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ARTISTS AS WORKERS



Autonomy

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We would like to thank all of the artists who gave their time for interview as part of this project.



Autonomy

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Executive summary

- This report offers a comprehensive outline of working conditions within the UK's visual arts sector.
- We foreground an understanding of the 'artist-as-worker', emphasising the labour in artistic labour, and highlighting the sector's interaction with wider trends, such as the gig economy and marketisation in education.
- Drawing on extensive interviews with a diverse range of workers within the UK's art industry, it highlights the levels of precarity and inequality endemic within the sector.
- The Covid pandemic often reinforced many of these trends. We hear powerful testimony about the impact of the crisis from a range of artists, activists and sector representatives.
- Based on our findings, we identify a range of recommendations to protect artist-as-workers going forward, particularly in the context of a Covid recovery. These include:
 - Universal Basic Income
 - Studio space subsidies
 - Revitalised artistic education
 - Public works programmes



INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This report began as an inquiry in October 2020, just as much of the UK entered the second Covid lockdown, and six months into a global pandemic that has changed employment conditions for workers around the world. The crisis has caused massive disruption to artists. For many, this has meant cancellations of projects and livelihoods put in the balance; an upsurge in caring responsibilities, and attempts to navigate multiple welfare and support schemes.

However, Covid did not produce precarity, exploitation and inequality in the art world out of thin air. Rather, it exposed, amplified and accentuated a set of pervasive trends that have long characterised the labour conditions of artistic workers in the UK. All too often, these have gone underappreciated, underexplored - insufficiently criticised - by those both within and outside the industry. Artistic labour seems to be easily forgotten.

As such, this report attempts to reposition the contemporary UK artist as a worker, by placing their working conditions front and centre. Dismantling romanticised images of the 'lifestyle' artist, we show how the conditions of contemporary artistic labour cannot be understood outside of the growth of the 'gig economy', and the marketisation of higher education, for instance. Importantly, we focus - as greatly as possible - on developing an account of 'the artist as worker' in the words of workers themselves.

The inquiry therefore combines data from published sources, with personal testimony taken from interviews with visual artists and key stakeholders in arts organisations undertaken in late 2020. These were designed to shed light on the financial livelihoods of those in the sector, and how they have changed and adapted during the pandemic - taking into account the support available to visual arts organisations and to artists individually. Together, this develops a picture of 'what it is really like' to work as an artist in the UK: from everyday concerns and worries, to the impact of national level policy.

One of the principal problems encountered, however, when considering current artistic labour, is that art is not a 'job' in terms of the commonly understood definition of the word - it has no single job description, salary or terms of employment. While it is often considered a 'vocation', it is also certainly 'work', and this ambiguity has laid behind centuries of confusion - philosophically, ethically and practically - over how artists are remunerated for the work they undertake. Contemporary visual artists have among the most varied and poorly-defined careers, with no clear trajectory and no two artists having followed the same path. Despite this divergent career structure, the study looks for emerging trends extrapolated from the individual testimonies of how the world of work for artists has changed, and how this has affected artists' incomes, ability to survive and ability to continue - or not - with their artistic practice. It also examines how future policy changes, associated with the "Build back Better" and "Levelling up" agendas, might reshape and reposition the sector, and raises some questions and suggestions regarding future policy interventions which might better serve artists' unique and diverse needs.

Section One offers an initial background to the conditions of the contemporary artist-as worker. It identifies the long history of artistic labour being neglected, dismissed and/or exploited, while providing an overview of the place of the artist-as-worker within the current UK art world. Rather than prominent 'blue chip' artists, the report focuses on 'grassroots' artists, who make up the vast majority of those working in the sector, detailing the additional forms of labour and sources of funding upon which they rely to subsist.

Section Two draws on an extensive range of interviews with artists and activists within the sector, developing a detailed account of life for artists-as-workers, 'in their own words'. In particular, it focuses on the myriad ways in which workers attempt to 'survive' as artists, particularly through the Covid pandemic, along with the personal and social effects that these take.

Section Three collects a series of recommendations to support the 'artist-as-worker'. Drawing on ideas and policies from both the UK and abroad, past and present, it sketches an alternative vision of artistic labour 'as it could be', made possible by recentring an understanding of the artist-as-worker.



I.
**ARTISTS AS
WORKERS**

Artists as workers

‘Doing what you love?’ Overlooking artistic labour

“and everyone thinks it’s easy... it is hard work, being an artist. It’s not just sitting around!”

Sarah Jaffe’s recent book *Work Won’t Love You Back* (2021), argues that modern workers aren’t only required to labour in exchange for a wage, but also to love their job and discover personal fulfilment within it. This stems, she suggests, from the expectation that a worker who loves their work will work harder, make more sacrifices for their work, and expect less in return. Often, we talk about being ‘passionate’ about our jobs, in terms of a quasi-romantic devotion. But this level of ideological reverence can just as easily lead to workers being exploited in the name of what they love: their work. Often, this exploitation comes directly from an employer, but it also comes from social norms and expectations. Jaffe, for instance, takes the example of women’s unpaid labour in the home, particularly child-raising, which is often done by mothers in the name of love, and remains almost exclusively unpaid.¹

¹ Jaffe, S. (2021) *Work Won’t Love You Back : How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*, Bold Type Books

Self-employed modern workers - from consultants, to journalists, actors, film-makers, to artists (our focus in this report) - are all at heightened risk of exploitation. They are expected to love their work. Money, it is presumed, should not be their motivation: artists should feel grateful to be working at all, even if they're unpaid or on very low rates. Just as the mother's love for her child, or the activist's devotion to their cause makes them vulnerable to exploitation in their names, so too does an artist's creative passion. Artistic labour - to many people - is almost by definition, work undertaken for the love of it, rather than remuneration.² While this understanding might have sedimented within the popular imagination for centuries, it is just as much a construct of ideology as the belief that child-rearing is a woman's vocation.

The sense that the artist isn't a worker, but a conduit for creativity, has its roots in Renaissance Europe, when the emerging merchant classes began to invest their newfound wealth into art, becoming the patrons of a new breed of artist.³ Many of these artist masters were identified as 'individuals', uniquely gifted in their own right, in stark contrast to the well-established system of guilds, where membership only followed a period of apprenticeship and learning. The idea of an individual artist-genius implies a special individual, possessing innate talent. The vast, and often collective, labour spent training and honing skills is thereby overlooked. As such, we can see how the concept of artistic 'genius' is closely tied to a forgetting of artistic labour: creativity is thus perceived as a product of talent more than work.

2 *Ibid.*, 150

3 Jaffe provides a full account of the historical context of the contemporary artist, *ibid.*, 152.

By the industrial revolution, art works had gained commodity status in their own right and institutions sprung up around them to preserve and increase their reverence. The great art academies, museums and auction houses of Europe were all founded in the late 18th and early 19th century, to train and distinguish 'great' artists from the rest. As Jaffe points out, the industrial revolution heralded a growth in the demand for art, not only to decorate the homes of the burgeoning middle classes, but also because, in contrast to the mass-produced products spewing forth from the factories, a sense developed that art was not the result of 'work', but of something else, something special, a higher kind of activity. Thus "Art", a term that had simply meant "skill" at one point, became a term for what we now think of as the fine arts, and indeed was to be contrasted to skilled labour as something that could not, in fact, be taught. An artist was thus a special kind of person."⁴

"Working creatively, or being an artist isn't always seen as a proper job that has economic value"

This romantic myth of the artist prevails in the popular imagination, and even in much of today's international art world.⁵ However, it fails to consider how artists, like everyone else, need to afford to eat, live and put clothes on their children's backs. Before the 20th century, art was the almost exclusive preserve of the well-off – only those who could afford not to work to sustain themselves could be artists: i.e. wealthy aristocrats and those they chose to patronise.

4 Ibid., 153

5 See Jones, J. 'Drawing a blank: can artistic talent ever be taught?', The Guardian, 9th October 2021. Accessible at: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/aug/09/drawing-a-blank-can-artistic-talent-ever-be-taught>

In the 19th century, only the sons (almost always only sons) of middle class families could afford to attend the academies, and train in the fine arts. In the UK, it was not until universal education, and particularly the Bauhaus-inspired Art School system of the late 1950s onwards, along with the introduction of the practical 'Foundation Course', that working class children had access to art and design further education.⁶ The UK's art school system and higher education, with free access for all until fees were introduced in 1998, produced some of the greatest creative minds of current times, including David Bowie, Pink Floyd, Brian Eno and Vivienne Westwood. However, the rise of tuition fees has seen a shift in focus towards university degrees that offer the chance of high-paying careers.

In the latter half of the 20th century, young creatives in the UK could also rely on a relatively generous state benefit system, and 'signing on' was one way to ensure a reliable income whilst artists, musicians and actors established their creative careers.

⁶ Research on the impact of UK art schools on culture has been undertaken by Tate in their project 'Art School Educated: Curriculum Change in UK Art Schools 1960-2010'. They note: "A comprehensive history of UK art schools and their impact on the history of modern British art had not been undertaken, despite the schools' distinguished contributions to cultural life." For an overview, see Tate. (2021), Art School Educated, accessible at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/art-school-educated2>

As Thatcher attempted to reduce the numbers of unemployed, the Enterprise Allowance Scheme (EAS), introduced in 1981, offered a nominal stable income to anyone who wanted to start their own business. Eligibility for the scheme required applicants to have been unemployed for at least eight weeks, and to put up to £1000 (approx. £3800 today) of their own cash into their fledgling business, but it benefitted many older artists who were establishing their careers in the 1980s, among them Turner Prize artists Tracey Emin and Jeremy Deller. Whilst the more generous state benefits of the past and the EAS were hardly equivalent to universal basic income,⁷ they were nevertheless instrumental in supporting an older generation of artists in a way almost unheard of in today's contemporary artworld.⁸

"[Becoming an artist is] virtually impossible unless you've got money, your family are famous, or your father's a filmmaker. As a working-class person, I had no connections whatsoever, and no idea what it meant to be an artist, I just had a feeling I wanted to do it... so you could go to art school"

The financial crash in 2008, followed by years of austerity, has meant that, once again, creative careers have increasingly become the preserve of the elite. This has had a devastating effect on the arts, excluding those without the resources to sustain themselves in a cut-throat career. If we want an inclusive art world that speaks to the experiences of everyone in society, then artists must come from all social strata.

7 Young, C. (2017) 'The peculiar story of Margaret Thatcher and Basic Income', The RSA Blog. Accessible at: <https://www.thersa.org/blog/2017/12/the-peculiar-story-of-margaret-thatcher-and-basic-income>

8 For a case study of how EAS supported Metro Theatre Company during the 1980s, see Stage Directors UK. (2020) Supporting the Freelance Creative Workforce, 22. Accessible at: <https://stagedirectorsuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Supporting-a-Freelance-Creative-Workforce.pdf>

By examining the 'artist as worker', this inquiry tries to demystify artistic labour, and examine the state of artists' livelihoods both before and during the Covid crisis that began in early 2020. At a crucial time for the arts, when both funding and creative degree courses are set to be slashed by 50%, there is an opportunity for the arts to make their case for an arts-based recovery.⁹

What is 'the art world'? How do artists earn a living?

Contemporary art can seem a complicated world, whose structure, institutions and boundaries are often unclear even to those who work within it. It consists not only of artists, but of art schools (and by extension academia and research in university art departments), publicly funded art institutions (eg museums such as Tate, organisations such as Arts Council England), private (or commercial) art galleries (such as White Cube or Hauser and Wirth, which are essentially exclusive shops for art, but which also hold exhibitions open to the public), auction houses (eg Sotheby's, Christie's) and a plethora of organisations which commission and support artists. These include private individuals and bodies, local councils, historical museums among many others.

9 Weale, S. (2021) 'Funding cuts to go ahead for university arts courses in England despite opposition', The Guardian. Accessible at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/20/funding-cuts-to-go-ahead-for-university-arts-courses-in-england-despite-opposition>

Alongside this are organisations which support and advise artists and arts institutions, plus philanthropic foundations - including artist-run initiatives, galleries, charities and voluntary organisations, plus artist studio complexes, which can also be for-profit or have charity status. And this summary is by no means exhaustive.

Importantly, the art world isn't defined or united by a single trade or professional body. This means that a cogent definition of what the contemporary art world is, or indeed is not, is nigh on impossible to locate. As such, even those immersed in the field will have contrasting experiences and opinions of what the art world entails, and hence their own position within it.

Adding to the confusion, there is no single job description for a contemporary visual artist, and defining its role or remit is an impossible task, because there are so many different ways of working as an artist today: from different media and practices, to the wide variety of means through which artists are paid for or support their work. Indeed, it is rare to be directly employed as an artist (although many are employed to use their artistic skills - for example doing web design or animation - a subtle yet important difference). Many artists work speculatively - that is, they spend their work time making art, which may or may not sell or earn them an exhibition fee, and hence ultimately pay for its making and overheads. When artists do make money from their work (for example by selling a work, or earning a fee or commission), it is often irregular and unreliable, making it very difficult to plan financially - or even pay the bills.

This speculative dimension requires most artists (namely those who don't earn enough from their work to stay afloat, or who don't have access to private financial support) to earn part or all of their living elsewhere, often to underwrite the expenses incurred by their art practice as well as to support themselves.

Nevertheless, at the 'top' of the industry, there are a significant minority of artists who not only manage to support themselves through their work, but also make a good living from it, sometimes employing other artists in their studios to produce and manage their work. Artists who make a living from selling their works can be described as commercially successful, but many highly-acclaimed artists, whose work is exhibited at the likes of Tate (and internationally equivalent art museums and collections) are not necessarily commercially successful.

These artists are sometimes described as critically successful, and despite the appearance of success, they may still be struggling to make ends meet, even as their Tate exhibition is open to the public and they are nominated for high profile prizes and awards. Although the reality is more complex, to simplify the field, we can suggest that artist workers can be divided into two broadly defined categories, which function simultaneously and with much symbiosis: 'blue chips' and 'grassroots'.

"Sadly in the media, all you see is the celebrity artists who make a lot of money, but they are in a very small minority, and there's a big difference between them, and even those middle row artists who are making a living. But it won't be a good living, and it will be sporadic, and challenging and difficult."

Blue chips

'Blue chips' exist within a high-status international economy, driven by the sale of very expensive art works. The work of these artists regularly commands five to six figure sums, and some will be familiar as tabloid staples who have become household names - the likes of Tracey Emin, Jeff Koons or Yayoi Kusama. Such artists are represented by blue chip galleries (e.g. White Cube, Gagosian, Hauser and Wirth), which operate essentially as brokers, selling their artists' work to wealthy individuals and collectors for hefty commissions of up to 100%.¹⁰ In many ways, this blue chip art world functions as its own luxury commodities market, whereby artworks exist largely as assets or investment pieces, whose prices can be tracked and manipulated by their holders.

¹⁰ That is to say, a sale price that is double the 'asking price', although artists in high demand might receive a greater percentage of the sales price, as their galleries need to keep them on side. Data on this is notoriously opaque, since galleries might be offering different deals to different artists in their stable, of which they publish little publicly.

Works by blue chip artists are often central to the collections of publicly funded museums internationally, where, somewhat controversially, their status as financial assets is elevated by their contextualisation within the canon of art history, frequently at the expense of the state.¹¹ This is the art world as it exists in the mind of the average citizen - accessible through public museums and collections, referenced in the press through its sky-high prices, rich artists, elite gallerists and headline-grabbing gestures (think *Angel of the North*, or *My Bed* - Emin's 1998 unmade bed, now part of the Tate collection). Typically, blue chip artists can expect to make good money from their work, but they are very much in the minority of the overall workforce: the art world equivalent of the 1%.

The economy of blue chip art relies on a stream of liquidity from international art buyers and collectors. In most instances - with prices in the tens to hundreds of thousands of pounds and often significantly more - this means very wealthy individuals - top CEOs, oligarchs, Sheiks and multi-millionaires. The blue chip art market rarely suffers during financial crises because those who sustain it are asset holders, who tend to get richer during such events. Mirroring the growth in global inequality, for every artist who makes a good living (and more) from their work in the blue chip art world, there are tens of thousands who don't make enough to survive.

¹¹ A critique of this relationship between the commercial art sector and the Tate can be found in an exchange of letters between Eddie Chambers and Tom Denman regarding the recent exhibition of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye at Tate Britain. See *Art Monthly* (2021), No. 448: June-August

Grassroots

Some of these artists further down the food chain may even be well-known and apparently successful, with a public profile and critical acclaim for work exhibited in museum shows and exhibitions internationally. But for a variety of reasons, this still provides an insufficient income to live off. These artists may also be represented by commercial galleries, but may not command the sky-high prices of their blue chip counterparts. Often they fund themselves through a combination of occasional sales, grant applications (for example, to Arts Council England) and commissions. In previous decades it was expected that emerging and acclaimed (if not commercially successful) artists would sustain their work by staffing fine art and related degree courses, however, over the last two decades large cuts to the higher education budget, particularly for art and design programmes, and structural changes with the sector, mean that universities hire far fewer staff, and many of these are on short, precarious contracts.¹² These changes have meant that university teaching is no longer available to many artists, and even for those who do find a job lecturing, it is often not the stable source of income that it once was.

¹² According to Artquest, who gather information both formally and informally from the approximately 4000 artists per year who contact them, opportunities to teach art in universities have been decimated in the last 10 years or so by cuts to HE and reorganisation of art departments. "More and more we hear of lecturers not being replaced or expected to take on more teaching."

The simple reality is that purchasing art remains a niche interest, and there are not enough wealthy art collectors in the world to sustain all those who aspire to be artists. The vast majority of young art students who graduate from art degrees are therefore unlikely to progress to a career sustainable through sales of their art alone. Many will drop off and find careers in other fields, but of the art graduates who do manage to pursue a career in contemporary art, most will find that they need to supplement their incomes, either for a number of years before they 'make it big', or on a long term basis, because their work is not commercially successful. Lack of commercial success, beyond sheer luck, can come for a variety of reasons. Individuals may make art that is materially difficult to sell (such as sculpture, installation, performance or video art, which appeals only to very limited numbers of collectors, and makes up only a fraction of the sales that paintings do), very expensive to make, politically provocative/unpalatable or unfashionable, or because they simply reject the commercial art market as exploitative of artists.

As such, the majority of artists must work in other jobs to support themselves. Since teaching is no longer an option for most, many seek work in hospitality or the gig economy, or they may develop a concurrent career. Common options aside from lecturing include working in school and gallery education, art handling, arts administration or other roles in the museums and cultural sector. The model of juggling one's practice with some other method of survival is extremely common, and yet the aspiration that artists should make a living solely from their work is regularly pedalled in art schools as the ultimate goal for students (despite the obvious fact that the majority of lecturers are also working artists who make a living by teaching). There remains little focus on the reality for the majority, that even if they become critically successful, they are likely to need additional income.

This "grassroots" end of the art world operates in tandem with the blue chip art world - to a large extent, it feeds it (with new artists) and underpins it (not so much financially, as structurally, artistically and intellectually). It encompasses the vast majority of those who define themselves as artists, and certainly most of those who are the focus of this inquiry.

The first major study into artists' livelihoods in over a decade was undertaken in 2018 by Arts Council England,¹³ and it demonstrates that not only do the majority of artists live on very low incomes, but just a third of their income comes from art itself. The mean average total income for artists across the UK in 2015 was £16,150 per annum, with only £6,020 of this income (equivalent to 36%) derived from art practice.

13 Arts Council (2018) 'Livelihoods of Visual Artists Report', available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/livelihoods-visual-artists-report>

The report indicates that only a tiny minority (2%) of visual artists earn more than £50,000 per annum from their art practice; only 10% of visual artists believe that their art income alone provides them with enough to live on, and only 3% of these thought that the income allowed them to live 'comfortably'. To quote the report: "the art market is described as a 'winner-takes-all' - a very small proportion of artists receive a large slice of the total artists' revenue."¹⁴ The vast majority of artists therefore rarely make enough money from their art practice to survive.

To those inside the art world, this state of affairs is tiresomely familiar, yet to the non-specialist reader, the hardships that artists endure, and the lengths they go to in order to be able to continue and sustain their creative practice may seem extraordinary.

How much do artists earn from their work?

Prior to the Covid pandemic, the Arts Council Livihoods of Visual Artists Report, published in 2018, painted a grim picture of visual artists' incomes.

- Mean average total annual income for artists across the UK in 2015 was **£16,150**. This was lower than the National Living Wage, both in (£16,302) and outside (£18,750) London. The median UK salary in 2015 was £27,600.
- **69% of artists earned less than £20,000 in 2015.**
- The mean average income derived from art practice in 2016 was £6,020 - around 36% of total income. **However, two-thirds of visual artists earned less than £5,000 in the previous year from their art practice** and only 7% earned more than £20,000.
- To make up the shortfall, the report found that visual artists juggled a portfolio of low paid, precarious jobs.

Funding Allocation

To support their work, artists therefore often rely upon subsidies, most often allocated to the contemporary visual arts in England through Arts Council England (ACE), and parallel bodies in the UK's other nations. These are non-departmental public bodies, who - alongside a further 42 public bodies, such as the National Theatre, Tate, etc. - receive their own funding base from DCMS (in England), with Arts Council Wales and other devolved agencies similarly sponsored by national governments across the UK..

ACE describes itself as a “public body that supports a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries. Its remit for the arts includes a wide range of visual, performing and literary art forms. It has funding responsibilities for regional museums and a development role across libraries and the wider museums sector. Arts Council England [seeks] to make the arts and the wider culture of museums and libraries an integral part of everyday public life, accessible to all, and understood as essential to the national economy and to the health and happiness of society.”¹⁵

15 Centre for Economics and Business Research (2019), Contribution of the arts and culture industry to the UK economy. 12. Accessible at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/contribution-art-and-culture-sector-uk-economy>

ACE funds more than 800 National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) which can be found in all the English regions, and are guaranteed regular income from ACE for a period of 4 years (recently increased from 3 years in light of Covid), after which they must reapply to retain their NPO status. Each year £71.3m of Lottery money goes into the National Portfolio, investing in touring and working with children and young people (up £1.7 million from £69.6 million in 2020). NPOs range from music venues, arts centres, art and literature festivals, theatre and dance venues and companies, and include such familiar names as the National Theatre; Museum of London; Almeida Theatre Company Limited; Birmingham Opera Company; Bristol Old Vic and Theatre Royal Trust Ltd; English National Opera, National Theatre; Opera North, Punchdrunk etc. Well known NPOs in the field of contemporary art include the Whitechapel Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Whitstable Biennale, New Contemporaries (1988) Ltd, Art Monthly, a-n The Artists Information Company, Ikon Gallery, The Artangel Trust amongst many others.

Alongside funding NPOs, individual artists, community and cultural organisations can apply directly to ACE on an ad hoc basis for grants to support their work, via an application procedure called National Lottery Project Grants. This offers sums of £1000-£100,000 to successful applicants across the creative arts (music, performing arts, visual art). There are also grants available for Developing your Creative Practice (£2000-£10,000) to support creative practitioners in progressing their careers to the next level, developing ideas, training and mentoring. These are the principal ACE grant applications for which contemporary visual artists are eligible.¹⁶

During 2020, ACE played an active role in distributing the emergency spending supplied by central government to DCMS under the auspices of the Culture Recovery Fund, with £250 million in grants ranging from £25,000 to £3 million to cultural organisations (both profit and not for profit) based in England.

¹⁶ Find information of other funding offered by Arts Council England, see <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding>

How are artists funded to make up the shortfall?

In England, Arts Council England (ACE) is one of the principle bodies to allocate state subsidy in the contemporary visual arts*. There are similar bodies in Scotland (Creative Scotland), Wales (Arts Council of Wales) and Northern Ireland (Arts Council of Northern Ireland), who allocate funding in relatively similar ways.

ACE funds over 800 **National Portfolio Organisations** (NPOs), who, in 2021, received £71.3m 'to protect and develop' England's 'national arts and culture ecology'. NPOs include the National Theatre, English National Opera, Whitechapel Gallery, the Bristol Old Vic, alongside many more.

At a smaller scale, individual artists, community and cultural organisations can apply for ad hoc funding from ACE through **National Lottery Project Grants**. These offer between £1000-£100,000 to support discrete artistic projects. Grants between £2,000-£10,000 for Developing your Creative Practice are also available to support progression, and are particularly significant for visual artists.

During 2020, ACE helped to distribute emergency spending supplied to DCMS through the **Culture Recovery Fund**, comprising £250 million in grants ranging from £25,000 to £3 million. During Covid, ACE also offered discrete emergency funding during Covid.



**II.
ARTISTIC
LABOUR
BEFORE AND
AFTER COVID:
IN THEIR OWN
WORDS**

Artistic labour before and after Covid: in their own words

To inform our investigation of how working conditions within the artworld were both changed and reinforced by the Covid pandemic, which had a hugely disruptive effect on artistic labour, we chose to put personal narratives and individual testimony in the spotlight, to explore the nuances of artists' lived experience, along with the impacts of key policy decisions on workers.

As such, 21 individuals were invited to participate in online interviews during November and December 2020, using a semi-structured format to gain insight into their working practices before and during the Covid crisis, as well as their future prospects and aspirations.

Interviewees were selected to cover a range of experiences and positions in the contemporary art world, including artists and representatives from organisations supporting the arts. They ranged in age and experience from new graduates to second-career artists, and were selected - as far as possible - to represent social diversity in terms of gender, race, immigration status, caring responsibilities and (dis)ability. We selected artists who, prior to the pandemic, supported themselves and their practices through a variety of means: from teaching in art schools or universities, commissions and sales, to ACE grants, freelance work in the arts, freelance work in other fields and PAYE employment.

As the pandemic took hold, the cohort encompassed artists who:

- received financial support from UK Government schemes, such as 'furlough' or the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme.
- received financial support from ACE Emergency Response Funds
- fell through the gaps and received no financial support
- lost their regular employment
- left or are thinking of leaving their creative roles due to financial constraints, to seek work in alternative sectors
- set up grass-roots initiatives responding to the Covid crisis
- started education or training during Covid

A more comprehensive list of interviewee profiles can be found in Appendix One.

What does day-to-day life look like for grassroots artists?

In line with this report's overview of the contemporary UK art world, our interviewees time and time again outline **a constant scramble to balance their artistic practice with further forms of employment.** While, for many, this situation was always marked by a degree of precarity, some had nevertheless found a way of 'making it work' prior to the pandemic. Very few derived significant income from their own artistic practice.

"I had a day job in a [major London] art gallery as an invigilator on PAYE, 4 shifts a week. It was my only paid job. Everything else I did was freelance work, which I was doing in museums and galleries, doing mainly outreach... My creative practice is my community workshops, and delivering them"

"Pre-covid I was working 2 days a week at... a small NPO art gallery - which luckily was a PAYE job, and one day a week teaching in a university as an Hourly-Paid Lecturer. And that was a casual contract, but it's PAYE. Then around that I would do freelance gallery technician work, all self-employed, or I would apply for residencies and commissions, and ACE funding."

"Sometimes my work [art practice] really has supported me, and then other times I've just had to find other work."

"Pre-Covid I was doing OK, I'd paid off my debt. I was working 4 days a week, with the 5th day in the studio. I was working for a not-particularly-nice company, but they let me work 4 days a week, and were flexible about childcare. It's a sexist industry, and I was planning [in Sept 2020] when my son started school to manage 2 days a week in the studio and start to make a bit more time for my art practice... But then obviously Covid happened."

Balancing artistic labour with education - whether teaching or studying - was a common phenomenon:

"I was studying for a Fine Art degree, but also selling some work [painting and collage] very occasionally. I probably made 2 or 3 sales a year and applied for commissions and open calls ... I spent half my time making work, and then half my time (3-4 shifts a week) working front of house for a big art institution in London... We were called 'casuals'. It essentially means that there's no minimum hours: we have to ask for as many as we want, and then they give us what they can. Sometimes you might not get any work at all."

"I was teaching in every sector you can imagine. I was doing school workshops for galleries, I was in primary schools one day, the next day I was at the Royal College of Art teaching postgraduates. I was - still am - living a freelancer life, teaching in very different contexts. There's loads of different things and you kind of follow the money to a certain extent."

"Every few years there's a kind of shift in the balance. Basically since I started teaching, hours have been cut in colleges. Then I stopped teaching completely... for a few years. After that, I went into freelance work. So it's basically a matter of taking whatever there is. You're constantly adapting and looking for opportunities. You make it a positive thing, or you'd throw yourself out the window. You just adapt to change, as artists we have no choice. Friends with 'proper jobs' can't believe how many things I do all the time!"

"Working creatively, or being an artist isn't always seen as a proper job with economic value. But if you consider the real economic value of the creative industries in this country, that's not being mentioned at all in the whole Brexit process, compared with something like fishing, which is a tiny fraction - it's a symbolic thing. That government campaign about 'Fatima's next job' - I mean, find me an artist, or a dancer, or a musician who hasn't got four other jobs."

"I call it a mixed economy, but most of what I earn is from my studio work. 90% of what I do is spending time in the studio. You can have periods where you're doing more of one than the other, and it's not consistent. Perhaps that's one of the things that makes artists and people in the art world quite resilient and agile. They might have periods where they sell a lot of work, but then they might have dry periods where maybe it's just not selling as well... And it's not predictable, it's never like you're producing a product that's consistent... It's a rarefied few artists who can sell everything just because they've made it."

Are artists expected to work for free?

Our interviewees often described **being asked to work for free**, in line with the way that artists' labour is often under-valued and seen by outsiders as a 'hobby' or leisure activity, and not worthy of payment. Indeed, many described how **this unpaid labour is an essential part of what keeps the industry afloat**.

"[As an artist] you are unique in the institution [e.g. museum] in the sense that you're the only people who aren't being paid.. and I find it utterly exhausting, because I'm not a professional at copywriting, or designing the booklet or whatever. We're already doing the work of about 10 people."

"...a big, publicly-funded commissioning body needed an artist on the panel, and they got in touch and said "would you be the artist to help us choose commissions?" And I thought "yeah, great." I asked, "what's the fee?", and they said "there isn't one - we can pay your travel." So I said, "everybody in the room is being paid apart from the artist?" and they said, "oh, we hadn't ever thought of it like that..." Shocking!"

"I have to actively resist taking on things that would be rewarding to me [but are unpaid or poorly paid]... because I know my mental health, my ability to maintain myself, is going to be negatively affected by that. Society at large does not value the things that I, as an individual, value, therefore I am pressured to betray my own values in order to survive."

"There was a show I was about to be in... It's been cancelled now due to Covid. It might be postponed. ... we lost quite a lot of work due to stuff being cancelled. Good stuff... but we're in a lot of online festivals now, and that's a whole new thing, but there's no money in it. And quite often you have to pay a little bit to get in them anyway. But I suppose it's just the idea that works are getting out there into the world and that's quite nice."

"So there are contracted staff [in the gallery or museum] who are being paid £200-300 a day to build stuff or whatever. And we're being paid nothing [as the artists], but we need to be there. It's just this idea that we [artists] are paid in a lump sum, but no one else in any part of the institution would be paid in a lump sum that doesn't refer to labour. And I've been trying to work out where that idea came from!"

"I don't find it acceptable [that the vast majority of artists can't make a living from their work]. We wouldn't accept that in any other industry. We have Fairtrade wine, Fairtrade food, clothing, all the rest of it. Yet we expect artists to contribute to the common good for nothing, and - not only that - to pay for it. Not only are they not getting paid to do it, but they're investing in the product itself. Paying for the studio, the materials, paying for the exhibition, the PR materials, everything else. They're the only person in the room who doesn't get paid."

Are these working conditions sustainable?

Unsurprisingly, our interviewees often described these working conditions taking a **detrimental effect on their physical and mental health**. A constant sense of precarity, and a felt need to be productive, often led to long hours, stress and - sometimes - burnout.

“As an artist you’re never off duty, somehow you’re always behind. It’s hard to have a holiday: there’s no time off. I feel guilty when I’m not being productive [in my paid work] because it’s the time that I could be doing my art, which is the thing I like doing, and then that makes me feel weird about it, because then that means that art also gets consumed by the same demand for incessant production that I hate about capitalism!”

“Becoming an artist has become virtually impossible unless you’ve got money, your family is famous, or your father’s a filmmaker. I’m working class, and had no connections whatsoever, and no idea what it meant to be an artist, I just had a feeling I wanted to do it... so you could go to art school”

“It’s not so much the workload, although that is obviously a problem. The thing is that you can’t live your life according to the values that you hold. It’s a power struggle between you and the people who are giving you the money. And there isn’t really a culture of feedback, there isn’t a culture of care... What’s demanded of you is this really blind loyalty towards the project - and especially in public. Because you’re basically doing marketing [for the commissioners]... but at the same time I’m also meant to make it a meaningful, politically interesting project.”

“I think my mental health was massively affected by my life as an artist, to be honest. ...I was suffering from terrible anxiety and depression about my art career. It was just all consuming, and it crushed me, pretty much. That on top of the stresses of looking for work [to pay the bills] and looking after my child. I just got crushed.”

"I had a massive burnout... partly it's the carelessness of the industry, and partly it's how you're being socialised. I'm slowly unpicking that burnout [that I suffered just before Covid] as a thing where I just didn't know how to demand better working conditions for myself... I was a freelancer, working on a really big project, the biggest sum I'd ever been offered, trying to make something work that couldn't work. The brief was just impossible to deliver. It literally involved me working 12 hour days."

As well as long hours and burnout, others described how existing institutions and working conditions make it particularly difficult to those from more diverse backgrounds to persist as artists:

"The whole grammar, all of these unspoken rules [in the art world]. I'm a migrant, I don't know these things. I'm an outsider to the class of people [in the arts]... I am welcome anywhere in any museum right now, as a participant, as one of the 'hard to reach' demographics, and they'll photograph my afro, and make sure I'm on their marketing material. But they don't want me to work there. There's no space for me. And this is the epitome of the colonial hierarchical system still in place in the museum world... You are literally inferior... The world of museums and galleries treats me... like I'm invisible... I don't matter."

"In France, they understand that the arts are part of the whole cultural output. The people own culture, not the other way around. Whereas here it is market-driven, everything has to be quantified."

"After I graduated I tried to 'make it' but I didn't have any means, didn't have time, had small kids, was a single mum. It was: "OK, just go find a job". With having no means comes having no confidence. I was so naïve whilst studying, because I come from another country, and I really bought into that Blairite kind of 'hey we're going to include everyone'. I've never got anything, the doors were shut tight. I ran myself into the ground applying to all these schemes. I ticked so many boxes, I'm disabled, I'm a person of colour, I'm a single mum... they never took me. They need to make it look like the job was opened up... but it's still the same people being recruited, [it's down to] who you know and your networks. That's the way people get in, and I never got that. They say it's a glass ceiling. I'd say it's concrete - nothing will get through. It's impenetrable. It's like gaslighting."

“20 years ago, you’d go to art school, and then out you’d go, and just ...try and work it out, and probably squat for a while or whatever, it was seen as partly a lifestyle thing as well - for people who could afford that lifestyle, or who could scabble through to cope with that lifestyle whether they could afford it or not. And I think that’s changed as, politically with the instrumentalisation of the arts starting with New Labour, and how it became about also social work and medical care and now it’s social proscribing, and there is a drive to make the arts and artists more essentially monetisable, or to fit them into the national economy in a way that isn’t really what they’d expected.” Representative from Artquest

Who is excluded by contemporary working conditions in the art world?

Many interviewees worried that, as a result of working conditions in the contemporary art world, only a narrow range of people and lifestyles were compatible with continued practice. **‘Balancing’ precarious, underpaid labour with caring responsibilities - or finding oneself ‘out of place’ among the social groups dominant in artistic circles - risks art becoming an even more exclusive career.**

Framing these issues as a ‘lifestyle choice’ often legitimises the sense that such inequalities are inevitable. Art Council England’s stated remit “to make the arts and the wider culture of museums and libraries an integral part of everyday public life, accessible to all, and understood as essential to the national economy and to the health and happiness of society”¹⁷ will not be met if the future consists of elite artists making art for elite consumption.

¹⁷ CEBR (2019), Contributions of arts and culture industry to the UK economy, 12. Accessible at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/contribution-art-and-culture-sector-uk-economy>

Crucially, the lack of transparency about how difficult it is to sustain oneself as an artist, and the illusion of success created by many, masks fundamental inequalities. This allows the art world to believe its own hype: that it is a meritocracy and success is purely the result of hard work. As the 2018 study *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries*¹⁸ noted, “a high proportion of respondents to the ... survey believe that success in their sector is based on hard work and talent (otherwise known as ‘meritocratic’ beliefs), and [that] respondents who are most attached to this idea are highly-paid white men.” As the myth of meritocracy embeds inequality within the artworld, so does the framing of art as a lifestyle choice, leading to the situation where people are prepared to work for free, or for very little – they are then expected to be grateful for this ‘opportunity’.

“I’ve had conversations with women artists who say ‘I now have to make a decision whether or not I want to have kids, or be an artist, because I can’t afford to do both’ and this is obviously particularly acute in London, because of the insane cost of living.” Representative from Artquest

“I used to earn enough money to live [from my art practice] before I had a kid, but I would be going away on a residency once a year for 3 months, and I probably would have had a commission, or some kind of funded thing. For about 3-4 years I did that. ...I still did a few film jobs in there to make sure I could [afford to] live in London, but that was on a single-person’s budget. ... it was a lifestyle choice, but yes it was OK, it was liveable... I didn’t have any idea how much a kid would, kind of, ruin my career, in terms of having to be there [at home] full time.”

¹⁸ ‘Panic! 2018 - It’s an Arts Emergency!’, is a 2018 project incorporating the release of a major paper, led by sociologists from the Universities of Edinburgh and Sheffield, investigating inequalities in the cultural workforce, as well as a public programme that aims to make a significant step to start a more effective conversation within the industry. Further details can be found at: <https://createlondon.org/event/panic2018/>

"Since BLM happened, [I'm not from a Western background] I've been doing a lot of work [at my workplace], pretty much because my organisation is unable to do it, and it feels like the microaggressions have got more and more visible, and I've been able to see through more of my colleagues blind spots and ignorances... I would say they're still lacking quite fundamental knowledge of what racism is, and how it reproduces itself. So I guess I hadn't noticed how much pretending I'd been doing... I hadn't really noticed how much like a version of myself - that was palatable to a majority upper class white British office - I was being. And actually it really struck me how when we started going to back to the [office] a couple of days a week, the change in my voice, like the parts of my personality I was hiding. And in a way, I think the fact the BLM happened, just basically meant that I could just be myself more, without feeling that people would react badly to it."

"To talk about children. Most of the people I work with, these are women who often don't have time for a relationship, and could never even contemplate having children. The thought of being able to have a child is completely impossible to me because I have no stable income what-so-ever, so I'm always kind of joking 'I have neither kids nor a career'".

A representative from Artquest spoke about the dominant expectations they see circulating within the art industry:

"We at Artquest come down firmly on the side of equity - that it's not a job, but it is labour and it does deserve and require payment... We have priority in our programme for working with people from lower socio-economic backgrounds ... The same as being a professional sportsperson: there are a few people making all the money and then most people making no money at all. But in sport it's seen as more acceptable to be interested in sport, and playing football without the pressure of 'if you're not earning money being a footballer, then you're a failed footballer'. This is not a conversation people have - but they do about artists. And artists also do that themselves: present themselves as being successful and having residencies and exhibitions, but not talking about having to buy new shoes for the kids and they can't afford them, or whatever it is." Representative from Artquest

“Most people get [art] jobs from word of mouth; there’s hugely widespread nepotism in terms of internships, in terms of where opportunities come from. There’s being in the right network, and hearing about the right opportunity at the right time is the most valuable thing about it. All of which Artquest was intended to short-circuit. So it does go back to artists trying to present themselves as looking successful, which then starts to feed into the wider artworld also trying to look like it’s successful, rather than there being a more honest conversation amongst artists about how bloody hard it is, and how unfair it is. And I don’t think that’s really done very much. There’s a huge resistance to that.

For example, whenever we employ an artist to do a talk, we put it in their contract that they have to spend the first few minutes talking about what their circumstances are: are they living in a housing coop? How can they afford to be an artist? Do they have a private income? Does their partner have a good job and they don’t really have to worry about money? How do they actually keep it all together?... to try to demystify that. But we have so much pushback against it - some people are very happy to do it, but a lot of people are absolutely not going to do it, and they tend to be the ones with the private income or the ennobled parents. This kind of initiative - transparency - is doing work to chip away at the stubborn aura of success.” Representative from Artquest

Why are artists’ rights not better protected?

Given all the risks of an unregulated sector, with workers primed for exploitation, one would assume that artists would be inclined to protect themselves collectively against poor conditions. **However, while organisations and unions representing artists’ rights do exist, they remain less prevalent than might be expected.** Interviewees reflected on the possible reasons for this, while also identifying benefits that might come from increased union membership or other organising activities.

A recurring theme was a sense that - within a very competitive art world - young people, those who are able-bodied, have no dependents and have means, can afford to be precarious, to do zero hours contracts and 'undercut' their colleagues. Precarious contracts are rarely anyone's first choice, but they get presented as a "flexible" part time option because other standard contracts can be inflexible, with a consistent lack of good part time work in the field. Many thought that more value ought therefore to be placed on part-time work, job shares, and so on.

The reasons behind poor rates of unionisation are varied and complex, but many touched upon the fact that artists are a very dislocated and disparate workforce. Workers may rarely come into contact with other artist workers facing similar challenges to their own. The lack of a collective voice can also be ascribed to the stubborn endurance of the hyper-individualised, romantic ideal of the artist as individual genius, who needs no one but his own talent to survive and thrive. The interviewees also provided some insight into instances when organising has helped them to overcome some of these issues.

"The only model you see of an artist is one person in a studio making a genius piece of work. That story is still very powerful, and that's basically what our art education is still based on. Art education as it is in the UK - and as it's successfully spreading throughout the world - is a very Westernised idea of the artist generating this out of yourself, and being an individual, and art is the space of autonomy, where you can be free, and you can do what you want. And so that doesn't lend itself very well to a more unionised idea, where it's about compromise, and becoming more aware of where you give and where you take."

"It seems like artists are almost our own worst enemy, in a way. We sort of grumble about it, but at the same time, we're incredibly accepting of shit conditions... We'll talk about it, and be vocal about it, but still not join a union or do anything about it. There is this thing where it seems to be standard that you're a union member if you're a musician or an actor, and I think the rate card has something to do with that. We've got a recommendation for rates of pay, but we don't have a rate card, where members demand minimum pay, where you can say [as a union member, you must pay me this amount per hour]." Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

"There does seem to be a suspicion or an idea [among artists] that unions are too slow moving, that there's not enough direct action. And I think that's why UVW [United Voices of the World] is very popular, because they're very active and they participate in a lot of direct activity as well. And I think that there's this sense that there's something bureaucratic about unions that puts people off... That's some of the hesitation." Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

"Unionising is something that is never talked about in schools... Even in fine art BAs, everything is kind of geared around these individual stories of success, and within universities there's a lot of anti-union management. So the lack of awareness of what unions do in the first place, and then going into institutions that are hostile to the idea of being in a union." Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

Others picked up on the difference between artist unionisation in England and other parts of Europe:

"It's a fascinating question, that unionisation happens almost everywhere else in the world [but not here] - all across Europe, there's associations of visual artists, there's unions, there's *La Maison des Artistes* in France,¹⁹ who actually negotiate with galleries for [standardised] working conditions for artists, and so the fact that's not [the case] here I think is an anomaly. There was the National Artists Association (NAA) which folded just before Artquest started, and they did have some of that representative function, slightly like a union... and it was funded by the Arts Council England, but they decided at the time [over 20 years ago] not to fund it any more... When the NAA disappeared 20 years ago, the money that had been used for that was used in part to set up Artquest, but without any representative function - we were specifically never to have a membership. But that kind of advice, information, which could be about contracts, could be about pay, could be about working conditions, that's what we were set up to do, and that's a big part of what we still do. We have a free legal advice service that gets a lot of questions about copyright, about contracts etc... And a-n²⁰ had been around for around 20 years at that stage, so a-n slightly took over some of that function, although they were never representative... So I think it's probably a lot of reasons [why artists are poorly unionised in England], probably the structure of the art market in the UK as well; the fact that the NAA was around for a while, and then disappeared and was never really replaced."
Representative from Artquest

¹⁹ Created in 1952, *La Maison des Artistes* is the biggest association for artists in the visual arts and creators of graphic and plastic works active in France. See: <https://www.adagp.fr/en/what-maison-des-artistes>

²⁰ a-n is the largest artists' membership organisation in the UK with over 23,000 members. See <https://www.a-n.co.uk/>

“AUE... [takes on] individual cases, and we’ll liaise with short or long term employers, or institutions that have contracted, or not contracted members, and often that’s around people being offered work, being asked to do preparatory work, and then the institution pulling out and not paying for the preparatory work or damaging someone’s artwork and not paying for it, or saying someone’s got a fee, and actually when they get their contract it says that a percentage of that fee must be used for marketing, or something else. So then we’ll enter into negotiation to draw up a new contract or give them advice on that. We try and spread it between the exec... It’s all voluntary, but we pay the GFTU (General Federation of Trade Unions), for an administrator, to take on our day to day admin, so that it doesn’t need the exec [who are all voluntary] to do it. And then we pay freelancers to do the website, or update the coding or something.” Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

“There is a culture of fear around. There seems to be a fear of blacklisting, whether it exists or not, there is genuinely a fear from our members that if they make too much of a fuss, or if they call out an organisation for not taking care of freelancers, that it means they won’t ever get any opportunities again. And that does seem to be a recurring fear that we hear from people.” Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

Trade Unions for Artists

There are a number of trade unions (legally recognised and affiliated with the TUC) aimed at self-employed visual artists, principally:

- Artists' Union England (AUE)
- Scottish Artists Union (SAU)
- United Voices of the World's Designers + Cultural Workers (UVW-DCW).

All of these unions' memberships are growing steadily, numbers remain modest in contrast to those in comparable sectors such as Equity (the union for actors) or the Musicians Union. A full list of unions relevant to the sector with membership figures can be found in Appendix Two.

"Being a union member definitely does make a difference. Often when people come to us with case work, it's something that they've already tried to resolve themselves, and they've just been ignored, or all of a sudden their emails stop getting replied to. And then as soon as we write a letter, they're like 'oh sorry, we've just been very busy'. So we do get results. And this can be quite substantial institutions, and individual people just haven't got any response and have felt gaslighted, and then when the union writes to them, and says 'actually we're going to deal with this on behalf of this person now' then they start to reply, or offer a payment. It definitely helps, and it takes the pressure off someone feeling like they're on their own." Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

“DCW²¹ was almost like a research project in the beginning, asking ‘why are there no design unions?’, looking back at the history of design unions, and the problems that exist in the design world. We thought why set something up from scratch as if we’re separate from other workers, when actually UVW [as a union who already represents disparate workers, like migrant workers, service sector works, not like a traditional union set up] is already doing it, so we felt there was obviously a parallel there with freelance [design] workers. We also wanted to get away from this idea that design work can be seen as a more privileged type of work, it doesn’t mean that it doesn’t deserve protections. That even if you love what you do, it doesn’t mean you don’t need a trade union.”

“One of the problems we’ve been having with the freelance arena, is that some people say “I’m happy with a zero hours contract; I need a zero hours contract because my artistic work can be unpredictable, and for 3 months I might not be available”. For us [PCS Culture Group] this was undercutting what we are trying to do [i.e. get rid of zero hours contracts]. Actually what should happen, is that artists should get proper artist status which recognises the intermittence of their work and then there’s no justification for these organisations to say ‘oh, but people want a zero hours contract’.”

Representative of PCS Culture Group

21 *United Voices of the World - Design and Cultural Workers Sector (UVW-DCW)*; ‘DCW acts as a member support network: we support one another to find solutions to the problems we face and look for solutions collectively’ See: <https://www.uvwunion.org.uk/en/sectors/designers-cultural-workers/>

"It's often quite an isolated existence as an artist and quite disparate. When artists come into contact with other artists, it's often not within a framework of solidarity, it's in competition with one another. This is a system which pits artists against one another, and that alienates and isolates them. This is exacerbated by open calls [open entry exhibitions and projects] which are competitive by nature. It's about who decides these things - is it a small number of expert curators, or the workers, or the audiences?"

It comes down to how we allocate cultural resources and who decides. You can also explore the equality side of this, by examining boards made up of middle class or upper class white men and women - but mainly men. It's not equality. If you're going to allocate public funding to an artist in this way - i.e. through competitive open calls - you're going to reward the same people, just because they've already done loads of public commissions. Then you're missing out on something different... rather than paying big money for blue chip artists for public works, why not spread that pot much further and involve more local artists and communities."

Representative of PCS Culture group

What was the effect of the Covid pandemic?

By all accounts, the Covid crisis hit the creative and cultural sectors disproportionately hard, given its reliance on in-person events, such as performances, exhibitions, shows, festivals and concerts. In turn, this had a disastrous impact on workers in these sectors, who, like most of the artists interviewed for this inquiry, are frequently self-employed or work on low-paid precarious contracts.

The quotations below reveal how the interviewees' experiences of support from Arts Council England (ACE) during the pandemic were very mixed. While some resented having lost 'in-progress' grant applications to ACE at the start of the pandemic, others were pleasantly surprised at how many actually received ACE Emergency Response Funds. Others mentioned the difficulty in applying for ACE grants as a barrier - during the pandemic and prior - using ACE's notoriously bureaucratic online portal 'Grantium'.²²

We also hear the complaint that ACE does well to target its funding at institutions, but less well at distributing it to individuals in need of support. This is an ongoing issue for visual artists, who are rarely employed by or affiliated with particular institutions. As such, well funded museums and galleries are able to retain their administrative and managerial staff, but still none of the money gets through to the creatives who supply the content.

²² One of the interviewees notes: "The ACE portal is just extraordinary, even though they say they've made it easier, it is a phenomenal amount of work. And I know a lot of quite well-established artists, they don't have a lot of money, but they are successful, and they look at it and say I just can't do this. It's a huge barrier, and I don't understand why. A surprising number of artists wouldn't even consider it because it's so impenetrable."

Aside from ACE, some interviewees were able to access emergency government support through the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) and in the form of Universal Credit (UC), although there were many who were entitled to nothing, through no fault of their own. While interviewees were able to survive the crisis, the precarious nature of their work in the visual arts exacerbated their difficulties in making ends meet. In addition, for those with children, the lack of childcare and continuation of work from home created another level of stress that was not experienced by the child-free.

The experiences described below therefore back up research commissioned in May 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic by CVAN, along with Artists' Union England, a-n The Artists Information Company, Artquest, AxisWeb, and other arts organisations which found that:²³

- 58% were worried about the ability to get future work
- 44% of visual arts workers had permanently lost work when the first lockdown was enforced
- 20% felt that they were not eligible for support

"In the first lockdown, literally halfway through, I lost my job with a week's notice... I'd been working til midnight, and with my child at home, a 4 year old demanding attention all day, so I'd been working late to make up the hours. And with the film industry shutting down... they got rid of all the people they could get rid of, all of the freelancers got told to put themselves on furlough"

²³ Contemporary Visual Arts Network, et al. (2020) Impact of COVID-19 on Visual Arts Workers: Summary of findings. Accessible at: <http://newartwest-midlands.co.uk/editorial/impact-of-covid-19-on-visual-arts-workers-survey-results/>

"I'd had to get rid of my studio, because I could no longer afford it... I was saving the money"

"With my freelance [art and design] work, normally there'd be bits and bobs that I'd be offered... sometimes workshops, sometimes through a studio... and a lot of that didn't happen, and hasn't begun again. And I wasn't eligible for SEISS because I make more than 50% of my income from teaching. But I did get UC to make up for my lost income and help pay my rent."

"They got rid of freelancers. That's what they do in these kinds of situations, isn't it. We are the precarious workers."

"I couldn't even think about my art during the first lockdown, I was too busy working, exhausted, looking after my child... We did a little bit of creative stuff, but it wasn't really my art... It wasn't an uncreative time. After the initial shock and trauma of everything, I had more head space [after losing my job], I found it quite a good time for ideas. I found my local community, met the people upstairs, I found it quite inspiring in a way. Not that I made much, but I did write down a lot, and I had a lot more sleep! So the second half of lockdown was a pause. The first half was horrific, because I just couldn't cope with working, having a small child, the anxiety... just all that stuff going on around us and just not having enough sleep."

"Funding opportunities have dried up. Projects that used to rely on artists and curators meeting up are really difficult to fund at the moment. So yeah it's really down to Covid."

"I didn't qualify for SEISS because I haven't been self-employed long enough. But even if I had become self-employed the minute I was made redundant [early in 2019], even then, I would have not been eligible for government support, so that's a massive gap in the system. It is outrageous that the recently self-employed aren't eligible for anything."

"Before Covid, my life was just one ginormous, endless production cycle. I was just working 7 days a week, because I had to. It's scary what's going to happen in the future [as a freelancer] but because I got one of the covid grants from the government [SEISS]... that's a little breather."

Others had a more testing time with the 'support' available for artists during the pandemic:

"My creative work, my output as an artist has been decimated. Without my studio [since the studios at university closed] and without the ability to earn enough money to rent a studio, has meant that I'm stuck attempting to make artwork in my room, which is really hard to do... trying to make art in the same place where you sleep... it's very hard to focus. It's not just the physical problems that it's not a big enough space... it's the inability to focus."

"Because of neurodivergence, I have a problem filling in forms. I couldn't understand the ACE Emergency Response Funds applications. I needed support to fill them, and in the end I couldn't do it."

"I was part of a syndicate of people; we applied for the ACE emergency money. ACE doesn't know this, but we applied as individuals, but we're sharing out the money with a group of people, because so many people were excluded from that emergency grant. So I was part of some collective effort to look after each other and make a little personal economy of people sharing it out with each other... It's a really old model [ie the mutual fund] that's been used by working class communities, immigrant communities - pooling the money so that people who need it can have a chunk at the time when they need it. ...there's loads of people who fell through the SEISS, and can't apply for the ACE grant either, so it's our way, on a grassroots scale, just trying to mitigate the impact that that had on people."

"I've been looking for work since April [2020]. I'm managing to get interviews, but not anywhere beyond that... Plus, because I have life savings - in an ISA, which I've saved over the last 25 years [in lieu of] a pension, I'm not allowed any benefits. So I've just been basically living on my savings, and watching the pot get smaller and smaller."

"I didn't apply for ACE [Emergency Response Funds] - every time I looked at their criteria, it was so restrictive and so prescriptive. It's not been about artists just surviving, and maybe making work, or maybe just not having to make work at a time of crisis - it's always about writing a proposal. So I gave up. The deadlines were incredibly tight, and at the time it was impossible to be creative when the whole world was changing so much. I couldn't make up anything interesting enough that would tick the boxes they wanted. It was a very stressful period. I felt that if you could get up in the morning, and keep yourself clean and in one piece, that was all you could aim for. An ACE application was just beyond the realms of manageability."

"I got ACE [Emergency Response Funds] funding... because I lost freelance work, and I was able to prove that, and also because I argued that I was not eligible for any other funding... The criteria [for ACE emergency response funding] wasn't very clear, the examples they gave of what you can apply for weren't very clear. They essentially only gave one example - like equipment for your office. So that's what I applied for, and that's what I got. But it felt really cruel having to apply to buy a really expensive piece of equipment, just because that's more likely to get funding than your basic necessities... If I'd applied just to get money to cover my rent and bills, they probably would have said no."

"I was really pleasantly surprised to see how many artists did get ACE Emergency Response Funds, because actually that's quite a huge number of people. The official Artists Union England criticism was that the bulk of support was for larger institutions [rather than individual artists], and that it didn't come with conditions that would ensure retaining staff... who were most at risk of losing work. One of the responses from ACE to that was that they are not allowed to tell organisations how to run themselves." Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

"Although the union was happy to see the large % of people whose applications were successful, [got the ACE Emergency Response Funds] we were critical of the fact that people who had applications in-process, who'd already put months and months into writing them, that those were just automatically scrapped. Probably a lot of those proposals could have been tweaked, and that might have provided work for someone for a year rather than a few months. That's the thing that we felt showed a lack of understanding about the amount of preparation and research and work that people put into putting together an application. And the understanding also that generally people applying from project grants, that will sustain them, and also provide employment for other people for several months. So that was something the union was critical of." Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

Has the Covid pandemic threatened your future as an artist?

Looking cautiously towards the future, some interviewees were more hopeful than others about their prospects of surviving as an artist. For some, Covid represented a **major setback, pushing them into forms of employment in which artistic practice would be very difficult**. For others, the pandemic also seemed to be a moment that revealed the inequalities and injustices already present in the art world even more starkly.

“On a personal level, I don’t want to say that this is good moment, I mean like my finances are completely fucked, I have no future that feels relatively secure or stable. But there’s something about this whole freedom that I feel from being completely fearless, because the whole thing is falling down anyway. Before I was so invested in making this better.”

“I’m starting a new full time job next week. Back to what I did 10 years ago; full time; paid holiday - there will be no time for art. But I need to, to have a PAYE job, if there’s some chance this happens again, I’ll get some kind of furlough, or safety net. I just need to save up, I need to get paid every month... I have to take what’s offered... But it feels like I’ve gone back 10 years, and will be earning only marginally more than I earned 10 years ago. And all the people around me have doubled their salaries. But I’m going to get a liveable wage, monthly, holiday pay, but the art will have to go on the back burner for another few years. I feel like I’ve gone backward. Almost 10 years has been wasted”

“One of the things that I had planned to do after my degree [completed in July 2020], was to apply to a bunch of residencies, so that I’d have somewhere to work, and it would be good for my CV. And now, I have been applying to loads, but they’re all being pushed off into the future for next year, or they’ve become online residencies, and that’s completely the opposite of what I’d been planning. I wanted to hit the ground running after my degree, and it feels like the pandemic is stealing that time away from me, so that when everything does eventually settle down, I won’t be a newly graduated student any more.”

“It’s month by month. Hopefully, in 6 months time I’ll be surviving financially, but who knows. And you almost can’t think about it. Things have always been hand to mouth for me, but now it’s even more extreme. It’s not just Covid, it’s also to do with the fact that any kind of creativity isn’t valued, and we all have to be freelance. I’d love to have a proper job, and work, maybe 2 days a week, get well paid and get on with my practice the rest of the time. But those jobs don’t exist. Covid has just shown up how unequal, how bad our system is. And people are using it as a smoke screen. My employer has used it as a smokescreen for restructuring and redundancies. They’ll use any excuse to make their staff more precarious.”

Others wondered whether Covid would take more permanent effect on their artistic output:

“I don’t really think I will have much freelance [art and design] work in the future because there are so many people competing for the same things. I hoped maybe I’d be able to start my own things, or maybe apply to ACE. It would be nice to set something up, or do something on my own terms, rather than waiting for crumbs. I’ve made the choice not to do really corporate work, or go with an agency, and I probably could if I really had to, but I’ve been quite lucky in that I haven’t. There’s so much competition, but also there are so many people whose skills are better - anyone graduating now, their technical skills are amazing compared to mine.”

“The sense, like this shockwave going through the sector [art galleries and museums] that we’re going to get way way less funding very soon, and there’s this moment now where there’s all this cash being splashed about, but the moment Covid ends, it’s going to be like the apocalypse, and the demand to be productive is to show that the organisation [the gallery where I work] is valuable and worthwhile, and shouldn’t lose any funding, and should in fact get more funding. But then this creates this impetus to be constantly seeming to produce value, and it’s way way easier to produce the appearance of value than it is to produce value. ...When we’re all so busy being productive, who has the time to actually consume anything?”

“I’m giving up on an idea of a career that I had [as an artist] because I felt, coming from a working class background, I had to prove that I can exist in that middle class artworld. That I can make my money from it, and that I’m legit, you know, that I’m a proper artist. Because I internalised it - even though it’s bullshit, I internalised this idea of meritocracy and that you’re only good as an artist if you make your work, and you keep going, and at some point something’s going to work. And that’s such a damaging thing. Even if I say that on an intellectual level, on an emotional level I’m still really invested in it, even though it doesn’t make any sense. So it’s about unlearning a lot, and retraining yourself, and thinking about, what does stability mean to me? What does security mean to me? These interests that I have that have lead me into art, where else can they go?”

Has the Covid pandemic generated any new opportunities?

Some of the interviewees - particularly those who received various forms of support - nevertheless reported some unexpected positive effects during the pandemic: having more time on their hands, or being pushed into creative directions they never would have previously discovered. Others found access to support and funding that might not have come their way had it not been for Covid.

Increased time

"I got to spend a lot more time by myself, which was quite nice, in my studio, so that was initially beneficial. I did some handyman-type jobs, learning whilst I was doing it... learning from YouTube videos. Just to have long periods, like a block, being able to do stuff [in the studio] was greatly beneficial. It's been quite a fortunate situation... If I hadn't got that [SEISS], I would have been looking for work."

"I don't know if it changed [my practice] but it provided other output opportunities, you know like Instagram takeovers, peer forums where people who are not based in London can show up, on an equal footing, which has been quite good."

During the Covid lockdowns, many people stuck at home took up arts and crafts, with activities such as drawing, embroidery knitting and pottery peaking on social media. Capitalising on this new found enthusiasm for art at home, Channel 4 hastily commissioned Grayson's Art Club (first broadcast 27th April 2020), a semi-educational series in which the popular artist and his wife shared and celebrated the works of 'amateur' artists from all over the country "making new works and hosting masterclasses set to unleash our collective creativity during lockdown." As such, the Covid crisis has seen people from all parts of society re-evaluate their lives, leading to a greater recognition of the positive role that art and culture might take in a future focused on wellbeing, living a fulfilled life and to our changing national identity.

“Creatively in a lot of respects it was probably good, because all of a sudden I’ve got all this free time, I mean furlough was like a UBI for a lot of people - although not UBI, because it wasn’t universal. But having all that time was amazing in some ways, but also being in lockdown really negatively affected [my mental health] so there was this constant tension of like ‘oh everybody’s going to go write their novel now’ but at the same time feeling like I’m actually anti-productivity, like politically, but also for my own wellbeing. I need to focus on just not being productive. It’s just that same tension of like I want to seize this opportunity, but I also need to live in the reality we’re in, which is not terribly conducive [to creativity]... I was also doing web-development work over that period, when I was mentally able to do that kind of work, to also bolster my income as much as I could.”

“The art sector itself was in trouble - the professional art sector - galleries, museums, Arts Council, they weren’t in a position [to help artists] either, because they were looking at massive losses [once the first lockdown started]... I just saw that there was no way artists were going to get a look in here, and we were just going to be left out in the cold, and I literally wrote on a piece of paper “assets”. What are my assets? Artworks, and a culture of trust and generosity - something I’ve fostered through a mentoring programme [I’ve been running].”
Matthew Burrows, Founder of Artist Support Pledge

Artist Support Pledge

Artist Support Pledge was a creative solution to the immediate financial problems that artists were facing during the pandemic, founded by arts Matthew Burrows at the start of the first lockdown on 16th March 2020. It's a good example of how the crisis engendered creative solutions and positive actions. Comprising just a simple set of rules of engagement, it is open to anyone who can get online:

"The project uses social media platform Instagram, a popular platform for artists to post images and share their work. Artists and makers can post their images using hashtag #artistsupportpledge giving details of their works and price (no more than £200 or equivalent). If people are interested in buying, they message (DM) the artist. Anyone can buy the work and artists don't need permission to join. Every time an artist reaches £1,000 of sales, they pledge to buy £200 of work from other artist(s)."

ASP has certainly been very successful - and helped a large number of artists - with an estimated £70m in sales generated (up to end of Nov 2020). However, ASP is an appropriate platform only for artists who speculatively make 'objects' which can be sold (be they paintings, photographs, drawings, prints, sculptures, etc). It is not so useful to some of the artists interviewed in this inquiry, who have non-object-based practices (video, performance), or operate more through workshops and social engagement.

"[I was just scraping by] and then I spotted the Artist Support Pledge. To be honest, I wasn't sure if selling work for £200 would a) be possible, b) be a good idea in terms of revealing the prices of your work and c) be revealing that actually you'll flog something off relatively cheaply. I mean what does this mean for your amazing art career that you're gonna sell stuff for £200?! But then... you need the cash, just do it. But then I realised it takes me such a long time to make these paintings. £200 - in terms of labour, it's not a great hourly rate for doing them. ...I made almost a couple of grand, but... First of all it was all to friends. So I haven't sold anything to a stranger, not a single thing through the hashtag.. [However] it's been an amazing motivator.... Now I'll go there [the studio] once my child is in bed, so my studio time has gone up exponentially compared to what it was, and I'm kind of engaged with my practice again. I needed something just to get me going and to get me painting again. And it's worked. Going to the studio is what's pulling me through this time."

Solidarity

"In terms of DCW (United Voices of the World; Design and Creative Workers Section), I started getting active in May [2020] and I think [lockdown] has afforded us to be able to meet [virtually] so much and to organise with people across the UK. I wonder what it will be like when we can meet up in real life again.... I think we've seen a huge surge in our union since Covid in terms of member numbers... people definitely know they need to join one [a union] and that has really helped. It's also meant that people are more likely to become engaged, ... and come to understand what workplace struggle means, and what inequality means. But I also think a lot of art workers have always innately known that, because it's been part of how they've had to make rent at the end of every month."

“There have been really positive aspects of shifting online, but it’s just not been through creative projects predominantly. It’s been through connecting with union members [in different parts of the country] that geographic decentralisation has been really good. But it hasn’t happened for me, at least, in terms of creative activity, it’s happened in activism around the sector and how fucked it is.”

“We’re trying to unionise [my colleagues] which is something that we’d attempted to do multiple times in the past, but just never quite got the willpower together from the staff. But this moment provided an opportunity for all the people who were furloughed to come together and discuss our conditions and how we were being treated, and we were like yeah, now we need to do it. So that became a really big focus for that period of time [during lockdown].”

Other unions had similar stories:

“[Unlike other unions] UVW don’t differentiate between salaried workers and freelance workers. If you join as a member you get their resources regardless of what the working situation is, which I think is a really positive thing [for those who work in freelance art careers] ...Traditional union structures don’t accommodate all the ways in which workers are being exploited... This [UVW] is a younger union, it’s got far less resources than these bigger, older unions, but it’s trying to approach the problem in a different way. Hopefully we can build it into something that really works.”

“We [AUE] thought more and more people [members] would drop off, and we did hear from people who said ‘I’m going to have to cancel my membership, because I can’t afford it, because I’ve just lost all of my work’, but we actually had more people signing up, at a greater pace than we would have normally. And with that more enquiries. ...We also thought that if there was less work available, we’d get less enquiries about case work or issues, but actually we ended up having more. Artists were still getting asked to do things for nothing, like ‘well you haven’t got anything else to do at the moment’ sort of thing. We were just appalled. It was outrageous.... People were contacting us about seeing an increase in ‘opportunities’ that were unpaid, but offering ‘exposure.’”
Representative of Artists Union England (AUE)

"I joined the union during the first lockdown in April [2020]. If any positives have come out of the pandemic, it's people flooding into unions. The growth of all the unions in the UK has been amazing during this crisis because everyone's remembered again why they're so important. And people being trained in organising, and activism, has sky-rocketed. And people remembering that collecting and organising can actually change things. So yeah, I think that's a positive, and I'm really thankful for my union, and it's well worth the money... So that was an eye-opener. This was the first time I joined a union, and I'm going to be a union member as much as I can for the rest of my life now."

A world turned upside down?

"The art world is very white, and very unequal, but I think that is beginning to be held up [for scrutiny]. But I don't know how held up [to scrutiny] it can be, unless people are paid better."

"What would it actually mean if all these recovery funds that are being dished out at the moment, if they weren't prioritising the imagination of the people who are already in charge, but if it was actually really thinking, what do we need in the culture sector? To not just repeat everything from before [that wasn't working]. That money [Cultural Recovery Fund] is going to be given to all these institutions with a very clear political agenda - we've already seen that with the Oliver Dowden letter about museums not being able to challenge their colonial history. What would it mean if all these policies weren't just made by a very select elite group of people?" Representative from Migrants in Culture

"The [artworld] constantly thinks it has to prove it is relevant and valuable, partly because it's a subsidised sector. Like 'the Tate has closed, but here's a million digital workshops you can do at home with your kids' just doing what we did do before, not very well, and we're just going to move it online now. They [art institutions] almost feel like if they're not constantly producing, and not caught in this super neoliberal logic of 'we need to constantly be working, we cannot afford a day's rest' [they are not worthy of their funding]."

And that filters down to what people [artists] are expected to do. A lot of these people, these projects are running their bodies completely into the ground. They are exhausted, and I see that.”

What could the culture sector do to lobby government effectively? The culture sector should be at the forefront of a 4 day week, and all these issues. But they’re so busy competing, and being productive, in a useless way that just looks productive.” Representative from Migrants in Culture

We see from these quotations that Covid has provided the opportunity for a reset, a chance for new ideas to address some of the embedded inequalities in the art world. One example already happening is the bringing-together formerly disparate organisations to form a cohesive platform for campaigning, such as the Contemporary Visual Arts Network (CVAN), who have set up a series of regional groups to help support visual artists across England.²⁴

In the face of a potential new era of austerity, arts organisations are coming together more than ever to fight for their sector and institute positive changes.

However, we must also be wary of some of the so-called opportunities for artists that have arisen during the pandemic - the ‘opportunity’ to work for free is always a hidden pitfall. Even when individual artists can afford to offer their labour unpaid, this leads to an expectation that artists will and should work without pay, and devalues their work, lowering the bar for those in their wake who may not be able to afford to do so. Often this hidden labour masquerades as leisure, and hours spent on social media often blur the boundaries.

24 See CVAN, accessible at: <https://www.cvan.art/coming-soon/>



III.

**SUPPORTING
THE ARTIST-AS-
WORKER:
POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS**

Supporting the artist-as-worker: policy recommendations

The generous and candid testimony from these interviewees has helped to shed light on how artists - as workers - have sustained their careers and lives, both before and during the Covid pandemic. To fellow visual artists and those working in the arts and culture sectors, many of these stories are likely to resonate: familiar tales of financial hardship, unpaid work and exploitation, all undervalued by a society that places a high value on the idea of art, but a low value on the labour required to produce it.

The interviews paint a picture of an art world that functions only for a select minority of financially successful artists. The sector was exploitative and unequal long before the pandemic, with artists often working unpaid across a range of projects, events and exhibitions in both the public and private spheres. The pandemic has not only emphasised and highlighted these structural inequalities, but in many cases also exacerbated them. However, with crisis comes opportunity, and indeed many of the interviewees made positive suggestions for how their working lives might be improved, which we examine in our conclusion, along with other possible policy solutions.

With the UK government's declared intention to "build back better", there are opportunities for the arts and culture sector, redefined with inclusivity at its heart, to form the backbone of cultural and economic recovery. Sadly, at the time of writing, the reverse appears to be the case, with swinging cuts to public funding of art and design courses in higher education recently announced.²⁵ The third section of the report offers a selection of recommendations that would help to put arts and culture at the heart of the recovery from Covid. These would benefit artists individually, socially and economically, whilst offering numerous benefits to society more broadly. In short, the arts-based recovery outlined here would offer wide-ranging opportunities to the most excluded and disenfranchised in society, fulfilling the so-called 'leveling up' agenda whilst offering excellent value for the public purse.

1. Acknowledge the problem

'Fixing' the problems facing artists as workers first requires the industry, and those who labour within it, to recognise them. This report, in part, is an attempt to begin this process. Indeed, many of the artists we spoke to felt trapped. On the one hand, 'keeping up the appearance' of 'success' - and therefore downplaying the deep difficulties they often faced - was taken to be vital in a very hierarchical and competitive art world. On the other hand however, they were very often struggling to make ends meet, suffering from poor pay and working conditions, with knock on effects to their physical and mental health. Admitting this in public, though, was taken to be equivalent to admitting that they were unsuccessful - or in other words, to be avoided.

25 Weale, S. (2021) 'Funding cuts to go ahead for university arts courses in England despite opposition', The Guardian. Accessible at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/20/funding-cuts-to-go-ahead-for-university-arts-courses-in-england-despite-opposition>

As a representative from Artquest noted, “artists present themselves as being successful and having residencies and exhibitions, but not talking about having to buy new shoes for the kids which they can’t afford, for instance”. Another artist articulated the problem even more concisely: “I just want to turn things around, I mainly want people to start by telling the truth about where we’re at. Until that happens, we’re still imagining that there are more opportunities than there really are.”

What existing projects can we build on? In addition to more recent campaigns by groups such as White Pube, who have made transparency central to their recent manifesto - ‘people across the creative industries need to declare if they have rich parents who helped them get where they are today’²⁶ - organisations such as Artquest, a-n The Artists Information Company, CVAN and Arts Council commission surveys and studies into the state of artists’ working lives - many of which feature as evidence in earlier sections of this report - have begun to bring the working conditions of artists to the attention of a wider public. But so long as the ‘grass roots’ art world continues to attempt to model itself on the capitalist structure of the ‘blue chip’ art world, with its almost limitless supply of liquidity, and as long as the model of success for young artists involves selling their work to oligarchs and Sheiks, there is little hope of reform.

²⁶ The manifesto also included calls for similar proposals we recommend in this report, such as Universal Basic Income, and could be seen across public billboards in London and Liverpool during 2021. See <https://www.thewhitepube.co.uk/about>

Covid has helped to forge greater cooperation among a formerly disparate set of artists' organisations, now working more closely together towards common aims. On 8th Sept 2020, CVAN launched the Visual Arts Alliance, which so far includes national sector support organisations [a-n](#) [The Artists Information Company](#), [Artquest](#), [AxisWeb](#), [Creative Workspace Network](#), [Curator Space](#), [DACS](#), and [International Curators Forum](#). They've argued that, to

'build back better' we need a new approach, one where we address inequalities, the climate emergency and the imminent economic hardship that will be faced by many. This is the moment where we must come together to ensure that artists play a leading and pivotal role in pushing for societal change, where we challenge established ways of working, thinking, and being in the world."²⁷

December 2020, CVAN, in collaboration with a-n, the All-Party Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group, and think tank Policy Connect, launched a paper titled *Visual Arts: The beating heart and soul of building back better*.²⁸ This report acknowledged that "if the visual arts are to contribute more to tackling loss of employment, social disparities and inequality, and to continue to provide, as the Culture Secretary said in July 2020, the "soul of our nation" system changes are needed".²⁹ It makes policy suggestions about how the government and DCMS can improve the situation in the sector so that it continues to support the economy and the Covid recovery:

²⁷ See (2020), 'CVAN Presents... A Visual Arts Alliance: what can and should it achieve for the sector?', Online Webinar, Accessible at: <https://cva-network.squarespace.com/past-webinars/2020/7/23/a-visual-arts-alliance-what-can-and-should-it-achieve-for-the-sector>

²⁸ See, CVAN et al., (2020), *Visual Arts: The beating heart and soul of building back better*. Accessible at: <https://www.creativelancashire.org/posts/visual-arts-the-beating-heart-and-soul-of-building-back-better>

²⁹ Ibid.

1. Formally define the value of the visual arts sector and measure in DCMS trade figures, using similar criteria as for craft, and establishing a group of visual arts-specific Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes.
2. Set an annual growth strategy and targets for the visual arts and ask for the same to be done at the local level.
3. The Government should extend and simplify current tax incentives for small galleries and new artists ... to support the government's levelling-up agenda. Specifically, the Museums and Galleries Exhibition Tax Relief should be rolled-over for a further five years, increased and expanded.
4. Remove barriers to talent from abroad.
 - Visual artists should be explicitly part of the government's proposed 'Global Talent' immigration route as it is developed, using the new Standard Occupational Classification code(s) in Recommendation One.
5. Strengthen networks to deliver social inclusion and diversity
 - To provide capacity for the existing network of galleries, local authorities, schools and universities to operate more effectively together and provide sector leadership, collaboration funding should be provided through the government to support delivery of the growth targets in Recommendation Two.

The fact that current SOC codes³⁰ describe artists' labour so poorly is significant, as an Artquest representative explains: "it is a problem, because it [the art world] has to make itself legible to governments and policy makers, rather than the other way round - states aren't interested in the mess, they want everything to be measurable - that's how they operate."

Research by the OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus OECD Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sectors (published Sept 2020)³¹ further underlines why artists' poor visibility to the state is a problem

"Cultural employment is often underestimated in official statistics for a number of reasons. When estimating cultural employment, it is difficult to determine what proportion of some economic activities and occupations is genuinely cultural. For this reason, activities and occupations which are only partially cultural are often excluded from official cultural employment statistics. In addition, labour force surveys include only a respondent's main paid job and do not capture the secondary employment or volunteer employment, which is present in CCS [Creative and Cultural Sectors]".³²

30 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes classify jobs 'in terms of their skill level and skill content... [they are] used for career information to labour market entrants, job matching by employment agencies and the development of government labour market policies'. See ONS, 'SOC 2020', accessible at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020>

31 OECD (2020), OECD Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sectors, accessible at: <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/>

32 Ibid., 6.

Further,

“CCS also have sector-specific and highly varied business models that government policies do not sufficiently recognise. For example, business models vary across CCS from not-for-profit and public institutions (e.g. museums, libraries) to large for-profit players (e.g. Netflix, Spotify). What is typical for a large share of creative professionals or micro-businesses in the CCS sector is that economic growth or profit making is not always the primary goal but it is rather instrumental to remaining in the creative business, which is the intrinsic goal. For many of them, intrinsic motivation and personal satisfaction from the completion of their creative tasks are important additional drivers of their work. Many creative businesses are based on intangible assets, such as highly specific forms of skills and expertise, networks of social relations, or reputation and credit in specific creative communities. These intangible assets make it challenging for them to access business supports and credit, as lending institutions may be reluctant to provide credit due to difficulties in the valuation of intangible assets.”³³

Acknowledging the problem first relies upon **acknowledging the work that artists actually do, and the conditions in which they labour**. This is a crucial step in making poor conditions from the artist as worker more visible, rendering their positive contribution to society easier to define and, hopefully, defend against future spending cuts.

2. Build 'artist-as-worker' solidarity through trade unions

Our interviewees told us time and again that they regularly faced expectations that they, as artists, would or should work for free. Note that this is not in reference to the speculative work artists undertake in their own studios, doing research, developing their practice and making art which may or may not be exhibited - this activity is by its nature unpaid, except in the extremely rare event that an artist has some kind of patron. And while it is desirable to be paid to exhibit work, the possibility that publicly displayed art might sell is often in this case motivation enough. Rather, this refers to the unpaid work that artists are continually asked to undertake through 'donating' their time to work on projects, presentations, give talks, do residencies, participate in events and sometimes even to teach or undertake sizable public commissions.

Despite the obvious disadvantages it presents, many artists continue to offer their labour unpaid. In doing so, often under significant pressure, they end up perpetuating a cycle of inequality: devaluing their own labour and making it harder for others who subsequently find themselves in similar positions to demand fair pay. These actions are usually fostered by an atmosphere of competitive individualism, along with the idea that it's a 'dog eat dog world out there', and if you don't take this 'opportunity' someone else will, and it might just be your lucky break, and so on. While this idea has been addressed by artists groups over the years, it is one which would be best addressed in art schools.

The Precarious Workers Brigade have begun to take action on this front. They describe themselves as a “UK-based group of precarious workers in culture & education. We call out in solidarity with all those struggling to make a living in this climate of instability and enforced austerity”.³⁴ Their pamphlet *Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability and Reclaiming Education* includes “tools for critically examining the relationship between education, work and the cultural economy.” They identify solidarity as the key antidote to this kind of willing self-exploitation, which for artists can be found in all sorts of guises: through graduate networks, studio groups, crit groups, artist coops, membership organisations and, of course, trade unions.

“How do we begin to break the love spell that work has us under? We might begin by understanding that love is a thing that happens between people. It is necessarily reciprocal, like solidarity. Love was once considered potentially subversive precisely because it encouraged people to value something other than work. No wonder the workplace had to absorb it. Work cannot offer it, but other people can. And it is precisely those bonds of solidarity to extend beyond the transactional relationships of the workplace that can help us break free.”³⁵

34 See Precarious Workers Brigade (2016), *Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability and Reclaiming Education*. This is a critical resource pack for educators teaching employability, ‘professional practice’ and work-based learning. Accessible at: <https://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/TrainingForExploitation>

35 Jaffe, S. (2021) *Work Won't Love You Back*, 13.

Solidarity is a foundational force for change, and one which we saw from many of the interviewees offered hope, strength and practical support through the Covid crisis. The structural inequalities inherent in the art world are replicated across other sectors that also rely on short term contracts, and are familiar to such precarious, freelance workers, often on zero hours contracts by another name - including academics, journalists, musicians and actors. But, in contrast with these other freelance sectors, visual artists are very poorly represented within trade unions. For the sake of comparison, the University and Colleges Union (representing academics) has over 115,000 members; National Union of Journalists has 35,000; Musicians Union has 30,000 and Equity (the actors' union) has 46,000, whilst the Artists Union England (AUE) has 600 (July 2021) and the Scottish Artists Union has 1800 - though it ought to be noted that these are both relatively young organisations. Poor rates of unionisation mean that artists often go without access to advice and support around working rights and conditions, and are open to exploitation.

Far more significant unionisation of artists-as-workers is likely necessary to achieve the collective bargaining power necessary to set higher expectations for working standards and rates of pay. UCU, NUJ and Equity and MU all have strict guidelines on rates and conditions for their members with which to hold employers to account. AUE has made a start on this, by offering structured pay guidelines to its membership, along with a-n, while Artquest offers related advice. But without the bargaining power of a broader union membership behind them, individual artists are often the last to be paid out of stripped-back budgets and austerity-ravaged finances - if they are paid at all.

Other unions have also made a vital recent contribution to representing artists' concerns: several of our contributors were active in *United Voices of the World's Designers and Cultural Workers* section (UVW-DCW), PCS Culture and Bectu, who represent non-artist freelancers in museums and galleries. A broader spread of unions is to be welcomed: the more actively representing self-employed workers in the art world, the better the chances are of conditions improving. However, it seems that many artists remain unaware of AUE (or UUVW-DCW), so one way of increasing membership might simply be to publicise their services more widely to potential members. This might mean greater social media presence, or actions as simple as putting posters on notice boards in art schools.

The role of trade unions also desperately needs to be reinserted into art education. One interviewee suggested that teaching the history of the trade union movement, alongside skills such as consensus decision-making, conciliation and conflict resolution, could well lead to greater solidarity among artists.

3. Explore new models of funding

The phrase 'the artist is always the lowest paid person in the room' was heard from many of the interviewees, but there was also an acknowledgement that in the UK at least there remains some public funding for artists. However, it was often felt that such funding was frequently targeted at institutions, who then channel it into hiring arts administrators and gallery/museum staff (i.e. salaried roles) rather than using it to pay artists to make art. Putting public money directly into artist's pockets is something that even the most well-intentioned of policy-makers seems to have trouble doing.

During the pandemic, applying to ACE for Emergency Response Funds was an individual artist's only way of directly accessing arts-specific subsidies, and even then the bulk of the Culture Recovery Fund went primarily to "bricks and mortar and employees".³⁶

Other countries established forms of Covid compensation, aimed at providing incentives for artistic creation. The Lithuanian government, for instance, has instituted three-month long scholarships for artists and cultural creators (EUR 1,800 each). New Zealand, through the Arts Continuity Grant, supported creative and professional development, and the creation, promotion, and distribution of new work up to NZD 50,000.³⁷

Subsidising space

An alternative form of subsidy, with rents across the country sky high and rising, would be access to affordable studio spaces, which eludes many artists. As one interviewee pointed out, giving artists free, or very cheap studios "is the most effective form of subsidy. And it hasn't ever happened [in the UK]. ... it does happen in other countries, Canada used to subsidise artists studios." Through its 'Culture Plan', the City of Vancouver, for instance, has created and subsidised studio space for artists 'to create the conditions necessary for the awarded artists to create meaningful artistic work, experiences, and relationships in [the city].'³⁸

³⁶ See Wade, L. (2021) 'Lack of support for theatre is to discourage dissent, says top playwright', The Guardian, accessible at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jun/25/laura-wade-theatre-posh-home-im-darling-government-cuts-arts>

³⁷ See OECD (2020), OECD Culture Shock, 28. Accessible at: <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/>

³⁸ See 'Artist Studio Award Program', City of Vancouver. Accessible at: <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/artist-studio-award-program.aspx>

DACS, the not-for-profit visual artists' rights management organisation in the UK, also made a similar proposal to rent out 'vacant commercial spaces to artists rent-free for three years' a central proposal of their 'Manifesto for Artists' published in response to the pandemic.³⁹ During Covid, some studio complexes in the UK were able to access ACE Emergency Response Funds and thereby use the funds to reduce their artists' rents. However, this form of subsidy is both indirect and temporary. More permanent, direct forms of subsidised studio space provision ought to be explored.

Universal Basic Income

A bolder way to subsidise creative practice - and put money directly into artists' pockets rather than see it channelled through arts administrators - is to introduce a Universal Basic Income (UBI). UBI is a regular, unconditional cash payment, designed to ensure everyone a guaranteed income floor, regardless of their circumstances, and is universal, meaning everyone within a geographically defined area receives it. Reflecting on the pandemic, some interviewees often described the benefits of being furloughed or claiming SEISS as akin to a period of universal basic income: "I mean furlough was like a UBI for a lot of people - although [not properly...] because it wasn't universal."

³⁹ See DACS (2021), Manifesto for Artists. Accessible at: <https://www.dacs.org.uk/about-us/manifesto>

Many have outlined a range of possible benefits from a UBI for artists and other self-employed or freelancer workers:

“When financial insecurity is taken away, people pay off debts, retrain, set up businesses, the young stay on at school and the poor make less demands on health and welfare systems. Everyone who receives UBI ends up contributing to economic growth, either through their own entrepreneurialism or through increased consumer spending. In short, UBI should be seen as a stimulus that encourages creativity and entrepreneurialism by removing financial insecurity. If you are a freelancer, the benefits of UBI are clear. It would provide you a steady income to tide you over between jobs and to support you when sick or on holiday. If you currently have a day job to pay the bills, UBI means you have the choice to leave the day job and create the headspace you need to develop other projects”.⁴⁰

It isn't surprising that UBI has gained momentum and popularity during the pandemic as equitable and good value for the state. The use of “stimulus cheques” in the United States, and other direct payment schemes around the world, has shifted attention towards the potential benefits of direct, unconditional, non-means tested forms of financial support. The First Minister of Wales, for instance, has also recently announced his intention to trial a basic income scheme in the country over the next parliamentary term, albeit focused on a cohort of care-leavers.⁴¹

40 “Over the past couple of months SDUK has been working to ensure that the freelance workforce is protected, and represented. As part of our work we are releasing some research into the importance of the freelance workforce in the creative sector, and also into a variety of financial schemes that have helped support a freelance workforce in other contexts. These ideas are starting points for discussion - this is an ‘opening offer’ rather than a fixed set of recommendations.” Stage Directors UK. (2020) Supporting the Freelance Creative Workforce, 16.. Accessible at: <https://stagedirectorsuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Supporting-a-Freelance-Creative-Workforce.pdf>

41 See Autonomy (2021) Piloting a Basic Income in Wales. Accessible at: <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/ubi-in-wales/>

In Ireland, responding to the Covid crisis, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, published *Life Worth Living: The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce* in November 2020.⁴² Referencing the OECD Culture Shock report, this acknowledged that “employment and income support measures are not always accessible or adapted to the new and non-standard forms of employment ... that tend to be more precarious and are more common in the Culture and Creative Sector” and argues that sustaining the sector is both an economic imperative and a cultural and social necessity, and that investment “will return distinctive benefits for our lives as individuals, as social beings, and as communities. It will also generate significant dividends for our creative economy, our tourism industry and our international standing.”⁴³

As such, its principal recommendation was a 3-year UBI pilot for arts sector workers, citing recent evidence from Finland showing that “recipients of UBI were not deterred from seeking employment to further improve their circumstances. Ireland’s artists’ basic income pilot has progressed rapidly, with €25 million now set aside to fund 2,000 artists over the course of three years. The Minister for Arts, Catherine Martin, has noted that ‘applications for the Basic Income pilot for artists and arts workers will open in January 2022’, with ‘the scheme... up and running in spring’.⁴⁴ Recipients will be given €325 a week, to be added onto any further taxable income.

42 Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Ireland), (2020), *Life Worth Living*. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/4769e-arts-and-culture-recovery-taskforce-report-published/>

43 Ibid., 8.

44 *Journal of Music*. (2021), ‘Basic Income Pilot for 2,000 Artists and Arts Workers to Begin in Spring 2022’. *Journal of Music*. Accessible at: <https://journalofmusic.com/news/basic-income-pilot-2000-artists-and-arts-workers-begin-spring-2022>

Although Ireland's UBI pilot remains one of the most exciting recent initiatives, other countries also have more substantive support schemes for artists-as-workers. For example, the French *Intermittence de Spectacle* system acts as a safety net for performing artists, musicians, and backstage workers, accounting for the irregularity of work in this sector: "once you're officially recognized as a working artist, you're assured of having a vital minimum... It's based on how much you work. But even if it's not much, you'll have a fixed sum to get you through."⁴⁵ Similar systems could be introduced in the UK, covering visual artists and others who work in the sector. This might provide the kind of support that the participants in our study have craved. A more restrictive system than UBI, however, confined only to creative freelancers, would require a system of recognition for inclusion.

For example, it could be available only to graduates of certain art courses, or members of certain trade unions, or even professional trade bodies (which currently do not exist, so would need to be instigated as part of the policy design). This may bring its own set of problems around inclusivity, but implemented with sensitivity, such support could solve many of the financial issues this inquiry identifies.

45 Beardsley, E. (2021) 'In France, Performing Artists are Guaranteed Unemployment Income', NPR. Accessible at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/11/954994402/how-france-is-helping-its-artists-during-the-pandemic?t=1629468252864>

4. A New Deal for the arts

A further state-sponsored solution to the poor situation of artists-as-workers could take the form of a 'New Deal', modelled on the 1935 USA Federal Art Project (FAP). This was the visual arts division of the New Deal/Works Progress Administration, and provided employment for approximately 5000 artists across 48 states until 1943.⁴⁶ Central to the project was the employment of artists for a standard living wage, paid for their daily labour, rather than their status as a 'famous' or 'successful' artist.

A contemporary update to this policy might see every government department, local council and company or entity with over 200 employees obliged to offer work to an artist. This could be through residency programmes, or more traditional roles inside the organisation, to be negotiated by the artist and recruiter. It might not be PAYE employment, but could offer the artist 1-2 days work per week, paid at a pre-approved standard rate, over a period of 6-12-18 months, as appropriate to the parties involved.

ACE, or the other devolved arts agencies, could administer such a scheme, which is not dissimilar to current (albeit isolated) initiatives, such as the engagement of an official 'election artist' during general election years, most recently Cornelia Parker in 2017. Similarly, the 'Section 106 agreement' which forms part of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, requires developers to spend a certain proportion of their budget on offering something to the local community that will enhance and aid the local area.

⁴⁶ It was preceded by the 1933 Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), organised by the Civil Works Administration "to give work to artists by arranging to have competent representatives of the profession embellish public buildings." Lasting less than a year, it provided employment for approximately 3,700 artists who created nearly 15,000 works. See: <https://wageforwork.com/work/precedent#top>

This comes in return for the granting of planning permission for their development. In some instances, Section 106 has seen developers include artist studios in their plans, or even commission artists to create works of art to be displayed publicly on or around the sites/buildings in question. Reforming Section 106 to include a specific percentage spent on engaging artists would be another way of implementing these policy ideas.

5. Take art closer to the public

Along with a catastrophe for the cultural and creative sectors, the Covid pandemic has also ushered in a crisis on Britain's high streets. Deprived of footfall during multiple lockdowns, and facing an uncertain future for consumer spending, many high street shops have closed, leaving town centres decimated.

A September 2020 report for the Fabian Society, *Cultured Communities; The Crisis Of Local Funding For Arts and Culture*,⁴⁷ makes a series of recommendations based on research from 2009-19 into cuts in local government funding, along with insights from Hull UK City of Culture 2017 and Waltham Forest London Borough of Culture 2019 on how to place art and culture at the heart of the Covid recovery while maximising value for the public money. One of their central recommendations is for councils to purchase empty high street premises, and use them for cultural activities.

⁴⁷ Cooper, B. (2020) *Cultured Communities; The Crisis Of Local Funding For Arts and Culture*: "This report presents new research on the cuts to local government funding of arts and culture between 2009-10 and 2018-19. We have also analysed Arts Council England spending. The report also reviews the importance of arts and culture for local areas to boost recovery after coronavirus. Throughout the report, there are insights from Hull UK City of Culture 2017 and Waltham Forest London Borough of Culture 2019. The report makes recommendations on how national government and local government can place arts and culture at the heart of a post-Covid-19 recovery and ensure that every pound spent on arts and culture is used effectively."

It suggests that these spaces could then be “provided for community arts organisations, creative industries and individual freelancers or creatives to work from”.⁴⁸ To ensure that the UK Government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda is also met, “Creative organisations occupying spaces could be required to support under-represented groups in the sector to create new and accessible opportunities for employment in the sector or pay any interns the living wage.”⁴⁹ Progressive ideas such as this could be central to putting art and culture at the heart of ‘building back better’.

Artists and studio complexes have long made use of empty and abandoned properties. Whether through squatting, negotiating short-time leases in unoccupied buildings or through more formalised guardianship schemes, artists will always make the most of any opportunity to use affordable space. One new organisation putting this idea into action is *Hypha studios* who invite artists to apply for free short-term studios and project spaces, aiming to “regenerate the high street through the formation of cultural hubs with programming to engage local communities... and by removing financial obstacles to creativity, and crucially, we provide opportunities to those that could not previously access this level of support or visibility.”⁵⁰ Rather than relying heavily on local authority or central government subsidy, they describe their business model as “well suited to spaces in local authority ownership, where a host of socio-economic and place making agendas can be advanced at low risk and no material cost to the council, apart from the opportunity cost of foregone rent over a limited period. It would also appeal to private landlords through the mitigation of business rates on vacant premises in the short term, and longer term uplift in value.”⁵¹

48 Ibid., 29

49 Ibid.

50 See Hypha Studios, accessible at: <https://hyphastudios.com/>

51 Ibid.

The benefits of this kind of scheme are numerous: low investment costs; regeneration of barren high streets and town centres; bringing art and culture to the doorsteps of communities who might not otherwise engage with the arts; creating an economy not based on commerce, but on experience, community and education; and hopefully, the creation of great art. However, some artists in our study were wary of art being seen as a tool for regeneration or a solution to society's ills. Their concerns were that art and artists risk being co-opted as a cheap panacea to serious entrenched problems that have resulted from decades of austerity and cuts to public finances in community cohesion, youth work, the care sector, mental health and education. As one artist noted, "ultimately the government isn't funding the NHS to look after mental health, they'd rather just pass it through some artist 'workshop'. So I feel incredibly cynical about the government's relationship to the arts."

One such organisation working in the field of art and health, sometimes called 'social prescribing', is Aesop, whose declared objectives are to "develop arts solutions based on social needs and show health, care and other sectors how the arts can work for them".⁵² Both Aesop, Hypha studios, and the many other benevolent organisations who seek to broaden the remit of fine art, undoubtedly have laudable aims. But the fact remains that making art and culture a utilitarian tool, valued only as something that is 'useful' to society, saving the state money on more expensive, 'real' solutions to complex problems misses the point. Art is also about much more than this: joy, self-expression, shared humanity, finding higher meanings, challenging the status quo and so on. A genuinely advanced society ought to support the expression of culture for its own sake, not merely to marginally cut costs and increase profit in other tangential sectors.

52 See Aesop (2021), 'About Us'. Accessible at: <https://ae-sop.org/about/>

6. Renew and revalue arts education

At the heart of any discussion of a more equitable art world is education, and access to education for all. If governments in the UK are to seek genuinely to embrace the so-called 'levelling up' agenda in the post-Covid world, rather than simply recreate it, then there are opportunities waiting to be grasped. The World Economic Forum Future of Jobs report (2020) states: "Skills gaps continue to be high as in-demand skills across jobs change in the next five years. The top skills and skill groups which employers see as rising in prominence in the lead up to 2025 include groups such as critical thinking and analysis as well as problem-solving, and skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility."⁵³ In other words, the skills likely needed in the coming years are exactly those taught and developed in art schools. Investment in universal art education at all levels should therefore be a key policy cornerstone for any government wanting to future-proof their workforce.

The lack of understanding of what fine art really entails was something that frustrated many of our interviewees, who were fed up of being cast as 'lazy' or 'drop outs'. One respondent outlined how this assumption became embedded in early schooling:

"young people are not going to get to art school and get through it if they're not properly informed. It even starts in primary school, with the way that art is talked about, and seen as a fun thing, and a soft option. And it's not! It's not too much to say that, that's why you end up with an unrepresentative [cohort] of people at the top. It goes that far back. You need to know what art is to see it as a viable career option ...that art is a really difficult option, it's not a soft option, it's actually harder than other A-levels."

⁵³ World Economic Forum (2020), The Future of Jobs Report 2020. Accessible at: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020>

In seeming defiance of their own declared ambitions to 'build back better' and implement a 'levelling up' agenda, in July 2021 the UK Government moved to slash funding to university and FE courses in music, dance, drama and performing arts; art and design; media studies; and archaeology,⁵⁴ cutting "by 50% the 'high-cost course funding' distributed by the Office for Students (OFS) for university arts courses in England, while at the same time prioritising funding towards 'high-value' subjects in science and engineering".⁵⁵ The art world has united in opposition, with CVAN and the Visual Arts Alliance holding a virtual protest march under the hashtag #artisessential, and penning an open letter to education secretary, signed by over 300 leaders from across the visual arts sector including art institutions, art schools, galleries and universities asking to revoke proposed 50% cuts in subsidy support to arts subjects across higher education.⁵⁶

Art education is not just about fuelling creative ideas and investing in great future works of art, but as we have seen from this study, when it is open to all, it has the capacity to enhance equality. Goldsmiths' Warden Frances Corner OBE explains how the forthcoming cuts will disproportionately affect the least privileged students: "it is primarily ethnically diverse and less-advantaged young people who will suffer, as many courses across the country, which currently offer an opportunity to study close to home, will have to close because they are no longer economically viable. In short, this is a further economic barrier put in the way of access and progression."⁵⁷

54 Weale, S. (2021) 'Funding cuts to go ahead for university arts courses in England despite opposition', The Guardian. Accessible at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/20/funding-cuts-to-go-ahead-for-university-arts-courses-in-england-despite-opposition>

55 Sharrat, C. (2021) 'Cultural Vandalism: the Artworld Responds to UK Education Cuts', Arts Review. Accessible at: <https://artreview.com/cultural-vandalism-the-artworld-responds-to-uk-education-cuts/>

56 #ArtIsEssential (2021), 'Open Letter', accessible at: <https://www.artisessential.art/open-letter>

57 Sharrat, C. (2021) 'Cultural Vandalism: the Artworld Responds to UK

We are led to conclude that whilst the UK Government has paid lip service to the ideas of 'building back better' and 'levelling up', they are, in the field of contemporary visual arts at least, determined to continue ravaging with further cuts an already dysfunctional sector, and equally determined not to implement policies that would result in their stated objectives being achieved. One look at the profile of much of the art world might give a clue as to why this might be. Why would a regressive, neoliberal government want to fund a sector in which even the elite is dominated by progressive, sometimes radical, left-leaning artists and their associates who are often openly hostile to the Conservative government, neoliberalism and capitalism itself? Restoring and expanding funding to arts education institutions will therefore be an essential step to supporting the artist-as-worker.

APPENDIX I



Appendix One

Named or representative contributors:

Matthew Burrows - founder of Artist Support Pledge

Representative of AUE - Volunteer executive member of Artists' Union England

Clara Paillard - President of PCS Culture Group

Representative of Migrants in Culture - a core member of Migrants in Culture

Representative of Artquest

Anonymous contributors:

"Artist and PT lecturer, working in London and the South East"

"Artist and curator based in Scotland"

"Artistic director of a small NPO artist-led performance company; based in London"

"Former FT employee (Technician) at a renowned London music venue"

"Freelance curator and visiting Hourly Paid Lecturer at various universities, based in London"

"Artist and freelance gallery technician based in London"

"Artist and Self-employed fabricator and furniture maker for art and design clients; based in London"

"Freelance artist and PT employee of a small publicly funded art gallery; based in Scotland."

"Recent graduate, curator and paid intern at a London art gallery"

"Freelance graphic artist and Associate Lecturer (Hourly Paid Lecturer) at a London art university."

"Freelance Community artist specialising in inclusion; based in London"

"Second career artist and art teacher based in the North"

"Film artist, also working self-employed as director of their own limited company; based in London"

"A well established artist working in London"

"A well-established artist, lecturer and freelance artworker based in and around London"

"Recent Fine Art graduate of London art college working short term contracts in London arts venues."

APPENDIX II



Appendix Two

Principal trade unions representing artists-as-workers

Artists' Union England (AUE)

<https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/#top>

Established 2016

Members 830

For: Visual Arts in any field

National affiliation: TUC, GFTU

Equity

<https://www.equity.org.uk/>

Established 1930

Members: 46,000

For: Actors, Stage Managers, Dancers, Variety performers, Creative workers

National affiliation: TUC, STUC

International affiliation: ITUC

Musicians' Union

<https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/>

Established: 1893

For: musicians working in all sectors of the British music business.

Members: 30,000

National affiliation: TUC, STUC, Labour

International affiliation: ITUC

PCS Culture Group

<https://www.pcs.org.uk/>

The PCS culture group is the over-arching body covering all PCS bargaining areas in the sport, culture, and arts sector and represents the interests of all of our members.

PCS Culture Group organises in the following bargaining areas:

British Library; British Museum and associated;
Creative Scotland; Department for Culture, Media & Sport; English Heritage; Gambling Commission;

Heritage Lottery Fund; Historical Environment Scotland; Historic England; Historic Royal Palaces; Imperial War Museum; National Galleries of Scotland; National Gallery and associated; National Library of Scotland; National Library of Wales; National Maritime Museum; National Museums Liverpool; National Museum of Science & Industry; National Museums of Scotland; National Museum of Wales; National Portrait Gallery; Natural History Museum; Royal Household; Royal Parks Agency; Southbank Centre; Sport England; Sport Scotland; Sport Wales; Tate and associated; Victoria & Albert Museum; Visit Britain; Visit Scotland; Wallace Collection.

National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) <https://www.nsead.org/>

Established: 1888

Members: 1500

For: art, craft and design teachers, trainee teachers, lecturers, artist teachers, parents, consultants, museum and gallery educators, inspectors, institutions and organisations.

Bectu - Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union

www.bectu.org.uk/

Members: 40,000

For: broadcasting, film, theatre, IT, telecoms, entertainment, leisure and interactive media. staff, contract and freelance workers in the media and entertainment industries.

Merged with Prospect on 1st Jan 2017, Bectu is politically independent.

Scottish Artists Union (SAU)

<https://www.artistsunion.scot/>

Established: 2001

Members 1800

For: visual or applied artist working in Scotland who meets at least two of our membership criteria

UVW's Designers + Cultural Workers (UVW-DCW)

<https://www.uvwunion.org.uk/design-culture-workers>

A cross-sector trade union organising isolated and groups of workers across the creative industries.

Many of us are precarious, overworked and underpaid. We are made to compete against each other for jobs with no disclosed salaries, bad management and terrible conditions.

As UVW-DCW, we educate members about our rights at work, secure legal representation for workers, and organise and campaign to transform our industry in the interest of its workers.

For: designer, curator, film-maker, illustrator, writer, artworker, educator or any other creative worker; in a studio, gallery, museum, art school, theatre, fashion company or even from your bedroom; as an employee, agency worker, intern, student or self-employed.

Established: 2018 as a branch of UVW.

Other organisations that support but do not represent visual artists

a-n The Artists Information Company (formerly artists newsletter)

a-n is the largest artists' membership organisation in the UK with over 23,000 members (correct Jan 2021). We support artists and those who work with them in many practical ways, acting on behalf of our membership and the visual arts sector to improve artists' livelihoods. We have a reputation for providing compelling insights and playing a catalytic role in influencing and informing cultural policy. Founded in 1980, a-n The Artists Information Company is a non-profit-distributing limited company. As an Arts Council England Sector Support Organisation 2018-2022, a-n receives grant aid amounting to 21% of income, augmenting 79% from membership, advertising and services.

Artquest

<https://www.artquest.org.uk/about-artquest/>

Artquest is a website providing advice, information and opportunities for visual artists. It uses research about visual artists working conditions, career barriers, and motivations to develop the professional information, advice and projects that they need. We help artists understand and engage with both the art world and the real world: from building networks, finding opportunities, earning money or getting exhibitions to understanding their legal rights, finding affordable accommodation or doing their tax. We do not charge membership fees, our core services are provided free of charge, and many of our projects provide funding for artists development. All of our content (except Artlaw) is distributed under a Creative Commons non-commercial, attribution, share-alike license.

Artquest is funded by Arts Council England's London regional office as part of their national portfolio, we have a non-exclusive focus on practice in London.

We are an externally-facing programme of UAL, Europe's largest creative higher education institution. Our programmes are free and open to any professional artist no matter where they studied, including self-taught artists.

Axisweb

<https://www.axisweb.org/>

An independent charity, a website for visual artists, providing a platform to support and profile what they do. Through a determination to create the space artists need, our programme comprises a range of activities, including: insurance, networks, space, opportunities, R&D awards, profiling, advice, mentoring - enabling artists to be artists. Artists blur the boundaries and we adapt and change with their evolution, seeking to provide the best support we can.

Creative Visual Arts Network (CVAN)

<http://www.cvan.art/>

CVAN is a sector support and advocacy organisation that represents a diverse visual arts community of artists, creative practitioners, and arts organisation, institutions and art galleries across nine regions in England. The network is representative of the whole of England's visual arts sector, bringing together individuals ranging from artists, independent creative professionals including technical professionals, academics, students, National Portfolio Organisations and organisations (including studio providers) with investment models outside of NPO and ACE funding. CVAN's representation of the whole visual arts ecology means that it can consider and articulate the individual segments of the sector in relation to its whole. The Contemporary Visual Arts Network represents and supports a diverse and vibrant visual arts ecology, embracing a broad range of artistic and curatorial practice across the nine English regions; London, S East, S West, East, East Midlands, West Midlands, Yorkshire, N East, N West.

Migrants in Culture (MiC)

<http://www.migrantsinculture.com/>

Anti-Brexit, anti-racist, anti-colonial solidarity organisation “Migrants in Culture is a network of migrants organising to create the conditions of safety, agency and solidarity in the culture sector for migrants, people of colour and all others impacted by the UK’s immigration regime.”

Public Campaign for the Arts

<https://www.campaignforthearts.org/about/>

“Tens of thousands of people have joined the Public Campaign for the Arts, from every one of the UK’s 650 constituencies. We came together to urge a rescue package for our cultural sector. And we can do more. 54 million people - over 80% of the population - engage with the arts in the UK every year. Imagine what we can achieve, if we all link up for the arts.”



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