Small Utopias

*Poor Artists*, Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammed (aka The White Pube), (Particular Books)

*Tactics for the Tightrope: Creative Resilience for Creative Communities*, Mark Robinson (Future Arts Centres)

*Poor Artists* is a rambling, digressionary, funny, ridiculous, opinionated and sometimes fictional engagement which explores the authors' belief that 'working as a professional artist is an unattainable luxury' but goes on to question 'why so many artists try anyway'? Part of the book (the fiction) follows the activities and financial success of Quest Talukdar, a non-existent artist and their commercial work invented by a real artist, who becomes despondent about the work she makes that is selling but doesn't feel like part of any genuine artistic practice.

Intertwined throughout the 300 pages are lots of encounters with other artists, gallery owners, art and cultural critics, movers and shakers, wide boys, financiers, art students, friends and those more concerned with fashion, fame and bank balances than the art itself. Many of these characters, according to the back cover, speak using 'anonymised interviews with real people', often within scenes set within actual galleries and art events, such as the Venice Biennale.

It's an entertaining read, and gets better as the book goes on, although in the end I think it fails to note that the idea of the self-expressive artist is a fairly recent one and that before that artists were craftspeople and that in more recent times those who have worked as a professional artist are likely to have included running workshops, selling prints and editions of work, and lecturing or teaching art as part of their practice. Although the lure of big money for art still exists, it feels like the market & fashion end of things, something which most if not all fields within the arts have, is always in sharp contrast to the realities of life further down the foodchain.

As a poet I've known for decades that writing has cultural value but little commercial value. Accepting that and supporting myself since the 1980s, running writing workshops, giving readings, selling books, writing reviews and other journalism, along with successfully applying for grants and later teaching creative writing to university students, seems a perfectly reasonable way to survive within the current capitalist system we seem to be trapped within. The music industry is still coming to terms with something similar, the result of a lot of music becoming digital and available through the ether, its audience mostly now disinterested in owning 'musical product'. Those who have survived are either so big they make money touring and – if they own the rights on merch, or have become genuinely indie cottage industries, recording, distributing and managing themselves.

So yes, the art world is bizarre and nasty, corrupt and basically a business, but no more so than any other business that deal in making money. The thing is artists don't have to engage with that, they can work outside it, they can challenge it, circumnavigate it, subvert it, or try and ignore it. The White Pube knows this, because their book and a lot of their previous writing challenges and engages with the problems it discusses, but I feel there's a lot of time spend in *Poor Artists* moaning about how unfair it is that artists are poor and ignored by the established art world. Boo hoo. Get over it and devise methods of resistance and change.

In Andy Merrifield's book about John Berger, in Reaktion's Critical Lives series, which I have just read, Merrifield paraphrases Berger, stating that 'commodification is real enough, but it has not overwhelmed everything, can never overwhelm everything'. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, especially when the news reports million-dollar sales and the queues for blockbuster exhibitions stretch round the block and are sold out for months ahead, but art is, indeed the arts plural are, happening elsewhere, both despite and because of this.

Mark Robinson has been at the heart of both establishment and alternative arts scenes. He founded the poetry magazine *Scratch* and its associated publishing imprint back in the 1980s, became a vegetarian chef and then moved into arts management in the form of the Arts Council, Northern Arts, Cleveland Arts and The Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Durham, before setting up Thinking Practice, which coaches, advises and facilitates across the cultural sector.

Robinson is a pragmatic and encouraging writer, who has worked for access, fair pay, equality, dignity, participation and support across the creative sector. His years of working within the system have stood him good stead to write this book, a measured, engaging and challenging set of discussions and observations aimed at facilitating good practice in running arts 'businesses' (which doesn't mean establishment ones or big ones). Robinson is mostly concerned with communities, creative communities, built to help their constituents and built to last. If occasionally there are buzzwords bandied about here – such as empathy, trust and connection – they become practical terms when discussed in the main text.

Everything is up for question, debate and change. Stability does not mean stale, it means a kind of security, be that a studio within a studio block, a radical publisher finding or creating their readers, perhaps simply formally grouping together for financial or cultural survival. Robinson knows failures happen but turns even that possibility in to a chance to reflect, reconsider and recover; he also knows that communities consist of individuals, and challenges us to make individual, communal and creative change.   
  
These two books will appeal to different types of readers, to those who think intuitively or rationally, those who are practical or idealistic, yet both have much to offer everyone. The White Pube end their text by suggesting that 'Maybe it isn't about the whole world, or the art world, but about this place right now. Sheila's studio, mine. Our small utopia.' It's a good place to start, but utopia needs to be bigger than that, and Robinson's ideas might just help it happen.

Rupert Loydell (980 words)

*Tactics for the Tightrope* is available as a free download [here](https://futureartscentres.org.uk/resources/tactics-for-the-tightrope-creative-resilience-for-creative-communities-by-mark-robinson/).

There's an interesting 2021 interview with Mark Robinson at [*Creative United*](https://www.creativeunited.org.uk/interview-tactics-for-the-tightrope/).