

Artists' fees in Switzerland

Artists live in precarious financial circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this fact to the attention of a broader audience and thus also politicians, who have not always been known for their culture-friendly attitudes. Artists were the first to suffer acute hardship as a result of the lockdown and the accompanying de facto occupational ban. Accordingly, the Suisseculture Sociale association was very quickly tasked with organizing emergency aid for professionals in the cultural sector in March 2020. Thanks to this organization, approximately 1,650 people have received support to date – from the beginning of the crisis until today where necessary. The relatively low number of recipients shows that most artists have been able to make ends meet without having to claim emergency aid thanks to other support measures, such as compensation for loss of income and cancellation fees.

Income situation of people engaged in the Swiss cultural sector

At the beginning of 2021, Suisseculture Sociale, together with the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, commissioned a study to examine the income situation and the status of retirement provisions for people working in the cultural sector. Although the questionnaires did not focus on the impact of the pandemic, but were intended to survey the financial situation independently of it, it likely influenced the responses of those working in the cultural sector. The shocking result of the evaluation was that the financial situation of artists has worsened significantly in the past five years since the last study on the topic. While 50% of the respondents earned 40,000 Swiss francs or less per year back then, the figure today is 60%. In Switzerland, this amount corresponds roughly to the subsistence level. If nothing else, the obvious plight of cultural workers has provoked action on the part of some parliamentarians, who are now actively advocating for culture and also want to achieve longer-term improvements in cultural funding and social security. And although many millions had already flowed into the various support measures for the cultural sector in the autumn of 2020, the Swiss parliament approved the Message on Culture for 2021–2024 without opposition, even with some increases. This message specifies the financial resources that will be used to support the individual cultural industries.

For the first time, it states that artists are entitled to appropriate fees for their services and that the federal government will only support projects that include such fees and ensure that they are indeed paid.

Guideline – Fees for artists

Another positive innovation is a working group within the "National Cultural Dialogue", in which representatives of the Federal Office of Culture, Pro Helvetia and the cantonal and municipal cultural offices discuss topics related to the promotion of culture. The working group is concerned with remuneration for the services of cultural workers in the various industries and aims to make recommendations to the cultural funding organizations on how such remuneration should be handled. After some insistence, the relevant cultural associations have recently also been consulted.

The Message on Culture for the 2021–2024 period states that the recommended fees proposed by the professional associations for cultural funding should be authoritative.

Visarte, the professional association for visual arts in Switzerland, published its first "Leitlinie – Vergütung von Leistungen bildender Künstlerinnen und Künstler" ("Guideline – Remuneration of Visual Artists' Services") brochure in 2016. A new edition, "Leitlinie – Honorare für Künstler*innen" ("Guideline – fees for Artists") was issued in 2020. The document explicitly addressed creatives and not exhibition institutions. The aim is not to dictate to the latter the specific fees they should pay, but to provide artists with a tool for their own fee negotiations. The guideline serves as a recommendation and offers guidance for agreements between exhibition organizers and professional visual artists.

In the run-up to the publication of the new guideline, discussions were held in larger groups with representatives of museums, art galleries and independent art spaces as well as Pro Helvetia to allow the various perspectives to be discussed and, if possible, to achieve a rapprochement. During this process, a shift in attitude could be observed on the part of the exhibition institutions. Fees for exhibiting artists were no longer fundamentally unthinkable from the outset but were now almost a matter of course in certain situations. Nevertheless, the discrepancies between the various institutions are great. While some actively advocate for fair remuneration of artistic performances and pay correspondingly generous fees, others still focus mainly on the services they provide as museums in connection with an exhibition, holding the view that the additional remuneration of artistic work is unnecessary and that demanding it is downright indecent.

Clearly then, a greater awareness of the need for fair remuneration of artists has been attained in recent years, but the goal – its implicitness – still has not been achieved and will probably take a few more years to reach.

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