

PAULINA ROJEK ADAMEK
University of the National Education Commission, Krakow

The Illustrator and His Agency: The Artist-Producer in the Light of Janet Wolff's Concept

Abstract: This article employs Janet Wolff's theory of the social production of art to investigate the creative agency of Polish illustrators. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with experienced practitioners, the study analyses how artists negotiate the persistent tension between aspirations for autonomy and the socio-economic realities of their profession. The findings reveal that illustration is not merely an individual pursuit but rather a collaborative practice, shaped by networks of clients, institutions, and audiences. This collaborative nature simultaneously supports creative expression and imposes significant constraints on artistic control. Importantly, the research demonstrates that while illustrators often achieve high levels of symbolic capital gaining recognition, prestige, and professional respect, this rarely translates into stable economic capital, thereby exposing the structural precarity that continues to characterize the field.

Keywords: illustration, artistic autonomy, Janet Wolff, creative agency, symbolic capital, collective creativity

Introduction

Janet Wolff (1981/1993, 1983/1993),¹ a researcher of art sociology, is not the first to reject the image of the artist as a person functioning in isolation from the surrounding reality. Someone who, solely through their genius and reliance on talent (described, among others, by Gołaszewska 1986; Osęka 1975), gains the title of artist and recognition in the art world. Similar to Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 2001), she considers the context in which the artist works and develops their artistic identity to be important. However, it seems that Wolff attaches greater importance to understanding the conditions and describing them on a micro scale, i.e., work in various artistic professions, than Bourdieu. His concept, as one of several undeniably fundamental to breaking with the traditional, mythical view of the artist-genius, focused more strongly on understanding the factors that shape one's position in the field of art and document the status of the artist than on the factors that determine creativity. In this text, we are primarily concerned with showing how broadly understood conditions influence creative work, the release of resources for the purpose of creating solutions and making creative decisions. To a lesser extent, we are interested in how the characteristics (properties) of the field and the capital possessed influence the

¹ Janet Wolff, born in the USA, professor at the University of Manchester. Bibliography: *The Social Production of Art* ((1981/1993), *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* (1983/1993), *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (1990), *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty* (2008).

position of the artist. It is therefore a more process-oriented than structural perspective. Adopting this assumption meant that Janet Wolff's concept proved most useful in studying agency (limitations and possibilities of work) in the profession of illustrator. The choice of this category of artists is not accidental. Being an illustrator means being between purely artistic work and design work. Although this difference may be subtle or even imperceptible to the layman, a persistent researcher in the field of art (fine arts, applied arts) will present many reasons to separate these professions. In a nutshell, it can be said that an artist creates unique works, from concept to completion, to convey an idea or provoke reflection. A designer, on the other hand, focuses on repeatable objects that, after the design stage, go to factories, responding to needs and solving problems, often making goods widely available. Art asks questions, design most often provides answers (Rojek-Adamek 2019: 53–56). The work of an illustrator resembles that of an intermediary between what is a purely autotelic experience (evoking an emotion) and what is more instrumental in nature (serving purposes such as marketing). Sometimes, however, illustrators are referred to as graphic designers, which is neither correct nor fully accepted. The importance of the topic can be seen in the number of discussions taking place on internet forums dedicated to design. As one participant says:

Illustration is the art of making images that work with something and add to it without needing direct attention and without distracting from the thing they illustrate. The other thing is the focus of the attention, and the illustration's role is to add personality and character without competing with that other thing. Graphic design is the art of making images that attract direct attention towards themselves and use attention for a specific, deliberate purpose. (...) Most illustrators are competent designers and most designers are competent illustrators. There is a lot of overlap between the two disciplines. ("What does it mean to be an illustrator?," n.d.)

The presented text is intended to achieve at least three goals. First, to introduce Janet Wolff's theoretical concept because, although it is well known, researchers do not often refer to her views, preferring instead the perspective of the aforementioned Bourdieu. Second, it will present the assumptions of the concept in the perspective of the empirical possibilities of studying creators in the social system. Thirdly, based on the results of interviews conducted by the author with renowned Polish illustrators, it will provide a better understanding of the perception of creative agency in a complex system of dependencies and relational conditions.

Literature Review

Janet Wolff's Approach to the Study of Artistic Practice

The sociological description of art and artistic work is a vast and complex field, with many different approaches and methods. However, in this particular context, the focus is on the factors that determine limitations and possibilities. In other words, the aim is to explore the influences on the artist's decisions and sense of agency. Although many artistic professions strongly emphasize the autonomy and independence of the individual, it is difficult to ignore the fact that art is created as a complex process of collective action. Moreover, Janet Wolff emphasizes that artistic activity encompasses not only the creative act itself, but also the

entire set of conditions that make it possible — from technical support, through institutions, to networks of relationships (Wolff 1993: 32–34). This is not an isolated view, but for the purposes of this study, her views on the conditions of art production set out in *The Social Production of Art* (1981/1993) will be crucial. In the field of sociology of art, there are at least a few researchers who, like Wolff, have drawn attention to the entire spectrum of circumstances in which the creative process takes place. As Arthur Danto (1964), George Dickie (1974), Howard S. Becker (1982), and Pierre Bourdieu (2001), the world of art is a system in which the artist functions in an environment of other actors, without whom their work could not fully exist. To capture the conditions of agency in the field of art, Wolff refers to concepts such as creativity, autonomy, and choice. The starting point for her reflections are the classical concepts of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, including, above all, the concept of social facts defined as “any mode of action, whether fixed or not, that exerts external compulsion on the individual” (Durkheim 1968: 38). The researcher then refers to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s theory of the social construction of reality (1983) to emphasize that social reality is produced and sustained by the interactions of individuals. Ultimately, she concludes that every human act — including creative acts — is conditioned in many ways, and its sources lie in social, psychological, and even neurological and chemical factors.

If human action is free and creative, this quality cannot consist in its somehow escaping from social (and other) determinants, for these apply universally. To put this another way, there is always a multiplicity of causes for anything which happens, including a human act. (...) Because this is a study of the social nature of artistic creativity, moreover, I shall not be interested in psychological or other determinants, but concentrate on the relationship of agency and social structure. (Wolff 1993: 22)

In this context, the author’s reference to Anthony Giddens’ (2003) concept of structural duality is particularly significant. It is based on the assumption that social structures are, both the result of human agency and a condition for its realization, and therefore not only limit the actions of individuals, but also enable them (Giddens 1976). Social structures such as language, institutions, the market, or the system of norms are dual in nature, i.e., they are both the result of collective human actions and the framework in which these actions develop. In this context, the independence of the creator does not consist in isolation from these structures, but in the ability to consciously and critically use their resources. Artistic autonomy is therefore manifested not in avoiding social conditions, but in creatively transforming them.

The specific issue of innovative (or ‘creative’ in this particular narrow sense) practice is not problematic, but can be understood as the practical outcome of a uniquely specific combination of structural determinants and conditions. That is, the originality is not a peculiar quality of the act, but a retrospective judgment on its product or form. (Wolff 1993: 24).

The researcher thus shifts the concept of creative freedom from the realm of absolute autonomy towards *relational agency*, i.e., the ability to act (choose) in a historically and socially determined context. What is more, not only production, but art itself is not autonomous. In order to have an impact on society, it must take into account conditions such as time, dominant ideologies, and the market. Otherwise, it will become incomprehensible: “The conditions of production are just as much determined by social, ideological, and broad

cultural structures as the conditions of consumption” (Wolff 1993: 94). In this sense, as Wolff emphasizes, the concept of cultural policy is not based on the notion of the culture producer as a “free” entity, because in both artistic production and consumption, specific conditions (boundaries) of structure are important. Therefore, she does not ignore the conditions of art reception, emphasizing the importance of the accessibility of culture, preparation, and education of the audience across the entire spectrum. The emphasis on the active role of the participant in artistic practices is certainly a point of convergence with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept. In his view, it is cultural capital (one of the key concepts describing an individual’s resources) that allows for an in-depth analysis of both aesthetic disposition and reception competence, which determine the way a work of art is perceived and evaluated (Bourdieu 2005: 68). Wolff, whose approach differs somewhat, devotes more attention to the analysis of social structure and social practices (e.g. conventions of style, ideology, censorship, but also the accessibility of culture in the context of marginalization or exclusion on the basis of gender) than to the importance of cognitive structures (dispositions shaped by habitus), which are evident in Bourdieu’s work. Nevertheless, both authors clearly emphasize the activity of the recipient.

The appreciation and evaluation of works of art, then, despite the possibility of adopting the distinctively aesthetic mode of attention, are ultimately inseparable from the non-aesthetic aspects of existence. This is not to claim that we judge works of art by political or moral standards; it may still be the case that there are specifically aesthetic criteria (and ones which may be trans-historical and trans-situational) employed in such a judgement. It is to claim that the way in which we apprehend the works in the first place is a function of our everyday extra-aesthetic existence. (Wolff 1981: 81)

As previously outlined, one of the most significant concepts in Wolff’s theory is that of collectivity. From the perspective of the issue under analysis, this is significant insofar as, according to her argument, artists in this system of dependencies function more as *producers* than as free, unrestrained creators. Presenting the reader with structurally formed institutions that support the work of artists of various specialties (the art education system, patronage and sponsorship, gallery owners, art dealers, critics, auction houses, museums, technical facilities, access to studios, and, last but not least, critics and reviewers) the author argues that collectivity has a broad dimension. Drawing on Howard Becker (1974), she explains that collectivity

refers to aspects of cultural production which do not feature in the immediate making of the work, but are necessary preconditions for it certain technological prerequisites (...) and particular aesthetic codes or genres. (...) Secondly, then, the notion of art as collective applies also to those arts which appear most ‘private’ and individual. Even writers need materials, need to be literate, benefit from acquaintance with some literary tradition and conventions (...), affected by both the book market and (possibly) literary critics (Wolff 1993: 32–33).

As an example, she points to the invention of printing (Eisenstein 1980), which changed not only technology but also intellectual and socio-cultural life in Europe. Printing influenced the way art and science were created, distributed, and received. Importantly, it enabled the widespread dissemination of ideas and, as a consequence, created new roles and institutions, such as academies, the community of critics, and the publishing market. The influence of the social and institutional context shaped both the way artists worked and the reception of their works. This is one of the reasons why Wolff describes the artist as

a producer, moving away from the understanding of *creation* as a magical phenomenon. As she writes, various theories of creation ignore the process of creation and omit any consideration of production (Wolff 1993: 138). Adopting a perspective in which the artist functions as a producer allows us to see how their actions are intertwined with the influence of social structures, i.e., institutions, norms, and everyday practices. This is not a choice between what is socially determined and what results from personal freedom. The artist is neither completely independent nor a passive product of the surrounding context. Rather, it is a relationship of coexistence in which the individual and social conditions interact with each other.

(...) the cultural product ('work of art') loses its character as a transcendent, universal fact, whose 'greatness' is unanalysable, but somehow mysteriously and inherently present. It is seen instead as the complex product of economic, social, and ideological factors, mediated through the formal structures of the text (literary or other), and owing its existence to the particular practice of the located individual (Wolff 1993: 139).

The Originality of Wolff's Contribution to the Sociology of Art

In Janet Wolff's perspective, art appears as a social product, embedded within a complex network of historical, institutional, and economic conditions. Rejecting the romantic image of the artist-genius acting in isolation leads to an understanding of creativity as a form of collective action, entangled in specific social relations, technologies, and the logic of cultural institutions. At the same time, the concept of agency is redefined not as an expression of absolute individual autonomy, but as the capacity to make situated choices and practices within structures that both enable and constrain action.

However, the originality of Janet Wolff's approach in the sociology of art lies primarily in her consistent effort to transcend the reductionist frameworks that dominated traditional sociological analyses (Wolff 1993: 31). Contrary to the standpoint adopted by Pierre Bourdieu, who subjugates the aesthetic domain to the imperatives of the social realm and the pursuit of symbolic capital, Wolff endeavors to preserve a harmonious equilibrium between social analysis and the acknowledgement of artistic autonomy. Her concept assumes that, although works of art are socially situated, they cannot be fully explained solely through structural mechanisms or class interests. Wolff thus rejects the tendency to interpret aesthetics exclusively in social terms. Her proposal preserves a sensitivity to the specificity of artistic practices, combining socio-cultural reflection with an acknowledgment of the complexity and ambiguity of aesthetic experience. Furthermore, her perspective is consistent with the limitations of the dominant perspective on *cultural production* in the 1980s and 1990s. This perspective primarily concentrated on the institutional dimensions of creativity, frequently neglecting the aesthetic and symbolic elements of artistic works. In this respect, her position differs from that developed by Howard S. Becker (1982), Richard A. Peterson (1990), or Diane Crane (1992), whose approaches—while crucial for identifying the institutional and organizational determinants of creativity—tended to marginalize formal and aesthetic aspects of art, treating them mainly as outcomes of cooperation within *art worlds*. While Becker focuses on the cooperative aspects of creative processes and Peterson analyses the impact of production structures on cultural diversity, Wolff stresses the risk of simplification inherent in reducing artworks to their conditions of production. Her proposal therefore constitutes an attempt to

reconcile sensitivity to the social embeddedness of art with the defense of its symbolic and aesthetic complexity (Wolff 1993). It should be noted that the discussion on cultural production is also a discussion on creativity. In light of contemporary analyses, the works of Andreas Reckwitz offer a perspective that is, in a sense, complementary to Wolff's approach. Reckwitz (2017) conceptualizes creativity as a cultural *dispositif*—a complex constellation of norms, practices, and aesthetic imperatives that shape the modern understanding and organization of creative activity. His analysis emphasizes that creativity is not merely an individual trait or an institutional outcome, but also a product of dynamic discourses and cultural imperatives.

To conclude, incorporating these three dimensions: the collective nature of action, situated agency, and material-economic conditions establishes a theoretical framework for further analysis. Although not all of these dimensions can be explored in full, reference to Wolff's conceptual framework makes it possible to examine how Polish illustrators operate as producers within the creative process, integrating their individual creativity with the broader social, institutional, and economic conditions that structure their field. The following chapter demonstrates how these theoretical assumptions have been translated into methodological decisions concerning the selection of empirical material, research strategy, and analytical framework.

Methodology

The research perspective adopted assumes a grounding in qualitative research of an interpretative nature (Blumer 2007). This perspective assumes that social reality is not a collection of objective facts, but is constructed in processes of interaction in which individuals assign meaning to objects and actions (Berger, Luckmann 1983). The key emphasis was therefore placed on the analysis of actions, interactions, and the meanings assigned to them, assuming that the world of social actors is shaped and interpreted by actors and participants in interactions (Hałas 2007). The presented results are part of a larger research project implemented in 2025 among Polish producers of books.² This section of the study examines how illustrators operate as producers, integrating their creative work with social and institutional conditions as well as collaboration with other actors. Specifically, it addresses:

How illustrators experience agency and their role as producers in the creative process?

How socio-economic conditions shape creativity in their everyday practice?

How collective dynamics and collaboration influence the production of illustrations?

The methodology employed in this study was qualitative, involving the collection of data through individual in-depth interviews (IDI). The material presented herein constitutes only a fragment of a larger research project encompassing a total of 75 participants, including 25 illustrators, 25 book authors and 25 translators. It should be emphasized that the findings presented relate exclusively to a subset of the conducted research within the

² The study was conducted by IncludLab on behalf of the Book Institute. It was co-financed by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage as part of a special grant entitled "Study on the condition of people creating books in Poland" (agreement no. 145/DF-VII/2025 dated 9 June 2025).

illustrators' field and represent the perspectives of individuals occupying either a high (top) or medium and semi- medium position. A purposive sample was selected based on professional experience, position within the artistic field, and key socio-demographic factors including gender, age, and region of residence. The criterion pertaining to position within the literary field was operationalized through an assessment of the respondents' body of work, received awards, and media presence. Furthermore, differentiating variables were incorporated in the sampling process, including the genre of literature practiced and the type of audience targeted. Ultimately, 13 creators participated in the referenced part of the project. They were people of various ages, with a predominance of those born in the 1960s. Among the women were: three born in the 1960s (R1, R3, R5), two in the 1970s (R4, R8), two in the 1980s (R2, R6), and one in the 1990s (R7). The men included two born in the 1960s (R9, R10), two in the 1970s (R11, R12), and one in the 1980s (R13). Each of these individuals is characterized not only by significant creative activity, but also by recognition from the artistic community and readers of literature. Although the perspective of these authors does not fully reflect the diversity of the Polish illustrator community, it does allow for insight into the specifics of the field, especially from the perspective of individuals with established or well-developing professional positions. These creators usually have broader institutional experience, are more likely to enter into relationships with publishers, the media, award jurors, or the book market, and have a better understanding of the relational aspect of the field (dependencies, power) and its subjection to various external influences (ideologies, the market, criticism). The method of reaching designers involved, in the first stage, establishing contact with illustrators who are in prestigious databases and portals dedicated to illustration (e.g. <https://instytutksiazki.pl/pl>, <https://www.ibby.org>). In addition, artists featured in publishing series (e.g., PWN, Znak, Nasza Księgarnia, Dwie Siostry) were also included. In individual cases, a second stage of sample selection using the snowball method was applied. Data were collected between May and July 2025 through in-person interviews conducted by the author, each lasting 1 hour 15 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Given the extensive dataset, this article focuses on selected aspects that illuminate illustration as a form of creativity situated between artistic and design production. The analysis centers on the experience of agency, expressed through creative and economic autonomy, and the role of collaboration with other actors.

Results

The key issue was the description of agency in the process of working on an illustration, understood as the practice of producing a work. This concept is multidimensional and covers various aspects, from the conditions of the creative process itself, through the perceived degree of (in)dependence, to social engagement and ethical decisions made during work. However, due to the complexity of the issue, it is impossible to discuss all its dimensions in a short text, so the scope will be limited to the experience of agency through the prism of creative and economic autonomy and the perception of the role of collective professional practices.

Illustrator—artistic identity and creative autonomy

The illustrators perceive their work above all as an autotelic creative act, thus relegating material concerns to a secondary position. This persistent myth of the “poor but fulfilled artist” continues to shape both artistic practice and professional identity. In accordance with the theoretical framework developed by Janet Wolff concerning the social construction of artistic subjectivity, the respondents in this study reproduce the aforementioned narrative in their respective accounts, thereby conceptualising illustration as both a vocation and an identity. The act of drawing has been described as an inherent need, one that is firmly embedded in the psyche from early childhood and which subsequently evolves into both a professional pursuit and a pivotal aspect of selfhood. As one interviewee expressed, their work is carried out “from the heart” [R5], while another defined illustration as a “natural way of expressing oneself” [R6], frequently inseparable from private life. As one respondent says:

When I started working as an illustrator, it was a moment when it was simply the most important thing in the world to me, because I was very happy that I had managed to start working in this industry. Well, the industry looked completely different back then than it does today, so I had some really crazy projects to work on, and it kind of took up 100% of my attention [R7].

The experienced and described sense of vocation to pursue the profession of illustrator is an important argument in favor of recognizing the possibility of self-expression through drawing as an autotelic value (independent of external conditions). This form of creative endeavor fosters the establishment and preservation of a sense of individual autonomy. Moreover, it can be regarded as a praxis that is chiefly characterized by the overarching objective of art.

Well, it's complete independence in the sense that if I don't want to do something, I simply won't do it (...) it's a cliché, isn't it, about being the master of your own destiny or the blacksmith of your own fate. Well, that's really how it works. In the sense that I am aware that if I do something, it's because I've decided to do it. And that's how I define the autonomy that I have in a very broad spectrum [R13].

However, the respondents' accounts demonstrate that, while creative freedom is held in high esteem, the complexity of the issue is also highlighted by their statements. The pursuit of creative autonomy is predicated on a delicate equilibrium between the aspirational yearning for unbridled liberty and the pragmatic constraints imposed by the commercial imperatives that characterize this vocation.

At the same time, the analysis shows what is present in sociological literature (e.g., Wolff), that artistic creation cannot be seen solely as an individual practice, but as co-created in a network of dependencies. The statements of the respondents indicate that situations limiting creative freedom, e.g., through excessive interference by editors or authors of texts, are not uncommon.

And if I felt that something like that was happening, I don't know, in the way the editor talked or communicated, I mean, there are people who, for example, like to come up with illustrations and tell me exactly what to do. That's [...] I either walk away from it or say that if I don't have that freedom, then despite my sympathy and respect for what they have done with others so far, I simply can't do it [R1].

The accounts also show that autonomy is not an easily attainable trait in this profession, which is why many interviewees generally adopt a specific strategy to defend their artistic vision. In practice, this means, for example, the ability to discuss with publishers, not to succumb to their *strong suggestions*, especially in the case of original books, refusing to work with *unprofessional clients*, and above all, “being guided by one’s own values” [R2]. One of the artists stated very categorically that “if I don’t want to do something, I won’t do it” [R11]. Interestingly, the same respondent also admits that he often accepts commissions that are not particularly interesting to him, but he does so “for a specific purpose” (financial gain).

It should be emphasized that most respondents ultimately report a strong sense of independence and creative autonomy, often working on “their own terms” and without direct artistic pressure from publishers [R10]. Nevertheless, achieving this state is neither straightforward nor guaranteed. Its realization depends on broader contextual factors, including the quality of collaboration with other actors in the field and the financial conditions underpinning the publishing sector, from individual royalties to systemic levels of funding. While illustrators articulate a sense of vocation and frame creativity as both an inner necessity and an autotelic value, in practice this autonomy is constrained by structural limitations that necessitate compromise. The financial situation thus emerges as a key determinant, shaping not only the respondents’ everyday functioning but also their capacity to exercise independent creative agency.

Agency—between art and economics

The majority of interviewees highlighted the unfavourable remuneration conditions for illustrators in Poland, as well as the significantly low sense of social security resulting, among other factors, from the high costs of accessing pension and health benefits. The respondents emphasised that rates within the industry are low, and the amount of work required to complete orders remains inadequate in relation to the remuneration received. It has been noted that certain individuals have explicitly indicated that their income is lower than the national minimum wage. It is noteworthy that these statements emanate from artists who occupy senior or high-ranking positions within the field of illustration, thereby underscoring the magnitude of the issue.

It’s not so luxurious that I can wait for inspiration. I do work a lot, and I won’t hide the fact that it’s not just some creative frenzy and internal compulsion, but also those strange people from the gas company and those who want me to pay for electricity. Also, the fact that I take on so many commissions and work so much is simply because it’s my source of income [R1].

Only four interviewees assessed their current financial situation as satisfactory or sufficient to support themselves independently. One illustrator noted that, at present, he is able to sustain himself solely through creative work, without recourse to full-time employment, a marked improvement compared to earlier circumstances, when he was compelled to seek alternative sources of income. Previously, only a substantial financial influx from advertising commissions enabled him to devote attention to his book projects. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that “most of the illustrators I know have some other additional jobs. Not because they want to, but because they have to” [R10]. Another

interviewee, when asked about success in the profession, adds that it means above all that “you don’t have to borrow money from friends and you can still pursue your modest passions with the power of money” [R11].

In this small group of illustrators who declare that they can make a decent living from their creative work, there is a significant comparison between the Polish illustration market and the situation abroad. As the respondents emphasize, in countries such as France and Italy, the profession of illustrator is much more appreciated, both in terms of prestige and the rates offered, which are significantly more favorable than in Poland. One of the interviewees admitted that her financial situation remains stable mainly thanks to foreign commissions, which account for about 90% of her income. She notes that without this source of income, her professional position on the Polish market would be much more difficult. In the context of the Polish publishing market, she notes that the rates are so low that, in terms of working time, she would earn less than the national minimum wage. She adds that “Polish publishers often hire novice illustrators for any remuneration, really” [R2]. During the interviews, critical opinions about the financial situation were repeatedly expressed, but significantly, they were also accompanied by expressions of frustration with the market, which depreciates the value of creative work. This reveals a certain ambivalence in their experiences, where on the one hand, creators often declare a sense of agency (e.g., in choosing projects), while on the other hand, they clearly raise the issue of limitations resulting from market realities (fewer and fewer commissions for decent rates). One of the interviewees, despite her recognized professional position, admits that in the current situation she is even actively considering a change of profession. As she says, her skills can easily be used in the area of UX services, where the rates are much better. As she stated:

(...) at the moment I would say that this autonomy is great. However, let’s be honest, I accept far fewer books than I used to, and my attitude has changed a bit because I no longer take it as seriously as I used to... So my autonomy is great, but I feel that the opportunities have decreased, so I can choose, but from a smaller pool of opportunities than before [R7].

Due to low earnings, many illustrators are forced to take on additional commissions or look for full-time work to ensure a minimum sense of financial security. An interviewee employed at an academic institution declares that the earnings from her full-time job at the university are “okay for me, they have calmed me down, I mean, they give me peace of mind” [R8]. However, she emphasizes that if she had to support herself solely from illustration, “it would be very difficult.”

Their financial situation directly translates into their ability to secure a future pension and pay regular social security contributions, including health insurance. Of the thirteen interviewees, eight declare that they pay pension and/or social security contributions in various ways. Two of the respondents do not do so at all, and the rest gave evasive answers. Regularly setting aside the required amounts is only possible thanks to additional sources of income, such as employment outside of illustration “I have health insurance thanks to my part-time job at a cardboard packaging company” [R12] or insurance through their spouse’s employer: “I have health insurance through my spouse’s company” [R2]. The smallest group is those who pay full social and health insurance (ZUS) on their own and only from their artistic work salaries.

The interviewees' accounts reveal a persistent tension between creative agency, understood as the capacity to devote oneself fully to artistic work, and the structural constraints imposed by financial instability and the conditions of the Polish publishing market. In accordance with Wolff's theoretical framework, which posits that artistic subjectivity is inherently socially constructed, illustrators' agency does not manifest as an absolute entity. Rather, it emerges as a negotiated process that seeks to balance the aspiration for autonomy with economic necessity. Adaptive strategies, encompassing supplementary labour or reliance on spousal support, serve to illustrate the means by which artists sustain their practice. In sum, the respondents highlighted how material conditions shape professional control and artistic authority, but also affirming the collaborative essence of illustration as a socially co-produced practice.

Experiencing creative agency and illustration as a collective practice

The majority of respondents emphasise that illustration is inherently collaborative, requiring interaction and cooperation with others. Effective collaboration is valued for its ability to generate outcomes that extend beyond the confines of technical production, thereby allowing team members to contribute diverse perspectives. This process is therefore pivotal in the integration of individual artistic identity with creative influence over the final product. As one respondent notes:

When it comes to artistic freedom, for me, illustration is a very collaborative project.(...) it is based on cooperation and the exchange of ideas. And it used to be very difficult for me to listen to criticism or comments on my illustrations, because I thought that what I had created was the best [R6].

They emphasize that although the act of drawing itself can be lonely, the overall process of creating illustrations, especially for books, is strongly embedded in the context of collaboration with publishers, authors, graphic designers, and even other illustrators. Undoubtedly, the publisher and editor-in-chief play a key role.

in most publishing houses, there is an editor who leads the project, and this is the person who is more responsible for the concept, for supporting the creator in doing something, initiating the project, often suggesting a topic for the project to focus on. (...) Sometimes there is also an author of the text (...). At later stages, there are certainly proofreaders, people from the promotion department, from the sales department, with whom you have to cooperate in carrying out various promotional activities to support the sale of the book [R7].

A frequently mentioned aspect of agency is control over the entire creative process, including not only the illustration itself, but also the editorial aspects of preparing the book. One of the illustrators surveyed emphasized that thanks to the graphic skills she has acquired (including the use of specialized software), she designs and typesets publications herself, which allows her to ensure the visual consistency of the work and overall control over it:

I can't stand ugly letters on the cover, I mean, the ones I consider ugly, and so on and so forth. Therefore, I design and typeset many of my books myself, so that I can control the whole thing and ensure that my illustrations are not placed in a context that I don't like visually. So, I have this autonomy here, but I also acquired the skills that are necessary for this [R5].

Illustrators consistently identify collaboration as a central component of professional practice, although it is occasionally experienced as a potential constraint on creative

autonomy. Respondents cited instances in which excessively detailed instructions limited their artistic freedom, even when the publication's nature did not demand such precision (e.g., non-scientific works where exact reproduction is not critical). One strategy to preserve control over the creative process involves the deliberate selection of clients and projects. Most respondents prioritize working with "professional" clients and reject assignments that conflict with their values or require imitation of another artist's style. As one interviewee observed,

My assumption is that I don't want to illustrate books that I don't like (...) I don't do any work related to alcohol or any stimulants at all (...) The deadline is decisive in terms of the amount of work. Of course, the rate is very important here. (...) I also like to agree on a schedule with such a client, in which not only I commit to specific deadlines, because I know from experience that sometimes, even if I make an elaborate plan and fit the client in here for this month, the next month, and so on, it can all fall apart because one client simply fails to deliver [R2].

The concept of a creative agency encompasses more than merely the individual artistic act, but rather, it is defined by the dynamic interplay between the artist's autonomy, constraints imposed by institutional frameworks, and collaborative partnerships. While many respondents initially report acting with complete freedom, "from the heart," further reflection on the creative process reveals persistent tensions. The assessment of autonomy is rendered complex and often ambivalent by external constraints of an institutional, market-driven or relational nature. As is illustrated by the statement made by one of the respondents, this ambivalence is expressed in a clear manner:

This is a difficult question because the answer is complex and it is difficult to give a concise answer, because theoretically I can have complete autonomy, no one can impose anything on me, but then I won't earn a living [R5].

Conclusions and Discussion

Illustration, as emphasized in the introduction, constitutes a form of creative practice situated at the intersection of art and design (Simon 1996; Norman 2018). This positioning, which defines its disciplinary and professional character, introduces structural constraints that generate tensions between creativity and service, autonomy and function. The illustrator's freedom can thus be conceptualized as a dynamic negotiation between individual artistic vision and external meanings, functions, and institutional expectations. Creative agency, in this sense, is relational and contextually mediated—operating within networks of economic and institutional dependencies that simultaneously enable and constrain artistic practice. In the context of Polish book illustration, autonomy is defined as the capacity to negotiate the boundaries of practice within specific institutional frameworks. These frameworks encompass publishing policies, editorial hierarchies, and the broader dynamics of the cultural market. Despite being inextricably linked to a particular socio-historical context, artistic production simultaneously gives rise to an independent domain of meaning and experience. The findings serve to reinforce Wolff's thesis that creative work emerges through situated practices—that is to say, socially mediated forms of action in which aesthetic and institutional dimensions are mutually constitutive. The study further indicates that illustration represents an inherently collaborative mode of production—a fundamental dimension of creativity identified by Wolff. Regarding economic autonomy,

the analysis reveals a persistent tension between artistic ideals and the market's utilitarian logic, confirming Wolff's claim that material and economic conditions are integral to sociological account of creative practices. The data also suggest that illustrators experience a sense of agency primarily in relation to their artistic identity and creative decision-making, but less so in shaping the structural and economic conditions of their labor. A significant proportion of professionals adopt adaptive strategies in lieu of explicit negotiation, coming to terms with institutional constraints as an inherent aspect of their professional milieu. This dynamic illustrates the dual structure of the Polish art world, where individual agency operates within systemic limitations. As Wolff emphasizes, creativity cannot be reduced to an individual expression of talent; rather, it should be understood as a socially embedded cultural practice, entangled in relations of power, institutional logics, and normative expectations. Consequently, artistic autonomy is not perceived as a stable attribute of the artist; rather, it is conceptualized as a dynamic process of positioning within the domain of cultural production. This process is characterized by a constant negotiation between structural constraints and individual agency. Although analogous analytical frameworks can be found in Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, the present study focuses less on the reconstruction of the mechanisms of the field itself and more on the subjective dimension of artistic experience. This phenomenon can be attributed to the composition of the sample, which consists of illustrators who occupy positions of high and medium-high professional status. Particularly striking is the finding that a strong position within the field—measured in terms of cultural and social capital—does not automatically translate into professional agency or economic security. In Bourdieu's terms, the symbolic capital that confers prestige within the field of cultural production does not readily convert into economic capital, a mechanism typical of fields governed by the logic of autonomy (Bourdieu 1993). In other words, symbolic recognition does not guarantee material stability—a key insight that invites further analysis. This phenomenon aligns with broader debates on the precarization of creative labor, increasingly relevant in the context of technological transformations and the rise of AI-based production tools (Butaru and Mateescu 2025).

In conclusion, it is evident that the creative autonomy of illustrators is inextricably linked to economic precarity, thereby unveiling the inherent contradictions within the Polish cultural economy. The conditions of the illustration market, characterized by low remuneration, absence of social protection, and constrained access to welfare, highlight systemic deficiencies and the social valuation of cultural labor. The case of illustrators thus becomes emblematic of the broader tension between autonomy and dependency in the field of cultural production. Future research may expand the concept of artistic agency through Margaret Archer's approach (Archer 2013), which conceptualizes the dynamic interplay between structure and agency. Such a framework could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how institutional and market structures shape, constrain, and occasionally enable creative action. Ultimately, this analysis serves as a point of departure for reflecting on the value of immaterial labour and the position of cultural producers within contemporary societies and public policy. Despite the growing interest in cultural labour, there remains a paucity of sociological research of comparable scope and focus capturing the situation of Polish illustrators. The existing body of research

typically encompasses more extensive classifications of artists or designers. Consequently, this project signifies a pioneering endeavour within the domain of sociological inquiry, as it is among the first to undertake a comprehensive exploration of this particular field.

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Biographical Note:

Paulina Rojek-Adamek (Ph.D.), sociologist at the Institute of Sociology, Cognitive Science and Philosophy at the University of the National Education Commission, Krakow. Author and editor of publications in the fields of the sociology of art and design. Co-author of research projects funded, among others, by the Ministry of Science. Speaker and co-organizer of panels at international sociological conferences (ISA, ESA) held in the UK, Canada, Brazil, and Australia. She has completed research fellowships at the Royal College of Art in London.

ORCID iD: [0000-0002-0717-026X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0717-026X)

paulina.rojek-adamek@uken.krakow.pl