Is artists' exploitation inevitable or is it just a question of identifying effective, enduring, preventative frameworks? Proceedings of the 2023 Aberdeen mini summit, 16 June 2023, Aberdeen, UK.

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Is artists' exploitation inevitable or is it just a question of identifying effective, enduring, preventative frameworks?

Proceedings of an event that took place at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen in June 2023, developed by Dr Susan Jones

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Introduction

Is artists' exploitation inevitable or is it just a question of identifying effective, enduring, preventative frameworks?

Developed by independent arts researcher **Dr Susan Jones** and organised collaboratively with **Dr Jon Blackwood**, Gray's School of Art, the Aberdeen mini summit held in June 2023 was informed by artists' activism on pay and conditions including creation of FRANK in 2021 and weindustria's 2023 research report *Structurally F*cked.* The research questions included:

- what will equitable working environments look and feel like for artists?
- what attitudes and measures will ensure lasting improvement in artists' social and economic status?
- what would counter any impediments to their achievement?

Chaired by Jon Blackwood, presentations from the organisers and **Donald Butler** (Independent artist/curator), **Ben Callaghan** (artist and activist, Scottish Artists Union), **Simon Poulter** (artist and curator) and **Lindsay Seers** (artist and co-founder of FRANK) examined and contextualised causes of artists' exploitation and proposed enduring strategic frameworks and personalised approaches for navigating a fraught and contested terrain. This publication contains texts developed from presentations by Susan Jones, Ben Callaghan, Simon Poulter and Lindsay Seers, with a summation by **John Wright**.

Resources

The open access reading and resources listing accompanying these discussions can be viewed by following this Google Doc Link

Credits

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Contributor Biographies

Dr Jon Blackwood is a curator, lecturer and writer specialising in contemporary art based in North-East Scotland and Associate Professor in Contemporary Art and Research Lead at Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. He has a particular interest in contemporary art in the Western Balkans, having lived in Sarajevo and Skopje from 2011-14. He has curated exhibitions in Cetinje, London, Sarajevo, Skopje, Zagreb, Tallinn, Aberdeen and Edinburgh and has experience of working with performance, installation, sound, video and relational art in addition to more traditional media, painting and sculpture. Particular interests are in contemporary art and activism, contemporary art and protest cultural ecology, psychogeography and peripherality. He has published six books, and numerous articles including *Introduction to Contemporary Art in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (duplex 100m2, Sarajevo, 2015) and *Critical Art in Contemporary Macedonia* (malagalerija, Skopje, 2016). Recent curatorial experience include two shows at Summerhall, Edinburgh in 2017, and two shows each for Look Again festival, and Peacock Visual Arts Aberdeen in 2018/19.

Donald Butler is an interdisciplinary artist, producer and writer based in Glasgow. Informed by their experiences of living with HIV and the collapsing of identity with epidemiology, their practice is an infected body, a stain of immorality, a site of contagion; it looks to viral transmission as a relational method and as a system for the display of information. Haunted by trauma and steeped in complex interconnectedness, Butler's research and practice sits at the cross-over between Queer and Working-Class struggles.

Ben Callaghan is the Learning Organiser for the Scottish Artists Union. They studied at Edinburgh College of Art, 2009 - 2013 completing a BA HONS Intermedia. Past roles include being a Committee Member at Rhubaba Gallery and Studios from 2016 - 2020, and Operations Coordinator at Collective Gallery. Ben is a member of and activist with the Design and Culture Workers branch of United Voices of the World, an independent union that leverages intersectionality amongst precarious workers to build a broad, multi-ethnic, multi-sector membership. Ben lives in Edinburgh.

Dr Susan Jones is an independent arts researcher working across creative industries and academia. Her 2019 Manchester Metropolitan University doctorate qualitatively examined arts policy and artists' livelihoods interrelationships, with studies since focusing on since focusing on policy and infrastructural impacts on artists' social realities. Writing has been published by Art Review, Art Monthly, Arts Professional, Corridor 8, Cultural Trends, Double Negative, The Guardian, Sluice, TransArtists and a-n The Artists Information Company. Presentations include *Razing the agenda*, Original Projects; *Dangerous ground*, HIVE; *The social role of artists*, Centre for Cultural Value; *Finding freedom: artists' pandemic stories*, CAMP; *Confronting disturbance: artists' livelihoods in a Covid world* at The Coast Is Queer, Blackpool.

Simon Poulter has established a national profile both as an artist and curator. His present focus is on a series of paintings and online works documenting the 'New Normal', including paintings of the Ukraine war. He has recently produced A10, working with Stoke Newington Literary Festival – a walking odyssey along the original Roman road from London to Kings Lynn. Recent work has included three large-scale commissions working with Mutiny, as part of the University of East Anglia's Future and Form programme, as well as test and trial work for the National Marine Park in Plymouth. He is currently developing a new work with Mutiny, in Hull, exploring the city's music history. Working with Brighton Museums, he is painting all of Britain's butterflies in watercolour. Simon currently lives in Plymouth.

Lindsay Seers is an artist and co-founder with artist Anne Hardy and curator Fatoş Üstek of FRANK: Fair Artists Pay which pioneers much needed change to fair practice and fair pay for artists in the UK through engaging with art organisations, funding bodies and commissioning agencies to reassess their current structures and methods in working with artists. Initiated in June 2021 with founding members Camden Arts Centre, Canvas Art Law, Contemporary Art Society, The Tetley and Contemporary Visual Arts Network, FRANK aims to holistically expand fair practice in the arts. It collaborates with artists, art organisations, funding bodies and commissioning agencies to employ methods and structures responsive to our transitioning society, prioritising inclusive and intersectional working. It challenges hierarchical structures and works towards aligning the arts community to meaningfully engage to better fair practice in the arts, the directors aligned on the principle that unfair pay and unfair working conditions are no longer to be tolerated.

Dr John Wright is a research associate with the Centre for Cultural Value, University of Leeds. He has previously worked as a visiting lecturer at Leeds Arts University on BA Fine Art and as a module leader on MA Critical Studies at Bradford College. In his professional life before academia, he co- founded artist-led collective The Retro Bar at the End of the Universe and developed a curatorial background in both museums, galleries and in artist-led activity. Wright's research interests include collectivism in contemporary and historic art, the role of place in shaping artist-led activity and intersections between policy and arts ecologies.

Jon Blackwood

I was very sad when Conrad Atkinson passed away last year, because he really was a visionary in the sort of work that we're all talking about today. But he also set up a really interesting relationship between the artist and the worker and about the relationship of the working artists to the working class in *Strike*, done in 1972. Now for those of you who have not come across this work before—and forgive me if you have—this was a strike in Atkinson's hometown of Cleator Moor in West Cumbria, an area which has had systemic high unemployment throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century. This is other than in the 1950s, when Windscale (which later became known as the British Nuclear Fuel plan) was constructed nearby. Atkinson not only documented this strike, but was a participant in it, and took photographs of it, and also collected material objects from the strike, from political organisation to negotiating documents, and exhibited them as artworks in the gallery.

So it strikes me that the artist here negotiated with a unionised workforce involved in a localised dispute, not merely to document the strikers as subjects, but to stand alongside the people involved in the strike as one of their number, and to earn that position through patient negotiation and the gradual building of trust over a period of time. It strikes me that this particular intervention is relevant for the kinds of questions that we're asking generally from this session, but also those Susan touched on in her presentation. By what strategies can artists grow agency and build networks beyond the title of ‘culture’ and the cultural world, to work with others, to lift up everybody? The image I’m showing here is from Atkinson’s series for Workington, for West Cumbria from 1980, which features the Brannan thermometer works, the site of this particular strike.

It's a strategy which isn't only of a particular time and a particular set of assumptions, because one of the criticisms of Atkinson's work and the parallel Artist Placement Group organised by Barbara Steveni and John Latham in the ‘60s and ‘70s is that this [activity] took place in a time of full employment and full

education, where free education up to tertiary level could be expected as a right, a right that had been hard won. It was a memory of a different economic order that was not right, where people such as my father, who were capable of going to university could not afford to do so and did not go, and instead built other careers.

But the strategies employed by Atkinson and indeed the Artist Placement Group can be found in contemporary work, such as the video surfacing by Amanda Loomes of 2019, and I had the pleasure of working closely with Amanda on her work. And I say this, this was just before the Covid lockdown. Now, Amanda's methodology is much like Conrad Atkinson's, and is chiefly focused on workers doing particular jobs. So she's worked in quarries and forests, on construction sites. And in this particular image here, she worked with a gang of road surfacers, and who were resurfacing one of the most exclusive areas in the West End of London, a street lined with a designer, handbag shops and expensive shoe shops, and so on and so forth. Amanda builds trust with the anonymous subject. So, although we never see their faces, we get to know them rather intimately—much in the manner of a long form radio documentary. But there is also an echo of Conrad Atkinson's strategy of participating as the unseen narrator and director of this film as an equal with the subjects thereby implicitly building a particular link between the role of the precarious artist and the precarious worker who is fulfilling a contract on a particular project.

I want to turn now to the writing of Gregory Sholette and his influential 2016 book *Delirium and Resistance, Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Sholette was significant, of course, in developing notions of dark matter and ‘bare art’ in relationship to the position of precarious art workers in the economy.

> *Under the conditions of Bare Art…has become an accelerating demand machine, seeking to extract ever more marginal and dispersed gains from an expanding pool of widely distributed participants- including indebted art students, underpaid cultural workers, unpaid artists and interns, as well as the innumerable networked contributors, with or*

> *without credentials, who assist in reproducing an increasingly bare art world*. (Sholette, 2016, p74-75)

This particular quotation really resonated with me in terms of the themes that we are attempting to introduce today. In his books after 2013 and during 2016/2017 Sholette developed the concept of ‘dark matter’. In other words, he suggests that the arts economy depends on a large number of failed artists who then accept the disciplinary constraints of the art world in receiving what other crumbs may be available at to them in another way. And so, I suppose the more classic Marxist explanation of this would be that most contemporary artists form a giant body of under-employed ‘reserve labour’, able to be brought into play when required, but otherwise left to get on with it. So the notions of dark matter in ‘bare art’, can be helpful for us in trying to understand the political and cultural economy of the contemporary art market.

I'm now going to quote from a celebrated paper written by Susan Jones towards the end of last year on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on artists’ livelihoods in England. What for me, is particularly important in this quotation is that Susan's research in this paper evidenced ‘an emerging grassroots appetite for a dramatic shift from current hierarchical patterns, driven by national imperatives to nuanced localised infrastructures that can ensure artists’ multiple talents and assets contribute fully to social and economic change for the better within communities’. What was most important for me as we examine the mulch from which today emerged was this demand for decentralisation, and what is called in European parliamentary politics, the ‘principle of subsidiary’. In other words, that decisions should be made at as local a-level as possible, and the increasing lack of talk, I suppose, between nationally determined imperatives and the needs of artists at regional or indeed at town or city level.

Recent events and publications that have been important for me personally in developing this work. And of course, this whole session today derives from the *Structurally F*cked* publication by We Industria which appeared in March. What was fascinating for me about how that was discussed, certainly in the cultural media I live and work in, is that this report was quoted on Instagram, and cited

in Instagram stories through an individual lens, but had little traction beyond the life of the Instagram story. There is a sense in which a very critical and political report was not pursued, perhaps beyond the short lifespan of social media. Although this is a very accessible, very easy to read, a report which speaks to many truths that we're all aware of, somehow the engagement with that didn't quite build the critical mass that might have been expected when it came out. I also want to pay tribute to Ben and the Scottish Artist Union for hosting events in Scotland called *'Art Work and Power'*. We had a very valuable event in Aberdeen last December, where a group of artists, together with Ben, worked and discussed how we might work together more closely on issues of pay and analysis of the power structures that underpin our cultural ecology, but also met with a local and cultural organisation, Krakatoa, run by an anarchist collective, and they were very interesting, showing us methodologies of non-hierarchical organising, and their plans for development in the future.

Of course Creative Scotland have, in a very timely way, just commissioned or released a commissioned report by Culture Radar, the *Illustrated Fair Work Guide*. Because of preparing for this we haven't had time to look at it properly. But it's already received a lot of favourable comments, and I'm sure it will be a very influential and accessible document relevant to these debates, in the months and years ahead.

Ben Callaghan

First of all, thank you to Susan and Jon for the invite. It’s really vital that there is more open discussion of labour conditions in this sector so I’m really grateful for this opportunity to hear from the other speakers and offer my own contribution.

A little bit about me: I am one two Learning Organisers for the Scottish Artists Union, alongside my wonderful colleague Kirsten Body. I organise learning events for our members and have been doing political education in various forms, mostly linked with art, since 2015 or so.

SAU is a registered trade union that is run democratically by its members. We recently reached 2000 members and we represent artists in over 150 different disciplines.

Our primary function is to empower our members to defend themselves against poor working conditions with advice and legal representation, and to campaign on our members behalf and in their interests

I’m going to try to answer the provocation Susan provided us from my perspective as a union organiser, how I would if I were discussing the issue in a union meeting. This perspective attempts to understand whose power determines the conditions we find ourselves in and how we can develop our own power to change those conditions.

I’ll be using some very basic Marxist analysis (apologies to any Marx scholars in the audience) so this might seem mind-numbingly obvious at points. It is! That is part of the problem. In order to properly address why exploitation stubbornly persists when everyone seems to agree that it is bad, we need to question our most basic assumptions.

As part of practising accessibility, I'm going to do my best to use plain language. This knowledge is not for experts, it’s for anyone who finds it useful, anyone it empowers. If anything I say is unclear or hard to follow I would really appreciate

any feedback anyone wants to give. I can also make the text I'm reading here available to anyone who would like it.

I've also added a link on plain language as an accessibility practice in the resources if folk are interested in reading more about that, along with other readings on what I'm presenting here.

Ok, let's get into it.

For context, the question Susan gave us was: is artists' exploitation inevitable or is it just a question of identifying effective, enduring preventative frameworks?

I'll start with the first part - **is artist's exploitation inevitable?**

In short, mostly yes, but also sometimes, importantly, no.

Before I describe this, I need to make a distinction between the everyday meaning of exploitation and the Marxist meaning, the meaning I use in an organising context.

The everyday meaning of exploitation is treating someone unfairly so that you benefit from their work.

This simple version is certainly something most artists will relate to. They're not wrong! A lot of things artists endure feel deeply unfair! But this meaning implies you could treat someone fairly and still benefit from their work. This is where Marx's meaning differs, and is, I think, a lot more useful to understand why we are exploited and what to do about it.

For Marx, exploitation means someone benefiting from your work in one specific way. They make money off of it. They profit.

At its simplest level this means someone pays you to do something (and usually they also pay for a bunch of other stuff - a factory and some raw materials are the classic examples). Then they sell what you produced and they end up with more money than they started with.

This is the basic process of capitalism - capitalising on investment as they say. Spending money to make money.

This describes a structure of power. At this very basic level, capitalism rewards the rich with more opportunities to increase their wealth and that wealth gives them the power to keep the poor in poverty by exploiting them, paying them only enough so they can survive.

Because of this core function of capitalism, wealth and therefore power are continually centralised into fewer and fewer hands. Because capitalism has essentially proceeded completely unchallenged for the past 40 odd years, we now live in the worst period of wealth inequality in modern history. The astonishing centralisation of power in the hands of the ruling capitalist class is both the source or at least the basic context, I believe, of every social crisis we currently face. Capitalism thrives in crises. We can see this all around us right now. We are told we are in a cost-of-living crisis. We are actually in a crisis of profit.

This is also the reason it feels like we can’t do anything about any of it. Because Capitalists like it just fine this way. They’re doing great actually. They hold all the power.

So that’s what Marx means by exploitation. It’s not a matter of what you feel is fair, ethical, moral or anything like that. It’s a matter of who can reproduce and increase their power in society and who can’t.

Before moving on I want to talk briefly about how oppression interacts with exploitation. Everything I’ve presented so far focusses on class oppression—the power of the rich over the poor. As Susan rightly noted in the provocation she supplied us with, artists who are female, disabled, non-white or of working-class origin suffer worse pay and conditions than their male, white, able counterparts.

The relationship between capitalism and other forms of oppression is complex and there is tons of excellent scholarship on the subject. Empire of Normality by

Robert Chapman and Rethinking Racial Capitalism by Gargi Bhattacharyya are just two quick recommendations.

For our purposes, just remember that capitalism generally responds to oppression in one or more of the following three ways:

- the oppressed group are exploited more than others. This is Susan's example.
- the political fight against a form of oppression is commodified, made into something people can buy or sell. It's pride month so you don't have to look very far for examples of this
- the oppressed group are criminalised, imprisoned or otherwise excluded from society at a basic level.

So that's what exploitation is and how it fuels inequality and contributes to oppression, but how are artists exploited and is it inevitable?

Let's start with how. We've established exploitation is profiting off someone else's labour. If artists are being exploited, who's profiting?

Well, let's look at some data about artists' incomes to figure this out. Thankfully, we have two excellent pieces of recent research that can deepen our understanding.

- Artists as Workers from Autonomy
- Structurally F'cked from Industria

I'm sure most of you are familiar with these reports, and depressingly familiar with their contents. I'm going to focus one particular set of data from the Artists as Workers report and a finding from Structurally F*cked which backs it up.

90% of artists subsidise their income with other work.

Of the remaining 10%, only 3% live comfortably and only 2% earn over 50k a year.

Backing this up: Industria's research finds **Artists median hourly rate for all types of artistic labour is £2.60.**

So that's basically 3 distinct groups. Let's look at them each in turn.

First, the 3%, the plus £50k'ers.

Some of these artists are self-employed and they're doing just fine.

Up to now we've only spoken about workers and capitalists. How do self-employed people fit into this? Basically they are their own boss and their own worker. They exploit their own labour to produce profits, which they keep. If they're successful, this minority of artists might even be increasing their overall wealth year on year. They are not being exploited.

The most successful of these artists are straight up capitalists, employing others to work for them and profiting from the sale of their work on the art market. Their gallerist might be making more than them but they're profiting enough not to mind.

Second, the remaining 7% - making a living, but barely.

These artists are also self-employed, also their own boss and their own worker. They are technically not exploited because no-one profits from their labour but neither are they making profits themselves. They are the petit bourgeoisie, a part of the precariat. This is a very interesting group because it further reveals capitalism's process of centralising wealth and power. Capitalists are primarily in competition with other capitalists. They are barely concerned with workers, simply and easily exploiting them. What they are really concerned with is putting other capitalists out of business and taking the profits that other capitalist wanted to extract for themselves. For this they need a continually replenished supply of people attempting to make it big and become capitalists but failing.

This competition means that small capitalists suffer terrible conditions trying to compete against other more successful capitalists and either just about survive

or become proletarianised, meaning forced out of business and into work for someone else.

SIDE NOTE: *If you want to know more about the petit bourgeoisie, which I recommend as it's very helpful to understand the economic and social structures that govern the art world read A Nation of Shopkeepers by Dan Evans, listed below.*

Finally, the largest group, the 90%.

This is the group that is almost certainly being exploited - unless they're living extremely self-sufficiently on a tiny income they are being exploited, not as artists but as workers in whatever other jobs they do to top up the tiny income they get from their art practice.

To put it in its most brutal terms: the vast majority of artists in the UK (90%) are owners of failing small businesses whose sole employee is themselves. This what explains the chronically low rates of pay described in the Structurally Fucked report. Paying yourself below minimum wage is perfectly legal for self-employed people and business owners.

As quoted in the Industria report, Robert Hewison notes: 'It is not the Arts Council that subsidises the arts, it is the artists.'

So yes, 90% of working artists are being exploited, but in the jobs they do to support their art practice, not within their art practice itself. 97% of artists face terrible conditions attempting to make art, but it's not the fault of exploitation. It's something else which I'll describe shortly.

So what do we do? Let's answer the rest of the question: **is this situation inevitable or do we just need effective, enduring preventative frameworks?**

As I've described, exploitation is a feature of capitalism, not of artistic labour and the only enduring framework to prevent it is abolishing capitalism. Easy, right?

Seriously though, I think the most important thing to take away from what I'm saying here is: if you are one of that 90%, join a union in your other job. Join a union that has nothing to do with your job, like Living Rent. Join movements to fight capitalism alongside people who are not artists. Improving working conditions in general will make it easier for everyone to make and enjoy art, or anything else anyone wants to do that does not generally produce profit.

But awaiting revolution, what about the other bad stuff - poor conditions suffered by precarious, petit bourgeois or part-time artists in their attempts to make art. What's causing that and can we do anything about it? Well, yes.

Firstly the cause: in a word - competition. Specifically, competition for resources. This is what causes poor conditions for artists. Capitalism only values art in a scant few circumstances. More people want to make it than our current economic structure allows. The means to make art are few, hoarded, privatised or otherwise not generally available. This puts artists in an antagonistic relationship not only with the people who do have those resources, but each other as well, as they compete for them.

To make matters worse, the institutions that generally hold those means to produce art perpetuate that competition, they teach artists to intuitively understand that everything is a competition. A competition for a graduate prize, a career opportunity, some public funding, representation by a commercial gallery. It never ends.

Competition is a capitalist logic, the 'winner-takes-all' process of the international market, designed to exploit losers so winners profit. For the vast majority of artists, this logic is directly antagonistic to their interests. They're not trying to profit after all, they're just trying to make art.

So what do we do? Cooperate instead of compete. Bring our power together to reject the powers that demand we compete with one another. SAU is just one example of this. Our members pay their dues to the union and that money is used to collectively benefit all our members in many different ways. When one

member needs help, the whole union helps them. Another amazing example I love is Keep it Complex's SolSyn—a funding syndicate—please go look it up!

I don't want to pretend that this is easy. Cooperation is not simple and it requires time and thought and care. And also unlearning competitive behaviours. It reveals that we may be attached to things—kinds of art for example, I think we could all name a blue-chip artist that we're a bit fond of—that can only exist at the expense of others. I believe this is good and we should challenge ourselves in coming to understand how solidarity is made, how we can truly have power together and what powers will oppose us when we do. I'll leave further discussion of how we build solidarity to a real union meeting though—me just telling you how it works from a platform like this kind of misses the point.

Instead I'll reiterate what I said earlier - the real exploitation isn't happening in our sector and we shouldn't just cooperate with other artists, we should cooperate with everyone. Art has poor history and a poor present of being exclusionary and elitist. The reasons for this are pretty obvious when you understand the economy it's structured upon. But in order for us to truly change artists' working conditions, this needs to change also. Our best chance, I believe, is to join broad popular movements that demand society allows us all the resources to any number of things that don't produce profit and instead are valuable in and of themselves.

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Keep it Complex - SolSyn. Available at: SolSyn

Reading Marx's Capital Volume 1 with David Harvey. Available at: David Harvey

On Plain Language - Available at Mapping Access

Susan Jones

Turning the tables: strategies for artists' equity

This presentation addresses the problematic conditions for artists' practices and lives that define and confine their contributions to contemporary visual arts and society. The aim is to inform sectoral and political discussions on future remedial interventions, strategies and infrastructures to ameliorate barriers to artists' multiple social contributions and secure their social and economic status.

It's the internal struggle between artists' intrinsic motivations for their practices and the 'small business' expectations attached to their employment status that puts artists at a social and economic disadvantage and is the root of their precarities. This baseline friction is compounded when artists' practices come face-to-face with the 'trickle-down' economic regimes governing arts organisations and with contemporary curatorial and gatekeeping behaviours and preferences.

My research (Jones, 2022b) into pandemic conditions—as far as artists' livelihoods are concerned—reconfirmed how 'world events' and economic turbulence, such as Covid-19 exacerbate artists' inequities and undermine their social status. Although government and arts policies choose to promote artists' irregular occupations as desirable, little attention was given within or before the pandemic to understanding the nuanced nature of artists' precarities nor to identifying, enacting and sustaining the structural shifts including legislative protection for artists' social and economic rights.

I'm going to start with a portrait of artists, before considering artists' current and future position in contemporary visual arts infrastructures.

Portrait Of Artists

Developing and sustaining a deep understanding and appreciation of the nature of artists, the drivers for art practices, and of the distinctiveness and variety in intention and approach in the artists' constituency is the basis for forging an open, equitable and inclusive arts environment

Holding strong beliefs and values is a core characteristic in artists' resilience over a life cycle – it's vital to emotional well-being and the professional drive of art practices. Artists gain nourishment – or psychic benefit – from art practices when intrinsically-held values of self-worth, personal growth and caring for others are uppermost.

This is not whimsy but vital for artists to build 'reserves' to rely on in times of stress and struggle (Jones, 2022a). Nurturing and amplifying artists' core strengths brings long-term social value to the lives of people around them, both professionally through collaboration with public programmes and personally.

It's not new news that artists warm to opportunity that speaks to their values and builds artistic knowledge and quality of economic exchange is a secondary consideration. But this is no basis for exploitation within the publicly funded arts. And as the data I'll provide indicates, it's the very particularities and distinctivenesses amongst the visual artists' constituency that make them worthy candidates for nuanced, holistic policy interventions.

Demographically, a fifth of the 42,000 visual artists' constituency is likely to be neurodivergent and three quarters dyslexic. Under a fifth are from global majority backgrounds (this greater than in the general population) and 75% identify as female.

While half the creative workforce is self-employed it's 75% amongst visual artists. Notably, visual arts graduates tend to start their careers later than other graduates. Visual artists are less likely than the general population to have dependent children to help care for them in infirmity and old age.

In economic terms, albeit that TBR's data is from 2018, artists incomes are likely to be 58% (or £16,150) of average salaries. Art practices contribute less than a fifth and only 7% for artists who earn over £20,000 a year. Arts Professional's post-Covid survey shows better prospects for arts employees, with a median permanent full-time arts salary of £34,000.

Aligned with general employment, female visual artists typically earn less than male counterparts, and disabled artists a third less than other artists. Income levels are in *general lower for artists from global majority and lower social class backgrounds*.

In contrast to designers, photographers, illustrators and cartoonists, lack of recognisable career trajectories cause visual artists' incomes to peak at 35-44 years (Kretschmer, *et al* 2011) , even though this is an artistic development point when many consider themselves as 'emerging'. Those graduating at a later age are likely to be less mobile and less flexible about where and how they undertake art practices and about income levels, this in part due to family and social 'responsibilities, dependents and ties' (Matarasso, 2017).

As an abstract concept, ‘going freelance’ and portfolio working sounds so attractive - heroic even – conjuring professional autonomy, personal freedom and life-style choice. But as Wallis and Raalte (2020) confirm, due to mixed, variable-level incomes and limited income-generating possibilities self-employed artists are “uniquely vulnerable”, as they carry an “invisible burden of taking all the economic risk”.

Incessant search and ‘pitching’ for viable opportunities to practice in what McRobbie (2002) defined as a ‘club culture’ limits artists’ self-determination and assertiveness. Artists can’t be ‘free agents’, nor as Jones and DeFillippi (1996) suggested can they make a living by ‘scramble[ing], bee-like from opportunity to opportunity’. Instead, to even ‘get by’ they have to project an image of being excited by and responsive to arts opportunities as they crop up, at short notice, and to work in contexts they’ve played no part in scoping (Morgan and Nelligan, 2015).

Self-employment is a theoretical status for artists all the time they are discouraged by conditions which limit their ability to negotiate terms for their working conditions in tune with, and supportive of, their specific social circumstances.

However much the practical (but voluntarily applied) guidance for employers and commissioners, arts budget holders bring their own judgements to bear on arrangements with artists. It’s common for artists to be told they’re charging “way too much”, for fees and budgets to be non-negotiable, reflective of commissioners’ unrealistic expectations. I’m not yet convinced that ‘policing’ by funders would resolve that.

Repositioning Artists

Augmenting well-evidenced sentiments expressed by Industria (2023) and FRANK (2022), my data demonstrates artists are indeed structurally fucked over. Lack of power over their social and economic status is compounded by policy's tendency to conceptualise artists as itinerant, infinitely adaptable, readily available visual stimulation and innovation providers.

They are positioned in a perimeter area, far from policy and decision-making tables, their voices ventriloquised, perceived as minor contributors to a talent 'pipeline' designed to sustain institutions' business models and feed government and Creative Industries economic and employment targets. By discounting the spectrum of 'types of artists' and the validity of artists' divergent social contributions it's an environment ripe for artists' exploitation. My current research into a typography for artists identifies about 20 types including:

- *Artists whose practices are predominantly about asserting self-identity and self-expression*
- *Entrepreneurial artists or 'artpreneurs' actively exploiting commercial art and NFT image markets*
- Artists whose central motivation is to *develop and support creativity in others* through engaged practices, community collaborations and development and formal/informal learning
- *Artists who are 'visionaries' driven by 'social conscience'*.

As regards pinning down the greatest cause of artists' economic precarity, PEC's 2021 *Creating value in place* study shows that financial uncertainty is greatest amongst artists whose livelihood prospects are *most* dependent on occasional and 'freelance' engagement with the programmes of funded arts organisations.

Belfiore's (2022) questioning of the moral economy of the subsidised arts sector is pertinent, in that implicit lack of consideration of the 'why and how' of artists'

practices contributes to perpetuating the silence within arts infrastructures around artists' impoverished social realities, that hinders change for the better. PEC's 2021 study reconfirms a significant 'talent drain' first identified by Honey *et al* in 1997, in that artists who are *more entrepreneurial* – the best at 'being self-employed' and money orientated, well versed in policy-speak and Grantium's 'weird ways' - are the most likely to leave the arts for more stable livelihoods elsewhere..

It is significant too that policy has allowed investment levels in autonomous, speculative practices pursued by a fifth of artists' (PEC, 2021)—the all-important R&D of 'art for art's sake'—to dwindle to a minor facet. Cross-referencing Alexander (2007) and Padgett (2020) produces an annual deficit of £7.2m in relative financial value terms in Arts Council England R&D funding for individual artists.

Economics-based perspectives claim 'too many artists' as the reason for their low social and economic status. Liberal education policies, the unregulated profession of 'artist' and economics-led validation systems create a 'winner-takes-all' market for contemporary visual arts in which it's only possible for small numbers of artists to do well, with wastage of many artists' talents and contributions through manufactured scarcity acceptable. As clarification, the actuality of 'oversupply' lies elsewhere, as data cross-comparison confirms there are no more artists numerically now than in 1985, while in the period 1997-2018 the overall volume of 'visual arts occupations' increased by 40% (Jones, 2019).

It's not feasible for arts policy and its institutions to have a direct relationship with *most* visual artists. But surely within its aspirations to enable sections of society to interact with and benefit from art in all its various forms, there's a responsibility for people in those 'powerful positions' who sit around the decision-making tables to be curious about who artists *are,* what they're doing and with whom, and what that 'means', and to understand the long-term social implications of the drivers, enablers and hindrances to artists' practices?

It's as if artists are positioned by them as a pool of material in which the arts ‘tree’ is planted, as a naturally occurring resource that nourishes the ‘roots’ so healthy leaves and tasty fruits are produced. Solutions to equivalence lie in creating a new holistic, ethical model for organising and amplifying the arts. We can’t just keep fixing up the worst bits of an imperfect structure: we need to get to deal with the ‘unknown unknowns’. So I’m going to end by proposing an alternative arts development structure.

What if the artist-constituency is repositioned around the rim of a wheel that also contains all the other enablers and promoters, so that visual arts development is driven by the interaction between and combined strengths of each and every contributor? This ‘systems shift’—maybe it’s *rewilding*—is a way to secure artists’ integrated interaction, representation and social exchange in perpetuity. It seems to me that it’s engendering localised, inclusive democratic arts policy to replace the ‘top down’ that’s the route to achieving artists’ rights within overall *pay parity* for all who contribute to the making and successes of contemporary visual arts.

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Simon Poulter

I’m hopefully not going to come over as the massive Tory in the set, but one of the things I wanted to do is to go into a speculative plan of action that situates us in a less nightmarish Tory world in 2024. By way of a preamble, I don't think artist exploitation is inevitable. A few things that need to be cleared up are around what an artist is, which has already been mentioned, and it probably can't be answered. As many people have said, there are relatively few artists who are PAYE or on contracted terms, so being an artist is generally a self-employed activity. However, I welcome thinking about off-grid and outside of formal systems. I know other people are doing that and respect it. Henry David Thoreau, author of the anarchist text *Walden*, did go off grid [in 1845] but then, of course, he had people to pay his fines.

What I'm suggesting here is that we create a new set of programmes for artists. I'm going to be citing Enterprise Allowance. Although this will only chime with people of my age, there is a generational thing in play at this summit. What some of us have experienced - and what others are now experiencing - proposes that this generational shift is the critical thing to look at. I’m thinking about the reform of Universal Credit which is an evil system due to the minimum income floor, and how the arts councils in England and Scotland can concentrate funding for artists on making new work rather than producing instrumentalised projects. Artists may claim not to be social workers, doctors or mental health nurses but I want to think about reforming the idea that artists may choose to work in this way, but that it’s not the only form of practice. I’d like to see more transparency in NPOs (National Portfolio Organisations) and other funded organisations, with publicly available information on the amount of resources they put into artists, with funding decisions based on contributions to shaping artists’ practices and not just meeting building overheads. I am also in favour of incentivising local government to support artists through match-funding projects that help artists to continue working in their communities

I graduated from St Martin's School of Art in London in 1991. Like many people, I fell off the edge. I went on to Enterprise Allowance, the government scheme providing £40 a week, housing benefit and benefit top ups for those with a family, as I had. I also got some money from the Prince’s Trust which insisted that I write a business plan. At the age of 21, that seemed like real punishment, why did I have to do that? But now I think business skills are important for artists and encourage them to do a business plan and a marketing plan too.

Let’s imagine the world after an election in 2024 with the Tories voted out and a new government formed. One of its first moves is establishing a Creative Allowance scheme to support creative people over the age of 18 who don't have a financial safety net to make work in any medium they choose. The allowance lasts for three years, although it might be for longer. There is no ‘work coach’, but artists are provided with regular mentoring sessions and personalised advice. Creative Allowance has no age restrictions and is designed to give people the support they need to make new work and a living from their practice which can be anything from visual art to textiles and design. Applying for Creative Allowance involves making a simple a four-page application that takes you directly into self-employment and immediate access to online business credit and training in taxation matters, technology and marketing. Supportive of neuro-divergent artists, applications may be made in video or any other format. A means test is applied, this running counter to how things currently work, as you wouldn’t be eligible for Creative Allowance if you’re earning over £50,000 or have a trust fund.

Once on the scheme, you'll get the flat rate weekly grant, with top ups based on your circumstances. Payment goes direct to your business bank account that provides free accounting software. Creative Allowance isn’t dependent on having art or other qualifications, but there’s a portfolio review in the first year by an independent panel of people who are artists, rather than other arts professionals—whatever you like to call them—who speculate in some way in the arts industry. If you pass the review, you receive two more years of financial

and structural support and at the end of the three-year period you're eligible to apply to an Open Creatives Fund operated by arts councils in England and Scotland. This competitive fund would be designed to support the best work made by artists. In terms of scope, it could be resourced to fund anything from 5000 to 40,000 practitioners a year. Successful Creative Allowance graduates might apply to become mentors for future funds because we'd want it to be artists rather than the salaried administrators of the visual arts to be at the forefront of determining where these funds go. This is not a reality, but it could be.

Despite government aspirations to reduce social disadvantage through 'levelling up' measures, the way Universal Credit works has the effect of 'levelling down'. The myth of the Minimum Income Floor allows the government to assume a certain level of self-employed profit even if you haven't earned that. If you've not made any money at all, then you get pushed off the cliff into any low-paid job. Picking strawberries, for example.

As context to my suggested 'Open Creatives Fund', you might compare it with the UK Seafood Fund. Within a long term vision for the industry, this is spending £100m annually on funding projects delivering skills and training to secure the future of UK seafood. The proposition here is to create the Open Creatives Fund by aggregating the range of funding currently going to the creative industries and art practices.

Progressing this expansive concept depends on collective advocacy efforts to force a political sea change. Using methods for wide engagement in speculative planning of supportive concepts and delivery mechanics for artists and could valuably move the debate away from the attention spectacle of social media— the 'Oh everything's fucked. Look at that!'— to generating some real action.

Lindsay Seers

Part 1: Be grateful you are given a chance

It is difficult to convey how much of a struggle it can be for some to be an artist. Having worked for 25 years as an artist and in art schools (to fund the art making) I've seen the despair that comes from such a fragile and tenuous career path. I've also realised that I am not alone in my own fears of failure. There's also a vulnerability for the artist within institutional hierarchies, in that their role is ambiguous as they are self-employed in an environment where others are waged. This provokes an othering of the artist. I'm not networked and perceive myself as an anomaly in that I'm usually approached by people who've seen my work and don't know me but want to show it.

I'm diagnosed as autistic and the way in which I have to make a work is very specific and doesn't easily fit into an expedient method. I often struggle with the way that to get grants, a work is required to be designed before it is made. My artistic process is to follow chance events and is performative. Like a dérive, it evolves at each stage and is in a constant state of flux until it meets its endpoint. I also continually adjust a work as my thoughts take on new aspects and narratives as they arise. It's not beholden to a single aesthetic or material. All of this makes me a very difficult artist to work with. The works are dense and complicated. They need high levels of expertise. Usually, I learn how to achieve the spectrum of skills required to bring down costs of hiring assistance. There's often a lot riding on the artist to pull off a show in the time and with the finite resources and budgets delimited by institutional rules. As Kyaga et al assert, those associated with the arts are considered to have a high incidence of alienation, depression and suicide.

The fact that a creative path in the visual arts is not clearly linked to payment and value has a significant factor in the poverty that many creative people suffer and has many life consequences. Writing about financial issues does not do me any favours, as speaking about money never seems to be easy.

Foregrounding money issues has often meant that I haven't been asked to take part again, although there are always artists with the financial backing to step in to fill the space I've left because of poor terms.

I came across a letter dated January 7th 1973 on a website via Lux. It was from structuralist film maker Hollis Frampton to Donald Richie, curator of film at Museum of Modern Art, New York. Richie had offered Frampton a retrospective for which there was no funding, but he offered "love and honour" as payment instead. Commenting that all others involved – from producers of film stock and the printing of it, to the projectionist, gallery guard and Richie himself – are getting paid as a matter of course, Hollis argues for suitable "compensation" for his own labour and expertise on the grounds of "fairness".

Box 99
Eaton New York 13334
January 7, 1973

Mr Donald Richie
Curator of Film
The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53 Street
New York, New York 10019

Dear Donald:

I have your letter of December 13, 1972, in which you offer me the honor of a complete retrospective during this coming March. Let me stipulate at the outset that I am agreed "in principle", and more: that I appreciate very deeply being included in the company you mention. I am touched to notice that the dates you propose fall squarely across my thirty-seventh birthday. And I am flattered by your

proposal to write notes.

But, having said this much, I must go on to point out some difficulties to you.

To begin with, let me put it to you squarely that anyone, institution or individual, is free at any time to arrange a complete retrospective of my work; and that is not something that requires my consent, or even my prior knowledge. You must know, as well as I do, that all my work is distributed through the Film-Makers' Cooperative, and that it is available for rental by any party willing to assume, in good faith, ordinary responsibility for the prints, together with the price of hiring them.

So that something other than a wish to show my work must be at issue in your writing to me. And you open your second paragraph with a concise guide to what that 'something' is, when you say: "It is all for love and honor and no money is included at all…".

All right. Let's start with love, where we all started. I have devoted, at the nominal least, a decade of the only life I may reasonably expect to have, to making films. I have given to this work the best energy of my consciousness. In order to continue in it, I have accepted… as most artists accept (and with the same gladness)…a standard of living that most other American working people hold in automatic contempt: that is,I have committed my entire worldly resources, whatever they may amount to, to my art.

Of course, those resources are not unlimited. But the irreducible point is that I have made the work, have commissioned it of myself, under no obligation of any sort to please anyone, adhering to my ow best understanding of the classic canons of my art. Does that not demonstrate love? And if it does not, then how much more am I obliged

to do? And who (among the living) is to exact that of me?

Now, about honor: I have said that I am mindful, and appreciative, of the honor to myself. But what about the honor of my art? I venture to suggest that a time may come when the whole history of art will become no more than a footnote to the history of film…or of whatever evolves from film. Already, in less than a century, film has produced great monuments of passionate intelligence. If we say that we honor such a nascent tradition, then we affirm our wish that it will continue.

But it cannot continue on love and honor alone. And this brings me to your: "…no money is included at all…".

I'll put it to you as a problem in fairness. I have made let us say, so and so many films. That means that so and so many thousands of feet of rawstock have been expended, for which I paid the manufacturer. The processing lab was paid, by me, to develop the stuff, after it was exposed in a camera for which I paid. The lens grinders got paid. Then I edited the footage, on rewinds and a splicer for which I paid, incorporating leader and glue for which I also paid. The printing lab and the track lab were paid for their materials and services. You yourself, however meagerly, are being paid for trying to persuade me to show my work, to a paying public, for "love and honor". If it comes off, the projectionist will get paid. The guard at the door will be paid. Somebody or other paid for the paper on which your letter to me was written, and for the postage to forward it.

That means that I, in my singular person, by making this work, have already generated wealth for scores of people. Multiply that by as many other working artists as you can think of. Ask yourself whether my lab, for instance, would print my work for "love and honor": if I asked them and they took my question seriously, I should expect to have it explained to me, ever so gently, that human beings expect

compensation for their work. The reason is simply that it enables them to continue doing what they do.

But it seems that, while all these others are to be paid for their part in a show that could not have taken place without me, nonetheless, I, the artist, am not to be paid.

And in fact it seems that there is no way to pay an artist for his work as an artist. I have taught, lectured, written, worked as a technician…and for all those collateral activities, I have been paid, I have been compensated for my work. But as an artist I have been paid only on the rarest of occasions.

I will offer you further information in the matter:

Item: that we filmmakers are a little in ouch with one another, or that there is a "grapevine", at least, such as did not obtain two and three decades ago, when The Museum of Modern art (a different crew then, of course) divided filmmakers against themselves, and got not only screenings, but "rights" of one kind and another, for nothing, from the generation of Maya Deren.

Well Maya Deren, for one, died young, in circumstances of genuine need. I leave it to your surmise whether her life might have been prolonged by a few bucks. A little money certainly would have helped with her work: I still recall with sadness the little posters, begging for money to help her finish THE VERY EYE OF NIGHT, that were stuck around when I was first in New York. If I can help it, that won't happen to me, not to any other artist I know.

And I know that Stan Brakhage (his correspondence with Willard Van Dyke is public record) and Shirley Clark did not go uncompensated for the use of their work by the Museum. I don't know about Bruce Bailey,

but I doubt, at the mildest, that he is wealthy enough to have travelled from the West Coast under his own steam, for any amount of love and honor (and nothing else). And, of course, if any of these three received any money at all (it is money that enables us to go on working, I repeat) then they received an infinite amount more than you are offering me. That puts us beyond the pale, even, of qualitative argument. It is simply an unimaginable cut in pay.

Item: that I do not live in New York City. Nor is it, strictly speaking, "convenient" for me to be there during the period you name. I'll be teaching in Buffalo every Thursday and Friday this coming Spring semester, so that I could hope to be at the Museum for a Saturday program. Are you suggesting that I drive down? The distance is well over four hundred miles, and March weather upstate is uncertain. Shall I fly, at my own expense, to face an audience that I know, from personal experience, to be, at best, largely unengaging, and at worst grossly provincial and rude?

Item: it is my understanding that filmmakers invited to appear on your "Cinieprobe" programs currently receive an honorarium. How is it, then, that I am not accorded the same courtesy?

Very well. Having been prolix, I will now attempt succinctness. I offer you the following points for discussion:

1] It is my understanding, of old, that the Museum of Modern Art does not, as a matter of policy, pay rentals for films. I am richly aware that, if the museum paid us independent film artists, then is would be obliged also to pay rentals to the Hollywood studios. Since we all live in a fee-enterprise system, the Museum thus saves artists from the ethical error of engaging in unfair economic competition with the likes of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. (I invite anyone to examine, humanely, the logic of such a notion.) Nevertheless, I offer you the opportunity

to pay me, at the rate of one-half my listed catalog rentals, for the several screenings you will probably subject my prints to. You can call the money anything you like: a grant, a charitable git, a bribe, or dividends on my common stock in Western Civilization…and I will humbly accept it. The precise amount in question is $266.88, plus $54.– in cleaning charges, which I will owe the Film-Makers' Cooperative for their services when my prints are returned.

2] If I am to appear during the period you propose, then I must have roundtrip air fare, and ground transportation expenses, between Buffalo and Manhattan. I will undertake to cover whatever other expenses there may be. I think that amounts to about $90.–, subject to verification.

3] If I appear to discuss my work, I must have the same honorarium you would offer anyone doing a "Cineprobe. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that comes to $150.–.

4] Finally, I must request your earliest possible reply. I have only a limited number of prints available, some of which may already be committed for rentals screenings during the period you specify. Since I am committed in principle to this retrospective, delay might mean my having to purchase new prints specifically for the occasion; and I am determined to minimize, if possible, drains on funds that I need for making new work.

Please note carefully, Donald, that what I have written above is a list of requests. I do not speak of demands which may only be made of those who are forced to negotiate.

But you must understand also that these requests are not open to bargaining: to bargain is to be humiliated. To bargain in this, of all matters, is to accept humiliation on behalf of others whose needs and

uncertainties are greater even than mine.

You, of course, are not forced to negotiate. You are free. And since I am too, this question is open to discussion in matters of procedure, if not of substance.

I hope we can come to some agreement, and soon. I hope so out of love for my embattled art, and because I honor all those who pursue it. But if we cannot, then I must say, regretfully, however much I want it to take place, that there can be no retrospective showing of my work at the Museum of Modern Art.

Benedictions,

[Signed]

Hollis Frampton

Hollis Frampton's letter to Donald Richie, MoMA
is published with permission from the artist's estate.

It's perhaps swimming against the tide now to ask for realistic payment to artists, especially given the impending cuts to arts subjects in colleges and universities. But even though written almost 50 years ago, the sentiments of Frampton's letter seem familiar to me. I've shown and performed around 140 times in my career, often with large-scale works, but I have seldom commanded an exhibition fee of more than £2000, a sum that in no way covers the weeks and years spent on developing projects. Often much of the money goes to production companies and on capital investment into digital technology, computers, screens, drives, studio costs, cameras or to some more highly paid professional work such as fabrication, sound

mastering or filming. As an example, for the Sharjah version of my project *Nowhere Less Now*, I was contacted 194 times about production and publicity matters through emails which were all replied to – often at length. This enormous amount of administration, image provision and writing involved is never paid for.

I can't speak for artists as a whole because of the highly individualised nature of being an artist and the circumstances by which each pursues their vocation. This particularity is also affected by an individual's identity and personality, their capacity for forming networks, and the dogged pursuit of success. For my part, my autistic tendencies mean I have a particular fear of social events and people, which is far from ideal. I can though talk about the mechanisms and infrastructures present in not-for-profit galleries, art centres and project spaces, which in general govern my own and other artists' careers.

There is something too about recognising the right to be an artist at all that is perhaps not so easily assimilated when from humble, working-class origins. My grandmothers were seamstress and nanny, my grandfathers a dustman and factory worker. My mother was a secretary and my father a door-to-door salesman after leaving the navy. It took me five years of taking my portfolio to interviews before I was accepted into art school. In my experience, when things have gone wrong in my work, it is because of financial issues not creative ones. I've always been presented with fixed budgets, not negotiated in consultation with me, and contractually delimited in the contract so that the artist must cover any overspend, no matter the cause. Quite often it seems though that budgets are exceeded by other parties not delivering to deadline, meaning money must be thrown at the project to get it made in time. I've often worked through the night in a gallery to finish a show (even though permission to do so has been hard won), continuing after the paid staff have finished their day's working hours. It's also has become apparent that artists have very different funds made available to them, this dependent on their perceived art world status.

The idea that an artist has a choice not to take on a show due to the financial implications is an important point in the a-n Paying artists Exhibition Payment Guide. But ultimately only those who can work without even an exhibition fee are well positioned to ‘get on’ in the arts. I’ve been left out of several invitational shows due to attempting to negotiate slightly better terms for production of my works to account for commercial fabrication costs. In essence though, NPOs (National Portfolio Organisations) fix the funds for artists’ fees and production costs in their budgets but then claim their hands are tied when it comes to paying artists at reasonable levels.

Of course despite the despair and anxiety, it's not all bad. We continue despite things. The journeys I have been on when making the works were and are fantastic encounters with history, documents, images, people, animals, plants and locations. Often, I found myself in places where I felt I shouldn’t really be allowed. There is an energetic and ecstatic reward in making things; before the art world tears them apart in critical essays that physically hurt. Then there are all the rejections from shortlists and funding bodies that feel like a body blow, so much so I rarely attempt them now. Or perhaps these are because I lack the demographic sought for in age, ethnicity or my diagnosis is not supported or considered real. The interface between making the work (a kind of ecstasy) and the rigours of installing it into an institution could not be more polarised. Often rather than being supported and listened to, I have been bullied and forced into untenable situations. I’ve been called difficult and exacting but that is a description of the work that is being personified as my character. The works that I make call on a specificity to place – the gallery location, its demographic, and the social and historical nature of that place. Behind every project there is an extensive manifold research endeavour couched in science, philosophy. literature, historical biography and critical theory.

The technical aspects - the form of the work - almost always end with exasperation from the gallery’s paid staff about the extent of detail. I’ve also found it difficult to be heard by technicians who’ve not worked with installation of my works before, as they don’t listen to me even if I’ve installed the work

several times previously. I believe this is gender related as working with women is always so much easier. Much to do with ‘value’ – whether you’re accepted and cared for - has consequences for one’s life and mental health. There can be a great deal of unwarranted aggression and resentment from those involved when things don’t go smoothly. It’s extremely distressing managing the extent of the endeavour I’ve committed to and the excessive workload that falls on me as the artist because no one else will work for nothing.

Part 2: How change must happen

My own lengthy and persistent fight for pay led to establishing FRANK (Let’s be frank fair artist’s pay) as a non-profit business company. Formed with curator Fatos Űstek, artist Anne Hardy and administrator Celina Loh, with Molly Barnes working on media posts, we’re working on fundamental ‘Principles of Art Labour and Remuneration'.

The focus for funding galleries in Arts Council England’s National Portfolio is on maintaining and extending property and buildings which are intended to boost the economy by creating employment for the building industry. But the gallery content is often underfunded and over-dependent on creative workers to make the spaces attractive to income-generating audiences, but without adequate payment for what is arduous artistic labour. The next generation of artists deserve to have a financial model equivalent to almost all other industries: the artist quoting for a job in terms of time and infrastructures / resources needed and the client (or arts organisation) finding the money to cover all the costs. The 2023 pay rates suggested by a-n The Artists Information Company and Artists Union England are cross-referenced to teaching salaries, which in any case have been static for twelve years. This works out at £365 a day for my level of experience using the a-n guide, a figure I’ve never received.

Ultimately, contemporary art is a niche subject for the public, with much contemporary ‘issue based ’art only preaching to the converted. My family background is one in which art does not figure at all as relevant in personal or socio-political debate. Art however has an important agency to promote complex meta-thinking in relation to form, regardless of content. It also valuably by-passes identity politics through its association to extraordinary minds that transcend cultural conditioning and stereotyping. Contemporary art can be as complex as it is dumb. It is a process that can often have rigorous aesthetic and philosophical implications and often speaks to the history of art in an ever-evolving manner. Like any academic subject it can be exacting, extending consciousness as a meta- narrative (a thought about thought). Artists’ conceptual, intellectual work is often explained in playful ways in gallery wall panels, these written large and designed for the public to read or ignore (make up one’s own mind), or to find a new level of understanding through questioning. Invigilators and arts professionals in funded galleries try to assist by talking intimately to individuals and groups about the works. However, the extent of both poor literacy (ability to read and write) and sub-standard visual literacy (how to comprehend the meaning of images) in British schools must inevitably affect people’s capacity to engage with the complexity of the arts.

Ability to cost each job is a vital skill for the self-employed workers, each a ‘free agent’ when deciding the time frame for labour and the associated costs on a ‘take it or leave it’ basis. But artists just can’t do this with NPOs who want to make all the decisions. Although making art may not be considered a business, we *are* deemed self-employed, and the all-important reality-check for the client or commissioning agent—the quotation for materials and labour from a self-employed provider—simply doesn’t exist in the art world. But creating site-specific work with unpredictable on-site labour resources while keeping to the agreed budget is nearly impossible. The only certainty is that the artist never finds the budget a little too generous. I would like to see transparency in exhibition budgets, them broken down so that artists can see the whole picture on the costs and fees to all involved. I’d like there to be meetings with all the artists in a group show to share knowledge and get some sense of working

together and ensure that works are shown sympathetically and according to the artist's requirements. For example to avoid setting sound works side-by-side and light-spillage ruining projected works, etc. Although this type of error might seem unlikely, in my experience it's surprisingly often been the case.

Although artists often work in art schools to make a living, suffering auto-enrolment into pensions schemes which takes much time and energy to undo. When visiting colleges for even a day, some enroll you as a full staff member and automatically deduct pension contributions. But with all the various pension providers it's almost impossible to reclaim these deductions. But the main problem is the excess of unpaid administration - the time filling in the multiple forms to become a temporary staff member. Art schools can pay artists as self-employed but generally chose not to, which also has consequences for their taxation and employment status.

In terms of future landscapes for artists, I'd like to see the UK to move towards the Norwegian model where every artist more-or-less in Norway is in the union and the union holds and distributes the grants to artists. Take up by artists of Artists Union England membership is currently not substantial enough to be effective, although I hope this will change, perhaps by linking up with UCU (University and College Union). What is vital is that artists develop livelihood models beyond commercial representation and the limited, targeted government funded grants and artists' initiatives such as the Artists Support Pledge. NFTs or blockchain models cannot help us as they're games for the world's richest people. We need new models that don't treat artists as a cheap option for tackling social change, that pay them like any other worker in our economic system and at similar rates according to expertise as other professionals such as scientists and architects.

I've been focused all my life on this idea of making art, prioritising it over everything else including family, relationships, holidays and so on, always trying to meet deadlines and to be good enough. It is difficult to step back from the necessity of exhibiting, as without it there is no career. But as Hito Steyerl confirms, no matter how hard you work as an artist, work won't love you back.

The possibility of making work such as that of Gormley, Deller or Shawcross – all born into privilege - is a false promise. When artists work for free it funds the wealthy art market and no matter how much you're willing to work for free, the only opportunity you're likely to get is to work for free again.

Money is where the art is …

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John Wright

I thought I would sum up today's event through a series of quotes from the speakers which attest to the conditions of artists' livelihoods at this moment. Susan Jones talked about artists being positioned in a 'perimeter area' and Jon Blackwood placed artists within the 'historical mulch' of contemporary art. The extraordinary vista of Grangemouth marked Donald Butler's formative years, with the oil refinery creating a 'horizon line shimmering from an excess of gas being burned off'. Ben Callaghan rued the 'astonishing centralisation of power, prices and profit' in the UK and Simon Poulter that post Brexit, we must now reside in the 'former UK'. When history is continually remade and reworked at every stage and politics dominates, as Lindsay Seers confirmed, it's inevitable artists feel 'helpless' in effecting change.

The weight of history and the overriding lens of capital punctuates this moment, the excesses of capitalism extinguishing artists' desires for individual and collective agency. This is instinctively understood by artists and brought to the fore in seminal texts by the likes of Claire Bishop, Mark Fisher and Gregory Sholette (Bishop, 2006; Fisher, 2013; Sholette, 2007). As Array Collective's experience of participating in the 2021 Turner Prize confirms, the cutting edge of collectivism and activism tends to pass institutions by. Policy urgently needs dragging into a new territory where decision-making is informed by artists' insight, with art school education taking a strategic role in effecting that shift. But if we're talking about a 'new economy' for artists what will it look like and how will it be manifested? As Susan Jones has argued here, solutions lie in strategic policy devolution, worked through locally and effected with care and consideration. Key objectives for devolved policymaking are building networks and agency amongst communities of interest and involving many people from many areas from differing social backgrounds and collaboratively creating a digital observatory that captures the data, bringing together skills and insight from academia and the sectoral bodies.

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Resources

The open access reading and resources listing accompanying these discussions can be viewed by following this Google Doc Link

Credits

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