Artists' lives:

ecologies for resilience

Susan Jones

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Executive Summary

Close study of visual artists' motivations and ambitions for their lives and art practices shows the importance of having time and space for professional reflection and making artistic progress. In combination with access to research and development funding, studio facilities make a significant contribution to artists' development and their social well-being over time as they deal with the uncertain artistic and economic conditions of the creative industries.

- Artists' practices are a lifetime pursuit in which deeply held beliefs about art's social and psychic value provide emotional sustenance. Artists' enduring motivations rest on intrinsic values including self-worth, caring for others and drive for personal growth.

> "All I ever wanted was a daily practice…. to commune ….with the material. That's the bit I consider to be the art, not the object that gets created – the practical fact that I'm allowed to do art."

- Most visual artists don't operate as small enterprises with business growth at the heart. Conducting visual art practices is of necessity experimental, speculative and time intensive. Some 44% of artists rent external studio space, creating an important distinction between domestic and professional lives and providing safe storage for equipment, materials, work-in-progress and finished works.
- Holding dedicated workspace is a marker of artists' continuous and serious practices, amplifying professional and career status and providing essential emotional, artistic and practical support amongst peers.

> "Affordable space is crucial … as my practice needs a lot of space – it can't be done at home."
>
> "I need to spread out, work larger and try stuff out."

- Artists in collective studios benefit from hosting invitational curatorial visits towards securing exhibitions and commissions, participating in open studios and using in-house space for their exhibitions and community activities.
- At all career stages, artists suffer restricted studio time, causing underuse of rented studios. The combination of poor economic prospects and scarce R&D funding means artists spend most of their time doing other income-generating jobs rather than being artists in their studios.

> "I couldn't afford a studio four years ago and although I'm in a secure relationship, my art practice is more precarious than ever. I'll only be able to keep my studio on if my grant application … is successful and DWP confirms my access support."

- Dedicated grants for artists to experiment, build artistic capacity and hone and upgrade technical and craft skills are highly valued but scarce. Artists receiving the Government's £10,000 Covid-19 'Small business' grant reported a positive boost and lasting benefits. Artists at an early development stage would particularly benefit from easier access to lower value grants.

> "It just takes so much time to do a big grant application, [that] I don't really have … I either have time for making, for community workshops or admin, but there's not enough time for all three [when] I'm working another job three days a week."

- Artists have a vested interest in forging locally distinctive environments and cultures characterised by self-sufficiency and sustainability as first-and-foremost, artists are people who eat, shop, sleep and socialise where they live.

> "Artists are creative thinkers. We need to build the 'what if?' 'why not?'. Artists' practices get dumbed down when they are sliced up to fit into other people's agendas."

- At around 20%, neurodivergence levels in the creative industries are 6% higher than in the general population. The associated dyslexia and dyscalculia impact on artists' basic communications skills, creating challenges for their professional relationships and when making applications for grants and projects.

- Artistic and financial success in arts and cultural organisations relies on a steady flow of affordable, flexible, skilled freelancers on a 'just in time' basis. Artists presenting as acquiescent, willing to work for low pay and grateful for whatever they're given are more likely to be offered the work.

> Arrangements for artists' fees which fall outside organisations' core operational budget make artists uniquely vulnerable as they're forced to shoulder the "invisible burden of taking all the economic risk".

- Artists seeking to forge careers through public and private galleries must pass control of their public image to the art world's cooperating coteries of curators, dealers, critics, senior artists and collectors. The byproduct of this cartel – the wastage – is the perceived 'over supply' of artists and limited livelihood prospects for many.

- When setting fees and terms, employers should recognise the difference in freelance and employed circumstances. On wellbeing grounds, freelancers need enough income to afford to take holidays and create savings for unexpected costs and for their pensions.

> "Artists must always be present for value to be created but at the same time they must always be devalued and de-economised for arts policy and business models to operate." Alexander (2017)

- DACS' *Artist Earnings Survey* (2025) shows the precarious nature of the visual arts as a profession. Median annual income for self-employed visual artists at £12,500 is 64% lower than typical incomes for individual UK workers. Unlike other arts careers, artists' incomes don't rise as they gain more experience.

- Artists' main sources of economic support are their own or a partner's permanent job. These provide employment benefits including mortgage credentials and regular income to cover artists' unexpected costs including healthcare, sickness periods, equipment replacement and personal refreshment including holidays.

> "I want to earn £35,000 like any professional. But it's really hard to earn money as an artist and it's so unpredictable. My earnings last year were £10,000 but £20,000 the year before. The difference was due to having four months of illness."

Credits

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Dr Susan Jones is an independent researcher and commentator specialising in close examination of the interrelationships between artists and the infrastructures for the contemporary visual arts. Evidence from her studies is published in arts and academic journals and briefings and presentations are provided to artists, artist-led initiatives, arts and cultural policymakers, sectoral bodies and networks.

- Artists in arts policy (2015-2023)

Artists' livelihoods: the artists in arts policy conundrum (2019) qualitative study of artists' livelihoods and arts policy through analysis of application and impacts on artists' development of EPR, Year of the Artist and Percent for Art policies, supported North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership (NWCDTP) and a-n The Artists Information Company; The chance to dream: why fund individual artists (2020) commissioned a-n The Artists Information Company; Are the creative industries good for artists? (2016) commissioned by Engage; A new deal? (2024) published Art Monthly.

- Artists in the pandemic: a qualitative study of conditions for artists' livelihoods during a time of great social and economic upheaval (2021-23)

Cracking up: the pandemic effect on visual artists' livelihoods (2021), Cultural Trends, 3.1, 2024; Is artists' exploitation inevitable? (2023) Summit and publication supported Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University and Axis; Telling tales: artists' pandemic stories (2022) commissioned CAMP; Artists' precarity is not just about pay (2022) published Arts Professional 2022; Fair enough? Artists in a post-pandemic world (2022) published Art Monthly, 461, 2022; Let artists flourish, for equality's sake (2021) published Double Negative, 2021; Reset or rewild: perspectives on future arts infrastructures (2021) published Corridor 8, 2021; Could do better: the exceptional impact of COVID19 emergency measures on visual artists with chronic conditions presentation with Vishalakshi Roy at *Another Artworld is possible*, Belgrade, 2020.

Introduction

Arts Council England has pursued resilience as a strategic policy goal since the government's austerity period after 2010. Promoted as a key expectation but only for funded arts institutions, policy's assumption is that resilience arises from a combination of sound business models, strong leadership and good governance. The effect of this narrow perspective has been to simplify the social scope and expectations of arts infrastructures. By setting aside the complexities of dealing with artists and supporting their varied and nuanced interests and multiple social contributions, these individuals were moved to the policy margins.

As revealed by the findings of this in-depth study, the effect of successive policies has been to marginalise artists' position in the infrastructures and 'ecology' of the arts. Artists at all stages of development lack social status, this whether seeking support for research and development or seeking mutuality in their arrangements with commissioners and employers.

In parallel and due to widespread adoption across the funded visual arts of commercial creative industries and 'gig economy' terms, the volume of paid work opportunity for artists has reduced and is less attractive in artistic and economic value. Arts policy's 'market economy' approach has the effect of undermining its stated aspirations to demonstrate equity and inclusion across the arts.

During the global pandemic, the Arts Council's 'institutions first' policy was retained and strongly defended. Declining a call from 550 UK arts freelancers for more nuanced financial aid, it confirmed that arts organisations would remain the priority.

> "While it may seem that large NPOs may be in less need of sympathy or support, the reality is that they tend to operate with tiny reserves, employ thousands of people and support many others through their supply chains. Many …. are run by artists and most of them employ or contract them. Their collapse triggers the collapse of entire ecosystems of human talent on which everyone in the sector depends…. Funding [them is] an attempt to ensure … these ecosystems can survive". Darren Henley, CEO Arts Council England

Research questions

- How do artists' personal and professional circumstances and contexts impact on artistic development, social aspirations, career prospects and their resilience?
- How do artists' pursuit of art practices over time relate to and benefit their locality and community?
    - Are Creative Land Trust's studio buildings supportive of the livelihoods and career progression of artists, makers and creative arts businesses?
    - Do they encourage artists, makers and creative arts businesses to set up and remain in London?
    - What would make them more attractive for users and retain them as tenants?
    - Do studios appeal to artists with differing social characteristics and from disadvantaged sections of society?
    - What are the environmental and wider social impacts of studio-based activities in the buildings?

This report begins with a portfolio of fourteen artists' stories in vignette format drawn from interviews held over the period 2017-2024. Using the artists' own words, terms and phraseology and anonymised for artists' personal and professional protection, these stories capture each individual's personality and attitude and convey the nuances of their personal and professional circumstances. By illuminating individualised approaches to making and manifesting art practices over time these provide an understanding of their experiences and the impacts on artists of external environments and contexts. These evocative stories and the analysis sections which follow on are a response to the study's main and subsidiary research questions.

Artists' stories

Olivia

Olivia graduated a decade ago and then moved to London where she lives with her partner in social housing and rents a shared studio not too far away. She is adept at reshaping her engagement-based practices to changing social and economic conditions. Her lived experience of neurodivergence led to paid work providing access support to artists, which has become a regular part of her income.

The driver for absolutely everything I do is a fascination with people, what they believe in, how they behave and what makes them who they are. I guess you could say it's a continual enquiry into how e as human beings relate to one another, how we think, process stuff and express ourselves. Our world is characterised by multiple crises now – with capitalist economics and power imbalances the major cause. So it's increasing social access and enabling inclusivity that run through my own practice as well as when I work collaboratively with people who share my beliefs and values. I want to make sure though, no matter what, that I have some kind of creative practice. I just need it for my mental health and wellbeing.

In the arts there's a lot of rhetoric and misassumptions with regards to recognising diversity and community and it's even spreading into notions of care now. I'm drawn to work in that space though because it's far messier and more complicated to deal with 'difference' than you'd think, and I like that. If I look back at everything I've been involved in, it feels as if I've created my own kind of reference resource – a kind of 'cabinet of curiosities' maybe – that I can draw on to navigate through the plural crises around nowadays.

What I'm really trying to do through my art practice is to help remake social and arts infrastructures so they are fairer and kinder, and better at recognising people's various social vulnerabilities. It's also about being an activist wherever I can, working to rebalance power, generate alternatives to capitalism and reduce the very many environmental harms.

Although I'm ten years into my art practice, in many ways I'm still feeling quite new at it. My ambitions are a bit fuzzy still. You start out as new graduate with maybe two degrees behind you, but are there recognisable career paths you can follow? Or is it more that after about five years there's just a giant, lengthy gaping bit after, that maybe lasts until you die?

It's not like I ever feel, 'this is my next step on the ladder', sort of thing. Some artists I know seem to think it's about trying to get shows in galleries of successive importance – you start with a small one and keep building up. But London is enormous and there's like kind of a million art worlds in the sphere. There are the typical routes that you could go but maybe those are more of a treadmill than anything else, so not necessarily any easier. I don't really think about it like that, I guess. Genuine connections are built more organically.

It does feel though that there's a 'sweet spot' that at least some artists do arrive at. That's when their status in the artworld as gained from length of sustained practice and being visible means they can get better fees and terms and maybe can actually afford to keep practices going. Having someone – an organisation or an individual – who believes in your work does really make a difference too.

Sometimes though it feels like we artists are just destined to repeat the struggles of the past. Looking back at who we now think of as the pioneers, it does seem it's mostly women and non-conformists in general who identify the missing infrastructures and get to work fixing that. That's beautiful and frustrating at the same time.

The pandemic wiped out a lot of how it used to work for artists, including a vast amount of artist-generated, experimental activity – including my own – and my feeling is that the arts still haven't got over that. What I *don't* see now are the programmes and support for mid-career artists. So for me, it's the encouragement and emotional sustenance I get from other artists and social activists in my community that keeps me going. I do like whatever I do as an artist now to be as self-supporting as possible and for sure, it's the working small that makes my practice sustainable now.

Looking back, I used to be able to raise about a third of my income from grants and the rest from project income. But I couldn't swing that nowadays. I did start gestating a new project last year and managed to find a bit of concentrated time in the summer to focus down on it. I know the kinds of organisation I need to collaborate with to realise it, and my dream is to make it real by the end of 2025, but we'll see.

There are a few super helpful things though. Me and my ‘accountability buddy’ get together once a week to share, write stuff and generally co-support. Pre-pandemic, I generally got an Arts Council grant through every year but nowadays, getting those grants is mega hard. I’d never hinge anything I want to do on getting one now. It’s not that I don’t know how to write a good application, because I do.

It does seem that for loads of artists, developing their practices is stunted by all the time fruitlessly spent on fundraising. What really enables me to keep my own practice going is the income pattern I’ve developed. So I have a day and a half’s income a week from an arts related job that’s really enjoyable, and another day’s income comes from doing access support work for artists. I top it up by doing bits and bobs of teaching and fundraising. It’s not relying on any income coming from art practice means I actually end up producing more art. It’s a bit odd too that in the year I made the most money ever – the income level considered just a baseline for London livers though – very little came from art practice.

So this income mix I’ve crafted for myself buys two days a week for my practice including my studio costs. These are long days though, sometimes maybe it’s 7pm before I set off for home. I’ve just taken on a bigger studio space for spreading out, making larger work and generally for trying things out. It’s my office too as there’s totally not space for that at home. Although I’ve had studios before this is the first where I’ve got a reasonable length of lease, plus it’s clean and warm and the rent’s good. It’s not just on my doorstep, but I can bike it.

The other factor in being sustainable is my low living costs. I wouldn’t be so unafraid of the future if we weren’t in social housing – that is quite an asset. But our only chance to stay in London depends on being able to buy, so that’s the focus for our energies and our savings right now. Juggling the mortgage adviser wanting to see the size of the deposit, having enough regular income and putting enough aside at the same time to pay my tax bill is a bit of a challenge though.

It's true there’s not much downtime in my life, even though I don’t work weekends. I wouldn’t say we have proper holidays, just take a couple of long weekends off a year. We’ve not got kids and have no plans to, so no school holidays to factor in. It does seem that even when couples are super equal about splitting things, it just takes a different toll on the woman. In the last few years, four close friends have had kids in quick succession and three of them have just stopped being artists and completely changed careers. Although they still definitely have it in them, they just can’t make being an artist viable.

Andres

Andres moved here to study for a Masters at a prestigious London art school and has been in the city for three years now and wants to stay. Since graduating, he's found enough regular art-related work to finance his studio and living costs and now has his first solo show fixed up.

My art practice is the place where I can examine and address notions of identity, diaspora and transnationality and pursue my fascination with the history and meaning of buildings and their social position as powerful places. I didn't get into fine art straight away. I spent a decade making my living in another profession, although I'd always kept my art practice running in the background. It was the Covid period and the aftermath which made me really rethink. I guess I'd just got disillusioned – bored really – with all the limitations of working in a commercial and applied art. So, I set about to retrain in fine art as it really seemed the most expansive route for me to explore my concerns around culture, belonging and family narratives.

While I was studying for my Master's I was pleased to be selected by an emerging curator to be in a thematic show. It seemed to go well for me and I got to give my first artist's talk and be paid a fee for it, which felt nice. I've been in some good group shows since and also had work in an arts festival in Europe.

I've been offered my first solo show here in a space run by an arts charity set up to support early and mid-career artists through exhibitions and so on. It feels pretty wonderful. Only the space is free though. I probably need some help to make a few grant applications as I've got to finance all the other costs myself. What would be great for me would be to secure gallery representation. Even though there's never a guarantee, I think maybe that's a stepping stone to getting more visibility and recognition in the arts.

About four-fifths of the money I need to live here comes from two jobs. My main work is with a curatorial organisation. I design and install exhibitions and I also do their event filming here and abroad. I feel fairly confident of that as reliable freelance income as it's a business that seems to be growing. Alongside that, I have a day's teaching on a university employment contract – that's for the academic year. Between these two and with a bit of income from my investments, I can get two days somewhere across the week to spend in my studio.I don't really have expectations of any income from my art practice as yet. The studio rent is what I can manage right now and the location is quite convenient. It's just a fifteen-minute bike ride to where I flat share. So for me, everything is affordable – just.

How I see it, the chances of it working out for me as an artist are fifty-fifty, but I don't really know. I'll just have to see how it progresses. I don't feel want to over define my art practice and I tend to think of things happening in waves. So the way I treat it is more like a continuum – one thing leading to another, kind of thing. I know I'll always be dealing with the ebbs and flows and that does feed my anxiety. All the thinking about and around my practice and how to make it work for me can keep me awake at night.

Francis

Francis who lives in North West England started out in the crafts but soon moved into photography. For many years, he combined his practice with activism in practice-led initiatives, university teaching and community education. Now almost 60 and in a solo household, he's developed a livelihood pattern that combines his professional knowledge with his wider social and personal interests.

The landscape has always been my anchor. When I get out onto the moor the top is quite flat and featureless and the temptation is to just look at the sky or the fringes. Some people find that landscape a foreboding place, but for me it's the draw. I can find my way around it alone and in the dark and it's not like that at all.

I've always felt strongly that practitioners should have an identity where they live and, an opportunity for their work in their region. When I graduated in the '90s a group of us were thinking, you know, 'what can we do next?', so we created an informal collective – a peer support group if you like. In those pre internet days we started meeting once a month to have conversations. It was word-of-mouth and spreading the word that got the more established practitioners involved, and that led to a load us being invited into our regional arts board to talk to them about photography. Okay they weren't handing money over at that point, but they were saying 'if you guys start to do something, there might be'.

Looking back, that was a period when it was possible for artists to develop ideas and great associations. So we got lottery funding for photography festival in seventeen venues and we showed twenty-one artists from all round the world. The region got a reputation for photography and we went on to form a photography network. That self-generated aspect was always the most important - not needing the institutions to do it, just getting on through the practice and doing things for yourself. It was different then and nowadays funders don't work like that. You know, they don't reach out to where the practice is going on, at the grassroots. Success in their eyes isn't

about what the artists in a place are doing. I don't feel they want to think about the negative aspects of the creative industries either as far as individuals are concerned.

I'd say a large part of what I've done over my professional life has been as an educator and facilitator, helping other people in one way or another through the medium of photography. Some of that happened by chance in responding to situations and opportunities as they came up. I've always enjoyed working like that but I do realise that can be a bit too self-critical - too reflective. Although that can sometimes be constructive, in terms of achieving my own personal development I probably sometimes undermine myself.

I think some people succeed in spite or despite of the stuff going on around – that idea of survival of the fittest. But if we're supposed to be a society that's becoming more socially just – that's with a small 's' and 'j' – I think we should look out for the people who slip through the net through lack of opportunity, because they and society are missing out. That's why part of what I do now is mentoring for new graduates and young people more generally, you know, helping them to work out what they want to study and work in and so on.

After many years of art lecturing, I financed my own MA. I saw that as a way to reignite my personal practice and make space for new things, new directions, to happen. It was after graduating in 2019 that I started to rebuild my career, but I was gobsmacked by what I found. I was offered a day's work on a degree course but when I looked, it involved a 240-mile round trip, which just wasn't financially viable. You know, I worked out they were offering me less pay than I'd been earning fourteen years before. Similarly, I was more than a bit surprised with the fee on offer for a commission in the commercial sector – this was from someone I'd worked with before. I tried to negotiate something more realistic but they just said they were short of budget and I ended up having to agree to a 25% cut.

It seems employers don't understand the difference between freelance and employed work. Their maths doesn't take account of basic things like holiday pay and pension contributions. It's about what's valued really – these people and institutions aren't valuing what experienced creative people bring in. For lots of creative individuals though, the thing that determines whether they are 'successful' – in inverted commas – or not has nothing to do with their creativity as such. It's far more about other external factors. But I've learned to be cautious about what I say about that and to whom.

Covid totally disrupted and mucked about with my life – I was one of those people who fell through the cracks. I couldn't get anything from the government – I felt it just didn't seem to hear the voice of people like us – and in certain segments of society there's the view that self-employed people are fiddling the books, you know, not paying their tax.

I'd developed a bit of a side hustle by then – an activity in parallel with my own practice and had a full year of work fixed up there. But that was all cancelled. You know I've never been driven by money but now I look back I can see it ended up costing me quite a lot to manage that period.

I've been wearing two hats since then. My main income comes from the side hustle which I genuinely enjoy doing, but it's mainly a financial necessity. On the creative side, I'm a mentor in a regional arts education organisation – that's really a continuation of work I've been doing for a decade and a half now that I get a lot from. Although I am trying to make the work/income balance more like fifty-fifty, the reality of day-to-day survival means, you know, I don't always have the luxury of pursuing the creative side of my work because it's always going to be more a gamble.

I have mixed feelings though about the quality of the professional development programmes I see around for newcomers. People talk about them as being a good idea, but when I look at some of the people and organisations perpetuating them, I think they're a bit more like a cash cow. To work with creative individuals, you really need to understand what kind of people they are, you know, the particular challenges they face and what triggers them. If I were writing a professional development programme nowadays, I'd want to have a psychologist involved.

I've had to give a lot to family over the last decade and speaking plainly, Covid was a bugger. An inheritance had already paid off my mortgage but I had to take money from my pension savings just to live on and haven't been able to pay that back since. I'm now the emotional and practical support for my brother who's got a debilitating condition and lives alone and I've now got an issue with my own health – I don't think of it as a disability. So, I've neglected myself but for the right reasons.

I feel life hasn't progressed very well for me professionally over the last few years. In some respects, you could say I've been in survival mode with little capacity – for want of a better word – to indulge my thoughtful, productive creative side life. But when I'm having conversations with people it's hard to be honest about things like that. There's this idea that we always have to put a positive spin on things.

Tanya

Tanya is 40 and lives in North West England with her designer partner and child. She has been earning her living as a freelance creative image maker in the commercial sector for almost twenty years. A joint vision with her partner to share their creativity with others led them to initiate a new community venture four years ago although that's since had to close down.

I feel great pride in being creative. I'm from a family where everyone was being creative *all* of the time – I just knew I had this creative thing in me and it felt like it would always be there. It's a physical feeling, like I just have to do something creative …. I kind of can't switch it off. You could say I'm obsessed with creating – it's just a magical and fantastical experience and such a massive contributor to my own mental health that I just want to keep spreading that word. I've always tried to inspire and enable other people to use their creativity because it feels good to make art and it takes them out of their everyday lives and makes them feel they're 'something'.

I developed my strong work ethic as a teenager and always had some kind of a job, not because my family didn't have money – they did. When I graduated, I mostly looked to the commercial sector for my creative work and thinking back to a decade ago, I was probably doing something like 100 commissions a year. Work has always come as much from personal friendships as professional connections – a lot of the friends I'd grown up went on to do ambitious things and I've really benefitted from that in terms of my income. But there's always been a cross-fertilisation between the commercial creative work and development of my own practice.

Keeping our own practices fresh and sharing our creativity with the community is really important to my partner and to me. Six years ago we did a lot of research into setting up a community venture and when we couldn't get any funding for that, we paid for it ourselves, you know, used all our savings and maxed out the credit cards. We found a building in a really good location – the perfect place really. But it was in a terrible state and we had to work so hard to do it up and make the studio, exhibition and community workshop spaces. By the end, everywhere including the yard was used – we made it all accessible.

We were both trying to keep our own work going at the same time and having my own space for the first time was like a dream come true. Everything was going well – we had maybe seven independent artists, makers and designers in the studios, monthly meet-ups for freelancers and the regular workshops for the community, with the places at them selling out. We were feeling really positive that the word was, kind of, getting out there but then Covid happened.

At first, the work just slowed down and then it just stopped and we had to cancel the public workshops. We did get the £10,000 small businesses grant and a bit of funding from the local council to make some community kits and we really just tried to adapt what we'd had planned to do. I put in an application to the Arts Council lottery fund – it was for about £15,000, so quite a big project. We wanted to have a programme of free workshops for low-income households and pay all the artists running them. Weirdly, I was so hyper focused when I filled out that form that it felt quite easy. I could see the patterns and how the wording was formed. I realised how the Arts Council just overcomplicates everything and you have to simplify things to fit exactly with how they think. So, you need good mental health to deal with that process. But we didn't get that grant.

At that time, most of our regular income came from my freelance work and that was actually going well. I really felt my work was getting better, though when I look back, the income wasn't really enough for us to live on. It wasn't long after that I had our daughter and having a child has just changed everything in our lives. I got really run down while I was pregnant – quite ill, really drained what with keeping the freelance work going, managing the building, being supportive to people using it and doing the childcare all at the same time. I became exhausted – even posting on Instagram was just too much.

Although I really needed to slow down, I also needed to make another application to the Arts Council – it was for £30,000. I thought getting that would power me on and we'd be able to keep our building going. But we didn't get it. That made us feel that artist-led things are always going to lose out to, you know, to organisations the Arts Council already knows about. So, without that financial boost I had taken a bit of a backseat with organising activities there and as a result, everything began to dwindle. I did find some of the artists there quite difficult to deal with too – they needed a lot of attention and that turned out to be a whole job in itself, sapping all my energy. I began to wonder whether having a building was even the right direction to be going in - it was such a detraction, you know, from doing the creative work. So, in the end, we just gave it up.

In the last two years every element of our lives has changed – we've had so many issues to deal with. We lost our home – that was for all sorts of complicated reasons and not our fault – so now we're in temporary housing and living month-to-month. I have to focus on my family and balance anything I do as a creative with the childcare. You know, I had always had this weird belief that anything I wanted to happen in my life, I could always make happen. Although it sounds really strange, all through our lives we would start by picturing where we wanted to go and believing that it was possible to get there and that's how we got to develop our building.

But now we're in this uncomfortable position where we don't know where we want to go or what our future is and as we can't picture it, we can't get there. My brain's stopped being able to think creatively because of the stress of everything. I've lost my magic – that's my resilience really – and that's scary because right from being a child I've been able to use that to overcome issues. It's been my way out.

I've needed counselling over the last two years - it started because I was really stressed about losing our home and my anxiety levels got very high. My neurodivergence and OCD traits have really come out – that's something I get from my Mum. You know, she's had that all her life – her mind is just very busy all the time. My mind is just like that – it never stops, and I worry about burning out. I feel it's common amongst creative people and why we connect with each other. But I don't feel there's many people like me where I'm living now so I have to restrain myself – you know, to try to be normal.

I've always been prepared to work hard but now we've got no house and no savings to show for that. Even when I do find work in the commercial sector, I'm finding the pay hasn't kept up with the cost-of-living rise. So, I do wonder how women artists can possibly make a living once they have kids. How are we meant to do that? Do you need to have a salaried job and just be creative on the side?

Anna

Anna graduated in fine art in 2019 but moving into the crafts felt like a natural progression. Her aim is to establish a viable business by making functional pieces people will want to keep for a lifetime and by passing her passion and skills onto others. She and her creative partner are looking to move out of London so they can live more cheaply and sustainably on the planet.

My practice has changed track quite a bit over the years since I graduated. My degree was in fine art but I came to realise later that what I really want – and need – to do is make functional, beautiful things from sustainable materials that will last a long time. I work intuitively and I've always been good at using my hands. It's a kind of trait that runs through my family going back to my grandfather. He made fine furniture.

I got furlough from my office job during Covid and that gave me time to find a course to help me make that shift. It just felt like a natural progression. One of my biggest motivations is not to be stuck looking at a screen all day. I did too much of that in the pandemic when I was working from home.

I want anything I make now to last a lifetime. It's got to have a function. Everything I do has to be about carrying on and honouring the traditions of my craft. It's about having a sustainable living from what I love doing and looking after the environment for future generations. I like to find my materials close to home, so I guess you'd call me anti-consumerist. I'm a ruralist at heart – I was brought up in the countryside and like to go there as often as I can.

Even though I'm very practical and organised, I've still got so much to learn. I've been finding it's not enough to be skilled in the processes of designing, making and finishing, my creative practice needs to be viable as a business too. Over the last year, I've really focused on trying to make work I can sell – the basic idea is to make enough income from my practice to replace the materials and make more pieces. But the downside of doing that is that the learning and skills development side gets neglected. And if there's no room in the making processes for mistakes to happen, I know I won't develop artistically, the quality of my work will suffer, I just won't be happy with it and people won't want it.

So, I do feel I'm at a bit of a crossroads. I know I really need to keep on improving my technical knowledge and skills and I've identified the courses I really need. But it's taking time out to do them that's the complicated bit, as I can't do them without some kind of grant. There's so much competition for grants though and making persuasive applications is super time-consuming. But I just don't have that time when I'm trying to make the work, passing on my skills to communities through workshops and teaching and doing all the business admin. I haven't got time to do all these three at the moment because until I've got a viable business, I have to spend three days a week doing a desk-based PAYE admin job for a reliable, regular income.

I try and be in the studio for the other two days from around ten to six, but of course that's not all making time. There's all the admin, the social media which I'm not very good at, and keeping my website up to date. I'll also be using those two days to make grant applications, on trying to get another set of workshops fixed up, and then I'll also be sending out invoices and chasing people for payment. All of that. If I've got a big deadline to get enough pieces made, I'm pretty good at prepping in advance so I don't have to do an all-nighter, frantically making stuff. At the weekend, I try and have a full day off where I don't think about any work things. We do take holidays but they're never for too long.

So far, I've been quite self-sufficient in developing my practice and I've been able to get quite a bit of useful and practical information from various membership and specialist bodies. But what I really need now to push my practice forward is personalised advice from a mentor with connections in my specific crafts field.

At the same time though I need mentoring in how to run my business and make it viable. I've found a perfect two-day a week course but taking it means finding the funds to pay both the fees and to cover my own time because I wouldn't be making anything I could sell while I'm learning.

Studio rents across London are insane – you can pay £200 a month for just a desk. But affordable space is crucial for me as my practice needs a lot of space – it can't be done at home. I've just downsized my studio a bit to a smaller, cheaper space – the light's good and I feel secure when I'm here and I can share with my partner who's also a creative. I like that there's not too much travel since it's near enough to where we live.

Our plan now though is to move out of London to somewhere else entirely, where buying a house is cheaper. We've each got a bit of savings and with help from our families we can make the deposit. We've worked out the monthly mortgage payments will be less than our rental here and in our own home we can maybe do more to become self-sufficient and be more active in social change. In my mind, it will take two years before I'll be able to work full time and earn enough income from my practice through sales and workshop fees to live on without needing a job alongside.

I'm trying to find the target audience for my courses – I take them to different places. When I'm running them myself it's a whole day to make something finished to take home. There's a fine financial balance though as you can't have too many people, but at the same time I need to charge enough to cover the cost of the venues and pay myself and for the materials and then I try to factor in the time needed for the following up.

Something that drew me to the studios I'm in now was the chance to run free workshops there for the community, without me having to do all that admin. Both of mine were oversubscribed and the feedback felt great. People enjoyed them and told me how it good they were for their mental health. It's good to share my craft skills and beliefs with others like that, but I've realised that teaching is a completely different skillset. When you're working face-to-face with people who are maybe neurodivergent or socially vulnerable in some way or with young people, you really do need to know what you're doing. But how do you get to learn to do that when there doesn't seem to be any specific training around?

Amelia

A Masters graduate and early career artist, Amelia's passion is to pursue her art practice without compromise and to very high standards. It's her professional qualification in a tangential discipline that gives stability to her life and makes remaining in studios in London amongst her peers economically viable. She's concerned though about her mental health and feels the threat of burnout is never far away.

Art is my passion – it's only thing that matters to me and that I really care about. Being an artist frames everything else I do in my life. I enjoy the precious times when I'm in my studio, immersed in the processes of thinking, and in exploring concepts and form before making them visible. I guess you could say art making fulfils a kind of psychological urge. In the place I studied for my Master's, I felt the subculture of high achievement came at the cost of quality, which I found oppressive and debilitating. I've worked hard since to break away from all that and to find my own way. Other people's responses to my work are always going to be less important than actually making it, but I'm glad to have a small, supportive circle of people around me whom I trust and admire and who support me to make the best decisions for it. They're also a way of sharing or spreading the things I believe in.

Like most other artists I know, I've got to have some income from regular work running alongside my art practice just to live. I took a second Masters in a subject not immediately related to my art practice and I've found the secure job arising from it inspiring intellectually. Importantly for a single person, this gives me the economic security I need. But it's more than that you know. Having it means I can slow down and be more considered with my practice in terms of only selecting the best artistic opportunities to progress it. I find there are professional international and interdisciplinary cross fertilisations too with my job which feed directly through into my art practice. That and ongoing participation in an ecological collective are significant in helping me to think about and position myself in society and in the world.

I find it hard though to make concessions to my general well-being in the way I live my life. One way or another, I'm usually working six days a week, with just two-and-a-half of those days actually spent on making art. Saturdays are always time to be in the studio. I always try to get all my admin out of the way though, so nothing gets in the way of being free to think and draw.

Sometimes – oddly maybe – I actually think though that all the various restrictions on my studio time increase the enjoyment I get from being there. You know, perhaps if I was working at my art practice full-time and trying to make my livelihood wholly from being an artist it might end up stymieing my whole creative process.

The shows and opportunities I get are almost always in the commercial gallery sector and generated through personal connections. My experience is that a curator likes the look of my work – has probably seen it in a group show elsewhere in their network – and sees the advantage to their own career development of contributing to mine. The issue for me and other artists at my development stage is the production balloon – you know, the time I need and the materials and process costs of making and installing new work. There's only a return on all the effort and direct expense if something sells, and maybe nothing does.

I must admit to finding the pace of it all very tiring and stressful and as a result my mental and physical health does sometimes suffer. Any holidays I take are usually brief and spent with family. The struggle to maintain intellectual space, quality and pace for my art practice alongside the intellectual and emotional challenges of my other job is constant. The risk of burnout is always there in the background.

For very early career artists like me, the combination of sustaining an art practice at the high level that's essential to achieving art world recognition while having little-or-no downtime for mental and physical renewal is an enormous psychological and physical challenge. It's a genuine issue that those with 'normal' arts jobs just don't seem to recognise when they're making their arrangements with artists.

I don't feel like there's a lack of artistic opportunity for me really. It's just that I'll always need to be quite deliberate about what I say 'yes' to. My assumption, you know, is that I'll only find the right opportunities and achieve the recognition I want for my artwork in the future because I've done it in the 'right' way, by making sure I've always been engaged with projects that I truly care about. In the past, I got some free arts mentoring as a prize which I found useful at the time. I've got no money to pay for that kind of advice now though so I rely on other artists - mostly those who I graduated with – and other gallerists I'm showing with.

I feel fortunate to have created my other occupation as it really takes the financial pressure off. It's maybe odd to think this but I feel that trying to make all my income from being an artist full-time would put livelihood pressure on something I feel passionate about. I've no faith at all in applying for grants. I've become jaded because I've put a lot of effort into applying for things and then not been successful. As it stands, it's just unfair. It's all super competitive and the bar's set extremely high. What artists in the early development stage really need is access to more grants at a lower value.

Making applications is so time-intensive and at one point it seemed I was spending more time writing them than on my art practice. Forms that ask for multiple answers to a specific word count are the worst. I work fast I think, but it's easy to spend a week on an application and then have maybe 5% chance of being chosen. With grants from Arts Council England, I almost feel like I'd need an expert to help – someone who knows exactly how to fill out that kind of application. There's a complete disconnect – like it's more about how capable you are of filling out an application than whether your work actually merits a grant.

Having a studio is essential for me as I've no space to do anything at all in my flat share. It's in a good location – I can cycle there – and I love the area and surrounding community. The only downside really is the lack of natural light. But my worry though is whether I'll still be able to have it in the future. You know, it's only financially possible at present as it's a joint tenancy. So if the other artists say they can't afford the annual rises and need to go somewhere cheaper, I'd have to move too.

Michael

Michael has just turned 50 and lives with his family in one of North West England's big cities. He progresses his art practice through exhibitions in commercial and public galleries in the UK and internationally. Although he knows the financial risks, his Christian faith and family encouragement gave him the strength to reduce the hours on his regular professional job last year so he has more time to spend on his art practice.

Making art is something I've always had to do. It's part of my life and I can't imagine what could ever replace it. I believe we're all made to create and we all need to have freedom to create, whatever that may look like. It's the being creative that makes each of us more of a whole person and fulfils a deep part of who you are intrinsically. It's not the idea of being an artist that interests me though, it's the painting, drawing and making of art so I must always maintain the craft of what I do. Although I might take a bit of time out occasionally, I need to spend intense periods in the studio when I'm constantly painting – using the materials and testing things out. When you believe in yourself as a person and an artist, you feel more assured about yourself and the work you produce.

I've never been tempted to join a studio group – I think that these can turn into a bit of a substitute for actually doing the art. I don't need to be living in London to get on – I've always found it good to be here as an artist - there's more of an edge to life and it's all still very developmental.

I really don't believe that the most authentic art comes from kind of throwing everything into the pit, you know making selfish choices where your family's future is concerned.

I'm generally in five or more shows every year, alongside the opens and prize shows. I know from experience that getting major prizes lead to getting into significant exhibitions, and that's when I sell work to those important private collections. So, I show my work in a mixture of commercial galleries, public galleries and museums and in artist-to-artist things like Contemporary British Painting. That's been great for artists – I feel lucky to be part of it. I've been selling through a London gallery – it's represented me for a few years now. There's a confidence from selling work and winning prizes that leaks into the work.

The residency I did last year with a private collector worked out very well though. I sold a piece to them for their collection afterwards and that's just been in a show in London. I had a very big thing in China a while back – did a residency and made a lot of work and then had a massive show in a prestigious gallery. But that all went nowhere in the end. There's maybe a year's worth of work just sitting in that gallery – I can't afford to get it shipped back, so I'll probably never see it again. So there's plenty of slip between cup and lip, sort of thing.

The Covid period was quite good for me as an artist. I was furloughed from my regular job and because my studio's at home, I had the space and loads of time to just paint. I could get up every day, pray, go for a run, then spend most of the time in the studio painting and a bit more with the kids at the end of the day. Just no one was in a rush or a hurry then and that felt like a real gift.

Matthew Burrows' Artists' Support Pledge on Instagram did make a huge difference to artists – it legitimised artists' self-promotion, something I'd not really thought of doing before. Every week, I sold probably two paintings – they were sort of palm sized – and what with selling larger works to some buyers, I finished the year with a better income than usual. All that was a blessing – a real boost to my self-esteem and a genuine encouragement for artists like me to just keep going.

After that lockdown experience I realised that if I wanted to really progress my practice, I needed to maintain that kind of extended space for it. I've been able to do that because an Italian gallery approached me after seeing my Instagram. They came over for a studio visit, I went over there to see the gallery and they offered me a major show.

Honouring that meant I need to have concentrated time to produce a lot of new work. It felt the right time for me to reduce the hours on my regular job working with vulnerable children – do fewer days – so I can really push my practice forward.

The household's always been financially secure because of my regular income so it is a bit of a worry, but we sat down as a family and talked it all through. It's scary but necessary – and it's better to regret what didn't work than never try. I've just got to make it work.

I often sell to private buyers here and abroad and find the scams easy to spot. If someone really wants a painting they're happy to give contact details so I can check them out. I send a high-res image of the work, then they transfer money into my account and it's cleared before I ship anything.

I've never felt the need to use formal contracts with galleries – each arrangement is scoped and agreed after discussions. My arrangement with the Italian gallery doesn't really constrain me much – I just can't be represented elsewhere in that country. I think the commission on sales is really quite high – so I'm losing half of a £4,000 painting to that – but on the plus side, I've always found UK and European commercial galleries good at paying promptly.

As a family, we've always spent as little as we can so we're very lucky to have paid off our mortgage early. I was brought up by my Dad to be very 'old school' as far as money is concerned. You know, buy nothing on credit but if you must, pay the loan off as soon as possible. I don't want my kids to start adult life with a lot of debt either so once they get to that age, we'll be helping each of them through university. We did lose income last year when my wife couldn't work – she was very ill for three months. Luckily, I got offered some extra work – it's really quite well paid and only takes a couple of hours a few times a week. That's going to continue - to give us a buffer in the future and I'll still do it when I retire. So, we're OK for now. But I'm at the start of that journey and it's going to be interesting.

Looking back, I can see that the pandemic was a great leveller for artists because no one was having these incredibly big shows or being super successful. Artists could just make work and weirdly, that felt intensely liberating. That's why I think the hope for the arts must come from the roots up – from artists themselves, not from the top down, because you know it's artists who are the massively adaptable people, who find ways to make progress and who are totally not fazed by the changes to the normal.

Nancy

Nancy took a Masters in London and lived and taught there for several years before moving with her partner to North West England. Joining an established studio group gave her a 'flying start' to establishing her full-time art practice. Now in her 40s, she works mainly through self-generated commissions and residencies, building dedicated periods for research and artistic replenishment into any funding applications.

I felt driven to be an artist from a very early age – it was all I ever wanted to do and I just wouldn't be told otherwise. It was my Grandad who really encouraged me as he'd been offered an art school place himself but his family was too poor for him to take it. I remember it was him and my Dad who paid for me to have extra art classes as a child.

In the seven years we lived in London I didn't really think it was possible to make a living from my practice and I didn't come across a lot of artists who were. I had to work full-time as a lecturer, my studio was a desk space used at weekends, so I really struggled to find time and energy to focus on my practice. We chose to come here because housing and studio costs are much lower.

I've been practising for over twenty years now and I know quite a few artists who are making a living from their practice. It does seem like it's possible and economically viable to be an artist in this region. Being in group studios has really helped me understand the different ways artists can work , which has kind of made me surer about how I want to develop my practice. I really know too what I *don't* want to be doing. When I develop my residencies and commissions I'm confident enough now to make the first move, with the view that I'm the one who's bringing in valuable skills and insight. This means the artistic contexts and financial terms for them have to work for me as well as for the commissioner.

It's not a fast process though. I may spend a couple of years building a relationship with someone and then there's the time needed to raise the funds. That's because I want everything I do to be productive and enjoyable. I do get more people offering me things now and I'm lucky that some of the commissioners I've worked with successfully several times do recommend me for other stuff. But I always feel you never really know when somebody might offer you something very interesting. So, I always try and keep up with people as much as I can, without burning myself out.

I'm quite pro-active in looking after myself mentally and I know artists are supposed to 'work the room' at previews but I'm not an extrovert and I find that just too emotionally draining, especially now I'm a bit older. Organising one-to-ones in my studio feels more comfortable and I've found they're usually more productive.

What works well though is when an organisation approaches me to find out what I'd like to be doing and what conditions would work best for me. So, my next residency with a smaller organization is going to be totally research based and I'm being paid for that for maybe two or three days a month. Then, they will apply for funding to commission a large work for next year. It's good for me to have this kind of rapport when I set off to do longer-term things. It's a way of working that really suits my practice – I really enjoy working with people like this and it works out better financially. Nowadays, I charge £300 a day for my time and that's pretty much on a 'take it or leave it' basis although it seems really hard to go above that.

People will only make offers if they've got confidence in me. I really value the 'good' commissioners - the ones who listen to you, appreciate you in the sense of acknowledging your specific skills and attributes. People who're happy to negotiate a contract for mutual benefit. After a few bad experiences I've vowed I'm never going to do someone else's badly organised, poorly resourced residency ever again.

I have my own development plan with goals and a workplan and I do refresh it regularly. I used it last year to apply for funds to learn new skills and pay for some artistic development including one-to-one mentoring. I paid for sessions with a mentor I'd chosen and every six weeks we'd go through what I wanted to achieve and so on. It still feels like I'm carrying out all the things we talked through in such depth then. I was putting together an Arts Council funding application at the time, so it was helpful to go through that thinking process with someone supportive and motivating, and then to set out clearly what I wanted to get out of a funded development period. This was at a time when the grant scheme format was being changed, which was quite horrible to deal with, so I was really proud of myself when I managed to get that big grant through.

Despite all the commissions and grants, I only made £10,000 after tax last year when I'd made more like £20,000 in the period before. But I lost three months to illness so there was only Employment Support Allowance for that time. In many ways though, it was the Covid period that was good for me. I feel really lucky to have got the £10,000 government grant for small businesses, then I got SEISS (Self Employment Income Support Scheme) income and also one of those really competitive Arts Council 'emergency grants'. I had a few commissions too, so I ended up being able to do a lot of self-directed work and just be in my studio most of the time.

I feel lucky to feel well-connected in my city and in an affordable studio with other artists around. When we have open studios, you get people coming in that you haven't met before. Then it's like that first moment – like a seed – and then you know them and can draw them into your circle. It's one of the really good things about being there.

There are a few niggles for sure – a bit too much professional rivalry maybe sometimes – and some artists do like everything around them to be, like, totally quiet. But I'm always going to have people visiting my studio when I'm trying to run a business.

I know how difficult, competitive and precarious it is for artists and how hard and unpredictable it is to earn enough money. I try to think of my art practice as a business but however well I'm doing, at the back of my mind there's still that nagging uncertainty. I'm thinking, like, 'is there going to be something coming up next? Can I risk standing out for the rate I need?' I'm always reminded of that saying – it's something like 'every job has a shit sandwich that you've just got to eat'. My ambition is to earn more like £35,000 a year, like any professional. Then I could save money and pay my way in my household.

But it's a bit like there's, like, a credibility gap between my financial ambitions and then actually achieving them. Having that kind of income goal just seems too much of a leap in the current arts climate. I've always had to rely a lot on my partner financially – he pays the lion's share of domestic bills and for holidays. When I had some unexpected health-related costs recently he paid for them too. I don't have much in savings for, like, emergencies, but I'd like to change that. I really need to be able to afford to have more quality in my life.

Susannah

Now in her mid-40s, Susannah lives with husband and son in rural North West England amongst the landscape that inspires her work and where she makes work from a bespoke individual studio. For a period, she had a successful dual career as artist and art teacher. Now, a combination of gallery and self-representation enables her to concentrate on making progress in her practice.

Right from being a tiny child I always wanted to be an artist – it was my mother who really encouraged me, as she'd not been able to do that herself. I believe art holds intrinsic value, and that people benefit from engagement with it. For me, it's a real joy when others appreciate my work. People should almost be able to see me as a person when looking at my work. It's being free to decide what I do that brings sincerity to my work.

Although I want my practice to speak of me, my beliefs and my life, making a sustainable living and being able to keep on making work whatever the circumstances remain key issues for me. As I'm not an extrovert, I just have to find ways to feel comfortable enough to perform in public situations – to find my voice, if you like. Although often people's perception of me is that I'm outgoing, that's just a persona I turn on. They can be a bit taken aback when they find I'm not really like that at all. All that emotional effort takes its toll on me though and I'm often totally exhausted at the end of something, just from all the engagement with people.

After university, I walked straight into selling work through commercial galleries and I could be an artist full-time. But my galleries struggled to sell after the 2008 financial crash and in no time at all, I went from supporting my life from my work quite easily, to being not able to at all. So I had to draw on my people skills instead. I took on all sorts of teaching work and two years later, my tax return showed four or five different income streams. When this routine proved just too exhausting, I trained as an art teacher. For several years, my financial stability came from teaching art half-time in a school, which with my website sales gave me the money and resources I needed to make the large-scale work I'm passionate about and that I show in big national opens and art fairs.

The Covid period wasn't easy. At that time, I was selling my work mainly through two commercial galleries but as they were shutting, I initially felt quite concerned about how things would go. But when I got the £10,000 government small business grant I just hunkered down. I could buy materials and make work and not worry about making any income from it. It was then I started to record my making processes more vigorously and share that on social media. Although I was way out of my comfort zone, I became more comfortable and professional in videoing myself, doing things like talking to camera and explaining my processes.

So I started sharing my prints in home environments on Instagram by using an app that showed artwork in situ and that with some Facebook advertising meant there was just an explosion of new people buying my work. Looking back, I can see I doubled my income at that time. Although there was a lot of admin. It took a whole day a week just to deal with all the packaging and posting off.

A really positive thing that happened to me after that was winning a £5,000 scholarship. That gave me time to work alongside a master printmaker to develop my skills, really experiment and scale up my work. That really buoyed me up and increased my confidence levels. But more than anything, it cemented my feeling of being an artist. There was something about doing such ambitious, large-scale work that really helped how I perceive and position myself in the art world.

Then quite quickly really it all turned to tumbleweed. All my usual methods were bringing in only half the income. I lost my main gallery and my application to Arts Council England for research was unsuccessful. It was so bad I even started thinking about taking a teaching job again. I did manage to turn it around – but it took a lot of hard work. I had to raise income from things I didn't necessarily want to do, and I had to dip into my savings just to keep things going.

I've had to develop two distinctive strands of work for different markets to make enough income since – it's really about balancing the bread-and-butter with the experimental work. What I know is that only about 40% of my time goes on making work – the rest is marketing and administration. When things are difficult financially, that part takes up even more time though.

I had a bit of a hiccup with my health during Covid you know, probably partly stress-related, but I feel much stronger now. I still have to work long days to make it all work financially. I'll do an hour's social media stuff before my son wakes up and then work in the studio through the school day. I'll do a framing run with him after pick-up from school, so that's another couple of hours and then I probably do two or three hours of admin in the evening. So all in all, that's about nine or ten hours. To buy time off in school holidays, I try to make a glut of work for sale and blitz the marketing.

Taking family holidays can be tricky financially though and I had to raid my savings to pay for last year's. I worry that there's not much left in my savings now, especially as my car's really, really old and I need it for absolutely everything I do. I wouldn't say our quality of life was poor but we're only just managing. What I really need is some serenity in my life – a slower work pace – and an extra £500 a month in income.

It's only now after 24 years of art practice that I've got some clarity on my artistic direction - that I'm getting where I want to be. I do feel that I've now gone up a notch in the art world – being represented and being seen and shown regularly has elevated my practice. Out of everything I've done, being invited to show work in a major European museum was the best – like a dream come true. It was the first time I've walked into a situation and felt 'this is I want to be doing – this is really the best outcome for my work'. Those kinds of things are great in terms of just elevating what you're doing.

I feel I've got to where I am now by learning from people who've been practising for longer than me and also by luck, hard work and dedication. But mostly I think I must just keep going, you know, pursuing things against all odds and keeping up a flow of ideas. It's a sort of resilience for me, I suppose. When stuff happens that's out of my control, when I don't feel like myself, the best thing I can do is immerse myself in my work and not really worry what comes out, because it's actually just about a process, and doing that settles me.

Edward

Edward moved to rural south west England twenty years ago. He has a well-established socially engaged arts practice which he combines with writing, art teaching and social activism. He supports localism and place-based identity through ongoing involvement with artist-led and community-based developments.

I believe the social value of artists comes from their pursuit of art practices over a life time and that there are many ways to think about and recognise mutuality and collaboration. By working small-scale and developing ways to show and share work in progress there's a sense that artists become indigenous and engaged quite naturally in a place and in nurturing and growing things from the ground up. I've experienced the benefits of being an artist embedded in my location – I'm treated just like anybody else and after all, we're all at work but in our various ways. You could say that localism is the product of the people in a place that's created, affected and amplified by the many - and different - kinds of relationships to be found in it.

When I left art school, it was setting up co-ops and collaborations that was how artists established and progressed art practices and all these years later, I'm still advocating for that. I've been involved in teaching for the last 20 years and I always encourage students to think about their relationship with systems and structures, and to take control by making their own. I'm active myself in artist- and community-led ventures and over time, I've come to realise that this is integral to my own development as an artist and as contributor to making a just society.

I believe that artists have to work to shift arts policy's wrong perceptions and approaches – you know how it disregards the complexities by framing and boxing things up for management convenience. From my perspective, the way Arts Council England structures value is completely bollocks. Not on religious grounds, I also have real problems with a lot of the arts being funded by people gambling on the National Lottery.

My own practice is a kind of three-way split. So what I do is contribute to art education, a chunk of my time goes to supporting artists' structures and then there's my own practice as an artist, performer and writer. As a teacher and practising artist, I bring living proof of the practicalities of being an artist into art education's theoretical position. In the artists' organisations I'm involved in, I help with governance, management and fundraising. The underlying principle – my rationale for it all if you like – is shifting society's understanding of artists as people and the value – and values – they bring to where they live.

In many ways, the Covid period was a breakthrough – that it created space for new stuff to happen was a real positive. It pushed me to make work in new kinds of places – you know, not directly in the arts and far more socially engaged. I sort of seized the moment and the new way to keep the momentum going in my practice. I got to work with new people and voices and it shifted my work up a whole notch. For one project, I was collaborating with artist-led groups in various places across England. It was exciting because there were few parameters and it really demonstrated the possibility of developing connections virtually across the geography – of shifting the focus of the arts away from London and the South East.

A side-effect of the pandemic restrictions – not travelling to work, more home cooking, no meals out and so on – was that I spent far less. When I looked at it, I'd saved about £4,500 in the year to use on my art practice. Of course, all the working online to reach people has ecological consequences. So while they create space for access and connections to develop do, artists need to consider the carbon weight of doing digital projects and of using AI – in terms of the data storage, the running of it – and they need to weigh that up against their need to communicate what they do and believe in.

There's a real tension now between artists' ability to make a living through their practices and the way arts organisations operate – they suck up all the funding and monopolise the attention and energy in the arts. Having to monetise everything mitigates against creating a welcoming, nurturing environment for artists and undermines their livelihoods.

There's a resilience mismatch too because the way artists need to practice – to be experimental, make mistakes and fail – is at odds with how organisations operate, you know having strong boards and leadership and emulating the business world's extractive economics and nothing ever being allowed to fail.

New localised artist-run ventures do happen here, despite all the restraints of Arts Council project funding – they've somehow worked out how to tick all those boxes. The important thing is they've managed to create spaces for artists where stuff can happen. So I think the work artists do locally is a kind of key resistance to the bigger things. By that I mean the obstacles you just can't take on because there isn't the scope to and that most artists don't individually have the capacity to tackle – you know, the enormity of climate breakdown and a government that seems to be more and more authoritarian, taking away people's rights.

It's true to say that at my age and position, I've some privilege which brings a freedom around how much paid work I need to do. It was easy get a mortgage for the house I share with my partner and because of my teaching job, a lot of that is paid off now. My overheads are quite low as I've got a studio at home, we grow our own vegetables and so on, and we have no dependents to think about. I've some savings due to an inheritance and about twenty years of an occupational pension to retire on when the time comes. All of this puts me in the fortunate position where I'm able to choose how much and what work I take on and which things are on an unpaid or voluntary basis.

I know there's stuff happening through regional and national visual arts networks, where they get funds to do something or they issue something. But I don't think it's really much about artists and their practices. What they're doing doesn't change the value structures and recognition factors in the visual arts. So really, if artists aren't funded and aren't easily visible to the funding system – they are excluded from it. Experiencing that only reinforces my commitment to putting my energy into what's local, communal and shared. My long-term wish is that we will all get to hear and experience in other senses what is valued in the arts.

Emily

Emily graduated from her Master's in 2010 and lives in one of North West England's big cities. Over time, her practice has evolved from live art performance to immersive, socially engagement and now she works directly with people and families who don't usually get involved in the arts. A home educator for a child with support needs, her strategy is to value family and practice equally.

Right from being a child, I always wanted to do art and excelled in anything creative. I just knew that was what I wanted to do, not that I got any encouragement at home. My mum just said 'No - people like us don't do things like that'. So I've always had to fight to do what I want to do and make the work that I want to make. It feels like society doesn't value the arts but I've never found anything as satisfying as art. Nothing else allows you not to know exactly what something's going to be and lets you learn and develop yourself through the processes of doing it.

In my art practice however it often feels like I'm having a breakdown – that's the best way to describe it. I could be totally on it, doing an amazing project and everyone loves it, but I can't see it. I'm feeling like something's wrong, it's shit, I'm upsetting people. The feelings are so intense I can't tell you.

We don't really have honest conversations about money and how artists can make living – it's a kind of toxic positivity. But as a neurodivergent person not just fresh out of university I'm sick of that and having to justify who I am and what I do. It's just exhausting. I know you've got to create your own opportunities, but that's easier for some than others. A radical idea would be just to give artists money to do something. It's about creating the contexts that value artists for who they are and giving them some agency. But the only source of funds for that is Arts Council England. As it stands, there's a lot of smoke and mirrors in the arts – and also between artists themselves. It seems like it's the artists who're propping up the arts organisations by keeping quiet about the bad treatment.

I've never had high expectations of income from art and I think that's because of my working-class background. So I'd always thought I'd have to support my practice through part-time work of some kind – you know, the shitty jobs with no income security either. Artists are exploited by that kind of hand-to-mouth existence and in their art practices too. Five years ago I got five grand from Arts Council England for a self-generated project. It was a massive departure artistically from what I'd been doing and I really thought that would help me plan my future, but it didn't work out like that. It's always so hard to think about what comes next – even in two years, let alone four or five.

In the pandemic I got a five grand government grant through the studios and a couple more for a community-based digital project, so I felt I could become self-employed. Reflecting now, I see that within that same year I had to manage that and also deal with the mental and physical effects of long Covid, my ADHD diagnosis, parenting a Covid kid and the perimenopause. No wonder it felt like everything came at me at once.

Since that period, I've drifted naturally towards work exploring neurodivergence and people's wider social needs. I've found my tribe through experimental and performative socially engaged practices with people and families who don't usually get involved in the arts, and now I'm trained in doing that. I've found it's better to work with organisations dedicated to inclusion as they can really support me as an artist and help to drive new work that's both accessible and artistically ambitious.

My mantra's been a bit like 'creativity starts at home'. I think people want to learn in a comfortable, safe environment and in families through something that's doable and affordable and fits into their routines. When my practice works directly with people and communities who're normally excluded by social and physical barriers in their micro, lower demand worlds, I've found it makes a massive difference to their lives. Knowing that's what I need doesn't make it any easier to achieve or to sustain my practice though.

Something needs to be one hundred percent what I want to do before I'll get involved. I know from past experiences how stressful it gets when I'm over ambitious and under supported, so I set clear boundaries. I protect my mental health by setting personal and emotional boundaries in my people-centred projects, and I use avoidance tactics when it gets too difficult.

I know that Arts Council England funding is the only option for artists like me so however hard it is to get any, I've just got to keep on trying. I'd always said I'd never go for DYCP (Developing your creative practice) grants – it's just a carrot being dangled when the success rates are so small. You hear all the time about artists totally undervaluing their time, just to improve their chances – you know really senior artists only charging £200 a day. Until I became part of the neurodivergent community and artists showed me their applications I'd never really thought about having specialist help, you know, getting access support. But I used access support funds to make a DYCP application and got awarded about twelve grand. Then there's a budget of about six grand on top to support me as I do the project.

I'd say that there's a lot of toxicity in the arts ecology. People talk about needing to be resilient but that's ableist. There's too much top-down research and gatekeeping going on and we don't call out the bad practices, so nothing really ever changes for artists. To be honest, although I've lived here for nearly fifteen years now, I've never felt part of the community. It feels to me like everyone has their own little cliques and structures and if you're not in one, you might as well just fuck off. I don't feel part of a community in my studios – they're just not my kind of people. Being in my studio space there is all about supporting my own health and wellbeing.

I could absolutely not do what I'm doing as an artist without my partner – it's his regular pay cheque that pays the mortgage and I've no savings myself. You know, I've got great ideas but too often, the people with the money just don't want to pay me to realise them. But I've had to make my peace with that – block out the negativity – or it would mess with my head. The way I approach it now is to value my work and my family life equally. My art practice has to serve me, as if lose myself to art it will kill me. I'm happy to do one major project a year worth maybe seven to ten grand – that's the kind of income that allows me to live my life and make the work I want to make. You know, at the end of the day, I can't work on my art practice full time because I'm a parent with a kid with support needs to think about too. Sometimes just getting through the day is enough. That's my reality.

Oliver

Oliver has been working as an artist for more than 20 years. He moved to London after the pandemic, drawn there by family ties and better career development prospects. His performative, often collaborative work, is the product of his fine art artistry and neurological state. Working full-time in an arts related job to support his wife and child has enabled him to take space in a studio building nearby.

I've always just enjoyed the making of my work – you know, using exactly the right brush and being really precise with paint – and I like that I'm drawing on and enhancing the skills that have always been part of my life. There's artistry in being accurate and authentic and it feels good to position myself and what I do within the history and traditions of fine art. The way I approach my work is iterative and self-referential – I think of it as a process of distilling my ideas, a kind of 'washing them through the rocks'. I just pour everything I've got into something, then it's the buzz that sustains me – that and the feedback from artists whose opinions I value.

For all I know the ways of making progress in the contemporary arts world, I still find it standoffish. Even now, it often feels like I'm figuring out those implicit rules of the game as I go, while being fearful of giving off the wrong signals. I'm surprised – maybe it's more that I feel hurt – when all the visual arts game-playing going on seems to want to keep me on the outside.

Like all artists, I need to feel acknowledged in my world and there's satisfaction from showing work and seeing how well it's received. You need to feel though that your practice is good enough before you can put it out there. Even though I've had a track-record of self-generated commissions in the past, I find the idea of sustaining a continuous practice now – you know, totally concentrating on creating a body of new work for each exhibition – almost impossible. It's easy to get derailed by all the unexpected stuff, something I've had quite a bit of over the last year.

I still have my wild, expansive ideas that push at the boundaries of practicality and economic viability. But if I want to get any sense of achievement, I know I have to morph them into smaller projects for the smaller places and artist-to-artist networks if I'm to achieve something tangible in the time available. I'm having to do my stuff for free most of the time, just to show I'm making some progress.

The artworld reality here is that many artists are paying to be seen in the 'right' places – it's like seven hundred quid to use a couple of metres of wall space and have a nice preview. However good or original your work is, you've got to spend time developing your networks. Of course, if you've done your degree somewhere like Goldsmiths there's immediately forty people who'll turn up at each other's shows. So, the stepping-stone to building reputation and actually getting where you want to be rests on things like that, on developing those 'right' relationships, paying your way and on being recommended.

I had a bit of studio space at home when I first moved down here. But that doesn't really work when you've got a family and, you know, all the domestic interruptions, plus having an external studio presence is part of the reputation building process. The studios I'm in now are open plan, but as no one else really uses my floor and one of the guys even lives abroad, I couldn't ask for anything better. It's quite often the case in London that an artist's studio is more like renting a bit of desk space, but these studios are good. They've got a good reputation and cool stuff goes on here, and that's energising. The artists are all a bit older and it's better for me not to be amongst trendy young painters.

You always need to unwind though for however long before you can start doing anything. Artists here don't kind of jump from a bike, run into the studio and start drawing as if it's a triathlon. Me, I get home from work, spend a bit of time with the family, and then it's only a fifteen-minute walk to get here. I can work quite quickly and because a lot of what I produce is smaller and more manageable nowadays, I always leave with a feeling of accomplishment – that I've got something done.

There's nothing relaxing about any of this though and I feel stressed even in the downtime. I'm the family's breadwinner on a short-term contract and no job security so even with some cash jobs alongside, I'm always under financial pressure. Things need fixing in the house but that means time and money which I don't have. Working away from home pays better but it's exhausting physically and mentally and where's my career as an artist and my family life in that? I worry all the time about how to present myself in the art world, how I come over to other people and how I should interpret their reactions. Whatever I'm doing I just have to pour all of myself into it and even when I do something successful, I can't feel that.

I've recently come to understand that the clouds of anxiety that have been hanging over me all my life are because I'm neurodivergent. Scoring high in the tests was a great relief – it felt like a weight was lifted off me. I could see how my work references how my mind works.

Even though the diagnosis has made a lot of things less of a mystery, it's a negative ecology for artists like me as every day, I find something that's debilitating. I may be aware now that I don't understand what's triggered me, but instead of trying to get on with my day, I focus on it and that brings the unhappy feelings and mental attitude I carry around. It affects my communication and body language with almost everyone I speak to and I end up feeling more vulnerable.

After all these years, I know how the arts funding system works but I still don't seem to be able to get any grants myself. What I really need now to evolve my practice to the next stage is that kind of 'no strings' funding again. I've looked at the Arts Council's Developing Your Creative Practice grants but the application process is daunting and so time-consuming. I'm up at 6, into work for 8, get finished at 4, then there's a tube journey home and a bit of family time before I can do anything else. At no point can I just open up a DYCP application form and start answering those questions. At the moment, getting a grant feels a bit like playing darts on the ferry.

I've been told I might be able to get something called 'access support' to do the forms – but how does that work? Do I have to find someone or does the Arts Council do that? I know I might get a grant of £10-14,000, but what I don't really understand is how I could just stop doing the work that supports my family and pays the bills to spend the amount of research time that the grant expects of me. It might be the perfect artistic solution, but it sounds like an economic disaster at the same time.

Strange as it sounds, Covid was one of the best things that's ever happened to me. I got that £10,000 government grant for small businesses just because I rented a studio and that just took away my fears. I started to get my flow with making work. I felt comfortable making work knowing I didn't have to stress about money all the time and then I made more because of the various commissions around then. Looking back, I can see the work I did really upped my game and that I'd started to develop the recognisable style I need to build a career.

Lizzy

After extensive travel and a period of working abroad Lizzy settled back in the semi-rural town in North West England she was born in. Now in her early 50s and living with her husband, her practice focuses on socially engaged commissions and presenting new work through invitational exhibitions. A diagnosis as neurodivergent which explains her inherent artistic and emotional traits has improved her confidence levels. But the combination of her personal condition and friction during a commission took a toll on her mental health.

I need to be an artist, it's like an itch I *have* to scratch. It's as if I'm 'locked in' – the whole process is compulsive. I'm like a little generator in perpetual motion and the more I do art, the more I want to do art and the more energised I get about doing art. I'd say what I do is playing around with reality and emotions and that my practice makes a professional response to social circumstances around me.

I've always believed you can do pretty much anything you want to do in life provided you focus, work hard and throw your thinking skills at overcoming the obstacles. I got this from my Mum who had a very 'can do, just try things out' attitude. We were a large, creative, messy household and we made our own entertainment. From early age, I kind of marked out being an artist as my territory.

But if we choose to follow this path, we have to persevere and be a bit crazy too, because the mystery of art is that it's got to convey more than words can. What I'm doing is expressing things normally kept rather private - like relationships - and focusing intently on what that interaction means to society**.** My doctorate gave me the confidence to follow my ideas and preoccupations and to not feel I have to justify every little thing I'm doing. Choosing to do that in renowned art school was a calculated choice in an art world in which prestige is a currency.

I don't think this country values artists as creative thinkers. Instead of being about experimentation – the 'what if?' 'why not?' – artists' practices get dumbed down and sliced up to fit into other people's agendas. There are far too many gatekeepers controlling everything and it feels as if art is only about being *useful*, and that anything that can't be quantified just gets squeezed out.

There's a real lack of creativity and solidarity amongst artists too when we're all so desperate for money. Although I sometimes involve people in workshops alongside commissions and enjoy passing on my skills to others, I'm not a community artist.

For quite a few years, I had more of a studio-based practice and I made my income from showing and selling work alongside part-time teaching in a special needs school. It was Covid that gave me lots of time in the studio to catch up with my own ideas. I was furloughed from teaching and it was a nice surprise to get the £10,000 government grant. I was very busy after that period with two community-based commissions That was a real vote of confidence – to win those and be paid properly. I really felt valued as an artist.

But with one commission – and after I'd worked so carefully and sensitively to account for all the social circumstances and historical references – one group totally misinterpreted my motives and was very vocal about it. I found that really traumatic. Although it did get resolved eventually, it left a bitter taste. I still felt 'cancelled' and the institution showing the work hasn't really had much to do with me since. Around that time, I got very frustrated and unappreciated by my teaching job too. I just felt like 'what am I doing it for when I'm not enjoying teaching anymore?' I was emotionally drained by all of it – burned out really – and paid for a mentor to work through all the negativities. Even though my next commission went well, I ended that period feeling very disillusioned with art.

I've taken antidepressants for a long time – I've made my peace with that – just treat them as just something that I have to take to manage anxiety. But everything about my emotional state became clearer with my ADHD diagnosis. That was brilliant in terms of explaining me to me. I can forgive myself for interrupting in conversations and changing topic mid-way through, now I understand that's just how my brain works.

ADHD's hyperfocus serves me well though – like when I work on a painting non-stop until it's done. When my elderly parents needed a lot of care I became much more anxious though, so I had to up the medication to help me cope. When it finally came, my father's death was traumatic. Then, once my mother's dementia was confirmed and the family home had to be cleared I really struggled.

Bereavement feels like an earthquake - there were so many hard decisions that had to be made that I got overwhelmed. It's just really very hard packing up people's whole lives in a place - you feel like you're throwing them away. I was so depressed it put a massive halt on my own work and on the community and environmental volunteering I do for my personal development. I feel it's only now that I'm starting to clear the rubble and able to reopen the roads.

I've since developed a successful side hustle and income-generator and that's been going really well. It's all about the making and interacting with people. I'm quite savvy when it comes to negotiating prices so it doesn't feel so personal. I get about the same income from it as part-time teaching but there's more satisfaction and independence. I'll probably go back to teaching – maybe in a few years – but for now I just want to use that income to be a bit selfish and spend time in the studio.

You know, I've done really well and built a good track record as an artist where I live. So now, I'm going to build on my CV by applying for exhibitions and bigger commissions elsewhere. What I need now is to create a substantial body of new work and to show it nationally. I've made a lot of prints in the past but I think my emphasis now needs to be on selling original paintings and finding the collectors who'll appreciate that they're unique.

We're not much interested in wealth and owning things – we don't have a flash car and through my husband's salary and some inherited money, we've only now bought a house. It was a bit scary though when he was very unwell and off work for a year and I had to be strong and practical for us both. But the whole experience reiterated my belief that we've only got one life to live and money isn't really *that* important.

Cora

Cora's commitment to social change, environmental activism and localism grew out of difficult childhood circumstances. Now in her early 50s and living in rural South West England with her partner, she's been able to adapt her own livelihood strategies in challenging economic circumstances and works to rebalance power across arts and cultural infrastructures.

I grew up in a low-income, dysfunctional family in shit, precarious housing where the poverty was cultural too. I've been scarred by that childhood – never had a lot of buffers. That's where my anti-establishment attitude comes from. I've always been involved in activism, in asking the hard questions, in pushing for change and in challenging the people holding power.

I consider myself a sort of conscientious human being. That's about being ethical, honest and kind in everything I do – sort of leading by practice. It's my responsibility to contribute to the change I want to see rather than to sit back and applaud the efforts of others.

We're in a time where there's an awful lot of performative campaigning and activism, when people don't understand what solidarity actually means. You know, the art world talks a lot about being more inclusive now, but it seems to me that it's only ever going to be as far as arts gatekeepers want to go.

I don't see much challenging of their own behaviours and ambitions going on, because they don't want to do themselves out of jobs. Artists having occasional relationships with organisations doesn't demonstrate equity. This idea that all artists need to do is get real and be more businesslike feels a lot like bullying. People claim the environment is changing for artists but like misogyny, it's not changing. As money for the arts gets harder to find, such behaviours are just doubling down.

It was the austerity period and that had the greatest impact on my career and livelihood as an artist. Until then, I'd been able to get work in participatory arts and public programmes in galleries. But that all started to fade away with the cuts in arts funding plus it became harder to get grants for my own projects. Then my regular teaching work reduced as art schools looked for artists with PhDs and more academic practices. I decided to take a step sideways and use my transferrable skills so I set up as a painter and decorator.

You could say that doing that work is sympathetic with being an artist – I know how to use materials, I'm confident around people and understand business and health and safety procedures and issues. So now, I do that work Tuesdays to Thursdays and spend Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays on my own practice and it all works well income-wise. My work outside the arts industry has taught me to be more focused about what I do take on. I know how to charge for my time and I know to put my prices up as overheads and materials costs rise.

But you know, there's a kind of contempt in the art world for artists who make a living outside the arts. It's almost as if we're not authentic, we're doing something dirty that shouldn't be spoken about. And you know what isn't acknowledged either amongst the people on salaries scoping the opportunities? It's the reality for artists of working freelance – with no regular money coming in – plus the sheer *time* we need just to make the work.

In the beginning, my new livelihood plan worked quite well. I'd got the decorating jobs fixed up, taken on a new studio and had a residency lined up, so 2020 would have been a good income year. But then Covid happened and the thought of lockdown just terrified me.

I've always had counselling and I really needed it then because echoes of my past vulnerabilities emerged. I anguished for all the people who found themselves unexpectedly confined to small spaces in difficult emotional circumstances, who were worried about money and their mental health.

But you know, what Covid conditions really highlighted for me was how limiting a lot of the art world's discussions are. They aren't much progressive or radical but quite blinkered and conservative. There's a cushioning going on for arts people that they don't always recognise – like having the privilege of paid time to do training and networking – and time to do all the image-building on social media.

It seems weird really that for arts organisers jobs the continuing professional development is built in. But unless we pay for it ourselves, we artists don't get any. I've seen some arts organisations put on artists' development programmes, but it feels like forever I've been saying that daytimes don't work for most of us. Our lives can be erratic – things can crop up at short notice and there's quite probably a clash with the 'day job'.

Commissioners don't seem to really understand what artists want and need to achieve with art practices and in society, nor do they get the precarity of working freelance. What I'd really like to see are attitudes that are more artist-friendly permeating across the visual arts, so that the things aimed at artists aren't all about delivering immediate 'outcomes'. With one-off opportunities, artists only ever have a transitory relationship with an organisation so the artist's tendency is always going to be to max out the budget. You know, we put in loads more hours than the money allows for, just to fit in everything on the list and get something out of it for ourselves too.

Artists are always going to be ambitious – we want to achieve everything we possibly can from something – after all, it's our reputations at stake. But what artists really need is *more time* – that's time to spend on R&D in the studio and for in-depth, critical dialogue with other artists. It's the only way we'll ever become sure about what we need to do as artists and have the confidence and skills to keep on doing that over time.

I couldn't even afford a studio four years ago and although I'm now in a secure household relationship, my art practice is more precarious than it's ever been. I'll only be able to keep that space on and block out time for my practice if this grant application I'm working on is successful and the DWP confirms my regular need for access support.

But I don't ever envisage not doing the decorating job – that's what pays the monthly bills. You know, my laptop just died last month, mid-sentence, the end. It was top spec when I bought it as my policy is always to buy the best I can to protect me longer. Getting a new four grand laptop wiped out my savings and so if my van dies I'll have a real problem.

My art practice is localised and sustainable. I've developed ways to make my work with fewer new materials – it's all about recycling, scavenging and repurposing what I have. Looking around the arts and culture, I see anxiety and vulnerability – organisations that seem riddled with fear because it's all so competitive and people who think they've got no room to move.

But change is possible if they decide to look for it. It's just a question of creating space and capacity for that to happen, making the decision to start and then doing small things differently. I believe that artists can be resilient - we're agile, flexible and thoughtful – and we're creative problem solvers: we flex and flux. We create new routes and relationships and always see many ways to make progress.

The findings

A credibility gap exists between the creative industries and social benefit ethos of government and arts policies and subsequent business models of the organisations which present contemporary visual arts to the public and the economic, emotional and environmental conditions supportive of the resilience and sustainability of visual artists' practices over the long-term.

- The primary cause of artists' economic vulnerability is the disjunction between their characteristics and their motivations and rationale for art practices and the ethos and working practices of the creative industries.
    - Regardless of the outlets and dissemination routes each visual artist 'looks to' for their work, conducting a visual arts practice is necessarily an experimental, time-intensive and speculative process in which direct economic exchange and business growth aren't primary motivations.
    - The quality of visual artists' endeavours over time and of the value of the activities and works they produce is dependent on pursuit of time-intensive experimental, iterative and 'right scale' processes.
- The conditions experienced by artists which have the effect of reducing their artistic productivity are a waste of their talent.
    - Rather than developing skills and artistic capabilities through the processes of developing and making new work, artists spend too much of their time on other income-generating work and the subsidiary functions of their practices including business administration, pitching for work and fundraising.
    - Poor access to funding for R&D, to acquire new practice-based skills, hone tacit knowledge and for essential equipment and technology limits artists' ability to grow and sustain their practices over a life cycle.
- Whether distributing works through commercial art markets or publicly funded, socially engaged and community-of-interest commissions, the underlying basis for sustaining visual artists' practices over time comes from 'hidden' economic subsidy.
    - Main sources of economic support to artists are their own or a partner's permanent arts or non-arts related jobs which have adjunct employment benefits and mortgage credentials.

    - Artists with salaried partners are dependent on their higher income levels and savings to cover unexpected costs such sickness periods and equipment replacement and for personal refreshment time including holidays.

- Artists' belief in the intrinsic value of art as a 'social good' and the creative need to experiment and take risks drive their pursuit of art practices while having an adverse effect on artists' emotional fortitude and their chances of livelihood over time.
    - Artists' neurodivergent traits including autism and ADHD impact adversely on all aspects of visual artists' practices and career development, affecting their communications, their ability to translate their ideas into applications for grants and work opportunity and the quality of their professional relationships with intermediaries, commissioners and funders.
    - Artists with neurodivergent traits who are dealing with chronic or lengthy medical conditions and anxiety, caring for children with special needs or elders or siblings experience the highest levels of emotional vulnerability which impacts on their artistic strength, confidence levels and overall well-being.
    - Neurodivergent artists with adjunct caring responsibilities have the least emotional capacity and physical time to expend on developing the complex relationships and resources necessary for realising unique people-centred works and socially engaged practices.
- Causes of artists' environmental vulnerability lie in the gap between artists' individuals' dedicated pursuit of personalised, slower and 'situated practices' and the expectations of them and contexts provided by the trickle-down, economics-driven environments for contemporary arts and culture.
    - Artists are first-and-foremost people who eat, shop, sleep and socialise where they live. They have a vested interest in forging locally distinctive environments and cultures that are characterised by self-sufficiency and sustainability.
    - The environments and mechanisms most supportive of artists' durational practices are self-generated, micro scale and closely aligned with artists' social and environmental beliefs.

- Whether individually held and convenient for their domestic arrangements or in spaces in collectively used buildings, having access to workspace is an important enabler of visual artists' pursuit of practices. Studio holding denotes the artist's continuous, serious art practice and enhances their professional status and identity.
    - Designated studio buildings 'hold space' for artists to gain recognition and support amongst peers. Away from domesticity, family commitments and other interruption, studios provide a sympathetic place for artists to develop ideas, work through visual arts and craft-based processes and to hone skills by formulating individual pieces and installations over a period of time.
    - By providing a professional context and conducive environment for critique of artistic practice, external studio spaces are a practical means for artists to gain emotional and artistic support from peers, supporting artist-to-artist development and for fostering common purpose and activism amongst the wider artists' constituency.
    - In a professional sense, holding external studio space is a tangible demonstration of artists' serious intent and validates their serious artistic intent to the wider artists' constituency and art world 'gatekeepers' including curators, critics and would-be funders.
    - As a recognisable 'work in progress' territory, artists' studios provide a professionally acceptably environment for displaying finished work to peers and in 'open studios' and for organising visits from commissioners, collaborators and collectors.
    - On a practical level including health and safety and insurance purposes, non-domestic spaces are the most suitable for holding stocks of hazardous materials, for safely using equipment and or messy processes, storing finished works and housing the records, ephemera and 'stuff' created by 'being an artist' over time.
- Of concern though is artists' consistent underuse of rented studio facilities, this due to the combination of artists' poor economic prospects from their art practices, including from R&D funding. Regardless of their stage of development, most artists need to spend most of their time not at work in their studios but engaged in other income-generating activities.

Conceptualising artists' resilience

> "Resilient people … possess three characteristics: a staunch acceptance of reality, a deep belief buttressed by strongly held values that life is meaningful, and an uncanny ability to improvise. They can bounce back from hardship with one or two of these qualities but will only be truly resilient with all three". Alexander, Harvard Business Review, 2013

Since the Millennium when government aligned the arts with the creative industries, artists' ability to survive and develop their practices and careers has been equated with the strength of their status in professional networks. The underlying assumption is that participating in these networks can create productive, trustworthy relationships and interactions for the benefit of all concerned. In such an environment, the predominant marker of 'being successful' is growth in an individual's artistic status – if not necessarily their earnings.

> "I've lived here for years [but] I've never yet felt part of the community. Everyone has their own little cliques and structures. …. To make your way up the arts pecking order, it's like you're expected to do things in a certain way. It seems to be all about who you're schmoozing with but … I've never felt part of the known networks, I've just got on and found my own doorways into the art scene." Emily

The pandemic disrupted art world norms and the usual working patterns and associated income-making routes and severely affected the resilience of individuals and arts organisations alike. Impacts of that 'world shock' have continued well beyond that period and as far as individual artists are concerned, there has been no 'return to normal' since.

> "Flexibility in freelance work enables some people to build careers in the creative industries [while] others find the work to be precarious, low-paid and lacking in employment support or training opportunity." Jeary and Brawley, 2024

Unfavourable contexts for visual artists are due to the more streamlined and extractivist business models now essential to the survival of commercial and subsidised visual arts organisations combined with the successive cost of living rises affecting everyone across society. Overall job quality for visual artists has declined in parallel, this because individual contributors are commonly (and technically) treated as 'freelance', meaning their contributions are generally one-off and of a fixed-term nature, with individuals having to little legislative or social protection.

> "Freelance work is not defined in policy or law, and as such this category covers the full spectrum of self-employment. This ranges from those who are self-employed in absolute terms – with the ability to negotiate fees, decide the timeframe for work completion, delegate work and employ others – to those who are reliant upon short-term contracts with time, conditions and pay set by the employer, often with a line manager and no option to delegate unsustainable practices." State of the Arts, 2024

Budgets and fee rates for artists' commissions haven't kept pace with the real-time increases in artists' professional and domestic costs.

> "I'm honestly shocked by the poor quality of commission opportunities I see being offered to visual artists, particularly in the public realm. Unrealistic budgets, absence of any proper research or thorough consideration and frequently not even a detailed brief. [The commissioners] often have insufficient knowledge or education about the type of work they're involved in commissioning or are consulting with clients about." Artist with 30 years of commissions experience.

Financial efficacy and programme delivery in arts and cultural organisations is dependent on easy and affordable access to a highly skilled, flexible freelance workforce but in the main, this is required on a strictly 'just in time' basis. Central to normalising insecure contracts and creating fragmented work and income patterns for individuals is arts organisations' assumption in that all but a discrete core of employed staff can be treated as freelance. As a result and particularly since austerity, the constituency of visual artists have experienced less work opportunity from organisations on tighter, non-negotiable contractual terms, with those artists who present as acquiescent, willingly reactive and grateful for what they are given more likely to get work.

> "I had an experience with [a commission] where I experienced a twenty-five percent cut in [the] fees [I'd proposed] - they just said 'This is the budget we've got.'" Francis

By nature, arrangements in which individuals must take opportunities as, when and where they are transactional and less supportive of a particular individual's career development. The result of this institutional norm and preference is lack of career development, in that work opportunity to artists from arts organisations can range from something of high career significance on one occasion to subsequent work at lower level the next. It can also be that an artist sees realisation of their artistic aspirations fade away when the organisation's fundraising for a project they've been gestating collaboratively on a speculative basis isn't successful. Artists can also be offered tokenistic fees to suit an organisation's budget.

> "I created two new commissions for [major public gallery] but was underpaid significantly. In the beginning they came with promises and gifts, this wasn't the case when it came to my fees ….. I was going to pull out of the exhibition but as it was a [an important show for me], I had to change my mind." Mid-career artist

Creating mutuality from the outset of an arrangement is a remedy to inequitable relationships.

> "If a collaboration is being funded … the application should be jointly completed. This can minimise power imbalances once the grant is awarded and ensure that the proposal … submitted is one that both the artist and organisation have agency in." Sherman and Montgomery, 2024

However the tendency of funded arts organisations to consider artists as minor contributors to their efforts to achieving artistic status and business viability is a barrier to the even-handed, mutually beneficial arrangements that are the most supportive of an artist's career development and overall resilience.

> "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 £2,000, 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." Lindsay Seers, 2023

However, artists' ability to make purposeful, persistent progress through conducting their art practice is a key factor in their sustainability over the long term. A core trait of experienced artists is consistently striving to make progress through their practice, developing knowledge and skills, and scoping, identifying and securing negotiated, productive relationships. Explicit within this is having the scope to develop the professional relationships and discrete networks that are genuinely supportive of an artist's individualised needs and expectations and having freedom and capability to choose between the various options.

> "Artist Jane Tallentire attributes receipt of a £10,000 Hamlyn award with enabling her to develop significant aspects of her practice that required learning new skills and new ways of working, as well as materials previously unaffordable to her." Lilli Geissendorfer, 2025

Artists who experience conditions that enable them to gain nuanced understanding of the implicit, informal, reciprocal and developmental mechanisms at play in their sphere of art practice achieve greater artistic capability and external credibility and gain a strong, personalised focus on future direction and how to get there. Research also concludes that 'no strings' grants are vital to artists' resilience by developing the conditions that sustain artists' careers over time.

> Direct grants can precipitate a "turning point in [an artist's] career… a moment of creative or professional breakthrough or change [with] significant and lasting consequences". By providing the conditions for making progress through artistic renewal and acquisition of the tacit knowledge and sector-specific skills unrestricted funding to individuals can be immediately transformative while also contributing to their long-term career building. Glinkowski, 2010 cited in *A chance to dream: why fund individual artists*

Although charitable trusts including Hamlyn, Freelands and Jerwood provide grants to individuals, these often specific to career stage and by invitation rather than open submission. As demonstrated in the stories forming the main body of this study, some artists can acquire skills development through grants from crafts-based trusts and foundations. Some individuals look to funding from Arts Council England's Developing your creative practice scheme although as this study shows, many artists who are worthy candidates are discouraged by the nature of the application process and high levels of competition. Notably however, the Arts Council's 2023/24 budget allocation of just over £7m direct to individual artists is the equivalent of less than 2% of government grant in aid. In comparison and to retain parity with awards to individuals in the 2007 pre-austerity policy period, the overall budget for DYCP would need to be £13m-15.4m to retain the relative value.

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Ecology of the visual arts

This discussion of the ecology for contemporary visual arts considers the impact of arts attitudes and policies on the artistic and career development over a period relevant to the research sample of artists who range in age from early 20s to sixty years old. Spanning the period since 2006 and referencing the impacts of arts austerity after the economic recession and treatment of artists during Covid, it highlights shifting and differing perspectives of artists' social value and status within infrastructures of the visual arts.

> "Throughout history, artists … have subsidised art production … even artists who 'live off their work' subsidise the market by their [low fees] .. the bloated, entitled, superfluous… politically toxic [ecology] is subsidised by free labour [over a] lifetime." Hito Steyerl, 2019

Emerging from its *Review of the presentation of contemporary visual arts,* Arts Council England's 2006-16 visual arts policy was the first to fully recognise and endorse the wide applications of visual arts practice ranging from gallery and public art to arts in healthcare and schools.

The most significant feature of the ensuing *Turning Point* visual arts policy was the recognition that the strongest infrastructures ecologies are inclusive, heterogeneous and participatory and characterised by a desire to cultivate interconnectedness and complex interdependencies.

> "A healthy arts ecology is dependent on a breadth of actors co-existing, cross-fertilising and co-developing activities for mutual benefit towards new interventions and innovations". Capra, 2004

Premised on a set of expansive conceptual and practical shifts, support for artists was second in this plan's five priorities. The artists' role was expansively framed: artists were invaluable as producers of unique works for public galleries and the art market and also vital to urban regeneration, community cohesion and in school art education. Measures in this policy that aimed to strengthen artists' careers and strategically improve their livelihoods included expansion of the markets for contemporary art, support for artist-led initiatives including open studios and the encouragement of new collectors through the Own Art purchasing scheme.

More specifically, artists' livelihoods would be strategically improved by widespread adoption of good working practices between practitioners, galleries and commissioners, this aided by dedicated good practice guidance, enhanced legal and professional advice and legislative changes to tax and benefits systems. Expectations that within a decade artists would benefit from a stronger culture of innovation and risk and greater opportunity to make new work within were amongst the policy's eight key outcomes.

Forged in a time of plentiful funding to the arts from a sympathetic government, the *Turning Point* policy envisioned a sustainable and inclusive visual arts ecology in which human and economic flourishing would arise from dynamic creative interchange, cross-fertilisation and co-development between participants. Policy responsibility for upholding good working conditions for visual artists was allocated to the new visual arts 'support clusters' developed from the Turning Point policy. These later formed the national committee and regional groupings of the Contemporary Visual Arts Network (CVAN).

Following the reductions in government funding to Arts Council England in the period of austerity from 2010, the policy preference was to fund a fixed number of arts institutions as the core instrument for delivering arts policy, with a hand's off attitude as regards guiding and policing the professional and financial arrangements between artists and funded institutions and relatively minor provision made for individual artists through open-access direct grants.

The Arts Council's Corporate Plan for the period 2015-18 went on to asserted *de facto* that artists lacked 'the right support to allow their work and businesses to flourish'. The adjunct visual arts plan proposed to remedy this by taking an "artist-led approach to strengthening the … sector by working in key locations across the country. At the heart … will be a locally focused campaign to support artists to extend their work and reach more people."

The Arts Council's subsequent *Let's Create* policy from 2020 conglomerated visual artists, craft makers, community artists., photographers and live art and moving image artists with performing artists and writers and many others who perform specifically intermediary roles such as curating under the new term of 'creative practitioners'. This term is defined as 'people who use their creativity, skill and talent to create cultural content and activity' and has come to be as much about support for the curators and producers who act as intermediaries or gatekeepers intervening between individuals and audiences.

Although Arts Council England then and since has continued to cite 'fair pay to artists' as an important operating principle for funded organisations – this to be reflected in their funding applications and behaviours towards artists – there are no formal monitoring processes or censoring mechanisms when good practices aren't applied.

In the pandemic and subsequent period after 2020, artists' livelihoods needs continued to be considered as subsidiary to those of arts organisations. The atypical work and income generating patterns of most visual artists were not accounted for when emergency support measures were scoped. As a result, the majority were ineligible for any type of financial aid.

> "I couldn't prove a profit to [get] the government scheme… [and] I had savings which took me over the threshold of being able to get benefits. So the reality is, I funded [that] year by taking money out of my pension pot." Francis

Review of submissions to the DCMS Inquiry into Covid's impact on arts sectors shows that two-fifths visual artists immediately lost work at the point of the first lockdown, with three-fifths expecting an 80-100% annual income drop and three-quarters ineligible for the Government's Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) and Arts Council England's Emergency fund for individuals.

> "….I felt quite anxious about how things were going to be going forward. All the galleries were shutting …. and I'm in probably two commercial galleries all the time which was sort of my bread and butter, and I could see that they wouldn't be able to sell. So [I was} feeling quite concerned about how things would go". Susannah

In relation to artists' pursuit of practices over time, the failure of the 'mixed income' business model now widespread in arts organisations presents a considerable threat. This is because most artists' residency, workshop, exhibition and commission opportunities are positioned within public engagement programmes and commonly provided on a 'just in time' and freelance basis. Artists can't be 'free agents', nor as Jones and DeFillippi suggested can they make a living by "scramble[ing], bee-like from opportunity to opportunity" when the terms for work are tightly defined by employers, and any payment made to artists entirely dependent on public programmes taking place.

> "It seems employers don't understand the difference between freelance and employed work. Their maths doesn't take account of basic things like holiday pay and pension contributions. It's about what's valued really – these people and institutions aren't valuing what experienced creative people bring in." Francis

As Wallis and Raalte have concluded, the arrangements for artists' fees which fall outside organisations' core operational budget, make them 'uniquely vulnerable' because artists are forced to shoulder the 'invisible burden of taking all the economic risk. Gaining work is highly competitive in the first place and even when secured, achieving it – and getting paid for it – is dependent on organisations remaining viable and their public programmes taking place.

> "With no notice at all, a regular freelance contract dropped from £200-£300 a week to next to nothing and there were no big projects coming my way at all." Ed

The *Turning Point* policy's implicit understanding that ecologies are at their most effective when functioning as non-hierarchical, location-specific ecosystems is pertinent to research to understanding contemporary frameworks for artists' resilience. Ecosystems which are self-supporting, self-regenerating and generated for mutual benefit through fostering purposeful, positive interconnections between diverse elements, functions and behaviours avoid 'wastage' – in this instance of the constituency of visual artists and the divergent and nuanced applications of their practices. A strategic and parallel benefit of embedding ecosystem principles in the operations of the visual arts is the enshrining of equity and inclusion principles and the associated contribution of such patterns to the forging of a transparent, meritocratic society.

> "The UK's visual arts sector operates as an interconnected ecosystem. From artists and educators to galleries and audiences, every component plays a role in sustaining a vibrant – and genuinely world-leading – cultural landscape …" CVAN, 2025

However, ambiguities due to historical precedent and curatorial preference in the interrelationship between contemporary visual arts galleries and artists impact hugely on the scope of artists' relationship building and professional interchange, this by inserting a layer of mystery and complexity into interactions and practical arrangements. Rather than a transparent meritocracy and due to influence from an artificially constructed 'subscription' process that filters and legitimises what is 'art' and conversely what are merely sales, the operations of the contemporary visual arts follow an implicit set of rules.

In effect, artists who predominantly look to galleries to show work and forge careers are expected to pass control of their public image to cooperating coteries of art professionals – curators, dealers, critics, senior artists and notable collectors. The byproduct of this cartel – the wastage – is in the form of a perceived 'over supply' of artists and ongoing limited livelihood prospects for many artists.

> "The precarious nature of visual arts as a profession is underscored by the stark economic realities faced by artists [in] that the median annual income for self-employed visual artists stands at £12,500, which is 64% lower than the typical income for individual UK workers." *The Artist Earnings Survey*, DACS, 2024

Getting onto the radar of nominators and being recommended to others for closed commissions and exhibitions is dependent on artists first having gained sufficient opportunities to become visible. Getting noticed and picked out by artworld influencers involves artists being seen in exhibitions and having their work critically discussed by peers – including the more established artists as well as curators, critics and academics.

> "I know there are curators who get to recommend artists for the 'closed' bursaries and commissions, you know, that only artists who are invited can apply for. Obviously, they don't want hundreds and hundreds of applications to look at, but I do worry that it makes everything about *their* taste in artists." Nancy

Current systems for presenting and progressing the visual arts as a social benefit privilege those with the financial, social and educational means to withstand it's structural and economic uncertainties. This is compounded by use of what McRobbie identifies as a 'club culture' method of selecting individuals, this imported into the arts sector from the commercial creative industries. In such a context, the ability of any individual to 'get on' in relies on a combination of their access to networks in the first place and subsequently on their 'network sociality'. Getting an offer of creative work "becomes less about an individual's work quality than on their informal knowledge and contacts and often their friendships."

Based on her experiences, artist Lucy Wright describes this ecology for the visual arts as a 'Hunger Games' resourcing scenario which has the effect of undermining artists' well-being and their livelihood prospects. To 'stay in the game', individual artists must continually pitch for – and in the main fail to get – competitively offered and relatively low-value opportunities and grant funding.

> "It just takes so much time to do a big application, and I don't really have that time … I either have time for making, for [community] workshops, or for admin, but there's not enough time for all three [when] I'm working [another job] three days a week." Anna

Although conflicting with stated arts policy expectations of equanimity and inclusion, use of recommendation over open submission has gradually gained dominance in the contemporary visual arts.

> "[One person] has been really supportive … [since I came] here, she contacted me about a commission and [since] …. recommended me for quite a few things." Nancy

Artists are discouraged by these covert recommendation systems from exhibiting behaviours or having expectations that might in any way undermine the art system's delicate balance, as they may come to rely on that system later in their careers.

> "I was getting told not to sell to anyone, [as an indicator] that you're at a stage [as an artist] where you should probably not be selling [to just anyone]." Michael

> "[Some] people … don't even consider you for things when you have a child … they think you can't handle it or you don't have the time for it." Nancy

Artists' ability to get on in contemporary visual arts ecologies by sustaining practices economically over time has thus become less dependent on work quality *per se* and more on a combination of 'knowing the ropes' and 'playing the games while having sufficient 'background income' to cover the time and expense of the high levels of networking and speculative working necessary.

> "Everyone has their own little cliques and structures. It feels to me like if you're not part of this club or this studio or not paying this fee to get a circle of opportunities, then you may as well just fuck off. To make your way up the arts pecking order, it's like you're expected to do things in a certain way. It seems to be all about who you're schmoozing with." Emily

Whether looking to public or commercial art settings, contemporary visual arts sifting processes have the effect of discouraging artists from being overt about their specific economic and longer-term livelihood needs. It's 'not cool' to be difficult such as by questioning fee rates and contractual terms, and artists are warned against income-generation from sales to 'curatorially unauthenticated' buyers such as from studios and social media platforms as these may undermine their future status with important collectors and buyers.

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Measuring artists' resilience

> "I have to just keep going, you know, pursuing things against all odds and keeping up a flow of ideas. It's a sort of resilience for me, I suppose. When stuff happens that's out of my control, when I don't feel like myself, the best thing I can do is immerse myself in my work …"
> Susannah

Visual artists are adept at maintaining and sustaining art practices in changing circumstances. Their intuitive strategies and approaches which take account of their personal desires and characteristics, specific family contexts and professional aspirations are by nature responsive and reflexive and demonstrate adaptability in the face of uncertainties. Such uncertainties include the shifts and changing preferences in culture, the arts and the political environment.

In the analyses following, the underlying causes of artists' vulnerabilities are cross-referenced to study data to consider resilience levels within this cohort of artists and to provide an indicative understanding of the most and the less supportive economic, emotional and environmental conditions.

Factors affecting artists' economic resilience

Economic stability - 1				
	Employment	Arts self-employment		
	Permanent professional	Grants/ commissions	Art /craft sales	Arts-related work
Michael				
Edward				
Nancy				
Susannah				
Lizzy				
Cora				
Amelia				
Francis				
Olivia				
Anna				
Oliver				
Emily				
Tanya				
Andres				

Artists like Michael and Edward experience the greatest economic stability in their lives, this predominantly because of the combination between having well-developed art practices and holding permanent professional status employment.

This baseline economic asset pertains whether the work held is full or part-time and in the arts or in another profession that's sympathetic to their art practices. As benchmark, a 2024 study of creative freelancers for Arts Council England concluded that 29% of individuals had regular salaried work and 69% relied solely on freelance income sources.

> "My job working with troubled children fits in with my art practice. It's not only that it pays the mortgage and puts food on the family table, I think of it as providing what I'd need if I was, say, a landscape painter. Even if my paintings were made in the studio, I'd have to go for a walk in the landscape to experience it. In the same way, the subjects for my work are related to my job… it's the equivalent of going for a walk. I can't really conceive of doing anything else I'd like as much. The financial security means I can take creative risks and although I do want sell my paintings, it doesn't really matter when I don't." Michael

Artists holding this 'dual career' status have the best day-to-day financial security, with their overall economic welfare improved through automatic access to employee benefits including sick pay and statutory entitlement to time off for holidays and extenuating circumstances including family caring responsibilities and bereavement. Notably too, it is only individuals in the study group with dual career status where pensions are legislated for and contributory who hold any pension savings.

Even when able to conduct art practices full-time, artists whose income comes entirely from their art practices through self-generated projects and pitching for commissions struggle to maintain a sufficient, regular annual income.

> "[I want to earn] £35,000 like a professional can, because then I could save money. [But] It's really hard to earn money as an artist and it's so unpredictable. I'm always thinking 'what's going to be next?' …. My earnings [last year] on my tax [return] were £10,000, but about £20,000 the year before. [The difference] was I lost four months with illness." Nancy

> "It's been a tough couple of years in the economy - very difficult selling … everything is performing about half of what I'd expect …" Susannah

Previous research has concluded that a key contributor to visual artists' resilience is their preference for acting as 'individuals not firms'. Individuals examined within this study don't behave like small creative industries companies who scale-up resources or outsource production in response to greater market demand. Rather, they 'right scale' by keeping everything 'in-house' and within a manageable scope and size.

> “Interior designers … say they want four of this size and six of that size [these are] those massive jobs [for] around 20 original pieces of work [to] pitch it to a client. I probably get about three or four requests like that a year … [But] if something like that came back [to me] when I’m [already booked to do something], it would be an absolute nightmare. I wouldn’t have the space or time to make the work.” Susannah

For artists at an early career development stage, maintaining economic stability comes from having lower expectations of income from artistic practices.

> “[Getting] 90% of my income … from my subsidiary work is a conscious decision because I [don’t] want to put that livelihood pressure on my passion.” Amelia

> [Pre-pandemic and when working in an artists’ duo] “a sixty-forty split was possible, where I would get 60% of my income from producer, curator, arts organiser jobs and the rest …. [from] project grants. We’d probably get a project grant once a year. But since the pandemic and going solo … it just wasn’t viable. I wasn’t getting those kinds of grants … and it was stunting my practice because I was applying to lots of things [but] not getting them [so] was waiting to get opportunities to do [any work]. In the [last couple of years] I’ve switched away from that. I’m trying more to not rely on any income actually coming from my actual solo art practice.” Olivia

Few artists in the research group had credible savings, with their small sums proving insufficient to cover unforeseen outlay or essential replacement expenditure.

> “I've got savings [of] £5,000 …… I've always saved. It takes the stress out of [it to] know that I can [cover] the next few months because I've got money in the bank but it's not that much.” Nancy

> “I’d been pretty much hitting my target sales income, [but then] quite rapidly, things became very different [and], I had had to dip into my savings to keep things going …. [and] I’ve not managed to start paying back into that yet.” Susannah

> “I did have savings … but my laptop died last month, [and] it was four grand to replace it”. Cora

> “My main focus is getting a new car [but] it’s massive, massive expense. I do so much driving to galleries and delivering and picking up work… but I’m driving round in a 12-year-old car, [with] 120,000 miles on the clock, and not really designed to do much more.” Susannah

Arts Council England's 2024 study of conditions for creative freelancers indicates that 68% are not in employment of some kind and thus not regularly contributing to work-related pensions or making financial provision for retirement beyond assumptions of a state pension. Notably someone considered to have a median annual salary of £37,382 who works from 22 years to 68 years and pays into a pension throughout would expect to have a £163,600 fund on retirement. This figure is based on the minimum contributions employees must pay when auto-enrolled into a pension, that is to say 4% of earnings, matched with 3% from the employer and 1% in tax relief.

Artists such as Michael and Edward have the most economic stability both in their working lives and beyond, this largely due to the financial and legislative security of permanent professional employment. In both these cases, they have pension savings and mortgages are paid off either because of financial prudence or inherited wealth. The household's stable economic basis is further aided by a partner's reliable income, whether derived from employed or self-employed professional work. Ongoing costs of art practices are lower too for such artists as neither rents studio space external to their homes, this by choice rather than necessity.

Some 44% of visual artists are however renting external studio space and as many of the artists' stories illustrate, this creates an important distinction between domestic and professional lives. External studio space is where an artist's tools and [in some cases toxic] materials can be suitably used and stored and where work-in-progress safely left when their studio time is limited and intermittent.

> "I used to think I wanted [a studio] close by home so that I could [just], pop there for a bit. I've had that before but [it] was a really cold warehouse where dirt would fall from the ceiling on your work and stuff. So, I think [although a little farther from home, being here] has shown me that travelling to somewhere doesn't really matter too much, as long as it's clean and warm." Olivia

Artists whose practices deploy craft skills and techniques need suitable space to deal with the materiality of the processes and steps and stages in production. They need to be able to store, season and 'work their wood', work on test pieces, safely leave works under development and during finishing and drying processes and then to securely hold stocks of finished pieces.

> "[Having] studio space that is affordable is .. crucial. I can't do my practice at home as I need a lot of space for it." Anna

Denoting a continuous, serious art practice, studio holding amplifies artists' professional status and identity.

> "This [studio] is great. I only have [a small space] but no one else [really comes in to use] this floor. I couldn't ask for more. Artists here are a bit older as well … they're not trendy painters…. and they do some life affirming stuff." Oliver

> "Being in this studio group … gave me a flying start really when I arrived here. I became absorbed into a community of artists of different ages and levels of experience, everyone was really open and wanting to collaborate." Nancy

Benefits to artists of being in collective studios include being able to host invitational curatorial visits towards securing new exhibitions and commissions, participating in open studios and using dedicated space for exhibitions and community activities.

> "[My studios are a 15-minute walk from [home]…. There are open studio group shows and members' shows …. Everyone has to do something to support the studios. Sometimes it's invigilating or tech work and because of my experience, I was asked to run some workshops." Oliver

> "There's a good thing about having a studio and [having] open studios [when] you get people coming in that you haven't met. Then it's like that first moment, like a seed, and then you know them." Nancy

> "[I can use the project space here to run community workshops]. From my end, it's really simple and easy. They take the bookings and I just turn up. This [way] takes out [all] the admin [which is what] takes up so much time." Anna

Factors affecting artists' emotional resilience

Emotional stability						
	ND	Anxiety	chronic condition	caring duties	housing security	income security
Michael						
Edward						
Nancy						
Susannah						
Lizzy						
Cora						
Amelia						
Francis						
Olivia						
Anna					tenancy	
Oliver					tenancy	
Emily						
Tanya						
Andres					tenancy	

Neurodivergent artists such as Emily who have a strong belief in art as a 'social good' but also have substantial caring responsibilities have the least emotional capacity and physical time to expend on developing the complex relationships and resources to realising their people-centred art practices.

> "Resilience is the most ableist word … It's like, 'Pull your socks up [as] if you pull your socks up, if you work harder, you will get there.' No, you won't because the structures don't allow it." Emily

Artists typically derive a combination of emotional, intellectual and artistic support from a discrete handful of individuals who form a circle of trust. Artists commonly cite a small handful of people including friends known since childhood and family members and specific artists whom they rely heavily on for their well-being.

> "Other than my family, In all the time I've been an artist, there's only been three or four people … in the arts in my circle of trust. They are the ones who have been pivotal, who have kept me going, pushed me to try something, and have helped me to take a different direction, so I feel like I'm in control of my own destiny." Henry

Tanya talks about the 'ambitious' friends she grew up with in the city who 'now do quite innovative things' who are an integral part of her professional network. A friend's interest in Michael's paintings caused her to act as an informal agent for him for a while and it through her connections and friendships that he became represented by a London gallery. Artists also value the consistent and unconditional emotional support derived from their family, with their mothers often cited in this respect.

> "She's amazing and she is very much if you want to do something, just do it. Find out how to do it and do it yourself. …. A few weeks ago I felt [a project I was working on] wasn't very good, my work wasn't good enough for that and I was disappointed with it and my [other] project wasn't quite working right and I was under pressure and I felt bad … that's when I'll kind of ring my mum … and say, 'look mum I just feel shit, this is not going right' and she says, 'don't be ridiculous, just crack on'." Henry

> "When I think about resilience my mum comes to mind; a person with so much heart and unwavering willpower; so many tears dropped, yet so much strength, push and 'umph!' in her affirmations and battle cries. I know the parts of me that are resilient come from her". Larry Achiampong, Axisweb

For newer artists such as Amelia and Anna who live in rented shared accommodation and also for artists with families and caring responsibilities such as Emily, external studio spaces are highly supportive of their art practices and overall emotional well-being. These provide artists with a "sanctuary" – a space where they can be themselves, reflect and continue forward from where they left off a week ago and quickly re-immerse themselves in their artistic processes.

> "What matters to me more than anything about my practice is that I get to be in the environment that I've created for myself. Working on a piece [there] is just an extremely healing and enjoyable conscious experience." Amelia

> "I've taken on [a] bigger [space] to be able to spread out a bit more, get back into [doing] larger [work], and … try out performance stuff. [Knowing] I can have [it] for as long as I want it and as long as nothing goes wrong [provides a] kind of stability that allows the other stuff [in my life] to be a bit more chaotic." Olivia

> "All I ever wanted was a daily practice… to come here after work so I can have that daily commune…. with the material. That's the bit I consider to be the art, never mind the object that gets created…. The practical fact that I'm allowed to do art". in Muhammad and Puente, *Poor Artists*.

Having positive experiences in group studios is not a given.

> "Most of the artists in this building are bogged down in a day job… [that] has to take precedence. And you can see how that slows down their practice. And for a lot of artists around me there is stagnation …. I think in some ways that artists' groups can be fantastic and in other ways they can be very limiting." Lizzy

> "I see myself as totally separate [from other artists here]. …But I can close my door and I'm in quite a separate area which serves me well. I can block out all the toxic positivity …. and sometimes [the] verbal abuse". Emily

For most artists in the research cohort, ambitions for continuous and developmental art practices necessarily include aspirations for periods of artistic research although this is combined with the recognition that grant application processes to enable these are lengthy and success rates are low.

> "Filling in a grant application form is not so much daunting, but a full-time job for two weeks. It's a labour of love though because you end up using the grant to pay everyone except yourself." Oliver

> "It's been a long time since I've applied for a grant… I really lost faith in that … I got jaded by applying for things and not being successful and [because] I was spending almost more time applying to things than I was actually [doing my] work". Amelia

> "[Applying for DYCP] was the last roll of the dice… I had one foot out of the studio…. [But then] someone I knew was successful…. showed me their application … I read it and I thought 'I could write this. I can get this.' I know it's a lottery ticket, but I just looked at the structure of it, [it's simpler] compared to National Lottery Project Grants which is like writing a PhD in my mind, I [felt] I'd got something here that could work." Emily

Dedicated grants specifically for artists to learn, hone and upgrade technical and craft-based skills are highly valued.

> "People were asking about whether my works could be larger and my immediate thought was 'Yes, but I have no idea how to do that.' So I look[ed] into ways financing the learning processes by working one-to-one with a Master printmaker]… and applied for and then got a scholarship [from a charitable trust] worth £5,000." Susannah

> "I'd need [to be in] a strong enough point in my practice … [to apply to] the Arts Council …. they just seem big and scary and it would take a lot of effort. [More relevant to me are the] mentoring support, and connections to other makers through Heritage Crafts and the peer support you can get through crafts associations." Anna

Artists who go through lengthy fundraising processes that are more relevant to organisations with skilled staff to gain sufficient resources for larger programmes of work can be struck by circumstances beyond their control.

> "I wanted to think about how … to expand my studio-based practice [into something] bigger. I'd had a quite clear idea, and I had the partners [in place] I'd been talking to [one of them] for four or five years about doing something. So, I put together the application and managed to get a £21,000 [for a £35,000 project] grant. …. But [then] I got ill …. which knocked me out for about four months [so I] had to postpone [the start of] the project." Nancy

Artists dealing with lengthy medical conditions, neurodivergent traits including autism, with anxiety, managing chronic conditions, caring for children with special needs or for siblings or elders experience the highest levels of emotional vulnerability, which in turn impacts adversely on their artistic strength, confidence levels and overall well-being.

> "… I had a suspected [medical condition and was] put on medication that my body didn't like, so I had a couple of years with my body behaving quite oddly." Francis

> "Went into hospital for treatment for [another issue] and was told later I had a large brain tumour. This has affected my health, mobility, and ability to work … My next scan is [in three months' time] and I'll not know the rate of growth [until then] …. I've tried the governmental pathways and [have already been] refused one benefit." Mid-career artist living in a rural area.

> "Being ND, it's … every day I find something … quite debilitating. … I'm aware that the triggering might not be that … people [are] being unfriendly, more that I don't understand the reason. But instead of … 'getting on with my day', I focus on that, and that becomes my mental attitude for [it]. It affects my ability to communicate, my body language with almost everyone else I speak to and makes you more vulnerable." Oliver

> "I've been neurodivergent all my life but didn't know [until I got a diagnosis recently]. But I know [now why I keep] interrupting in conversations …and changing topic mid-conversation—I understand it's just how my brain works". Lizzy

> "I'm dyslexic and have an auditory processing disorder and [more recently] I received an autism diagnosis. Since menopause, I've also noticed I have a different kind of capacity for all sorts [of things] and the signifiers or traits …. connected to autism have become more apparent." Cora

At over two fifths in this research cohort, levels of neurodivergence are higher than the 20% generally cited for the creative industries overall. The associated dyslexia and dyscalculia impact on individuals' basic communications skills as illustrated when describing the difficulties of handling professional relationships including the complex and highly competitive process of making applications for grants and in response to one-off commissions or projects.

While being in their studios is highly valued by artists for "precious… immers[ion] in the processes of thinking", the amount of time available to artists to inhabit them – to engage in experimentation and take artistic risks – is ever more squeezed. Due to high living and practice costs and "just to live", artists at all career stages are spending most of their time *not* in their studio. Instead, they're having to do the "regular work running alongside my art practice", including in insecure and unrelated jobs for most of the week.

> "I probably average twelve hours a month in my studio – a tiny fraction of what it was before the Covid and post pandemic situation of lack of commissions and funding and the cost-of-living crisis. I'm teaching in two art schools in different towns but the workload of these jobs [means] you have to do at least double that — so my 2 day a week job takes 4 days … and there are many weeks where I just don't get to go to the studio at all." Mid-career artist in the Midlands

> "I'm up at 6, in work for 8, finished at 4, then there's a tube journey home and a bit of family time before I can do anything else." Oliver

As their stories illustrate, artists commonly work long hours, six days a week, simply to accommodate all the various aspects of their practices and any adjunct income-generating work.

> "I'm working the whole school day, from drop off to pick up, which is only a six-hour day, but then I'll be latching things on to the end. So, I'll do a framing run with my daughter… after school, so that's another couple of hours And then I probably do about two or three hours in the evening, so … [it's] nine, ten hours [in a day], and…. then there's the weekend work …. when you're physically at events. At best it's probably 60% [of my time spent on] marketing and 40% on the making [of work]." Susannah

> "I always say to people, I either have time for making [my work], for teaching, or for admin, but I don't have time for all three because I'm also working part-time [just to have enough income to live on]." Anna

> "I'm working full time, around 35 hours a week and [solely] as a self-employed artist. My goal is a minimum of 16 hours a week in the studio. This isn't all making time as it includes some admin, meetings, workshops and mentoring. Conditions that affect this are most frequently my health and childcare, the type of commissions I'm working on and the point in the commissioning cycle." Artist in North East England

In tandem with managing their more complex professional conditions and life circumstances, many artists' lack 'human flourishing'.

> "A flourishing life is one in which a person's capacities and talents have developed in ways that enable them to pursue their life goals, so that in some general sense, they have been able to release their potentials and purposes. In terms of health, that is more than just an absence of disease. It embodies a positive idea of a physical vitality that enables people to live energetically in the world and implies a positive, robust, realisation of one's capacities." Olin Wright, 2019

Artists' emotional health and well-being are consistently impacted by lack of 'downtime' and sustained periods for personal refreshment. Rather than the annual statutory holiday period enjoyed by employees, 'time off' for artists is most often in the form of an occasional long weekend, a week visiting family or combined with going to something related to their profession.

> "I've blocked some time off … to get away somewhere and I'm toying with [spending some time at an arts event]. But … you do have a habit of putting them to one side due to the nature of the work." Francis

> "I've not been on a long holiday for probably about seven or eight years. So, holidays … have been a week normally. The problem is the cost of things now. It just so hard to prioritise that with everything else." Susannah

Factors affecting artists' environmental resilience

> "Capitalist societies are riddled with fear because everyone's pitted against each other. [In] the arts and culture sector, it's really common to hear salaried workers complain they're not on as good a salary as …. another industry. But why is [their] housing more important than [artists'] housing? [or] the mortgage payments of salaried arts workers than [the housing and studio costs] of freelancers?" Cora

Causes of artists' environmental vulnerability lie in the gap between their dedicated pursuit of personalised, inherently slower and embedded 'situated practices' happening away from the mainstream and the expectations to 'perform art practices' within trickle-down, economics-driven and impact-measuring environments of national strategies for arts and culture.

> "The way in which the Arts Council structures value is just completely bollocks [and] reinforces my commitment to what is essentially a wholly different way of thinking about value. [My] commitment is to the local, the communal and the shared. By putting my energy into those other kinds of structures, [my] rationale … for my work is to shift the scale of values and the understanding of value around what we're doing." Edward

The artists' stories illuminate how art practices are directly shaped by their personal and professional relationships with a place.

> "Those with ancestry [have] a different experience of a place …than those [with a lesser] ancestry, or who choose to claim an identity [there]. We can respect both those things in the same place [and] can move forward more powerfully, because we know ourselves better. There's a courage about knowing ourselves better." Cora

> "Most …. of my network and where I've drawn my support network from over the years – and I've lived in [this city] for fifteen years now – and what keeps me here …. is in the community." Olivia

> "[On graduation] we created an informal collective. In those pre internet days we started meeting once a month to have conversations. It was word-of-mouth …that got the more established practitioners involved, and that led to a load us being invited into our regional arts board to talk to them about photography. Okay, they weren't handing money over at that point, but they were saying 'if you guys start to do something, there might be'". Francis

Artists are first-and-foremost people who eat, shop, sleep and socialise where they live, and thus have a vested interest in forging locally distinctive cultures characterised by sustainability and self-sufficiency.

> "I want to [live where] I have that connection with where [my materials] come from. I'm really interested in low consumerism… I'd like to grow my own materials [and] I want to make functional, beautiful things that last a really long time, that only use natural materials." Anna

> "[I want] to find [ways of working] that are more sustainable ways and use [natural materials]. I've been reviving local heritage crafts [reusing] discarded materials and local plant life." Nancy

In this respect, research data suggests insufficient alignment at present between artists' values and their pursuit practice-based methodologies and arts policy's prevailing attitudes and preferences and thence with the work of publicly funded professional support and advocacy bodies.

> "[My regional visual arts advocacy body]…. seems [a] bit admin heavy … there's an office that does stuff … and [where] some ideas happen and then they issue something … but it's not really about artists [and how they practice]." Edward

Environments and mechanisms most supportive of artists' durational practices are self-generated and micro scale. These are closely aligned with artists' social and environmental beliefs, and held and amplified through interchange within practice-led communities of interest.

> "My art practice is localised and sustainable. I've developed ways to make my work with fewer new materials – it's all about recycling, scavenging and repurposing what I have." Cora

> "What I'm doing really … through my art practice is to help remake social and arts infrastructures so they are fairer and kinder, better at recognising people's …. social vulnerabilities. So it's also about being an activist wherever I can, working to rebalance power, generate alternatives to capitalism and reduce the very many environmental harms." Olivia

Self-determined, flexible and responsive localised development is a vital contributor to building the self-efficacy artists need to sustain art practices over time, this because the critical determinants in an individual's ability to act are being in control of life and environmental circumstances and feeling confident goals are achievable.

> "[Artists would directly benefit from] rewilding – it's a simple notion that could be applied across [the infrastructures of the arts]. It's like I've been doing with the grass at the front of my house over the past six years. It's really dominant and uses up all the nutrients…. But …if we don't have diversity in the grass, it's …. boring. So, the way you rewild it is … to scarify it and scatter down diverse seeds, like meadow grasses and yellow rattle, which challenge the grass, keep it at bay and create space for other species to grow up as well." Cora

> "It's mostly women and … gender non-conforming people that end up setting up the infrastructure that's missing. [When you look back to] art collectives… and stuff from the seventies [you] just [think] 'Oh my God, all the problems are still the same. We're all still trying to battle [those] things [now].'" Olivia

> "I think the hope from the arts has come from the grassroots up and not from the top-down. Artists are massively adaptable people – we're not fazed by changes to the normal." Michael

Academic analyses and insight since the pandemic period resonate with these artists' sensibilities and practice-led approaches.

> "[The need now is for] more sustainable, regenerative practices [that] accept and work in tune with natural and seasonal cycles [which] embrace the 'less is more' philosophy and the aims for sustainable development rather than unsustainable growth [to] promote and carve out time for rest, recuperation [and] wellbeing .." Walmsley et al, 2022

As demonstrated in hyper-local initiatives such as Deveron Arts, In Situ, Artgene, The Portland Project and New Bridge Project amongst others, 'place matters' to artists. Conscious embedding and positioning of artists and their location-based interventions and collaborations into communities make the art and artists 'part of everyday life'. These artist-led ways of doing things are by nature regenerative – a strategic mechanism for ceding and devolving power, social responsibility and financial resources.

> "My commitment is to putting energy into what's local, communal and shared. My long-term wish is that we will all get to hear and experience in other senses what is valued in the arts." Edward

> "There is much to be gained from organising glocal alternatives that are … contextually specific ... Incidental practice, peer-to-peer exchange ….. and a knowing relation to the 'not knowing' [of] precarity …. [can] forego the false promises of [a] winner-takes-all economy". Martha Bradfield, 2025

Evidence submitted to the 2020 Government Inquiry into the impact of Covid on arts and culture acknowledged the importance of artists' contributions and artist-led, microscale, grassroots activities, these being a vital facet of achieving social change and ambitions for social and economic equity.

> "Art imbued with a sense of place, reflective of local variations and specific impacts, is a prime contributor to sustaining vibrant, inclusive and diverse arts ecologies (Brighton and Hove Council, Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council, Haringey Culture Board, Torbay Culture). In rural areas, demand is high for conditions supportive of the range of creative and collective activities making distinctive contributions to local economic and social well-being (Creative Kernow)." Submissions to 2020 DCMS Inquiry into Covid impacts

CVAN's 2025 advocacy statement argues for greater efficacy for artists at the grassroots, enabled by new financial support for smaller and artist-led visual arts institutions.

> "[There is a] chronic lack of availability for affordable and sustainable studio spaces for artists, primarily due to low pay for artists, rising rents, limited property availability, and insecure tenure. The Government should support this critical part of the ecosystem by establishing a new £5 million Supporting Grassroots Visual Arts Fund to provide financial assistance to small galleries and artist-led spaces. … this initiative would offer grants for studio space, exhibition costs…. ensuring that early-career artists have places to develop their talent and bring that to a wider public."

It remains to be seen whether the government will accede to this proposal in which the level of funding is relatively small and benefits aimed mainly at early career artists. As comparator, a radical proposition made a decade ago was to side-step the existing arts distribution instruments by putting 20% of the Arts Council's allocation of National Lottery funds direct to new regionally determined programmes for individual artists and artist-led projects. If such a formula been adopted, the equivalent of £50.6m a year – ten times the amount now proposed – would be going to support direct and indirect interventions for artists and artist-led initiatives.

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Drivers and brakes

> "Artists must always be present for value to be created but [at the same time] must always be devalued and de-economised for [arts] policy and business models to operate." Alexander (2017)

Artists' continual quest for self-directed learning through personalised, developmental visual artists' practices is best characterised as a dedicated and situated pursuit of creativity within a life-long process. In contrast, the infrastructures for contemporary visual arts which are aligned to government policy and the parameters of public funding conform with the principles of the creative industries where the intention for original, novel and innovative creative work is to achieve a measurable 'market exchange value' of some kind.

Artists' foundational beliefs and values

> "I have this very strong sense in me that things could be otherwise. I can see it on a micro scale around me, in my community and other communities – that belief in alternatives to, you know, capitalism, austerity, the world slowly imploding ecologically. And I think probably that's the thread that unites like everything I'm interested in and do." Olivia

Artists' individual stories confirm that deeply held beliefs about the social and psychic value of art are the key driver in sustaining art practices over time. It is their beliefs that sustain artists emotionally through times of difficulty, providing them with a form of nourishment quite different from the buzz arising from immediate exchange including public appreciation. In combination with intrinsically held values including self-worth, caring for others and desire for personal development and growth these beliefs are an enduring motivation.

> "It physically feels like I just have to do something creative… I can't kind of switch off … it helps me mentally [and I have the] feeling that you can make someone feel better or … feel 'something'… [I need to convey] this idea … of how good it can be to make art … and the importance of it…. Just kind of spreading that word…. [providing a] light-heartedness that takes people out from what's going on." Tanya

Her emotional responses to the concept of 'home' are the starting point for Susannah's art practice. These are the context for exploring her purpose in the world, of thinking about her own mortality and her ambition to represent through her art practice the traces and memories she'll leave behind.

> "The reality … is that I don't feel myself to be a person if I'm not making work. The work sort of flows very naturally from one thing to another. All I know is that when I can't make work, I feel frustrated and I don't feel I can be who I am, and that is more important than anything else." Susannah

We know from previous research that artists commonly live by their values. The basis for building 'inner strength', their values enable artists to manage difficulties in their personal and professional lives including the continual uncertainty attached to achieving quality in their work and their career prospects. Artists' beliefs and values enable them to develop and sustain personalised approaches to livelihood attuned to their specific artistic ambitions and life circumstances.

> "[I'm involved with] people with super complex health and lives [so] I'm really interested in what that means. …[as] there's a lot of language or rhetoric [that] has been misused around *diversity* and *community* and even *care*. So what I'm interested in is how you can be together in [that] difference, in [the] messiness and complications and … difficulty. I think that probably carries through into my art practice, as I'm drawn to stuff I don't really understand." Olivia

From a psychological perspective, pursuing enjoyable and purposive behaviours gives artists good reason to persist with something. People in general enjoy healthier and productive existences when they have freedom to make their own choices, pursue personal goals for their own sake and make demonstrable progress.

> "A scholarship last year enabled me to put my heart and soul into making [new work] ….. My most ambitious … project to date, it was a natural progression in my work. It takes me a long time to feel in my comfort zone with any new experience… I can't tell you what a joy it is when you've worked so intensely on a project to see it being appreciated and welcomed into the world." Susannah

Levels of personal satisfaction and of emotional well-being are higher when individuals are engaged in something they enjoy doing and are stimulated by. This strong sense of purpose gives them a feeling of being control of their relationships and their lives.

> "An organisation approached me to do a research residency for two or three days each month. Then they're going to apply for funding to commission … a large work next year. I like [these] longer-term things. I feel too when I can do things off my own bat it shows [them and] gives them ideas, like, 'Oh, *this* is what she can do'." Nancy

Dedicated periods of experiment and risk-taking contribute to artists' sustainability by building artists' knowledge and skills and fostering their artistic surety and autonomy. Direct grants and awards empower artists and by giving them greater control over their own artistic direction and production and strategically contributing to career progression over the longer-term. Direct grants are supportive of artists' need for continuous learning and development and by enabling them to 'scale up' art production, open-ended funding contributes to both to artists' 'staying power' and to power-sharing.

> [I want] to make the work that I want to make…. just learn and develop, learn and develop, and take risks. [But]…. I guess [w]hat I have learnt is that you can't go big or be that experimental really without support. Emily

Jackson & Devlin's research for Arts Council England demonstrated how direct grants enabled artists to generate approaches to arts organisations and other collaborators. Larger sums of money not only gave artists greater control over the direction of a project but "encouraged ambition and innovation." Artists who received £10,000 government grants due to their small business status during the first Covid-19 lockdown reported unprecedented opportunity to 'hunker down', buy materials and engross themselves in making work without the worry of showing and selling. In this period of 'quiet time' and reflection artists were able to 'take the foot off the accelerator'.

> "Strange as it may sound, Covid was one of the best things that's ever happened to me. My £10,000 grant …. essentially took away all the fear, made everything safe… I just started to get my flow and felt comfortable to make work knowing I didn't have to stress. The work that came out of that upped my game and I was able to develop the [recognisable style] artists need to have of they're looking for gallery representation." Oliver

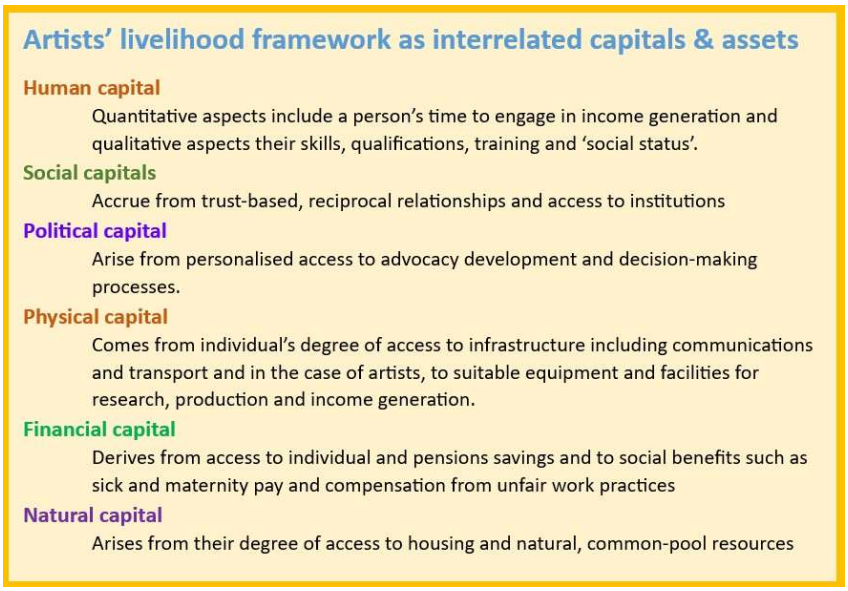
Artists talked in that period about being able to rekindle art practices by incubating and 'playing around with ideas' and felt 'refilled' by 'seeing things through new lenses'. They recounted how new skills were gained and their tacit knowledge amplified through self-directed professional development and built artistic agency through heightened self-esteem and confidence.

> "Liberated from having to 'justify every little thing' to intermediaries, artists drew on their beliefs and convictions to pursue their long-standing artistic and social preoccupations." Telling tales: artists' pandemic stories, 2022

Typically, visual artists are not by nature 'entrepreneurial', in that higher levels of economic reward, profitability and business growth aren't part of core expectations and personal goals for art practices. This underlying trait is reflected in related research showing that creative individuals for whom financial exchange is a primary motivation – the best at 'being self-employed', and well-versed in application writing and so on – are the most likely to depart the arts for more stable economic working conditions in the wider creative industries.

> "If I had put a hundred percent of effort into [getting] enough income from my studio practice, I might be in a different [economic] position … but [I don't want to] put that livelihood pressure on my passion." Amelia

Framework for artists' livelihoods



> "The health of the ecosystem of practitioners building alternatives is of critical importance." Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Artists' situated practices as contributor to their 'social capitals'

By fostering self-development through productive, healthy and inclusive frameworks for social good, artists' pursuit of situated practices holds strategic benefits. Firstly, these contribute to preserving local distinctiveness and grassroots development and secondly, working with and receiving encouragement from people who believe in them feeds into artists' acquisition of social capital, this being a key factor in maintaining sustainable art practices over a life time.

> "[We'd been discussing] doing something for four or five years really [and] it [was a combination of] research, engagement and production. I was researching and did a bit more training myself [with a] few courses. Then in each location, I worked with different groups of people – mostly women – teaching them how to [use these processes. [The project] finished with a large site-specific piece [made in and with] each community". Nancy

Trust-based interactions where goals, aspirations and resources are common build structural social capital, cognitive social capital arises from the development of shared meanings, interpretations and narratives in personal and individualised connections with relational capital accruing from deeper place-based relationships and interactions.

> "I'm interested in people and how we think and .. process things and … relate to one another and communicate…. I think in everything I've been involved in, I've been trying to remake the infrastructure around it, so that more people could access it." Olivia

Taking account of each artist's specific location, family circumstances and social responsibilities and contingent on their beliefs and artistic ambitions, their situated practices are artists' basis for 'seeing themselves in the world'.

> "[It's about] remembering that artists are part of communities, not [people] who come in and do something for a community. Artists live in … places, we make stuff in these places and just being there … …[brings mutual] benefit of some kind." Edward

By fostering a 'sense of belonging' in a place, the ensuing psychological, social, spiritual and physical benefits contribute directly to artists' development and human well-being over the longer-term.

Factors in artists' vulnerability

Experiencing emotional vulnerability diminishes artistic strength and personal well-being, causing artists to feel external challenges and shocks are unsurmountable. Lack of personal control over their artistic and career development is the main cause, this exacerbated when artists are structurally unable to put enough time to their practice. Self-doubt is inherent within the day-to-day practicalities of developing and making work and sustaining art practices in 'business orientated' working conditions that are unsympathetic to artists' beliefs, intrinsic values, and personal characteristics and to their immediate personal and economic circumstances.

> "There's always a tension — you always get … the creative bit and the fun bit, but then there's the mania …and the darker bit, you know, the dips and the self-destructive [aspects]." Oliver

As illustrated in the artists' stories, strains on their mental health arise from their personal characteristics, illness and chronic conditions, from family and caring responsibilities, project and funding failure and unsatisfactory working relationships. Overall, artists are found to lack 'downtime' and sustained rest periods for personal and emotional refreshment.

Regardless of the financial basis for their art practices, artists experience economic uncertainty due to fluctuating, variable income levels and because – unlike other arts careers – artists' income levels don't increase in line with the length of practice.

> "I do know that I want to keep making art … to make sure no matter what… that I have some kind of creative practice. I think I need it for my mental health and wellbeing [and] I'm at the stage … where I'd really like more people to see [my work]. [The pressure comes] if I'm trying to make all my money from it." Olivia

> "I've not been able to develop my skills .. to make mistakes and learn new things [because I've only … two days a week when I'm not at my office job [and in that time] I also need to make stuff for markets, … stuff that I can sell, or [do] prep for workshops." Anna

The economic success of the arts has become dependent on provision of a continuous supply of flexible, low-paid freelance labour with portfolio work patterns. One-off, short-term or zero-hours contracts on rates and terms fixed by institutions have become the norm. Although restrictive of artists' psychological drive to 'practice their art practices' and make iterative artistic progress, artists must 'show willing' by being readily available to take on such the work, while commonly having to finance their lives and studio-based practices from other sources. Such arrangements which suit institutions' need to achieve artistic goals and targets while controlling costs have led to a lack of rapport and common purpose, this especially between funded arts institutions and artists.

> "Leaders of [non-profit] arts organisations … had never before [this program] understood how much time and labour it takes for artists they've been working with for years to actually do the work… Staff sometimes struggled to understand the full scope of creative processes and what cultural work is, [leading] some to overly prescribe traditional artistic products (eg murals or sculpture) for collaborations." Sherman and Montgomery, 2024

As illustrated in their stories and whether towards embedding practices in a specific location or making work more widely available to others, artists have a basic need for dedicated and time to acquire, revise and hone their skills and to spend on building personalised, supportive and reciprocal working relationships. Artists' nuanced practices that are reflective of local variations and specific impacts are a prime contributor to creating and sustaining vibrant, inclusive and diverse arts ecologies.

> "I consider myself a sort of conscientious human … I feel like I've got a responsibility to contribute to the change I want to see [in my location], rather than sitting back and just applauding other people doing it." Cora

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Research method and sample

The study's method comprises individualised, semi-structured interviews with a representative cohort of artists. Drawing out the social phenomena of artists' lives and unpacking and illuminating the meanings, intentions, assumptions and values artists attach to activities within their 'real world' situations provides an understanding how these circumstances influence artistic, personal and professional ambitions and livelihood prospects.

The privacy of individualised interviews uniquely captures each person's life stance and journey, evidencing their artistic and social ambitions, achievements and failures and the particularities of each person's human and professional support structures.

An approach to evidence gathering which unearths and draws out subtle underlying 'hints' and assertions from in-depth, individualised conversations with cross-reference to sectoral data and knowledge is akin to solving crossword puzzles that are relational and multi-dimensional and which draw together a combination of knowledge, skills and induction in their resolution.

The 'pool of interest' in taking part in research interviews was created by circulating invitations direct to artists via artists' networks and intermediary organisations and social media, this data then interrogated to form a discrete, representative research sample of the visual artists' constituency. This 'open' process which has value to researcher and artist allows for self-selection by artists who are willing to speak about their particular circumstances and 'world'.

> "It makes me hear everything out loud …. I've had a rethink about what's happened… and I think it's really good to evaluate." Lizzy

This study's evidence-gathering method counters a tendency in sectoral evaluations to 'talk up' artists' successes and align to 'artistic excellence' policy concepts by predominantly capturing experiences and trajectories of 'known' or 'successful artists' picked out as grant or commission recipients or otherwise 'known' to funders, intermediaries and gatekeepers. Interviews resulting from an initial self-selecting 'wider pool' method respond to the acknowledged lack of evidence of 'everyday cultural practices' within arts policy development. Providing anonymity to participants minimises potential for selected artists to protect their public image by 'playing down' negative aspects of practices and lives, which hinders accurate assessment of the success factors.

Longitudinal study is rare as a data collection method in arts and creative industries research but invaluable in articulating levers and barriers to career progression and underlying causes and consequences of failure for individuals with vicarious career paths. It provides a rich seam of evidence of the continuum of creative individuals' lives, illuminating novel solutions to livelihood and career progression and examining policy assumptions about supportive infrastructures for creative individuals. This 'reality' knowledge gap is addressed by this study's longitudinal aspect.

Subsequent to the processes of *in vivo* coding of interview data designed to capture participants' actual words, terms and phraseology, groupings of initial codes were clustered and condensed to identify the substantive threads. The artists' vignettes which have been excavated and condensed from each artist's interview transcript form this report's main narrative. The distinctive research value of these anonymised narratives is that they bring each artist to life, revealing 'how things are' for individuals working within various aspects of the contemporary visual arts while protecting their identity and professional status. By articulating each person's rationale for and approaches to forging an art practice, these portraits capture and articulate heterogeneity and 'give voice' to each individual artist, using their particular language and style of 'talking'.

Artists' research sample

The constituency of artists forming the research sample was drawn from three sources. The cohort of artists based in North West England were first interviewed in 2017, these selected from a pool of offers from artists with ten or more years' art practice experience to contribute to my 2015-19 doctoral study. This cohort was reinterviewed in 2021 for the study of artists' conditions and experiences in the pandemic. These were joined by two artists with established practices from South West England first interviewed for my 2021-22 study of artists' conditions and experiences in the pandemic and then again for this study. A new cohort of four artists drawn in 2024 from offers from individuals based in Creative Land Trust's studio buildings in London completes the group of fourteen participants in this study.

Location in England

North West	South West	London	Rural	Urban
7	*2*	*5*	*3*	*11*

Personal profile

Characteristics								
Male	*Female*	*Other*	*Single*	*Partnership*	*Child/ren*	*Carer role*	*ND*	*Chronic condition*
5	9	0	2	12	5	3	6	3

The many quantitative surveys of artists conducted by various bodies for differing purposes since 2016 indicate that 75% of England's 42,000 visual artists' constituency identify as female and just under a fifth is from global majority backgrounds, this greater than in the general population.

Aligned with prior findings, the cohort for this study illustrates visual artists as being less likely than the general population to have dependent children. This data is pertinent both in terms of the subsequent impact on household income and expenditure levels and the impact of childcare on artists' studio time and availability for projects and residencies nearby and particularly away from their home base. Statistically, one fifth of artists is neurodivergent (ND) and three quarters dyslexic.

Notably when artists in the sample were first interviewed in 2017 none referenced the condition, however six (42%) of the artists of this overall sample now cite ND as a factor that adversely effects their day-to-day lives and pursuit of art practices. Note however that the higher percentage of artists in the research sample citing these traits may be suggestive of increases in access to formal diagnosis combined with greater willingness amongst artists now to openly acknowledge this.

Types and approaches to art practice

Art practice type							
Painting	*Sculpture*	*Photography*	*Fine Printmaking*	*Crafts*	*Socially Engaged*	*Live art*	*Installation*
3	2	1	1	1	3	3	3

Artists' practices encompass creating paintings, sculptures, drawings and photography for exhibition and sale in gallery and alternative settings, visually based live art performance and digital and multi-media installations, and participatory, socially engaged and collectively realised art practices in community settings.

Audiences		
Private	*Public*	*Community*
7	7	8

A small section of the artists' constituency benefits from the career development and economic security of commercial gallery or dealer representation. Paid and unpaid opportunity for artists from charitable and publicly funded arts organisations ranges from invitational commissions to create new work for public exhibition or display, to one-off or sessional engagement-based opportunities offered competitively where the scope of the work including outcome expectations and payment terms is preset.

Career point		
Early	*Mid*	*Established*
3	3	8

Development of artists' careers is atypical when compared with arts managers and curators and related professional patterns such as teaching. Premised on continuity *of some kind,* advancement stages for artists aren't formalised and immediately recognisable. Some analyses use length of practice to define artists as 'emerging', mid-career or 'established', although this approach is imperfect because it fails to account for time away from practice such as for child bearing and caring duties.

Such terms are more aligned with employer expectations, for example, in that emerging artists are assumed to have no family responsibilities, are more mobile and implicitly need or expect lower pay. In the same vein, those at mid-career bring greater experience levels employers – for example when delivering participatory work in communities. The 'recognisable style' of established artists has an obvious attraction to employers and commissioners whose own careers will be improved by association.

Practice as career type

Practice		
Solo	*Dual*	*Portfolio*
4	6	4

Research conducted by TBR in 2015 concluded that 28% of artists had dual careers, this in the main alongside art teaching of some kind, with seven out of ten artists dependent for income on art or non-art related jobs and 2% receiving Arts Council England grants. Within the practices of artists in the new research sample, the term 'dual career' in this instance has been extended from art teaching to artists' pursuit of any kind of professional status work.

Workspace

Type	
Solo/home location	*Shared building*
3	*11*

Main references and notes

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