

The Issue

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The working-class creatives tackling art-world inequality

Low pay and gatekeeping are among the factors contributing to the erasure of artistic talent in the UK. How can we challenge the status quo?



Photo: © Hyejin Kang

The creative industries in the UK would need to hire 263,200 more working-class people to be as socio-economically diverse as the rest of the country. That was the eye-opening headline of a recent report by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, which also revealed that art is the thirteenth most elite profession in the country, with 62% of artists hailing from privileged backgrounds. It was a reminder of what many people in the sector already knew: that precarious work, low pay, gatekeeping, and closed social networks are all contributing to a massive erasure of artistic talent in the UK. Art has a serious class problem.

Opening up education

Barriers to the arts crop up early in life; most people I spoke to for this article cited education and unequal childhood opportunities as major concerns. Young people from working-class backgrounds are often less able to access cultural activities, less likely to have creative role models, less likely to believe or be told that an artistic career path is open to them. The costs of further study can be prohibitive. As collector James O'Hara, who is from a working-class background, puts it: 'an industry that is so outwardly progressive should be having conversations as to why a massive demographic of students [...] can't afford the tuition fees.' For those who do make it to art school, the culture shock can be profound. 'I felt major imposter syndrome,' recalls London-based artist Seren Metcalfe of her student days. 'Most people went to private school or were already within the art world, whether because their parents were artists, their parents buy art, or they already had connections to galleries. It took me a while to see this as a class thing.'

'There is a wealth of talent out there and so many people just can't get on the ladder through education or networks,' says the activist Neil Griffiths. 'That's such a loss to everyone in society.' In 2011, Griffiths co-founded the charity Arts Emergency with comedian Josie Long in an effort to support people into and through arts education. The organisation pairs young talent from underserved communities with industry mentors to help them flourish in their chosen field, with a wider network of supporters (myself included) offering additional opportunities and ad hoc support. They helped 1,000 young people in 2021, and aim to at least triple that number over the next four years.





Max speaks to his mentor Kev at an Arts Emergency event, Manchester, 2020. Photo: © Charles Leek

Creating communities

Arts Emergency helps service users access influential creative networks that some of their peers grow up with. Just as important are the grassroots networks artists are making for themselves – such as Metcalfe’s Working Class Creatives Database (WCCD). ‘I created the database during my final years at the Slade out of a necessity to find a community,’ Metcalfe explains. ‘There was a small handful of working-class students and probably two or three with a regional accent, which felt quite alienating.’ The volunteer-led platform has been operating since 2020 with three main aims: ‘to provide a platform, create a community, and tackle classism in the arts.’ Anyone who self-defines as a working-class creative can sign up to have their practice listed on the website and access member benefits including weekly newsletters, Zoom meetups and socials, a reading group, critical feedback sessions, and a say in how the community is run. WCCD features hundreds of artists and has a 10.8k following on Instagram, using its visibility to call out art-world elitism.

As Metcalfe was launching the WCCD, curator Beth Hughes was kickstarting the Working Class British Art Network (WCBAN) – a branch of the wider British Art Network dedicated to research, theory, and practice – after realising that ‘there wasn’t much sophistication in the conversation around class and contemporary British art’. Funded by Tate and the Paul Mellon Centre, the network addresses fundamental yet complex questions and topics, including what it means to be a working-class artist, alternative funding models, and the importance of representative creative communities. ‘One thing that came out of our first year was this feeling of working-classness as quite single-narrative,’ notes Hughes. ‘Working-class art could only be about being poor, or about what you *don’t* have.’ Groups

like the WCBAN and WCCN put people back in charge of their own narratives and celebrate their diverse, multifaceted art on its own terms.

Reconfigured funding

Networks alone won't make an artist a living. For the art world to become truly inclusive, it must sort out the issue of artists' pay. 'As a curator, I don't have a job unless artists make art,' argues Hughes, 'but we keep them at the bottom of the pile when it comes to how the art world is funded.' Precarious, low-paid work is often seen as a rite of passage for creative professionals, but for those who lack financial or familial support, it can be an impossibility. 'There is a lot of talk about the glass ceiling,' says Griffiths, 'but there is also a glass floor where people who can afford to work for less or free [...] make it hard for everyone else to make a living wage through their practice.' Second jobs, funding applications, and other admin tasks eat into hours that would otherwise be spent creating art.

Accessible funding can make a world of difference for artists feeling the squeeze. In 2020, Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad – the writers and curators behind radical critical platform The White Pube – announced a series of £500 grants for working-class creatives, funded by Creative Debuts. The grant was originally offered to writers: 'we share criticism on art, games and culture in general, and we have always wished there were more working-class voices in writing,' says de la Puente. But in 2021 the pair widened the criteria to include all creative professionals.

Grant funding often involves lengthy application and reporting procedures, but The White Pube have kept theirs as simple as possible. And significantly, the awards have no strings attached. 'It was important to all of us that the recipients could just take the money and run,' explains de la Puente. 'I've been critical of this new culture of micro grants because they feel like a plaster over the bigger problem of inaccessible arts funding, so the simplicity feels important. I hope it continues for many more years – or at least until this country figures out universal basic income so that more creative people are allowed to spend their time doing what they really want.'

A new class of gallery

Commercial gallery models could also do with a rethink. In 2020, Ellie Pennick – a Northerner living in London – set up Guts Gallery after being forced to turn down a master's degree due to the cost. 'I was on benefits at the time, living above a pub [...] and working in the bar to pay off my rent,' she recalls. She convinced the landlord to let her exhibit art on-site, and grew her gallery from there with the help of 'a working-class business owner and artist, Kevin, from Glasgow [...] who educated me in the business side of it.' (Alongside other hurdles, working-class people are less likely to know someone with experience of running a creative enterprise.)

Pennick has adapted her gallery model to empower artists. Rather than 'representing' them, Guts 'champions' them. Artists and staff collaborate to set the gallery ethos, and a communally agreed Code of Conduct features prominently on the website that promises, among other things, to 'check in with our privilege constantly', pay above minimum wage, support artists with external opportunities, and take measures to prevent burnout. The gallery also takes less than 50% commission on sales – below the industry standard.



Installation shot of 'Buffer', a group show at Guts Gallery, consisting exclusively of recent graduates from arts universities in the UK. Courtesy Eva Herzog Photography. Photo: © Aggie Cherrie

Guts started as an itinerant project, but Pennick opened a permanent space in Hackney recently and has been quick to share the benefits. The gallery office doubles as a project space for collectives and curators, who are also offered logistical support. 'I was like: "We've got four walls around us, I worked in smaller spaces when I started curating, this could really help somebody,'" Pennick explains of the decision. Guts got its big break when the blue-chip gallery Sadie Coles offered its shop as a display space. This was 'a game changer' for Pennick, who is adamant that gallerists 'should pass on their knowledge to people starting out, because they're going to be the ones making the change.' The idea of

competition I just find... just a load of shit really,' she adds. 'I don't know why people do it. It makes more sense to support.'

This belief in skills-sharing and mutual support was shared by everyone I spoke to. Grassroots initiatives are leading the way; the hope now is that the art market's big hitters will follow suit. 'There's a new Cork Street space run by Frieze,' muses the WCBAN's Hughes. 'Imagine if they handed that space over to the Working Class Creatives Database. They've got the real estate and that's what these artists need.'

Collaborative collecting

Can collectors help alter the art-market ethos? O'Hara thinks so. 'It's the people who are spending the money who can make the change,' he points out. 'Spend your money with people who are looking after artists well.' The collector notes that gallery gatekeeping can also exclude budding art buyers. 'I found it really intimidating at first,' he recalls. 'These entities aren't going to improve themselves. It might need working-class gobshites like me to bash the doors in a little bit.' In an effort to make collecting more inclusive, Pennick offers buyers an interest-free payment plan. On a wider scale, the nationwide Own Art scheme works with 300 galleries to offer interest-free credit to collectors on smaller budgets.

For collectors looking to support working-class artists, the advice is clear: relationships beat transactions. 'The consensus is that [a collector] is someone who buys and collects art,' says Sheffield-based painter and poet Conor Rogers. 'You're way more than that. A collector can be a mentor; they can be someone who just turns out for you; they can be someone who puts you in connection with someone else.' The best first step is simply to make contact. 'Before you even get down to buying the work, start to build relationships.'

Getting outside of art-market comfort zones is also important. 'All the main collectors are in London,' says Rogers, 'but there's brilliant work elsewhere around the UK.' He recalls one Bournemouth-based collector who drove to and from Sheffield in a single evening to see his work. 'That, to me, speaks a thousand words.' The White Pube's de la Puente encourages collectors to look beyond traditional galleries and art fairs. 'The majority of working-class artists are showing their art in artist-led spaces or in small art fairs where they have rented out their own booths. For some people, these are not seen as prestigious enough settings.'

For those who do make the effort, the benefits are clear. 'Talk to the artists,' says O'Hara. 'Knowing the person just makes you connect to the work even more.'

A fairer arts ecosystem

In the last couple of years, grassroots creative communities have sprung up that credibly challenge the status quo and put working-class art in the spotlight. But it is up to everyone in the arts ecosystem – including curators, gallerists, critics, and collectors – to consolidate that change. ‘Invest not just in artworks but in artists themselves,’ urges Metcalfe. ‘Many are struggling to materialise ideas, buy resources, or afford studio spaces. Invest in arts charities and initiatives, invest in grants, scholarships and schemes that help artists to create art. Invest outside of London. Invest not just in artworks, but in ideas.’

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