occupations. I argue that the occupation serves as a reference point rather than a stable place of belonging for many contemporary workers in careers that take them across traditional labor market boundaries. I join Barley and Kunda (2004) in proposing a typology based on the production roles and associated identifications found among skilled workers within a loosely affiliated community of practice (Wenger, 1998). But unlike Barley and Kunda's study of "itinerant professionals" in high-tech work, any typology of creative workers must allow for movement between different kinds of work, rooting the categorical difference to identification strategies rather than institutionalized work roles.

There are two alternative explanations for the lack of coherence in my interviewees' occupational identities: their early career stage and the nature of these particular occupations. It is possible that more established professionals in the same fields would develop stronger connections to peers and professional institutions that would bolster their identities as either graphic designers or digital media artists. Faulkner (1983) suggests that identity is pegged to advancement, accomplished gradually over time. Although the nature and size of my interview sample do not allow me to make a conclusive argument, my data do not support this explanation. I do not observe consistent differences in self-identification by interviewees in the later stages of their careers—ten years or more, comprising 11 of the 55 interviewees (20%)—in comparison to the others. Instead, my interviewees tend to use conventional terms for the kind of work they are currently doing, such as "character modeler" in video game parlance, or simply "designer" for web design at a tech startup. This level of specificity leads me to suspect that a second explanation is also at play: the two occupational fields I study both feature weak occupational identities relative to other kinds of creative work. Occupations vary in their level of institutionalization and their ability to anchor members' identities. Future research should continue to explore how boundary-spanning work experiences affect worker self-identifications.

I close the article with two disclaimers. First, I do not claim to have identified a causal process. The stance that a worker takes toward the art-commerce boundary does not determine her actions; rather, I interpret my interviewees' accounts as efforts to bring order to the disorienting changes that most experience in the early phase of creative careers. One of the pitfalls of analyses of interview data is to frame personal accounts of social experience as causing or motivating action, rather than justifying or explaining it. Given the complexities of causality in social life, Lamont and Swidler argue for the role of interview studies in probing "categorization systems, where people live imaginatively" and the resources upon which they rely to understand themselves as "good, valuable, worthwhile people" (2014: 159). Career progression is subject to opportunity structures and resource flows that are beyond individuals' control. In staking claims and asserting priorities, creative workers apply conventional rhetorical positions to bring order to unpredictable circumstances and assert identities as skillful participants in commercial production processes.

Second, the creative professionals I interviewed are relatively successful, even as they undergo frequent and unpredictable changes in their early careers. While they experience periods of economic insecurity—including instances of unpaid, exploitative labor that are common in creative work—most of these graphic designers' and digital media artists' careers are stable or thriving. Thus, their success stands in contrast to research that frames all artists as precarious workers. Part of the discrepancy is due to this study's sampling strategy, as my interviewees are exceptionally well-positioned to join creative roles in commercial ventures. They received college-level training in a coastal metropolitan area that is home to many of the industries that make use of their work and where creative workers' incomes are relatively high. Their ability to weather dramatic shifts in work roles indicates that these creatives—like many other skilled workers and professionals—are shielded from the most harmful effects of economic uncertainty. Future research should look more closely at the conditions under which ordinary creative workers find security, as well as the forms of training and professionalization that enable them to weather uncertainty successfully.

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Matthew S. Rowe is postdoctoral researcher in Environmental Design at the University of Colorado Boulder. His dissertation is a qualitative study of identity mobilization in the training and careers of commercial artists. His work has appeared in *Sociological Perspectives* and *Culture, Health & Sexuality*.