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Social Purpose Lab x Artquest

Who gets to be an artist

Summary report

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This report looks at who gets to be an artist in the UK today, using survey data from the ongoing Applied data partnership to consider whether access to a career in this vital industry is equitable and accessible.

A collaboration between University of the Arts London and Artquest, this report comes at a time when the UK Government has committed to growing the visual arts sector as part of its Creative Industries Sector Plan – but meeting this ambition requires action to address the inequalities that the data lays bare.

Context

The UK's creative industries are a powerhouse, and its visual arts sector is particularly special.

The UK has the second largest visual art market in the world and has produced some of the world's best known artists – from David Hockney, Anish Kapoor, and Barbara Hepworth, to William Turner, Thomas Gainsborough, and so many more.

We are home to the top two Art and Design universities in the world, including UAL, and visitors flock to British museums and galleries from across the globe.

The arts are a British success story, and our artists come from all corners of the nation – yet this report exposes the stark reality that sustaining an arts career remains a challenge for many – particularly those who cannot afford periods of low or no pay.

Like many in the creative industries, most artists are self-employed and work freelance on short-term projects or commissions. These setups can be beneficial – providing flexibility and autonomy – but precarious, and come without employment benefits such as workplace pensions, paid leave, parental leave, and fewer employee protections.

Unpaid work or 'working for exposure' is often seen as an essential way to 'break into' a career in the arts, and many opportunities are obtained through personal connections or nepotism.

When work opportunities are paid, ultimately artist pay is still low, with median income for artists in 2024 at just £12,500 – 47% lower than the income of full-time minimum wage workers in the same year.

Wages this low inevitably must be supplemented by additional work, and the roles undertaken by artists can range from sector-relevant part-time or freelance positions such as in creative organisations or in education, to non-sector relevant areas such as in retail, hospitality, or corporate roles.

This set up is exploitative and it also widens access inequalities - only those who can afford to work unpaid, or who are able to work multiple jobs to sustain themselves, are able to access these opportunities.

Why does it matter?

Who gets to be an artist matters. Art is absolutely vital – it shapes our society and our culture, and how we understand the world. In both times of struggle and celebration, art can bring joy and meaning, catharsis and release, clarity and distraction. It shapes our cultural identity, helping us reflect, remember, and push forward, and it is also at the forefront of innovation, progress-making and pushing boundaries.

The arts are of major importance to the UK's economy and soft power, and access to and engagement with art and with creativity more broadly has been shown to benefit health and wellbeing, social cohesion, pride in place, and academic attainment.

In an industry this economically and culturally crucial, it is important that the makeup of the sector reflects the society around it, telling the stories of the whole of the country, not just its most privileged portions.

Access to the arts should not be determined by your background and enabling different people to take part allows the sector to speak a greater truth, resonate with a wider audience, push more boundaries, and foster more connections.

In short, it is imperative that whoever wants to be an artist should get to be one.

Key statistics

According to the Applied survey data, analysed from April 2024-March 2025:

Just 41% of artists regularly earned money from their practice, and 69% cited lack of income as a barrier to their career.

Yet over half of artists lived in London and the South East, some of the most expensive areas to live in the country.

Amidst the rising cost of living, nearly a third of artists had taken on more debt in the last year and nearly 15% had accessed a foodbank

A third of artists had seen an increase in employment outside of their creative practice in the last year, while just over a quarter had taken on work outside of their practice for the first time.

28% of artists did not have enough savings to last them one month, and only 8% had enough to last them one year.

Discrimination is a barrier for artists, in particular on the basis of age (32%), social background (22%), and ethnicity (17%).

Artists attended private school at 3x the rate of the general population, and 92.% attended university.

Ultimately, this report illustrates how financial insecurity, unequal access to creative education, and persistent regional disparities continue to shape – and limit – who is able to comfortably sustain a career as an artist.

These findings underscore the need for policy action:

- to expand access to creative education at all levels;
- to champion the value of the creative sector more broadly; and
- to address precarity and turbulence in self-employment that exist outside of traditional employment formats more generally.

More detailed analysis and recommendations can be found in the full report – [here](#).

To discuss the report further, please contact Esme Trevelyan e.trevelyan@arts.ac.uk.

Artquest

Artquest researches visual artists working conditions, barriers and motivations to develop the professional information, advice and support projects artists need to meet their ambitions. Specialist research and insights data on artists' livelihoods are collected anonymously through Artquest's programmes. This data supports Artquest and its partner organisations to develop their programmes effectively for a more equitable art world.

Since 2001, Artquest has provided free access to robust and trusted information and resources that help artists to build their networks, find collaborators and get feedback on their work. Artquest projects support artists to understand and engage with the art world and develop business models tailored to their circumstances.

Staffed by artists working part-time, around 30 active partnerships, and freelance artists and researchers, Artquest is a free resource for professional artists at any stage in their careers who work in any medium, including those who are self-taught.

Artquest is a public programme of UAL funded by Arts Council England as a national portfolio organisation.

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University of the Arts London (UAL) generates and inspires the creativity the world needs for a better future. Since 1842 our Colleges have been defining creative education. With curiosity, imagination and intent we make work which creates lasting change for people and our planet.

Our academics and practitioners deliver creative education and inspire new ways of thinking through research and innovation. We work with students at every level from pre-degree and short courses to postgraduate and online learning, enabling them to build the careers they want.

As a University we are ranked second in the world for Art and Design. We are formed of 6 Colleges with unique histories and identities; Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Arts, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion and Wimbledon College of Arts. Together, we are a community of makers, thinkers, pioneers and storytellers redesigning the future.

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