Research Digest: The Role of the Artist in Society

CENTRE FOR CULTURAL VALUE

About the Centre for Cultural Value

The Centre for Cultural Value is building a shared understanding of the differences that arts, culture, heritage and screen make to people's lives and to society. We want cultural policy and practice to be shaped by rigorous research and evaluation of what works and what needs to change in order to build a more diverse, equitable and regenerative cultural sector.

To achieve this, we are working in collaboration with partners across the UK to:

- make existing research more relevant and accessible so its insights can be understood and applied more widely;
- support the cultural sector and funders to be rigorous in their approaches to evaluation and foster a culture of reflection and learning;
- and foster an evidence-based approach to cultural policy development.

Our approach is primarily pragmatic: we want empirical research to drive decisions about cultural funding, policy, management, engagement and evaluation.

Based at the University of Leeds, the Centre's core partners are The Audience Agency, the universities of Liverpool and Sheffield, and Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. The Centre is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (part of UK Research and Innovation), Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Arts Council England.

About the Centre's research digests

Our research digests are based on a rapid assessment of published literature to present a "snapshot" of cultural value research across a number of core themes.

These research reviews are shaped in consultation with practitioners, researchers and policymakers to make sure they are as useful and relevant as possible. We invite people to take part through surveys, interactive workshops and policy roundtables. This helps us develop research questions that we can find answers to in the literature.

The reviews present an overview of key findings, what we know for certain, where there is emerging evidence and where further research is needed. We use the insight gained through the review process to make conclusions about the current state of the evidence and what implications this has for the future.

About this digest

This research digest summarises current evidence relating to artists working in **socially engaged practices**, the social value of this work, how they are funded and the different settings they work in. These settings range from artists working in residencies with town-planning departments to educational activities in schools, and wellbeing and mental health workshops within healthcare systems.

What do we mean by socially engaged practice?

Our research highlighted multiple definitions of what socially engaged art practice looks like. In broad terms, it is where an artist develops creative interventions in public. Examples can include guerrilla gardening, protest marches or even creating photosensitive murals to capture solar energy. Socially engaged artists differ from those making art objects like paintings, sculptures and video installations for galleries, theatres or traditional cultural venues.

Artists working in these socially engaged ways may have come from a more traditional background such as painting or sculpture but decided to change the direction of their creative practice. Equally, some artists come to socially engaged practices at the start of their careers. Others may receive specific funding to produce social outcomes for a given community or place. In short, socially engaged practices are another methodology running parallel to more traditional forms of art.

There are many current debates that depict the artist as both disrupter of the ongoing "status quo" and complicit in maintaining power imbalances. Many of these focus on the social value and impact artists can make in different areas of society. Even discussing "the" role "the" artist plays and the social value of their practice could be seen as misleading: artists hold many roles in society, and there are also multiple definitions of the term "artists".

For this digest, we will define "artists" as those who create artworks that make us think and provoke emotional responses to people, places and things. These artists are professional in the sense that they derive part or all their income from art making.

Further information

Contents

Highlights

- Socially engaged artists take issues and problems facing humanity into their art-making practices. In doing so, artists are in a rare position to highlight and reframe these problems for other disciplines, industries, policymakers and the wider public.

- When funding artists to work in socially engaged ways with disadvantaged communities, funders and policymakers need to give more support and care to both the artists and the people they are working with. More accurate articulation of the needs, responsibilities and relationships for socially engaged artists is needed to support this.

- Artists are not a homogenous social group and, like anybody else in society, have multiple roles. Artists' funding and support needs to reflect this complexity and be tailored, flexible and accessible. Moving away from short-term project funding to longer-term approaches is vital.

- There is a danger of conflating the role of artists with that of social workers, which could devalue both within society.

- The current system privileges those with the financial, social and educational means to withstand the structural uncertainty of working in the cultural sector, which often involves juggling a portfolio of temporary, freelance and part-time work. This excludes many within society from even imagining a career as an artist, reinforcing the structural inequalities within the sector.

- Policymakers, funders and organisations should take practical steps to ensure fair, equitable pay and conditions for artists, who are often "portfolio" working. An important first step would be to commission research into the effectiveness of different targeted social security measures for artists.

- Longer-term artist residencies within government departments – such as Meet the Neighbours and the recent MANIFEST scheme in the UK – may begin to provide platforms for artists to meaningfully contribute to the policymaking process. Although there is a wealth of academic research on artists' residencies, there should now be a focus on developing the evidence base around the impact of artists placed within government departments.

- Emerging research into culture as a commons and artist-led collective practice has the potential to shift our understanding of organisational relationships and generate new knowledge and methods which go beyond competition-based economies. Learning from these collaborative practices starts to open conversations about how sharing resources, knowledge and developing support structures can benefit not just arts and culture but other sectors.
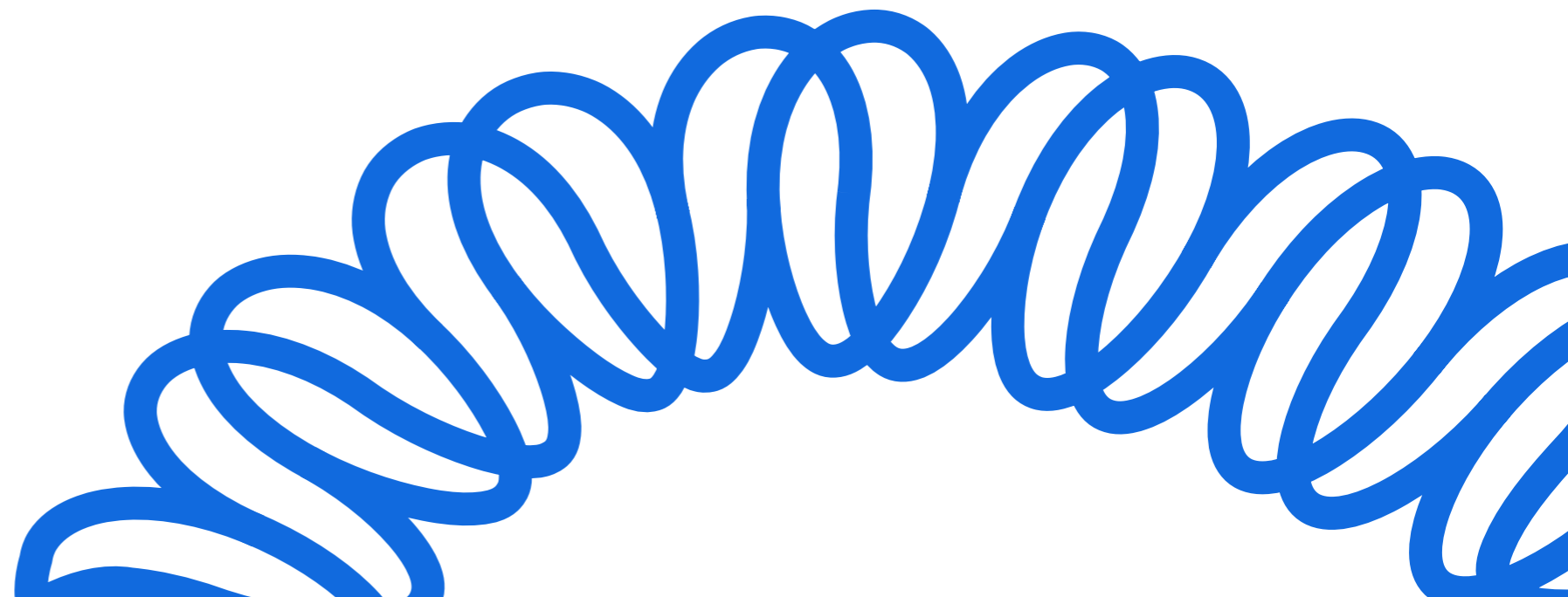
Introduction

Research regarding the social value of the artist in society has a long history. In the 1970s, there was much discussion among theorists, artists and policymakers about the issue. Artists Hans Haacke and Carle Andre, for example, argued that artists are no different from anybody else in society and that it is dangerous to suggest otherwise (Andre et al, 1975).

Haacke also believed there was a growing understanding at the time that artists' labour was part of a capitalist mode of production, rather than separate or exceptional. In the context of this review, this is important because artistic labour can be commodified and, in some cases, exploited for economic and political gain.

The context of this debate has since moved to focus on the working conditions faced by artists such as pay rates, lack of safe and affordable studios, and long-term financial stability. These ongoing issues have been highlighted in important publications and initiatives including Hans Abbing (2002) on the relative poverty of artists, and more recently by FRANK (Fair pay for artists), an alliance of artists, curators and arts organisations.

Over the last 40 years, these debates have been incorporated into broader discussions about cultural and social value. They have also led to an increased emphasis on the benefits artists can bring to the economy and to people's health and wellbeing.

This picture has been further influenced by public subsidising of the arts. Governments have seen that, by investing in arts and culture, artists might produce benefits for society. This has raised the question of the "measurement" of cultural value with a notable turn to quantitative methods to "justify" public funding against economic and social metrics (Meyrick and Barnett, 2020).

At the same time as this shift, many feel the social value of the artist is still more fundamental as artists are in a rare position where they can both reflect and challenge societal norms. What is more, the boundaries between art and life have become somewhat blurred. There has been growing debate, particularly around socially engaged practices in which the public can take part, about the ethics and effects of art's role in "non-art" places and spaces – sometimes referred to as "relational aesthetics" (Bishop, 2012).

> **"There has been growing debate, particularly around socially engaged practices in which the public can take part, about the ethics and effects of art's role in 'non-art' places and spaces"**

This review makes a distinction between artists' different motivations. Some work commercially and are market-orientated in their practice. Others are motivated by social practice and working with others to effect changes within society. This is not to say these lines are clear-cut. Some artists make work to sell through art markets and also apply for grants and funding commissions to work with different communities.

These differences become even more complex when discussing socially engaged artists. They are often reliant on public funding as their work is not by definition always commercially viable. They can easily become embroiled in the debates around economic impact as well as cultural and social value. This review focuses on these socially engaged artists working in this contested space.

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Method

The findings from our consultation process, which included a questionnaire and an online webinar with key stakeholders, produced a wide range of connections between artists and society. Four key themes emerged:

- artists working in and with communities;

- artists in education;

- artists' funding structures;

- artists as activists.

In initial searches of the literature, we discovered that each of these topic areas is suitably vast and warrant digests of their own. We therefore switched our focus to the questions which proved most important to the stakeholders during the scoping process: those centred around funding structures in which artists are employed or funded to deliver social impact outcomes.

This review therefore explores the literature on artists working in socially engaged ways or funded to produce social outcomes. It also:

- surveys the support structures for artists in these roles and questions the power relations within these policy and funding structures;

- draws upon what is already known in this area, including a focus on the complex factors that might affect artists' practice within these contexts;

- and identifies gaps in understanding and implications for policymaking.

What questions did we ask?

Based on our consultation exercises, we asked the following questions to help guide our analysis:

- What is it that socially engaged artists do that other practitioners arguably do not and is their experience any different?

- Why are artists funded to deliver social impact, and should they be?

- Are artists sometimes brought into these publicly funded projects in a cynical way?

- Do these current funding models, which include social impact outcomes, maintain existing power structures?

- How can artists be better funded and supported in these roles?

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What we included

We conducted a rapid review of the peer-reviewed primary research, using a systematic approach to identify relevant literature. The search terms were based on the questions and areas of interest identified through our consultation process (see appendix 1).

In total, 222 articles were included in our study.

This was then enhanced by:

- a search of the "grey" (non-peer reviewed) or unpublished literature (including theses and dissertations) identified through consultation with expert stakeholders;

- searches of key websites;

- and a limited Google search.

The vast majority of studies we identified had a focus on the global North with relevance to the UK, European and North American contexts. Our search protocols did not limit the geographic area and as such opened out our searches to as broad a base as possible.

The literature we reviewed was published between 1 January 2012 and 31 December 2022 to provide a snapshot of the most recent research and evidence. We also engaged with experts working in the field to ask them to make suggestions for literature that had not been identified within database searches.

This review does not set out to define what an "artist" is, nor does it restrict who can be called an artist. Instead, we based the literature searches on the use of the word "artist" in relation to socially engaged practices. We further focused on key studies and research on socially engaged artists' livelihoods and routes into social practice, and commentary on creative labour and the creative workforce.

What we didn't include

We did not include literature that focused solely on arts and cultural organisations and did not engage with artists . The focus of the review is on artists working in socially engaged ways, and as such, we did not include literature on artists primarily working commercially. We have also not included research and ongoing debates on creative placemaking because we will be publishing a digest on this topic within the next 12 months.

Findings

Three key areas of debate emerge from the studies considered by this review:

1. The social value of the artist working in socially engaged ways, linked to broader questions on the social value of culture.

2. Artistic labour, which includes explorations of where artists work and the environmental conditions to which they are subjected and inhabit.

3. How socially engaged artists are funded and why current public funding systems and policymaking are falling short for artists and the people they work with.

Each of these areas frame the questions raised within this digest and help to steer our findings.

Skippko Consultation Event (Photo by Nicki Taylor)

The problem with definitions

Artists who work in a socially engaged way create work that tends to offer non-object-based encounters that are collectively made, participation-focused and collaborative. Artists working in these ways make interventions within both social and political life (Hope, 2017).

The literature we reviewed presented multiple definitions of what socially engaged art practice looks like, and crucially, the different relationships that artists working in social settings have from public funding systems. The key differences within this literature stem from both how socially engaged artistic practice happens and why it is different from the broad church of other artistic activity.

The reasons for this are outlined by Brian Kelly and Grant Kester (2017) who focus on socially engaged artists within community and activist projects in Latin America. The essays in this volume follow how artists, communities and activists came together through actions that are not publicly funded and happen outside of institutional systems. Their aim is to disrupt, protest or attempt to instigate actual social change at local or regional levels. The authors stress that these projects are vital to democracy within Latin America and often occur at times of wider political tension.

In contrast, Claire Bishop (2012) focuses on socially engaged art from a participation viewpoint. Bishop documented the rise in participatory practices which blur the lines between artwork, artist and audience within contemporary visual art. Bishop traced its history throughout the 20th century, arguing that these types of practice are interwoven with the UK policy and public funding initiatives implemented by New Labour in the early 2000s.

This public funding strategy required social impact outcomes from projects such as "community cohesion" and "engaging with hard-to-reach groups". Bishop contends that these projects broke down class barriers to inclusion but conversely did very little to structurally change power relationships in society. Subsequently, the arts became a softer and cheaper alternative to state intervention (p. 283).

The differences between these two perspectives sum up the tension within the literature on socially engaged art. The argument, which has turned at times into spats between artists and academics (Schrag, 2018), is about where these diverse forms of practice become complicit in a system they are attempting to challenge. However, there is consensus on the need to develop a more detailed and critical understanding of socially engaged art.

Artists working with people

Anthony Schrag's research in this area suggests there has been a merging of different forms of socially engaged art under the catch-all term "participatory art" (Schrag, 2018). Schrag argues that this merging of very specific practices (and their histories) has led to slippages in how we talk about the intent behind working with people, along with the different relationships artists have with viewers, participants, audiences, policy, funders and the public.*

In the UK context, this is highlighted in the A-N blog from Drawing on the Outside by artist Sarah Filmer (2022): "i am determined that i WILL NOT simply be instrumentalised in the service of the government's agenda in which artists are compelled, by the project grant funding requirements, to deliver the social care that is chronically under-resourced by the current regime."

Filmer's experience sums up Schrag's argument that the danger of merging the artist with the social worker could devalue both in terms of their roles within society. Social workers are professionally trained and more often than not have a system of support and institutional policies in place to guide their work. In contrast, artists are not trained in care-giving and their overall intent is not to deliver social care but to develop their art practice.

Schrag discusses the need for clear language around what artists working within these socially engaged ways actually do. Schrag outlines different approaches and calls for a deeper understanding of where they come from while also questioning the motivations behind the work.

For example, are the artists being instrumentalised in terms of a public art project commissioned by a government or policymaker to install a very visible, physical object-based work that speaks to a specific agenda? Alternatively, is the work socially engaged in the sense that it is developed with or within a community or communities and speaks to a system of oppression?

Although these examples are somewhat polarised, they help illustrate Schrag's call for a more nuanced view of these practices. This has been echoed in recent studies looking at socially engaged artists' working conditions and outlining what makes this work different from other art forms.

* Six terms of practice: Community Arts, Activism Art, Socially Engaged Art, Relational Art and Public Art

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>
> - Sarah Filmer, Drawing on the Outside

Photo © Anthony Schrag

What do socially engaged artists do that other artists don't?

The literature we reviewed points to the notion that socially engaged artists are no different to any other artist in terms of being subjected to the same working and economic conditions. Yet, recent studies in the UK and China investigating artists dealing with social, environmental and ethical issues show that there is a difference in their experience.

Elenora Belfiore's (2021) work outlines that these artists experience an extra psychological toll and personal cost on top of the economic and social pressures. This is because they are trying to navigate the same systems that much of their work is attempting to challenge, often with very little support or budget for either them or the communities involved.

Similarly, a study by Jung-Ying Chang (2019) into the changing picture of artistic activity in Beijing and its relationship to state participation documents how artists have been chased out of areas. This is because their activities have been deemed "damaging" to the state. Artists have found it increasingly difficult to operate freely within the social and economic restrictions put in place by the government.

Conversely, Chang suggests that the Chinese state has recognised the interest in contemporary Chinese art from the international art market and has therefore designated specific areas (artistic and creative villages) in which artists can reside. Chang's account of this added level of personal cost for these socially engaged artists echoes Belfiore's work, albeit through the more extreme example of governmental instrumentalisation.

As well as this emerging understanding of the conditions of labour for socially engaged artists, there is evidence that their practices produce different forms of knowledge.

Photo © High Rise Project

At the heart of the debates on socially engaged practice is this difference between "symbolic representation" - work about the world - and "communicative action" - work in the world (Spampinato, 2015; Thompson, 2012; Helguera, 2012).

This highlights the tensions between these two perspectives on socially engaged art practice, and the different motivations and interests of both artists and funders. It also feeds the debate on social and cultural value because socially engaged art forces the question "Where does the art stop and life begin?" Is art purely cultural, social or is it a mix of both?

They also highlight a productive space described by Sophie Hope (2017) as "uncertain" and "ambiguous". Hope suggests this uncertainty between action and representation within socially enaged art practices can disrupt norms and expectations within funding commissioning processes (p.215).

Hope argues that this ambiguousness can foster unexpected outcomes. These may include:

- bringing in different people and perspectives to the initial commissioned brief;
- discovering different ways of working with people and communities that could lead to unexpected future projects;
- or even challenging the commissioning process itself by changing systems within funding departments.

From the literature we reviewed, there is an assumption from policymakers and funders that "communities" are somehow homogenous blocks of people who have the same needs and wants. This cannot be true when we think about people in our own street, or we think about care home residents or refugees.

There is a need to question the language and what is meant by words such as "community" and "social" when they are used to describe people in differing situations. The danger of not questioning these responses is that socially engaged art becomes entirely used as a vehicle for the "betterment" of problems or entirely instrumentalised by policymakers in a top-down approach which has no real relationship to a given place.
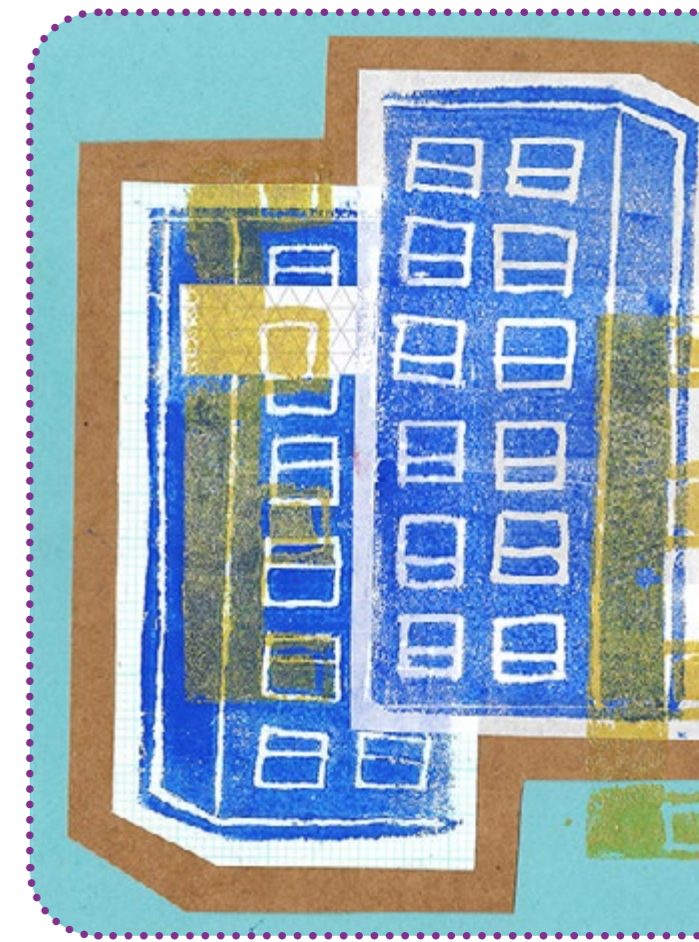
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Artists' funding and social impact

Let us turn to the question of why artists are funded to produce social impact or outcomes in the first place. The literature we reviewed tells us this is not straightforward and that there are different factors behind these funding decisions. Many of these decisions can be attributed to how artists are viewed within society and what value is attributed to their work.

A study by Pret and Carter (2017), exploring questions of social value creation within entrepreneurial and business studies, reported there is growing consensus that artists can "share their economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital in order to support and help revitalise their communities" (Pret and Carter, 2017).

This study regarded "creativity" as inseparable from what artists do, focusing on the skills required to develop knowledge exchange through collaboration with communities rather than questioning these assumptions. Although artists in this case study clearly demonstrate these skills, it is often taken for granted that artists can and will instigate social change in these situations, as we saw in Schrag's work.

What is evident in the studies we reviewed is an economic, or more precisely, private sector dimension to what is seen by many as social value in a public sphere. Kristina Kolbe (2022) outlines this relationship in the UK over the past 40 years as "intertwined logics of economically driven private and state interests" (p.258).

This push for artists to become entrepreneurs and produce both individual economic gain and social outcomes that "benefit" local, regional and national economies is evident throughout cultural policy.

Photo © Anthony Schrag

Arts Council England's (ACE) Let's Create strategy presents this story as follows: "They [artists] proved to be vital sources of talent and enterprise for our country's creative industries, which in turn emerged as major drivers of the national economy" (ACE, 2020).

This situation has become a cultural policy narrative and one of the key drivers around funding for artists. It informs policymaking strategies around the world, as detailed in Justin O'Connor's (2020) recent work on the role of culture post-pandemic.

Photo © Anthony Schrag

O'Connor argues that this strategy linking creative industries with economic success, which came into its own in the post-2008 financial crisis, is now ramping up again. But this time there is little evidence to suggest the sector is more equitable, sustainable and less exploitative than any other industry.

This policy story can also be found in Creative Scotland's Our Creative Voice strategy, Arts Council Northern Ireland's Strategy Framework (2019-2024) and Arts Council Wales' current strategy. Each of these arts councils support artists in differing ways through their grants and funding systems . This sense that artists can work with communities and even "revitalise" and "regenerate" them through creative and entrepreneurial practices has become inherent to the funding system and to new policy development in the UK.

The role of artists has been questioned extensively in the literature within these social and economic processes of regeneration and revitalisation. Artists' role in gentrification and the displacement of working-class people has long been a hot topic and contested area of research (Moskowitz, 2017). Similarly, the term "artwashing" has been used to describe the phenomenon whereby artists are brought into projects in often cynical ways to distract from gentrifying processes by the state through public-private partnerships (Pritchard, 2018).

Funding models: the relationship between social impact outcomes and maintaining power structures

As we outlined in the first section of this digest, these forms of socially engaged practices have become more attractive to policymakers over the last few decades. This is because of their perceived societal benefits such as increasing participation, cohesion and inclusion. This policy narrative has fed through to funders, resulting in social outcomes being embedded in application criteria.

Artists are increasingly being incorporated into the "creative economy" model, which appeared through the merging of the cultural and creative industries as an economic success story. This is often posed by governments as a positive outcome for countries since the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent cuts to public services introduced in certain countries, including the UK (O'Connor, 2020; Telese, 2021, Brook et al, 2020).

Yet simultaneously the artists that "feed" the creative industries are subjected to precarious working patterns, low pay and social inequity compared with peers in other industries that rely less on freelance or self-employed labour, such as healthcare or law. Some commentators have highlighted the self-defeating nature of this inequity: "Poor economic circumstances discourage newcomers from pursuing creative careers and reduce the "talent pool" on which the overall economy of the arts relies" (Jones, 2022, p.3). This precarious social and economic situation is then compounded by a funding system (both public and private) designed for short-termism through project grants with a lack of social and long-term financial support for artists.

This structural issue was brought into sharper focus during the pandemic. Our report Culture in Crisis: impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here highlighted the impact of social distancing restrictions not being "experienced evenly across the sector, with younger workers, women and workers from ethnically diverse backgrounds among the hardest hit in terms of losing work and income" (Walmsley et al, 2022, p.65).

This inequality was particularly apparent among freelancers and the self-employed who make up around 62% of the UK culture sector workforce. This can rise to around 88% in visual art, music and the performing arts, where artists are most likely to be captured in the data (Florisson et al, 2021). These groups were disproportionately affected by the pandemic due to their well-documented "portfolio" working patterns and their general ineligibility for government assistance schemes and recovery funding (FitzGibbon and Tsioulakis, 2022).

The crux of this argument, supported by evidence from across the literature we reviewed, is that this instrumentalist and extractive environment can be exclusive and inequitable for many in society. Many of the studies pointed to a deeply unequal cultural sector in the UK, with gender, disability, ethnicity, class and education weighing heavily on people's chances of successfully beginning and sustaining a career or practice (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017; Malik, 2013; McRobbie, 2015; Darcy et al, 2022). In short, the current system privileges those with the financial, social and educational means to withstand the structural uncertainty of working in the cultural sector and excludes many within society from even imagining a career as an artist.

These findings were not limited to the UK. For example, we found studies in Denmark looking at public art and social housing within marginalised communities (Eriksson and Sørensen, 2021); a study of the precarious working patterns of young people in the creative industries in South Africa; and another highlighting the extent to which artists are disenfranchised by their remote locations in Australia (Hadisi and Snowball, 2020 and Daniel, 2014). Although these studies are in very different contexts, there are some similarities to the inequalities in the UK studies, particularly for young people and marginalised groups.

Support structures and artists' livelihoods

There is now a strong and continually growing evidence base to demonstrate the deep inequalities within cultural work. This is further compounded by subsidised public funding systems that only work for a minority of people because they are based on oversubscribed competition models with reduced success rates. This suggests a mismatch between overall budget and demand (Jones, 2020), leading to a culture of hyper-competition among artists. This can be detrimental to meaningful relationships which are important to artists who work with people (Harvie, 2015).

However, several studies point to both theoretical and practical alternatives to these systems. These highlight the need for more equitable and sustainable support for artists. The following four terms come to the fore in the literature and present important ways of thinking through policy development for a more equitable and generative arts and cultural sector:

● Creative and Contributive Justice

This research follows much of the work around social justice and focuses on how the publicly funded cultural sector can be made more equitable for audiences, participants and workers (Banks, 2022). The central argument is that culture can be seen as a public "good" and is also capable of making meaning and value to complement other kinds of "good" within society such as education and healthcare. As a result, access to culture needs to be better distributed and, importantly, the ability to contribute to the making of culture needs to be radically re-thought to foster a more democratic sector.

In other words, people feel more ownership the more they are able to put into something. Although much of this work is currently theoretical, the literature suggests there are possible applications through various trials of universal basic income (UBI) for the arts, including one in Ireland.*

● Cultural Commons

Interlinking with the theories of creative and contributive justice are those more practical and observable instances of support structures for artists. Many of these take on a form of the cultural commons.

The cultural commons refer to the shared cultural resources and heritage available to everyone in a society. These may include the tangible, such as artwork, music, literature and architecture, as well as more intangible cultural traditions, customs and practices passed from generation to generation (Borchi, 2018; Botta, 2016 and Ramos, 2016).

The concept is based on the ideas that culture should not be the exclusive property of an individual, organisation or group, and that access to the cultural commons should not be restricted by where you come from, how much expendable cash you have or where you live.

There were many examples of cultural commoning practices throughout the studies we reviewed, each taking on different political and social characteristics. We could compare many of these traits, including non-hierarchical structures, prioritising of sharing resources over extractive profiteering, mutual responsibility and managing through understanding the interconnectedness of individuals and their environment.

For example, in Italy during rounds of public funding cuts to the arts, some theatres were occupied by groups made up of artists and other cultural professionals (Borchi, 2018). The groups implemented commons management structures including horizontal governance and pooling of collective resources to run the theatres over a sustained period of several years.

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* It must be noted that there are many debates around UBI coupled with ideas on the re-distribution and re-imagining of how public funding is accessed and how cultural labour is more equitably shared. Yet, these debates reveal a real need to move towards a more just system.

● Artist-led collective practices

Following on from the cultural commons and creative justice research, there has been growing interest in artist-led or artist-run entities (e.g., Coffield, 2015; Sholette, 2018, Wright, 2019, Schofield, 2021; Harker, 2022). Many of these collectives, studio spaces, art schools, organisations, galleries and initiatives are born out of a frustration with both the market-orientated gallery and public funding systems . They often emerge from socially engaged practice and develop forms of commoning to maintain their activities without regular public funding or reliance on the art market. These activities are important as they provide tangible examples of how the more theoretical work on the cultural commons and creative justice plays out in practice.

There are countless examples of these kinds of activities world-wide such as Jakarta-based collective ruangrupa, which is co-creating critically engaged artist-led schools based on greater access to education. In the UK, projects such as The Highrise Project and East Leeds Project are embedded within their communities and aim to work with artists, local people and other partners to instigate positive change.

● Artists within government departments

A departure from the concepts discussed above but a noticeable theme in the literature we reviewed was when artists are brought into residencies and placements within governmental departments. Whether working with local council planning departments in the US or with a regional environmental and utilities department in Canada, these residencies bring artists into policymaking processes (Taylor, 2022; Kovacs and Biggar, 2017).

Across the studies, a key outcome is often repeated. The artist-government residencies "spur civic innovation and shift contexts to inspire new ideas and opportunities" (Taylor 2022, p.1). Although there is evidence that artists have changed the way specific governmental departments view their work and that they have benefited through developing their networks and gaining further commissions, these are isolated situations and often temporary.

Johanna Taylor (2022) tracks a rise in artist in residence in government (AIRG) across the US and draws some useful conclusions which go beyond documenting the generally positive outcomes highlighted in the majority of the literature. Taylor suggests that artists do not always have an equitable relationship within these residencies and there is a tendency on the part of government departments to want to go beyond the specified duration of the residency.

This has a financial impact on artists who are often juggling a portfolio of temporary, freelance and part-time work. Similarly, Taylor found that many government departments are also financially depleted, and finding funds to support artists and residency programmes can be difficult.

However, where these AIRGs have been successful, they are linked to actual policy outcomes. Taylor documents cases such as in Boston and Los Angeles where residencies have worked on developing cultural strategies and policy creation (p.9). These have been well supported and have had terms of reference in place to start with which outlines what is expected for all involved.

Of course, these residencies are nothing new: there is a rich history of artists in residence (AiR), some of which is traced by Ben Dunn and Abigail Gilmore (2020) in their report on the Meet the Neighbours international programme, funded for three years by Creative Europe. This report offers a key insight into artists working within rapidly changing cities and their role in public space. The aim was for artists to work with neighbourhoods in different cities and develop residencies with people from these places.

Although this report is not strictly about artists working in and with governmental departments, these residencies engaged in different ways with public space, making the key findings also relevant to policymaking at different levels. The report found these residencies avoided instrumentalism by actively resisting a "single, unified narrative of place and value" (p.34). Key to this was building trust between artists and participants within neighbourhoods which does not always happen in shorter-term residencies in governmental departments. By working with local partners, institutions and participants in an ongoing and open way, these residencies became collaborative rather than extractive.

There are contradicitons and tensions within these emerging areas of research and debate. For example, much of the literature we reviewed assumes there is a specific role or place for the artist within society. However, broader debates within the commons-related literature are linked to concepts of cultural democracy.

These question the need to separate the artist from other professions because they argue this will re-affirm hierarchies of artists as pitted against other professionals such as healthcare workers or teachers (Jeffers and Moriarty, 2017).

Similarly, this process of "professionalising" artist-led models into more recognised arts organisational structures (often to attract funding) can jeopardise community-led arts models. This is because it can create a separation between the artist-led organisation and the activity. The power relations are shifted and communities are suddenly asked to work "with" a separate organisation instead of running it themselves.

Photo © High Rise Project

Conclusions and implications

The question of whether artists should be funded to produce social outcomes should be thought of in a different way. The literature tells us this is a complex question, but there is consensus that many of the ways forward are likely to be found in broader adoption, acceptance and understanding of themes such as:

- cultural commoning;
- creative and contributive justice;
- artist-led collective practices;
- and equitable residencies for artists in the policymaking process.

These socially engaged activities often go unnoticed by the established cultural and creative industries or at least are not always acknowledged.

The literature in this review presents a set of challenges to funders and policymakers. The changes required are not going to happen overnight. Indeed, there is evidence that the very language used to describe artists, and particularly those adopting socially engaged practices, is inadequate and a process of "unspeaking" and "unlearning" will be needed to facilitate change (O'Connor, 2020).

As outlined in the Highlights section of the digest, the literature in this review does begin to suggest a path forward in ensuring a more equitable and inclusive cultural sector and spotlights some key considerations to inform future practices and policymaking.

Next Steps

If you are aware of new publications or feel we have missed a vital piece of research or evaluation that should be included, please get in touch at: ccv@leeds.ac.uk

Appendix 1

These are the search terms we used.

Artist subgroups
Socially engaged artists; social practice; artists; visual; sculptors; musicians; dancers; painters; writers; actors; performance artists; digital artists; poets; spoken word; film; documentary; sound artists

Key terms
Public; funding; power structures; support; care; value; policy; social impact

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Glossary

Artist-led
A term usually referring to an activity run or led directly by artists. This could be a studio, gallery, school, etc.

Capitalist modes of production
An economic system based on private ownership and control of how things are made. In this system, the exchange of goods is regulated by the market. This mode of production is designed to extract profit and to constantly accumulate (gain) wealth for private owners.

Commodified
Something that is turned into a product for the sole purpose of selling or exchanging for another commodity.

Equitable
Fair and impartial.

Gentrification
The process whereby the character of an area is changed by the influx of wealthier, often middle-class people.

Grey literature
A term used to describe the wide range of different information that is produced outside of traditional publishing and distribution channels. Examples of grey literature could include evaluation reports, blog posts and articles.

Institutional systems
A system that organises social behaviour by specific and replicable standards.

Market-orientated
Something that is controlled naturally by the market rather than a state or government. It is often designed specifically for a particular market.

Non-object-based art
Art that is not about making an object such as a painting or sculpture and instead focuses on communication between people, places and things. Examples could include a performance in a public space or one that takes the form of a protest march.

Professionalisation
A process by which a trade or occupation is standardised and regulated. This usually includes the creation of a trade body that can represent its workers.

Public/private funding
Public funding is invested in and delivered by governments or states. Private funding comes from companies, individuals and foundations.

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