

# Tech Steamrolls the Arts

[The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech](#), by William Deresiewicz (Henry Holt; 368 pp., \$27.99).

Members of a book club at my highly selective undergraduate business school were stung by William Deresiewicz's portrait of careerist, grade-grubbing college students in his scathing 2015 book, [Excellent Sheep](#). The club members tended toward the introspective end of a student population known more for ruthless competition than self-reflection or deep thought, and were shaken after gazing into the author's mirror.

Luckily for America's dwindling cultured remnant, Deresiewicz has struck again. In [The Death of the Artist](#) he explores the conundrum of "how to keep your soul intact and still make a living as an artist" as technology steamrolls its latest victim, the arts.

Deresiewicz blames the "demonetization of content" for trampling quality. Music piracy exploded concurrently with digitization. E-book piracy soon followed. Once free goods appeared, involuntary demonetization ruled the market. *Homo economicus* assiduously avoids websites with paywalls. This race to the bottom has inculcated "an expectation of free everything" among arts enthusiasts. Surprise! The arts now drown in mediocrity.

Deresiewicz interviewed 140 artists for background. Their tales offer a frightful glimpse of our descent into the 21st century's artistic cesspool. Artists must now curate their online presence, edit their works, keep their own financial records, build their networks—and then produce art in their spare time. How do you write serious fiction

after discussing deductions with your accountant all morning? Then again, why bother? Amazon has closed the profit loop with a monopoly on book selling and a monopsony on wholesale book procurement. In 2017, 67 percent of all book sales occurred online. Of the six million risible books Amazon offers Kindle users, most are self-published and sell fewer than two copies per month. An all-you-can-eat cotton candy buffet would be an improvement.

But let's stare into Deresiewicz's mirror before we burn down any Amazon warehouses. Internet-addicted Americans crave the "instantaneity" of the online "Darwinian attention derby" where ephemera supplant the good, the true, and the beautiful. Instead of the Old Masters, we now have museum selfies. Like a balding Lothario who avoids the mirror's harsh reflection, I tremble to think of Deresiewicz's next cultural target.

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