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From "HAND TO MOUTH" *to* BREAD AND ROSES:

an inquiry into the lives of the Artists' Union England membership and the role of contemporary artists' unions in building grassroots *power* in the arts

industria

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This inquiry has been commissioned by Artists' Union England to explore the responses to the union's 2024 membership survey. Artists' Union England is a trade union for visual and applied artists, and artists with a socially engaged practice who are working in England. Launching in 2014, AUE gained its Certificate of Independence (formal status as a trade union) in 2016, and has been a member of the TUC and GFTU since then. AUE started as the idea of three artists, launched with 12 founding members, and as of June 2025 has over 2000 members.

Industria is an artist-run organisation, examining and challenging the current conditions of the 'art world':

Industria is against: *an exploitative 'art world' that requires the precarity of artists and a low-wage, gig economy in order to run.*

Industria is for: *an (art) world that dismantles myths of meritocracy, seeking unconditional dignity and the possibility of creative lives for all.*

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From "Hand to Mouth" to Bread and Roses is a title drawn from the testimony of an AUE member responding to the membership survey, describing conditions of life and work familiar to many artists. Combined with the historic aim of the labour movement for 'bread and roses' for all, it suggests the horizon to which organising together as artists and workers brings us closer.

industria

Artists' Union England

"We live hand to mouth with no safety net."

Artists' Union England member responding to the membership survey

FOREWORD FROM THE AUE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Artists' Union England started as a pipe dream; a dream born out of intense frustration from years of direct, lived experiences of dire working conditions as artists.

It took a long train journey home for three artists – Angela Kennedy, Sally Sheinman and myself – to work up the head of steam we needed to commit to the collective work of starting a trade union for artists in England. We drew strength and practical advice from the Scottish Artists' Union, the Musicians' Union, the University and College Union, and the wider trade union family. The three of us soon became 10, and together we formed the first AUE Executive Committee. We worked behind the scenes to develop our founding document and set up a website so we could launch publicly on 1st May 2014. At the time of launching it still seemed fanciful, doomed to failure, and an impossible hill to climb. But we refused to accept the received wisdom that artists could not unionise.

The fact that we are here, just over a decade later, with a membership of very nearly 2000, as active members of the TUC and GFTU, and with increasing national and international influence, is due to the hard work of the many artists who have served on AUE's National Executive Committee. Some are named in this report, but all are due respect and deep gratitude. Since the beginning, this work on behalf of the union has (ironically) been undertaken voluntarily. Members of the NEC have been motivated purely by the desire to see a sustainable trade union for artists thrive in England; recognising that, initially at least, this work could not be remunerated if the union were to remain financially independent. And whilst we wouldn't be here without the NEC both past and present, we would not be here at all without our members. Due to our ongoing membership growth, we have reached a tipping point where we can transfer the day-to-day work of the union to a growing team of paid staff. This feels like a monumental achievement, one every member of AUE has played a part in.

This report, so carefully put together by Industria, represents a significant milestone in the ongoing fight to build the union, change the cultural landscape in this country and improve artists' working lives. The report lays bare the stark reality of many of our members' financial precarity and the way this overlaps with race, gender, class, disability etc. to create intersecting challenges. We can only confront these realities if we can evidence them, and I would like to thank all of our members who took the time to complete the survey. Your answers provide us with the data we need to fight for our collective futures.

AUE was always intended as a vehicle for artists to drive political, social and cultural change.

AUE exists to build solidarities with other low- or no-paid workers, and to provide a collective umbrella beneath which we can all shelter.

In being a member of AUE, 'I' is changed to 'We'. It is within the space held by this 'We' that together we can take back power and redefine the terms under which we work, are paid, and must live.

AUE exists to create space for multiple forms of collective organising to tackle the shared systemic issues we face. Together, we can confront the wider arts and cultural sector, and change it. We need to because:

— We exist in a system that gives lip service to diversity but expects individual disabled artists to fund their own access support.

— We exist in a sector where, despite artists' freedom of expression supposedly being championed, there is active censorship of artists making work in support of Palestine.

— We exist in a system that will halve the (small) budget for a solo show, halfway through the production period, without apology, and with no acknowledgement or plan to mitigate the financial stress and distress caused.

Each statement above summarises actual situations that AUE members have faced.

And there are many, many more. Simply, these systemic conditions must be challenged. Artists are workers, and artwork is work.

On behalf of the current AUE National Executive Committee, I welcome this report and thank Industria for all that they have done, and all that we will do together.

In solidarity, for change,

Katriona Beales **June 2025**

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"Yes, bread we fight for – but we fight for Roses, too."

Bread and Roses, James Oppenheim, 1915

INTRODUCTION

From "Hand to Mouth" to Bread and Roses follows on from *Structurally F–cked*, an inquiry into artists' pay and conditions in the public sector, which we wrote as Industria and published with a-n in March 2023.

This new report is also written by the two artists who collaborate as Industria, this time in our dual capacity as current members of the National Executive Committee (NEC) of Artists' Union England (AUE).

In *Structurally F–cked* we concluded that organising as artists and workers by unionising is foundational to building any meaningful change in the sector. We have been members of AUE since 2020, when the increasingly precarious working conditions exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic brought about a renewed public awareness of unions and worker organising.

When an existing member of the AUE NEC suggested we put ourselves forward to join the committee because of our work on the report, it felt like an important next step in following through on our conclusions, committing to the work of strengthening the union. We recognised that actively participating in the organising structures of the union and becoming accountable to the AUE membership would be an important way of resisting any attempts to co-opt the cultural capital generated by the report.

We both joined the NEC in October 2023, taking on voluntary roles. Our responsibilities include representing the membership in taking decisions about the direction of the union, as well as helping with the day-to-day running of the union while it grows and becomes able to take on more paid workers. Continuing to build on the findings of the inquiry from within the union is an ongoing part of this work.

This report can be read as an extension of *Structurally F–cked*; focussing on the material conditions faced by artists within the Artists' Union England membership (which can be extrapolated to artists more broadly). Rather than looking at data drawn from individual instances of poor treatment and bad pay for artists within publicly funded projects, *From "Hand to Mouth" to Bread and Roses* is built on data drawn from artists' broader circumstances. This report explores how these circumstances impact artists' ability to make work.

The data used in this report is taken from the 2024 AUE membership survey. The report looks in detail at social class as a basis for organising, artists' overall incomes, the types of work and employment that artists undertake, artists' pensions and savings, and the availability and conditions of housing and studios.

This survey was undertaken in order to build a picture of the most urgent needs of AUE's membership and inform the organisational direction for the union over the next few years. This report presents that picture as the first step in this process, and we hope it will form a basis for mobilising the membership around the collective conditions it sets out. As with *Structurally F–cked*, comments and statements from the membership form a crucial part of the data, making the emotional and material realities behind the bare statistics more vivid throughout.

More widely, by writing and releasing this report under the umbrellas of both Industria and AUE, we hope to reiterate the importance of unionising – and worker organising in general – to artists and engaged readers within the sector. *Structurally F–cked* was followed by a flurry of research and reports from Arts Council England and DACs, gathering and presenting an abundance of new (but consistently dire) data on artists' and freelancers' pay. Rather than let the report sit as an internal tool for the union, adding another published set of depressing data to the pile, we wanted to use this report as an opportunity to mobilise would-be and should-be unionised artists and artworkers, too.

In the sections preceding the findings of the report, we have put together an overview of artists' unions and unions more broadly in the hope that these histories and possibilities can help galvanise artists' and artworkers' relationships with labour organising and its potential. AUE has consistently faced ideological opposition to artists unionising, from both within and outside of the 'art world'. It is our intention to make a clear argument for why unionising as artists is not just important but essential in tackling the deteriorating working conditions in the cultural sector.

The call for workers to fight for both bread (the essentials for living) and roses (the right to expanded necessities like culture and recreation) has echoed through the labour movement.

As we pointed to in *Structurally F–cked,* the art industry constantly demands that artists produce 'roses' for others (i.e. art as luxury goods or experiences for the wealthy) without meeting artists' most basic material needs.

Artists' unions and our relationship to the wider labour movement are essential for transforming our conditions as artists from 'hand to mouth' (as one membership survey respondent described the average artists' project-to-project existence) to 'bread and roses'. To demand bread and roses as artists and organised workers is to demand that the material conditions that make sustainable creativity possible are guaranteed to everyone.

ARTWORK IS WORK: ARTISTS AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

A NOTE ON UNIONS

As this report is written with both AUE members and a broader community of artists in mind, we want to take a few paragraphs to outline what unions are, and what they can do. (If you're already a committed trade unionist and familiar with the structures and aims of union organising, you are more than welcome to skip forward!)

A union is an organisation of people who come together to represent their collective interests, providing a unified voice to collectively bargain for better conditions. Within the labour movement, unions are organisations of workers; but community unions also exist and complement the role of trade unions for those in and out of work. This has included claimants' unions (for those organising around state welfare provision), debtors unions (those fighting for the cancellation of debts), and renters unions (such as Acorn and London Renters' Union) which have become ever more relevant in recent years as the cost of renting has spiralled.

Unions are financed by members' yearly subscription fees or 'subs', in order to ensure that they are answerable to no other financial interests. In the labour movement, a union's decision-making is coordinated by a National Executive Committee elected by the membership, as well as an elected chair or General Secretary. Depending on their scale, unions also have paid members of staff to carry out the day-to-day running of the union, including staff to support workers in negotiations and workplace disputes, organise in new workplaces, and run wider campaigns.

Unions often have branch structures created around workers who either engage in similar types of work, or are located in the same geographical area. Each branch elects volunteer representatives, and together the branch feeds into the democratic decision-making process of the union by putting forward and voting on motions or proposals. These proposed organisational intentions and positions are often then presented at annual conferences where, if they are voted for by the membership, they can influence the direction of the union as a whole moving forward. Smaller unions tend to have annual general meetings open to all members to propose and vote on motions to shape the union's direction.

Many trade unions choose to be part of broader groupings like the Trades Union Congress (in England and Wales), which aims to advance the role of unionising more widely and plays a central role in lobbying the UK government, as well as working with the global trade union movement. In practice, some unions find these added bureaucratic structures to be a restraint on their more militant organising needs. Amid the rise of casualised labour and the gig economy, smaller radical unions like United Voices of the World (UVW) and Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) have been gaining strength outside of these broader groupings. As a smaller, more nimble union of artists within the structure of the TUC, AUE has the opportunity to work against some of its more conservative tendencies.

Ideally – and often – the democracy and engagement enabled by good structures within unions mean that they are much more than the sum of these dry-sounding bureaucratic parts. When unions empower (and are empowered by) their members, they can be spaces of vibrant, worker-led politics that build towards a collective future beyond the immediate necessity of better pay and conditions.

As Eve Livingston writes: 'To think of the union as a distinct, unknowable body that will step in when times get tough is to misunderstand its purpose and existence. No infrastructure, marketing, elected representative or strike means anything without the strength in numbers of a united workforce who have made a commitment to one another. We, standing together, have the power to influence what the union believes, how it behaves, if and when it acts, and whether it wins. A union is a dynamic, living, breathing pact that only exists as its members.'[1]

At their best, unions are not services, but vectors of organising and power from the bottom up. For a closer read and listen on organising within unions, we recommend:

[1] Eve Livingston, *Make Bosses Pay: Why We Need Unions* (Pluto Press, 2021), 15.

Ian Allinson, *Workers Can Win: A guide to organising at work* (Pluto Press, 2022)

Eve Livingston, *Make Bosses Pay: Why We Need Unions* (Pluto Press, 2021)

Notes From Below, Workers Enquiry, season 1 episode 10, "Syndicalism and the New Limits of Trade Unions", 28 March 2025, https://notesfrombelow.org/article/workers-inquiry-our-new-podcast

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ARTISTS AND UNIONS

"Whether in the artisan villages of Ancient Egypt or in front of New York's Guggenheim Museum as workers rallied for fair contracts in April [2024], visual culture has recorded one constant truth: artists have always been on the picket line." [2]

[2] Sarah E. Bond, "The Ancient Art of the Labor Strike", *Hyperallergic*, September 1, 2024, https://hyperallergic.com/946991/the-ancient-art-of-the-labor-strike/.

In England, records of early union activity begin in the 1700s, and worker organising gathered in scale and urgency as capitalism took hold throughout the Industrial Revolution, despite unionising effectively being made illegal between 1800 and 1824.[3] In the UK, union density peaked at 52% in 1979,[4] before going into rapid decline as the effects of Margaret Thatcher's union busting took effect. The anti-union laws put in place under her leadership were maintained by New

[3] "Early Unions", Tolpuddle Martyrs, accessed November 13, 2024, https://www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk/history/early-unions#:~:text=There%20are%20limited%20records%20of,a%20Bristol%20branch%20in%201782.

[4] "A Stronger Voice for Workers", TUC, accessed November 13, 2024, https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/Astrongervoiceforworkers.pdf.

Labour and tightened further by subsequent Conservative governments.[5] By 2023, just 22.4% of employees in the United Kingdom were members of a trade union.[6]

[5] Karl Hansen, "How the Tories Tried to Make Strikes Impossible", *Tribune*, August 18, 2022, https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/08/thatcher-trade-unions-strike-industrial-action-solidarity-conservatives.

[6] Trade Union Membership, UK 1995-2023: Statistical Bulletin", *Department for Business & Trade*, May 29, 2024, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/665db15a0c8f88e868d334b8/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995_to_2023_Statistical_Bulletin.pdf

Since the 1970s, the UK economy has undergone a rapid de-industrialisation and shift towards a service-based economy, with employment in manufacturing dropping from 38.1% in 1973 to just 8.9% by 2018. During the same period, employment in the service sector leapt from 54.4% to 80.2%.[7] This process – coupled with the sharp rise of the gig economy – has radically changed the capitalist landscape in which unions now intervene, and in turn the kinds of unions workers now need.

[7] Chris McLachlan, "Deindustrialisation and Decline", *Notes from Below*, October 27, 2018, https://notesfrombelow.org/article/deindustrialisation-and-decline.

Straddling the peak of unionised labour and the beginnings of its decline under Thatcher, an Artists' Union (the AU) was set up in 1972 with an aim to become a member of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). However it did not have sufficient membership to do so by the time it disbanded in 1984. The first chair of the union was Mary Kelly, with Gustav Metzger as vice-chair. Situating the union within labour organising at the time, the AU's first bulletin included a quote from trade unionist Mike Cooley (who was involved in the visionary Lucas Plan in 1976)[8] congratulating the union on its formation:

[8] Jamie Medwell, "The Lucas Plan Was a Workers Alternative to Neoliberalism", *Tribune*, March 7, 2022, https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/03/lucas-aerospace-plan-1976-socially-useful-work-green-new-deal-manufacturing.

'I welcome the formation of the Artists' Union as another important ally for the T.U. [Trade Union] movement and the working class as a whole. The establishment of this Union is yet another sign of the growing awareness of white collar workers of the need to engage in class struggle. I wish them every success in the inevitable battles in which they will have to engage.' [9]

[9] "Artists' Union Newsletter", Tate, accessed November 13, 2024, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/items/tga-201020-8-94/atkinson-artists-union-newsletter-no-1/3.

Campaign documents and organising work carried out by the union made this commitment clear, with members organising alongside workers striking at a thermometer factory and working with the night cleaners' campaign. They also tackled the de-politicisation of the arts from within; lobbying what was then the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) and signing up new members outside an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, which functioned as the public face of ACGB, like union reps leafleting the factory gates.

From 1973-5, the Women's Workshop, a feminist group within the Artists' Union, worked on a research-project-as-artwork titled *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973–1975*. Presented as an installation of black-and-white photographs, audiotapes, charts, film, and text panels (and recently re-shown as part of *Women in Revolt* at Tate Britain) the work by Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, and Mary Kelly was part of a broader effort to make connections with unionised women in other industries. Representing the working conditions in a metal box factory in Bermondsey where members of Kay Hunt's family worked, the installation draws implicit parallels and distinctions between artistic and industrial labour, at a moment when the dematerialisation of the art object was in full swing and rapid deindustrialisation was on the horizon.

By putting these things into proximity, Harrison, Hunt, and Kelly's work marks the contradictory, entangled relationships between artwork and work of other kinds, including the 'labour of love' of reproductive labour. It hints at the ways artmaking, labour, and unionisation overlap and engage with whole histories of work – paid and unpaid – and its shifting structures and social relations.

Following the period in which the AU and its Women's Workshop was active, a rapid shift towards more 'flexible' and atomised roles took place in response to the enforced decline in manual labour and decreasing union density. As Kuba Szreder has identified, this process was encouraged by 'neoliberal ideologues' who now 'frequently present artists as role models of entrepreneurialism in a flexible labour market'.[10]

[10] Kuba Szreder, *The ABC of the Projectariat* (Manchester University Press, 2021), 89.

The mythically flexible figure of the artist has been wielded as an ideological weapon, assisting in the ongoing presentation of zero-hours contracts and platform capitalism as 'entrepreneurial' and somehow liberating. This deployment of the artist as a model for casualised labour highlights the urgency of restoring and expanding the collectivised understanding of artists as part of the labour movement.

This is not a new project, but it is one that has been persistently hampered by the dominant idea of the lone artist genius. Despite this, if we follow the histories of unionised artists, we can choose to be the labour movement descendants of the Féderation des Artistes of the Paris Commune, who sought for art to become part of communal luxury for all; the Artists' Union in the US, which formed in response to the Great Depression; and the artists of the AU, who sought 'a reorientation of the

arts away from bourgeois institutions such as museums and commercial galleries, and a move towards "identifying our aims ultimately with the working class movement as a whole."[11]

[11] Kirsten Forkert, "Artists and the Labour Movement", in: British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade, eds. Laurel Forster and Sue Harper (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010) 58.

THE FIRST DECADE OF ARTISTS' UNION ENGLAND

After the AU disbanded, the UK went without an artists' union for 17 years, until the Scottish Artists' Union formed in 2001. Artists in England would have to wait until 2014, when artists Angela Kennedy, Katriona Beales, and Sally Sheinman, formed the first National Executive Committee and Artists' Union England was born. Other founding members included Theresa Easton, Chris Cudlip, Vanessa Maurice-Williams, Hayley Hare, Margareta Kern, Mary Vettise, Bridget Harvey, Donna Cheshire, and Linda Sgoluppi.

AUE was set up after four years of austerity under the Tory-Lib Dem coalition government, when the decimation of public services and the dismantling of the remainder of the social safety net was well underway. Artists' lives were being impoverished along with everyone else's, and cuts to public arts funding through Arts Council England (ACE) and the slashing of local council budgets meant less paid work for artists in the public realm. As Angela Kennedy, a founding member of AUE, described in 2018; directors and organisations parroted the language of austerity and accepted its terms: 'the wider "art world", instead of arguing the case for artists and their important role in society, took up the vocabulary of: "resilience", "making do" or volunteering – which usually means doing things for less or for free. The terminology of 'the market rules', was absorbed; reacting with fear and accepting that philosophy, rather than questioning or resisting it'.[12]

[12] Angela Kennedy, "Artists' Union England – A New Trade Union", *Cuts #8*, (University of Leicester, 2018), 3.

Less public money also created a vacuum filled increasingly by private donors; making arts institutions and organisations more and more answerable to these multiplying 'stakeholders' instead of their publics and workers. This reduced accountability and democracy in the infamously opaque art sector even further. Whilst organisations including a-n, DACs, and CVAN advocated on behalf of artists in the gap between the folding of the AU and the founding of AUE, the need for a structure for artists in England to organise democratically against these rapidly worsening conditions remained clear.

From the outset, AUE aimed to engage in worker and community organising beyond the art sector. The AUE banner made by Pandora Vaughan (which has made a regular appearance in the trade union bloc on the Palestine solidarity marches in London since October 2023) was created specifically for the Anti-Austerity Assembly, which took place in June 2015 in response to the election of David Cameron's majority government. The Welfare Reform Act in 2012 sought to transition Working Tax credits into the Universal Credit system, making it next to impossible for artists to claim benefits to supplement their low and unstable self-employed wages in the process. As the policy was pushed forward in 2015, Scottish Artists Union and AUE jointly campaigned against it.[13] AUE also introduced rates of pay guidelines for the first time that year, aiming to set an industry standard for artists' day rates in England and enable collective bargaining to help enforce them with more vigour as membership increases.

Crucially, in 2016, AUE gained its Certification of Independence to enable it to join the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). This meant AUE had met the unfulfilled aim of the original Artists' Union in joining the TUC as a way to engage artists in the broader labour movement.[14] For AUE, this has enabled the union to begin building lines of solidarity with fellow workers facing casualisation, precarity, exploitative self-employment, gig economy conditions (and now a growing reliance on AI systems), whilst enabling us to break down perceptions of cultural elitism within the wider trade union movement.

[13] The joint statement put out by SAU and AUE in 2015 is available https://drive.google.com/file/d/187-rh8zXP-8YGw2eX47Pn1L9shGOkkbG/view

[14] The development was celebrated with a parliamentary launch at the House of Commons, attended by Gustav Metzger, Margaret Harrison and other members of the original Artists' Union.

As a result of the first motion AUE passed at the 2017 TUC (presented by current NEC member Martin Sundram), affiliated unions committed to spending 1% of their building and renovation budgets to support living artists by buying and commissioning art.[15] In 2019, AUE proposed Motion 75 supporting Palestinian rights to self-determination, which surpassed and extended the TUC's existing position. Putting motions emphasising wider social justice issues to the TUC and foregrounding them within the broader labour movement is a crucial way that small and agile unions like AUE can intervene in its structures. Our current Co-Chairs Zita Holbourne and Loraine Monk have also sat on TUC Equalities committees including the Race Relations Committee and the Women's Committee, as well as sitting as Observers at the TUC Council.

[15] Motion Passed at TUC 2017, Artists' Union England, accessed May 22, 2025, https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/motion-passed-at-tuc-2017/.

Outside the trade union movement, AUE has consistently engaged with and lobbied various art sector bodies and organisations, focussing on immediate issues around artists' pay as well as broader issues of transparency and cultural democracy. Through the Good Practice Charter, launched in 2020, AUE initiated a way for arts organisations to commit to standards of fair pay and fair treatment of artists set by the union.[16] During recent meetings with senior Arts Council England figures, AUE has consistently called for greater scrutiny of funded organisations' practices around artists' fees. AUE has also intervened on broader issues at ACE; contesting Elisabeth Murdoch's appointment to its board in 2018,[17] as well as ACE's politically motivated update to its guidance around reputational risk[18] (apparently formulated to increase self-censorship around Palestine amongst publicly funded arts organisations).[19] Over the last decade, AUE has also continued to represent individual artists by taking on casework, calling out organisations around broken contracts, delayed payments and exploitative conditions. Our union is now at a critical juncture in its growth: increased membership to around 2000 members (at the time of writing) has empowered the union to be able to take on its first members of paid staff, scaling up the capacity and public-facing profile of what has so far been an entirely volunteer-run operation. Thanks to our growing membership, we are in a position to have our first ever dedicated caseworker starting as a paid organiser in June 2025.

[16] "Good Practice Charter", Artists' Union England, accessed May 22, 2025, https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/good-practice-charter/.

[17] "Petition calls for reversal of Elisabeth Murdoch's ACE national council appointment", a-n, accessed May 22, 2025, https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/petition-calls-reversal-elisabeth-murdochs-ace-national-council-appointment/.

[18] "Letter to ACE re. NPO-Relationship Framework updates", Artists' Union England, accessed May 22, 2025, https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Letter-to-ACE-re-NPO-Relationship-Framework-updates-February-2024.pdf

[19] "Revealed: ACE risk guidelines formulated in relation to Israel-Gaza", Equity, accessed May 22, 2025, https://www.equity.org.uk/news/2024/revealed-ace-risk-guidelines-formulated-in-relation-to-israel-gaza.

In comparison with more established creative unions such as the Musicians' Union (founded in 1893) and Equity (founded in 1930), AUE is a 'baby' union. Every artist that joins AUE helps to grow its capacity and reinforce our recommended rates of pay as a process of collective bargaining for artists. This early juncture in AUE's growth also means that while the union is small, it is also nimble. Members who choose to engage actively in the union through actions such as submitting proposals to the AGM, setting up and participating in branches or member networks, and organising for AUE members to join protests, can directly shape the structures and agenda of the union in the process. Without the thoroughly embedded bureaucratic structures already in place in larger and older unions, participation in its structure and direction are much closer at hand.

WHY SHOULD ARTISTS UNIONISE?

"Solidarity, being able to be a part of a union that can represent artists and act quickly to address issues of concern to us. Being a newer, smaller union allows us to reinvent the wheel and avoid some of the hierarchy and bureaucratic mistakes of larger more established unions."

"Solidarity with other cultural workers, the peace of mind that membership of a trade union fighting to improve our pay and working conditions affords and having an active voice within the arts industry at large that is independent of those that employ and engage us, is vital."

"The union's collective voice means I don't sound like I'm pulling numbers or policies out of my head when negotiating contracts."

"Being supported in a case if badly treated by an org or institution, having industry experience and knowledge to draw from. My current experience being supported by AUE in a case against ACE has been amazing."

"Community, discovering support I didn't know was available, getting to feel like I have a voice without fearing that I will lose employment offers. Honestly I swear that just adding that I'm an AUE member to my invoices guarantees that I'm more likely to get paid on time."

"Feels good to have support behind me as being an artist can often feel quite lonely and anxiety-inducing. If I don't have work and a community then what will I do??"

"Feeling part of a push for solidarity between artists and the broader labour movement."

"Collective action and bargaining is so important for all workers!"

For artists less familiar with the structures and impetus behind union organising, the sections on unions, artists and the labour movement, and the history of AUE will hopefully have started to clarify some of the distinctions between organisations that seek to shape policy 'on behalf of' artists, and unions and labour organising which are initiated by artists themselves. For the artists responding to the membership survey, the most valuable thing about being part of an artists' union was overwhelmingly cited as 'solidarity' – a principle which sets unions apart from other organisations.

True representation demands a union: artists organising together as workers within democratic decision-making structures that enable members actively to decide the union's direction, speaking directly to power rather than being spoken for. Whilst artists may be represented on the boards and in the networks of organisations like DACs, a-n and CVAN, they are not elected by a body of artist-members to represent artists more broadly.

Funding streams from sources outside of members' subs, such as patrons, Arts Council funding, organisational memberships, and other sources, also complicates the picture of accountability. This year, for example, all of these organisations signed a Visual Arts Manifesto[20] organised by DACs, which called on the new government to enact various changes to 'create a more sustainable visual arts sector'. While many of the points this manifesto made were valuable, AUE elected not to sign it, primarily because it called on the government to incentivise arts philanthropy though tax breaks to 'diversify arts funding'. Clearly, we need much more democratic oversight of arts funding, not less. Because we are funded solely by our members' subs, AUE is independent, leaving us free to stridently critique and diverge from these positions.

[20] Visual Arts organisations unite to call next Government to action", DACs, accessed November 13, 2024, https://www.DACs.org.uk/news-events/visual-arts-organisations-call-next-government-to-action.

Ceding the public realm to greater levels of private funding entrenches unaccountable, philanthropic power over the arts, keeping them in the hands of an elite rather than the public. We have seen the effects of this in action during the last 20 months of Israel's genocide in Palestine, as philanthropists have wielded their financial power to censor speech and action by artists and artworkers in support of the Palestinian people. Philanthropy is rarely simply a generous gesture; it buys control and cultural capital, including places on the boards and committees that shape our cultural institutions. Offering tax breaks in exchange effectively redirects public finances according to the whims of the wealthy, allowing them to selectively fund their preferred types of art and institutions

while being praised for their generosity, instead of simply paying their (inadequate) taxes to meet our collective needs.

Organising democratically as artists within a union means we are organising on the broader terms of our needs as a class of *workers* and can work to re-organise the arts against the terms of this elite. It means we are able to organise around the specifics of our precarious and unequal sector whilst recognising that it is not *uniquely* precarious and unequal. When we organise on these terms, we are able to sidestep the exceptionalism and individualism which pervades the art sector. We become better able to recognise our individual struggles within the 'art world' as effects of the same structures of inequality that shape the world more broadly, and to take collective and organised aim at their roots.

The pressures of our sector and neoliberal logics at large, however, often work to convince artists that unionising is a lost cause. Writing as an early member of AUE for *The Double Negative*, Richard Whitby neatly summarises one of the reflexive obstructions to unionising that artists often seem to internalise: 'A culture of frantic activity [...] sometimes convinces people (myself included) that they do not have time for political engagement – every spare minute out of paid work should be invested in the studio. It needn't be this way.'[21]

[21] Richard Whitby, "Why I Joined The New Artists' Union", The Double Negative, December 12, 2014, http://www.thedoublenegative.co.uk/2014/12/why-i-joined-the-new-artists-union/.

The recently published report on Creative and Cultural Freelancers commissioned by ACE offers some helpful contextual data on unionising (or lack thereof) amongst visual artists and practitioners of other art forms that fall within ACE's remit. 24.9% of visual artists who responded to the survey were members of a union, compared with 38.7% of practitioners in dance, 39.5% in combined arts, 48.2% in literature, 53.2% in theatre, and 54.2% in music.

The report also summarises the reasons respondents gave for not joining a union, citing the most commonly given reasons as being either that they were 'unaware of unions that served freelancers in the sector' or because 'they felt they were ineffective.' Artists are effectively groomed against collective organising. Our individualised status as artists is often combined with a sense of proximity to collectors, directors, and gatekeepers (encouraged by a porosity between work and socialising within the sector). This builds a sense that we are working in a terrain where worker organising would not be 'appropriate', and it would be 'proper' to 'ask nicely' for change behind closed doors instead.

Organising as artists and workers means we can push back against this immobilising over-association with those with structural power in the 'art world.' Rather than relying on interpersonal relationships and goodwill within a sector that is fundamentally structured around underpaying artists and artworkers, we have to take things into our own hands, and harness the power of collective organising.

Anecdotally, we have heard some artists being squeamish about the idea of unionising; feeling that others with more money and time should be advocating on their behalf, or expressing reservations about straining interpersonal relationships by appearing too 'militant.' Unionising is somehow framed as both 'getting your hands dirty' and a luxury that time and cash-poor artists can't afford. To put it glibly, suggesting that artists are 'too good' for the tactics that won the beleaguered workers of the industrial revolution weekends and the eight-hour working day, feels astonishingly out of touch.

We as artists sit on a knife edge: on one hand, we are individualised 'role models of entrepreneurialism' under neoliberalism, and on the other, what we do overflows the construction of 'work' under capitalism (even as we continue to demand a fair wage). This overflowing – where art goes beyond what can be neatly defined and exploited for profit – is where art and artists retain liberatory potential. In both belonging to and transcending work as a category, art still carries a potential to explode the idea of waged work altogether. At its best and most radical, worker organising aims well beyond negotiating better pay and conditions to building a world that liberates us all from labouring for a wage. A world where our material needs are met unconditionally is a world where art and artists can thrive. Organising collectively against the grain of the individualised entrepreneurial logic we are encouraged to adopt is a step towards that world. Unionising as artists is a step towards liberation.

THE AUE MEMBERSHIP SURVEY DATA

THE METHOD

This inquiry draws on data collected through a survey of Artists' Union England members. At the AUE Annual General Meeting (AGM) in 2023, a proposal was moved by founding AUE member and current NEC member Katriona Beales:

'This AGM instructs the executive to survey the membership in order to understand the challenges facing us all more fully; to be able to represent the union better in strategic decision making; to be in touch with the wider membership's concerns and to highlight potential areas to campaign on.'

The proposal was passed by the membership, and so formed an important part of the union's work for 2024.

We worked with Katriona to write the initial set of survey questions in our capacity as members of the current AUE NEC; bringing together her experience of being part of the union for over a decade and our insights from organising the Artist Leaks survey and using the data gathered to write *Structurally F–cked*. The AUE membership survey was further shaped by the remaining members of the AUE NEC with their combined expertise as trade unionists and artists.

Structurally F–cked focussed on artists' specific experiences of pay and working conditions in the public sector, and relied on qualitative data to build a picture of how these impact, and are impacted by, artists' broader circumstances. The AUE membership survey was designed to expand on this, gathering more concrete quantitative data to make visible the material conditions faced by artists in our union.

The survey was circulated to the union's 1453 members (at the time of sending) between 8 May and 12 June 2024. The union received 168 responses, representing 11.6% of the membership.

While the data in *Structurally F–cked* came from a self-selecting pool and acted as a snapshot of artists working in the public art sector in the UK, the AUE Membership survey data is implicitly more specific in its remit and representation of unionised artists in England. We will draw on this distinction throughout our analysis of the data, keeping a bi-focal view of our findings in relation to the particular context of the union, as well as artists' living and working conditions more broadly.

THE QUESTIONS

The survey consisted of 31 questions, some of which gathered more detail through multiple sub-questions, plus a further optional section on equalities. A link to the full set of questions is included in Appendix 1.

After an initial set of questions about the artist member and their practice, the survey broadly covered the following categories:

— ***Housing***
— ***Studio / workspace***
— ***Overall income and income from artistic practice***
— ***Working conditions as an artist across the public and private sector***
— ***The impacts of austerity, the cost of living crisis, and Covid-19***
— ***Pensions***
— ***Members' positive and negative experiences of working with galleries and organisations***
— ***What members need from the union***
— ***Discrimination in the workplace***

These questions were shaped in recognition of our main takeaway from writing *Structurally F–cked*: that the most vigorous roots of the art sector's glaring inequities stem from a feedback loop set up by its entrenched position within an economy dictated by the accumulation of capital by a few at the expense of the majority.

By including sections focussing on housing, pensions and the effects of austerity in the questionnaire, the responses to the survey have provided us with the material to look more closely at artists' encounters with failing social safety nets and accelerating inequality.

This focus aligns the needs of artists with those of other precarious workers, the wider labour movement, as well as the demands of community unions; pointing to the coalitions which AUE can build on to improve the lives of artists in solidarity with others, and which all artists should keep in view as they struggle for greater stability.

THE FINDINGS

① Artists' Union England is made up of artists at the *sharp end* of capitalism

The broader collision of artistic precarity with structural pressures around race, disability, gender and caring responsibilities was covered in detail in *Structurally F–cked*, drawing on the painful testimonies submitted to the *Artist Leaks* survey we carried out as Industria.[22] Data from the recent DACs *UK Visual Artists (2024)* survey also illuminates glaring pay gaps for artists who are disabled (70%), artists from 'less privileged socio-economic backgrounds' (40%) and artists who are women (40%).[23]

[22] Industria, *Structurally F-cked* (a-n, 2023), 47–53, https://www.we-industria.org/structurally-f-cked

[23] "UK Visual Artists (2024) A survey of earnings and contracts", DACs, accessed February 19, 2025, https://www.dacs.org.uk/news-events/visual-arts-organisations-call-next-government-to-action. https://cdn.dacs.org.uk/uploads/documents/UK-Visual-Artists_A-survey-of-earnings-and-contracts.pdf?v=1732286727.

The already precarious lives of artists are further destabilised by the material effects of racism, sexism, and ableism in a society defined by capital and class. The data from the AUE membership survey suggests some of the ways our members' lives (as artists and trade unionists) might meet with the sharpest points of capitalism.

Gender, race and unionising

Of the AUE members who responded to the survey:

66.5% identified as female and just 22.7% as male

21.4% indicated they were from the Global Majority, while data from the 2016 Arts Council England Livelihoods of Visual Artists Survey suggests that 6.5% of artists are 'BAME'

6% identified as non-binary and 4% identified as trans

Given that our collective imagination is shaped by culturally and historically maintained biases, the 'average' trade unionist and the 'average' artist that would spring to mind, if we were asked to imagine each of them, might well be both white and male. Whilst contemporary union organising (and art making) engages a much broader coalition than might be suggested by these imagined figures, they persist as the products of gendered and racialised assumptions about 'real' work, workers, and artistic genius.

Unions are structures built within a racist and sexist society, and so racism and sexism have inflected (and continue to inflect) organising within them. Racism permeating from above has a long history of dividing workers and tainting the labour movement, especially during the postwar period as fears were whipped up over immigrant labour. [24]

In terms of gender, a long association of women with unwaged social reproduction (i.e. housework and raising children) has been used to hold them in opposition to 'the "real" working class.' Where this has been 'associated with traditional masculinity', it has been used to exclude women

[24] This history has included racism within trade union bureaucracies and broader structures like the TUC: "Race and trade unions", Britain at Work, accessed April 3, 2025, http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork/narrativedisplay.

from trade unions, 'seen by many as having been created by "real workers" (men), and as being their exclusive property.'[25] The significant number of AUE members who identified as trans and non-binary emphasises the double necessity of exploding gendered binaries in our movement, resisting essentialising transphobic policy and rhetoric. At the time of writing in June 2025, the Supreme Court has recently issued the harmful ruling that trans women are not included as women under the Equalities Act. Many unions, including AUE, have issued statements committing to push back against this ruling.

[25] Malone, "Who Is Not Here? Who Is Quiet? Who Is Unhappy?", *New Socialist*, September 30, 2023, https://newsocialist.org.uk/sexism-trade-unions/.

Strong resistance (usually from rank and file union members at the grassroots) and work against the conservative tendencies within bureaucratic structures has meant that although sexism and racism persist, the labour movement today is strengthened by significant proportions of marginalised workers. Since the early 2000s, women have overtaken men in terms of union membership. 2.9 million men are members of trade unions, compared with 3.5 million women as of 2023.[26] The highest union density in the UK is now amongst Black/Black British people (at 29%), with membership amongst Black/Black British women at 30.3%.[27] Following these trends, the AUE data suggests that union density is higher amongst artists from the Global Majority, artists who are women, and trans and non-binary artists – suggesting that those at the sharp end of racism, sexism, and transphobia may value the protections of unionising more strongly.

[26] Mary Davis, "Why trade unions need women and why women need collective self-organisation", *Morning Star*, September 9, 2024, https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/why-trade-unions-need-women-and-why-women-need-collective-self-organisation.

[27] "TUC Equality Audit 2022", TUC, accessed April 3, 2025, https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/equality/tuc-equality-audit/EqualityAudit2022?page=2%3D.

Of the AUE members who responded to the survey:

10.4% of those who experienced discrimination at work highlighted that this was on the basis of their race

11.9% of those who said they had experienced workplace discrimination as an artist said that this was related to pregnancy or maternity pay

70.3% of those who said that they had caring responsibilities identified as women

At their best, the organising structures built through unionising are crucial ways to work against racism, sexism, and their material effects in the workplace and beyond. Higher union membership amongst artists and other workers who are dispossessed on the basis of race and gender can be read as a recognition of what is at stake under 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (per bell hooks), and the potential of worker organising to push back against it.

Disabled artists facing discrimination

Of the AUE members who responded to the survey:

36.4% indicated that they were disabled, compared with 24% of the wider working-age population [28]

29% of those who had faced discrimination in the workplace reported that this was on the basis of disability

[28] Andy Powell, "Disabled people in employment", House of Commons Library, March 18, 2024, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7540/.

The survey responses indicate that many AUE members are disabled and likely to be structurally disadvantaged to some degree by an ableist, capitalist society that measures value in terms of ability to work and generate profit. This relationship between disability, work, 'productive' and 'unproductive' labour means that disability justice is of central importance to any labour movement, and disabled workers are also more likely to become union members.[29]

[29] "TUC Equality Audit 2022", TUC.

According to data from DACs, disabled artists earn 70% less than non-disabled artists. At the time of writing, the Government has recently published a Spring Budget which proposes deep cuts to disability benefits already stripped back by over a decade of austerity. An estimated 800,000 to 1.2 million people are set to lose their Personal Independent Payments

(PIP), which are supposed to address *some* of the additional financial costs of being disabled. These cruel proposals are being accompanied by deeply harmful rhetoric suggesting that PIP is a 'clear financial incentive to define yourself as incapable of work'.[30]

[30] Jessica Elgot, "Deep cuts, Pip and 'right to try' work: the key changes in UK benefits overhaul", *The Guardian*, March 18, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/mar/18/key-changes-uk-benefits-cuts-disability-pip-labour

The proportion of respondents indicating that they are disabled, combined with the yawning pay gap for disabled artists, and a renewed assault on disabled people by the current government, means that disability justice is of particular significance to our union and our ongoing organising against austerity.

Younger artists and workers are underunionised and underprotected

Of the AUE members who responded to the survey:

Just 15.7% were aged under 34

The median age for AUE members was between 45 - 54

Younger workers are also more exposed to the accelerating effects of capitalism, not only because they are starting out, but also because the 'social contract' supposedly cemented by the post-war settlement has utterly collapsed. Work has become increasingly unstable, and the basics of stable housing and being able to cover your bills are moving ever further out of reach for the majority of society.

As we have seen, workers at the sharp end of capitalism due to sexism, racism, and ableism are statistically more likely to have joined a union. According to the TUC, however, union membership among younger workers is currently significantly lower, leading to a 'demographic cliff-edge'.[31] A political climate which has reduced rates of unionising and weakened the labour movement means significant work needs to be done to introduce younger workers, including artists, to unions and union organising. Living their entire lives in the shadow of Thatcherism (and its revenant variations in the years since) has meant that atomised younger workers also have less cultural 'muscle memory' of collective organising.

[31] "Reaching young workers", TUC, accessed February 2, 2025, https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/equality/tuc-equality-audit/EqualityAudit2022?page=2%3D. https://www.tuc.org.uk/reaching-young-workers.

According to the survey data, AUE's membership fits into this trend of union membership skewing older. To push back against the current conditions of the 'art world' and work towards more vibrant political horizons on a wider scale, we need to build a thriving union with a strong membership of all ages. We hope that this report can play a small part in this effort, by introducing the union and the power of worker organising more broadly to artists in our own age group and below.

Our union is a coalition of working class artists and a broader artist-precariat

Class can be slippery to define meaningfully and usefully. In the arts in particular, the water is muddied further by the distinctions and overlaps between *actual* capital and cultural capital,[32] as well as arguments about whether art has been fully 'subsumed' by capitalism or not.[33] Nevertheless, in order to get an insight into how the AUE membership thinks about their relationship to class, we asked members responding to the survey to give us a self-assessed indication of their class position, based on both their income in the present and their family background.

[32] These overlaps and distinctions are usefully unpicked in this conversation between Juliet Jacques and Nathalie Olah: https://soundcloud.com/suite-212/the-suite-212-sessions-no-10-nathalie-olah?in=suite-212/sets/the-suite-212-sessions.

[33] "Art And Value, Reviewed By Nizan Shaked", Historical Materialism, accessed May 22, 2025, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/art-and-value-reviewed-by-nizan-shaked/.

Tracking the timeline of accelerating neoliberal ideology, and the accompanying decimation of the welfare state, recent reports have indicated worrying drops in working class representation in the arts over the last five decades; apparently halving since the 1970s.[34] In 2018, *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries* suggested that the proportion of practitioners of music, performing, and visual arts from working class backgrounds was just 18.2%, compared with a third of the broader population.[35]

[34] Orion Brook, Andrew Miles, Dave O'Brien & Mark Taylor, "Social Mobility and 'Openness' in Creative Occupations since the 1970s", *Sociology*, 57(4), 2023, 789-810, https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221129953.

[35] "Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries", Create London, accessed October 16, 2024, https://createlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-

Of the AUE members who responded to the survey:

53.4% identified themselves as working class
46.6% identified themselves to be middle class
0% identified themselves as upper class

Artists are often described socioeconomically as 'modern professionals', along with teachers, lecturers and police officers (at sergeant level and above). This categorisation is also made by Arts Council England in their equalities monitoring forms, placing precarious freelancers alongside public sector employees, and implying that artists are middle class by default. As we will see, the median artist and AUE member earns under £15,000 a year from all types of work, revealing this categorisation to be an oversimplification based on assumptions about education and income that don't neatly stack up against contemporary reality.

AUE members clearly strongly identify with being working class. Considering both the cold reality of the low wages that characterise most artists' lives and the historic aims of the labour movement to advance working class struggle, it is unsurprising that such a broad section of the membership of a union for artists aligns themselves with this class position. Whilst some theorists continue to balk at artists being categorised as workers, or indeed working class, we think it is most productive to understand both of these categorisations as a statement of solidarity and intent.

In the context of unionising and organising as artists, instead of drawing clear boundaries around a 'pre-existing empirical group classified as "the working class"', as Gavin Mueller puts it, we can instead 'look for the struggles themselves: the actual things that people are doing [...] to compose and organise themselves in struggle.'[36] This reading of 'class struggle' allows us to swerve more authentocratic distinctions between the working and middle classes and build a collective of AUE members as class comrades against a society and art system that keeps the overlapping artist precariat and working classes unstable and disenfranchised.

[36] Gavin Mueller, "Breaking Things at Work", *Notes From Below*, December 10, 2020, https://notesfrombelow.org/article/breaking-things-work.

Within the comradeship and collectivity generated by this perspective, of course, it is crucial that we remain alive to the varied struggles of our membership. Factors including generational difference (from the steady erosion of state support including free higher education, social housing, and welfare over the last half-century, to the accelerating commodification of housing), family wealth and stability, racialisation, disability, gender, caring responsibilities, and geographic location all mark and differentiate the severity of AUE members' experiences of class and inequality; impacting their ability to keep working as artists.

② Artists and Artists' Union England members are locked into *low incomes* under the current system

The category of 'artist' is caught between two mythologies. On the one hand, artwork is designated (along with other types of un- and under-waged work, including parenting and care work) as a 'labour of love'.[37] This dynamic is compounded by the 'romantic mythos' of the 'poor artist'.[38] On the other hand, the shape of most artists' lives is obscured from public view by a media-generated figure, composited from the tabloid attention contemporary art received in the heyday of the YBA generation. This is an image of the artist as thoroughly detached from reality, producing work 'a five year old could have made' in exchange for celebrity status and vast sums of money.

[37] Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* (Bold Type Books, 2021), 152.

[38] Szreder, The ABC of the Projectariat, 180.

Sustaining these interconnected myths shapes both the perception and reality of living and working as an artist; squeezing artists' incomes by

encouraging exploitation and self-exploitation, and discouraging artists' understanding of themselves as workers. This breaks potential lines of class solidarity by projecting a wholly unrealistic representation of the majority of artists' working lives and obscuring their unmet material needs.

The 'art pyramid': how the art system is stacked against artists

Whilst the archetypes of the tortured artist and the wealthy art-market celebrity are unrepresentative of the desires and actualities of the median artist, they function as effective ideological and disciplinary tools and have real roots in what Kuba Szreder terms the 'art pyramid' as it actually exists. Szreder draws on Gregory Sholette's analysis of the way in which the system of contemporary art relies on 'the unremunerated and unrecognised efforts of dark matter' to create exceptional status and value at the top of the artistic mainstream. Dark matter is used to describe all the artistic activity of those working at the bottom tiers of the art pyramid. Through their enforced 'failure' to become 'successful', the work of the majority enriches the few artists at the top of the pyramid with both cultural and actual capital. While this may make a handful of artists very wealthy, the main benefit goes to the market constructed around them. Szreder directly quotes Sholette to put this in stark terms: 'the art industry must ghettoize the majority of its qualified participants in order to generate artistic value.'[39]

Of the AUE members surveyed, for the 2022/23 tax year:

Over half earned below £15,000 a year

Over 72% earned less than £20,000 annually – well below the annual minimum wage salary of £21,673.60 for that year

At least 96.4% earned less than the UK median annual wage of £35,004 for that year

Wherever the real paucity of the majority of artists' incomes is made visible, what we are looking at is the outline of the bottom tiers of Szreder's art pyramid and the economic effects of the art system that constructs it. In the headline statistics above, the yawning gap between artists' incomes and the minimum wage in the UK, let alone the median wage, is another kind of dark matter – a sign of the unwaged and under-waged work the majority of artists undertake. In doing so, artists effectively 'donate' the missing proportion of our pay to the upper levels of the pyramid and the art system that surrounds it. In *Structurally F–cked*, we referred to this mechanism as a kind of 'coercive philanthropy'.

A double hit: cuts to cultural funding and welfare

Comparing the membership survey data on median yearly earnings with the minimum wage and the median wage in the UK marks a significant shortfall. The median annual earnings from all types of work for AUE membership survey respondents fell into the lowest category of under £15,000, reflecting the results of broader studies recently published by DACs and Arts Council England:

— The data from Arts Council England's *Cultural Freelancers Study 2024* shows that the median bracket for visual artists' freelance annual income is £12,500 - £15,000. 22.6% earned just £0 - £5000.[40]

— *UK Visual Artists (2024): A Survey of Earnings and Contracts* published by DACs found that the median annual earnings for visual artists is £12,500, a decrease of 47% since their last survey in 2010.[41]

The drop in artists' median earnings reported by DACs should come as no surprise given the erosion of public funding available to artists. The average commissioning budget had declined by four fifths from £100,000 in 2007 to £19,444 in 2013.[42] Considering that 41% of respondents make their money as an artist partly through commissions, shrinking budgets will no doubt have a huge knock on effect on artists' incomes. Shockingly, success rates for Arts Council direct funding to artists have also fallen from 52% in 2003 under the Grants for the Arts scheme to just 12.7% in 2019, under Developing Your Creative Practice.[43]

[40] "Cultural Freelancers Study 2024: Our largest piece of research into the freelance sector", Arts Council England, May 14, 2025, https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/cultural-freelancers-study-2024-our-largest-piece-research-freelance-sector.

[41] "Freelance work & fair pay", DACs, accessed April 16, 2025, https://www.DACs.org.uk/advocacy/freelance-labour#.

[42] "Livelihoods of Visual Artists: Literature and Data Review", Arts Council England, December 14, 2018, https://www.a-n.co.uk/research/livelihoods-of-visual-artists-literature-and-data-review/.

"I'm more reliant on [my] partner to provide a home for my child – this is compromising and if we split up I'd have to seriously rethink my entire career in order to survive. I'm worried that the cost of living could prevent some partners from leaving difficult situations because of this, especially if they have low pay."

[43] "Written evidence submitted by Dr Susan Jones", Susan Jones, accessed April 16, 2025, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/7139/pdf/.

Unsurprisingly, under these dire circumstances, 33.3% of the AUE members surveyed said that they relied on familial or spousal support in order to keep working as artists. This statistic implies how much artists without recourse to these financially supportive relationships will struggle to survive on such small incomes.

15.6% of respondents were in receipt of Universal Credit or other benefits as part of their income. Considering how low the median income bracket was, this figure seems surprisingly small. Looking at data from SAU in 2015, 67% of their membership were in receipt of Working Tax Credit. The sweeping changes and conditions applied when Universal Credit was brought in (a move which AUE and SAU campaigned against together) made it incredibly difficult for artists to claim in-work benefits.[44] The comparison between the 2015 SAU data and the AUE data from nine years later suggests the enormity of the scale at which this has impacted artists. It is highly likely this has directly contributed to the overall drop in artists' incomes. One member in the survey highlighted how they had been personally affected by this double hit:

[44] "Joint Statement on Universal Credit by SAU and AUE", Artists' Union England & Scottish Artists' Union, October 2015, https://drive.google.com/file/d/187-rh8zXP-8YGw2eX47Pn1L9shGOkkbG/view.

"I am concerned about the lack of funding for the arts as I often use public funding such as Arts Council England. I have also been affected by the change in Universal Credit support and am now unable to get support to subsidise the terrible pay as a full-time artist."

'Portfolio lifestyles' make little difference

Artists are often euphemistically described as requiring 'portfolio lifestyles' – a roster of flexible (and therefore precarious) jobs to fit around their art practices and scrape together enough money to meet the expenses of living and working.

The contemporary prescription for precarity under neoliberalism is apparently more precarity: to 'hustle harder' and take on additional jobs in your downtime, from running your own business to trying to squeeze a supplementary living out of exploitative platform capitalism.
Side by side, these parallel formulations suggest how the idea of an entrepreneurial and self-directed artist has been used to sell a false idea of freedom both in and out of the 'art world.' A feedback loop has been set up between this neoliberal idea of the artist and the precarious worker as an entrepreneur, with each continuing to reinforce the other.

Of the AUE members who responded to the survey:

79% said that they did not earn enough from their art practice to live on

40.5% indicated that they have an additional PAYE job (55.4% within the art sector, and 44.6% outside of the art sector)

The responses to the AUE membership survey reflect what we see across the 'art world'[45] – that artists are trying many different ways to cobble together sustainable and secure livelihoods, but none of these are functioning within a broken system. Many members indicated that they engage in a variety of more or less intermittent freelance work to plug the gaps in their low incomes from their practice, often alongside steadier PAYE jobs as well. For the median artist, the prescription of a 'portfolio lifestyle' as a solution to a lack of artistic income clearly isn't working well enough to guarantee meeting even the basic benchmark of a minimum wage.

[45] "Livelihoods of Visual Artists", Arts Council England, 9.

Historically, formal lecturing contracts in art schools and universities, as well as more intermittent visiting artist and lecturer opportunities, have been a core part of the 'portfolios' many artists build. Successive cuts to jobs across further and higher education, along with the specific erosion of arts teaching from secondary school upwards, have decimated and precarised jobs and opportunities across the sector, making this option for attempting to find a stable income all the more scarce. Susan Jones noted

in 2020 that the number of artists able to rely on this route has dropped by almost two thirds over the preceding 35 years.[46]

Amongst the AUE membership surveyed, 9.5% of artists were formally contracted as lecturers in higher or further art education. A much higher proportion, 41%, included visiting artist or lecturer roles as part of their income. This suggests that artists are much more reliant on these remaining casual, intermittent, and peripatetic days of work across various institutions than rapidly disappearing and casualised lecturing contracts.

[46] "Support for artists' livelihoods in a Covid-19 world", Padwick Jones Art, accessed April 16, 2025, https://padwickjonesarts.co.uk/support-for-artists-livelihoods-in-a-covid-19-world.

"There are fewer commissions, I am paid less when commissioned, there is far less teaching work about because art schools are struggling financially or have closed."

"It's a constant concern, towards the end of the year most paid opportunities cease, usually that's teaching opportunities, after Christmas I am always hoping and praying that calls start coming in. I literally live from week to week, my mental wellbeing inevitably dips, it's always the same, I beg, steal and borrow lol."

These 'vampiric and opportunistic' cuts in the education sector, based on a failing funding model of punitively high student fees (per the University and College Union)[47], have been matched by waves of redundancies in public art institutions. At the time of writing, a new assault on jobs (excused by directors citing lower visitor numbers since the Covid-19 pandemic and funding cuts) has been taking place in public art institutions from the Royal Academy to the Tate. Jobs in private sector galleries have been cut, too, including the 40 invigilators' positions axed by the White Cube in 2024 and replaced with security guards.[48] Many early career artists especially rely on these kinds of roles to live and work as artists. As they are casualised or axed, the art system relies on a shrinking pool of precarious and underpaid workers, while artists' options for scrambling together a liveable income dwindle ever further.

[47] "UCU: v-cs 'exploiting' funding crisis to make 'vampiric' job cuts", Times Higher Education, accessed April 16, 2025, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ucu-v-cs-exploiting-funding-crisis-make-vampiric-job-cuts.

[48] Anny Shaw, "White Cube in London lets go of 38 invigilators, most of them artists and students", *The Art Newspaper*, July 31, 2024, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/07/31/white-cube-in-london-lets-go-of-38-invigilatorsmost-of-them-artists-and-students.

The public / private divide

Many artists' incomes straddle both public and private / non-profit and for-profit sectors within the 'art world'. As Lise Soskolne, co-founder and organiser of W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) in the US, has noted, 'the non-profit sector produces critical value through its perceived status as being outside of, adjacent to, or above the amoral buying and selling of art in the for-profit sector [...]. While producing different forms of value and appearing to be on opposite ends of art's moral continuum, these sectors operate in reality through increasing overlap and interdependency.'[49]

[49] Lise Soskolne, "Made in Art School", in: Artists' Survival Kit, eds. Andrea Bellini and Goksu Kunak (Nero, 2023) 83–95.

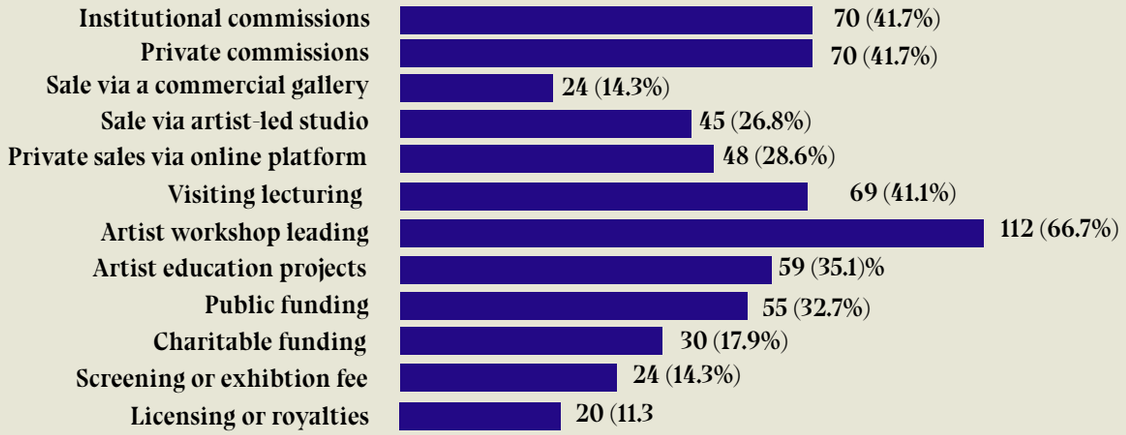
Artists are subject to the various tensions set up by this interrelation, which may also set some of the terms of their income. As Soskolne puts it, 'if as an artist you choose to retain your moral capital by eschewing the commercial market, you pay for it with your livelihood. Conversely, if you choose your livelihood and embrace the commercial market, you'll likely pay for it with your moral capital'.

In the UK contemporary 'art world', this plays out as a revolving door circulating artists between commercial and public galleries. Commercial galleries often stump up funding for exhibitions of their artists' work. This means private galleries plug funding gaps in 'the social good' of public exhibition programming while inflating their artists' cultural and moral capital (in turn exchanged for greater financial capital) through their association with the public art sector. As public funding dwindles and the public sector relies on the private sector to fill in the gaps, artists who are not commercially represented are far less likely to have significant shows in the public sector.

6.5% were represented by a commercial gallery

14.3% made a portion of their income through commercial gallery sales

Very few of the AUE members who responded to the survey had gallery representation, though they were a little more likely to make sales through commercial galleries. This suggests that AUE members and artists more broadly have limited access to stability through the private sector. In a union of artists, however, it might also indicate an element of ideological choice to situate their work and role as artist within the public sector rather than the market.



Private commissions and online sales outside of the gallery system were more likely to figure as part of artists' incomes, at 41.7% and 28.6% respectively. Respondents were also more likely to sell work through artist-led studios and exhibitions (26.8%) than through a commercial gallery.

Leading artists' workshops (so often part of public sector programming) was the most common source of members' income as artists at 66.7%, with artists' education projects featuring highly at 35.1%. Public funding accounted for part of the incomes of 32.7% of respondents, while institutional commissions provided income for 41.7%. Aside from private commissions, these four areas were the most frequently cited sources of income, indicating that despite all the cuts that have been meted out, the public sector is still a crucial source of work and income for AUE members.

Campaigning for a reversal of austerity, including cultural funding cuts, therefore continues to be essential work for the union. In order to live and work, and as a starting point for overturning the 'art pyramid' and breaking artists out of the cycle of 'portfolio lifestyles' and low incomes, artists and AUE members need not only a robust public arts sector, but also a new social settlement.

③ Artists' incomes are probably even worse than most data suggests

While the statistics on artists' pay in the last section set out a uniformly grim picture, it's likely that the reality is even more stark. In the AUE membership survey, the scale used to gather incomes would have needed to be finer to demonstrate just how much below £15,000 the median artist's income actually sits. Although the scale didn't quite capture the whole picture, the question on artists' income from all types of work was carefully shaped to determine a consistent figure that did not count artists' expenses as part of their earnings:

> *Using your latest tax return and / or PAYE payslips as a guide, what is your yearly income from all types of work? (In terms of self-employment this refers to your income after your expenses and before tax. For PAYE work, this refers to your gross income before tax. If you have a combination of self-employment and employment, please combine these).*

In the larger surveys from ACE and DACs, however, the questions on income were not specific enough to give a set of answers that represent artists' *actual* earnings from freelance work in a way that can be compared with the earnings of employees (i.e. before tax but after deducting expenses such as studio rent and materials). Given that questions were either set out specifically to determine artists' income gross of expenses, or were vague enough that artists might answer the question differently depending on their interpretation of the phrases 'earnings' or 'income', it is likely that the figures for artists' actual pay would be lower than those reported.

By being unclear about income and expenses, the DACs and ACE reports (and others before them) risk both underplaying the severity of the situation and failing to highlight the time, space, materials and therefore *money* that art requires before any income can be made at all. This oversight could be due to the fact that such reports are generally researched and commissioned by salaried professionals who are unfamiliar with the particularities of self employment for artists.

It would be highly unusual to include the costs of doing business as part of an individual's earnings in an analysis of any other category of sole trader or freelancer. Imagine, for instance, the costs of gym space and equipment for a personal trainer, or the cost of materials for a painter and decorator not being differentiated from their income in a survey of these types of work.

Continually understating the material requirements of making art is one of the factors that keeps artists underpaid and exploited, reinforcing the idea of art as an elective labour of love. Under the capitalist system we are working within, making art is often a messy combination of business, livelihood, and a pursuit of art for both its own sake and its liberatory potential. As we've seen above, this can entail speculative work, private commissions, and work for public 'clients' including galleries and arts organisations. To keep all of this possible, however, a continual level of 'investment' in studio space, materials, and research is needed, depending on an artist's means and practice.

> *"I keep pointing out the increased cost of studios [...] and gallerists say things like "oh we've never included the cost of a studio in a project budget before", as if that massive expense isn't entirely necessary in order to complete the work."*

A significant minority of AUE members surveyed (8.9%) indicated that their practice is costing them money to sustain because their overheads are higher than their income from their work as artists. As the quote above from one member suggests, these overheads are rarely accounted for in project budgets, leaving artists to shoulder the costs by taking them out of the incomes they patch together from various types of work.

It is therefore essential that future research into artists' pay and livelihoods deals precisely with income and expenses to clarify the conditions artists are dealing with at the bottom layers of the art pyramid, where a return on their 'investments' in their practice is almost endlessly deferred.

4 Most artists have <u>little savings</u> and *no* pension plan (and they're scared about it)

Of the AUE members who responded to the survey:

75.6% said they had financial concerns about reaching retirement age

78.6% were not making voluntary payments to a pension as part of their self-employment

71.4% were not making payments to a pension scheme through PAYE jobs either

"There is absolutely no way I will be able to live on my pension if and when I get to retire. I worry about becoming disabled in old age and not being able to afford social care."

"Being an artist does not allow me to save for the future."

"I have no savings or pensions, and have been told that due to not paying NICs while being self employed I won't get a state pension. I have no idea how I will stay alive if I get too old or sick to work, but can't put any money into a pension as I'm using it all to stay alive right now."

"I have no pension and my savings were decimated during the pandemic. I'm screwed!"

Both the data and the comments gathered from the questions on pensions in the AUE membership survey make it abundantly clear that artists are dealing with the ticking time bomb of even greater future precarity. This is also reflected in the latest data from broader pools of artists. According to the 2024 ACE Creative Freelancers Survey, 77% of those working in a creative role in the visual arts had been unable to pay into a voluntary pension scheme.

This leaves the majority of AUE members (and artists more broadly) relying on the State Pension. The full State Pension is currently set at £11,973 per year, and you are only eligible to receive this if you have made the necessary number of National Insurance Contributions. Artists who have been self-employed for long periods of time and have not met these requirements will likely find themselves in an even more precarious position. Several respondents to the survey said they had missed too many years of NICs to qualify for a full State Pension, either because their income did not meet the threshold for mandatory payments and they were not made aware of the importance of paying voluntarily until it was too late, or because they could not afford to pay them on a voluntary basis.

With artists' median incomes (£12,500 according to DACs and under £15,000 according to AUE) sitting only a little above the annual full State Pension, it is hardly surprising that artists find themselves unable to save for their futures, both in the shorter and longer term. Artists' current precarity locks them into precarity later in life, too. AUE members reported being unable to build up savings, let alone a pension pot. Several members reported building up a financial buffer, only for it to be depleted due to a lack of sick pay during periods of illness, or loss of income during emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic.

A timeline of precarity

Artists have no set career path. In the contemporary 'art world', we often find ourselves still classed as 'emerging' after decades of working, moving in and out of visibility and therefore paid work over the course of our lives and careers. This makes financial planning incredibly difficult, stalling big life decisions like starting a family, blocking artists from building up modest savings for the near future, getting together a deposit to buy a home, or putting money away for a reasonable pension. In an industry apparently obsessed with youth and the next generation of 'emerging artists' to be 'discovered' fresh out of art school, many artists (especially those who are marginalised in other ways) may also find opportunities and exhibitions, and therefore pay, start to dwindle as they age.

The timeline of testimonies below builds a picture of how this impacts artists at every stage of our lives:

20

"Girl I am never gonna retire LOL just like my mummy"

"I'm 27 and myself and most of my peers don't really expect to ever be able to stop working comfortably. Also no one explains pensions to you and it's really difficult to navigate."

30

"I can't afford a pension but I also feel that society will have collapsed by the time I get there, if I get there, due to chronic illness. But I will never be able to afford retirement regardless."

"I am 31 and I currently pay £40 p/month into my pension, as that is what I can safely afford at the moment.[…] If I don't buy a house soon, I won't have any assets at all, and this also prevents me from wanting children, due to the financial barriers and the impact it will have on my practice as an artist."

"When I have a good income I will pay into a pension scheme. I have thought this for years, now I am 34 I am worried I will not be able to."

"I won a big award a few years ago (£25k) and put half of it in a pension scheme with the aim to start saving towards retirement. Not long after, I was unwell for a while and my work dried up and I've not been able to access the saved money - I deeply regret having the confidence to save for my pension. At the same time £12k is barely going to cover my basic needs for a year by the time I retire."

40

"I began paying into a pension in my 40s. I do not know if it will be enough."

"Now in my mid-40s I am increasingly concerned about my finances for retirement. I will be relying on the state pension and the hope that my partner and I can pay off our mortgage by the time we retire."

50

"I'm 52 and have been paying some peanuts into a pension for only one year. I have no pension to speak of, no savings, minimal income."

"Approaching 60 so I feel I've missed the boat in pension planning."

60+

"I am 60, and less able to work the hours I did when I was younger. I won't be able to live comfortably off the state pension and there are less opportunities for older artists to earn money as an artist."

"I receive a pension, it does not cover my costs"

"I have reached pension age. Currently I am able to do other things to earn money but am worried about when this gets more difficult."

"Scared", "terrified", "paralysed"

These comments from AUE members shed light on the full implications of this perilous situation for artists' health and wellbeing, both now and later in life. Please proceed with care when reading the statements from respondents below, which include a mention of suicide:

"I will have to work until death for sure."

"I am never going to have earned enough to live off a pension and or retire."

"I have nothing for my pension. I have tried committing suicide over this. There's nothing I can do"

"I have no pension. I am terrified of not having an income in retirement and am paralysed about what to do."

"I don't think I have a good enough pension – so I'll probably continue working until I'm physically unable to i.e. no planned retirement."

"I feel I need to keep working until I can no longer work through disability I have very little in savings and a pitiful amount in pension contributions – how can I live a dignified life when I'm old and unable to work?"

"I have a longterm chronic illness and watched family members retire early out of necessity. I'm very scared that I don't have that option."

Reading the extent of the distress and despair experienced by artists facing precarious futures is devastating. While art is so often depicted as a labour of love, these responses make the stark realities of life as an artist clear. Rather than choosing to keep making art for art's sake, artists feel they will be compelled to keep hustling into old age in order to top up insufficient or non-existent pensions. The anxiety of being physically unable to keep going without a safety net looms large. The quotes reiterate the exclusionary physical, mental, emotional, and financial costs of engaging with the 'art world' as it currently exists.

No exceptions: guaranteed stability for all

Although the immediate cause of artists' precarity is poorly paid (and not enough) work within a sector patchily formed from public and private 'art worlds', the problem is much more deeply structured by capitalism and the increasing precarisation of work demanded by the current iteration of capitalism we are living and working under.

Since the financial crisis in 2008, significant numbers of workers have joined artists in the ranks of the 'solo self-employed'[50] – a category which has risen by 38% in the UK, with 1 in 8 workers now self-employed. This means there is a broadening category of workers who are intermittently and underpaid, and also more likely to be reliant on the State Pension alone. Recent studies show that the self-employed are paying into pensions at a similar rate to artists, with around 70–80% of them not paying into a pension at all, compared with 80% of employees who do have workplace pension plans.[51]

[50] Giulia Giupponi, Xiaowei Xu, "What does the rise of self-employment tell us about the UK labour market?", The Institute for Fiscal Studies, accessed May 14, 2025, https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/BN-What-does-the-rise-of-self-employment-tell-us-about-the-UK-labour-market-1.pdf.

[51] "Workplace pension participation and savings trends of eligible employees: 2009 to 2023", *Department for Work and Pensions*, July 31, 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/workplace-pension-participation-and-savings-trends-2009-to-2023/workplace-pension-participation-and-savings-trends-of-eligible-employees-2009-to-2023#:~:text=Trends%20in%20Workplace%20Pension%20Participation,-The%20workplace%20pension&text=The%20overall%20participation%20rate%20of,million)%20participating%20the%20year%20previous.

Beyond the UK, social security schemes have been developed specifically to address artists' precarious and intermittent incomes. This includes state pension schemes for artists in several countries across Europe,[52] and the 'Intermittent du Spectacle' in France, designed to keep artists in the performing arts afloat when they are in between paid jobs.[53] In Ireland, the trial of a Universal Basic Income for artists was described by Culture Minister Catherine Martin as 'a strong statement at home and abroad about the value that Ireland as a nation places on artistic practice both in terms of our personal and collective wellbeing, and also the importance of the arts to our identity and cultural distinctiveness'.[54]

[52] Dr. Clare McAndrew Cathie McKimm, "The Living and Working Conditions of Artists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland", The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon., April 2010, 42. https://artscouncil-ni.org/resources/working-and-living-conditions-of-artists-in-ni.(For example, special pension schemes for artists are available in Germany (via the KSK), Italy (via ENPALS), France, Finland and Austria).

[53] "The art of managing the intermittent artist status in France", European Trade Union Institute, accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.etui.org/publications/art-managing-intermittent-artist-status-france.

[54] "Arts Sector gathers to discuss Status of the Artist in Ireland & results from first year of the Basic Income for the Arts pilot", Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, May 27, 2024, https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-culture-communications-and-sport/press-releases/arts-sector-gathers-to-discuss-status-of-the-artist-in-ireland-results-from-first-year-of-the-basic-income-for-the-arts-pilot/.

As we highlighted in *Structurally F-cked*,[55] the conditions needed for artists to thrive are the same as those that would allow anyone and everyone to live dignified lives. It's worth reiterating that however refreshing it is to see the particularities of artists' lives and their contribution to society at least partially accounted for in some state policies and robustly defended by ministers, exceptions made for artists rather than universal policies risk marking out artists as a 'deserving' precariat versus an 'undeserving' proletariat. Artists' Union England's position, along with our own, is to advocate for UBI as an interim demand towards lifelong security for all, not just artists.

[55] Industria, *Structurally F-cked*, 74.

5 No rooms of one's own: the double *precarity* of housing and studios

To borrow and re-tool Virginia Woolf's oft-cited quote from *A Room of One's Own* (1929), an artist must have money and a room of her own if she is to make art. The persistent stereotype of the 'poor artist', however, holds that *real* artists must expect to trade in any kind of stability, almost as if they were performing penance for doing something they enjoy. Speaking retrospectively from a position of wealth, famous artists sometimes conspicuously position their emerging selves in line with this romantic trope: the virtuous artist who has taken a vow of poverty in order to dedicate themselves to their practice above all else. Apparently seeking to prove the purity of their work by demonstrating the self-sacrifice they undertook in pursuing their 'labour of love', they excuse the wealth they have accrued since they 'made it' by laying bare their earlier struggles (and heavily implying that other artists should suffer similarly). In January 2025, Tracey Emin delivered a classic of the genre in a comment on an AUE Instagram post sharing AUE's new recommended Rates of Pay guidelines:

> *"When I was young, I would work sometimes 18 hours a day (on my own work) I was on the dole. [O]n about £2k a year. Then I came off the dole because I started selling work, about £2ks worth a year. That went on for years… I was broke all the time but learning and believed in what I was doing. Art has never been an industry to me but a vocation, a way of life. That can't be priced."*[56]

Along with the rest of the YBA generation, Emin came of age in an era where squatting, the dole, and a lower cost of living overall meant that the 'elective precarity' of being an artist was significantly less unstable than it is now. From 1980 onwards, Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme rapidly eroded the social housing stock (40% of the housing sold off under the scheme has now ended up in hands of private landlords).[57] Rent controls were abolished in 1988, when the introduction of Section 21 and assured shorthold tenancies also gave landlords increasing power and control over their tenants. The introduction of buy-to-let mortgages in 1996 grew the number of individuals operating as landlords further. All of these policies saw house prices and the cost of renting rocket, pushing the basic security of stable housing further out of reach. Against this backdrop, squatting was made illegal in 2012, closing the shrinking loophole many artists, Emin included, had used to offset the limits of their dole money or occasional sales. As we noted in the last section, artists are far less able to access benefits under the Universal Credit scheme – the dole is no longer an option either. The 'bootstraps' have worn very thin.

[56] Artists' Union England (@artistsunionengland), "Artists' Rates of Pay Guidelines", Instagram, 8 January, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEj-xhAtUoQ/?igsh=MWpqeTA2bmV0aGJ3NQ==.

[57] Alva Gotby, Feeling at Home (Verso Books, 2025), https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=C_A7EQAAQBAJ&pg=PT5&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=1#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Today it's much more likely that you'll find young artists living in rooms in overcrowded and overexpensive HMOs (Housing in Multiple Occupation) than squats. In *Poor Artists*, The White Pube stretch the

realities of housing for artists today to surreal (yet painfully recognisable) extremes. Their protagonist, emerging artist Quest Talukdar, moves 'out' of her houseshare to live and make work in the gap under the floorboards of her old room.[58] The 'gaps' artists are able to squeeze into are now crushingly small. The costs of housing and time, space, and materials to make work jostle painfully for priority within the register of artists' needs. Sifting through the answers to the AUE membership survey makes it abundantly clear that issues of housing and studio provision are intimately intertwined, with the same forces making them both increasingly unaffordable.

[58] The White Pube, Poor Artists, (Particular Books, 2024), 13.

Housing

An overwhelming majority of AUE members (89.3%) are concerned about the cost of housing. Across a mixed picture of home ownership, private renting, shared ownership, social housing, and living with family members, there was a strong sense of precarity evident across the data and in comments from members.

Unsurprisingly, given the incomes of the respondents to the survey are well below national average, home ownership amongst members was significantly lower (49%) than the general population in England (65%).[59] Home ownership was also heavily stratified across the age categories, with a clear leap upwards from those aged 35-54 who own their own homes (46.9%) to those aged over 55 (rising to 74.1%). This aligns clearly with the growing unaffordability of housing for those in younger generations who have grown up with an economy increasingly reliant on the inflated value of assets.

[59] "Accredited official statistics: Chapter 1: Profile of households and dwellings", Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, November 28, 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/chapters-for-english-housing-survey-2023-to-2024-headline-findings-on-demographics-and-household-resilience/chapter-1-profile-of-households-and-dwellings#:~:text=Owner%20occupation%20remained%20the%20largest,2013%2D14%20(63%25).

Type of housing members live in, organised by age

Age	Members who own their own home	Members who rent from a private landlord	Members who live in social housing
18-24	0%	20%	0%
25-34	9.5%	57.1%	4.8%
35-44	46.3%	46.3%	2.4%
45-54	47.5%	45%	12.5%
55-64	73.3%	11.1%	8.9%
65+	76.9%	7.7%	15.4%

Amongst those who did own their own homes, there was still significant concern about increased mortgage costs due to rising interest rates coupled with the broader 'cost of living crisis', including high utility bills and food prices. There were also several solidaristic mentions of the increasingly hostile housing situation and economic environment that younger people, and younger artists more specifically, are faced with.

> *"I'm very lucky to own my home but the increase in mortgage rates has a knock on effect on my finances as my income as a freelancer is unpredictable. Put simply, uncertainty of expenses affects my ability to plan, feel comfortable renting a studio, maintain good mental health and find the headspace to make work."*

> *"We are incredibly fortunate to have paid off our mortgage two years ago, but we are still struggling. I have no idea how younger artists or people in cities cope."*

Whilst home ownership was less common amongst the sampled artists than the general population, they were also less likely to live in social housing. 16% of England's population live in social housing, compared with 7.7% of respondents who reported that they rent socially. Between these two positions, private renters were heavily overrepresented. While 19% of England's broader population rent through a private landlord,

31.5% of respondents to the survey said they were renting privately. These respondents highlighted the instability imposed by the constant possibility of having to move, the problem of skyrocketing rent increases, and the difficulty of securing a tenancy with an intermittent, unpredictable, and often very low income.

"Worrying about being able to prove my income if I need to move house - eg. providing bank statements to landlords - means I take more non-art work than I would do if my housing situation was more secure."

"Trying to find a new flat for next year and it is near impossible. Spending more time on rightmove than I am making any work."

"It affects my mental health, my disability and puts a strain on my finances as an artist. I won't be able to do this from month to month if my rent goes higher. I rent on short assured tenancy and my landlord is threatening to kick me and my child out."

"It makes creating work stressful and almost impossible."

"I am less able to devote my time and mental capacity to my art as I have to constantly worry about how I will pay my rent."

In contrast to the romance of the poor artist who sublimates their needs in order to make their art (at least until they make it big), or the neoliberal picture of artists as highly peripatetic individuals who do not require stable and sustainable lives and communities, the artists' testimonies above show the immobilising impact of housing instability. In our last inquiry, *Structurally F–cked*, Lola Olufemi's text *She Wants to Make Something* included a line that struck a chord with many readers: 'Isn't it preposterous, that needing to pay rent has stopped so many artists from making anything at all?' The palpable distress in the quotes above demonstrates a feeling shared by many artists who find themselves constantly on the edge of having to stop making art due to the overwhelming costs of sustaining their lives, let alone their work.

Ever-accelerating house and rental prices driven by an asset-focused economy are tanking living standards for all but a few across society. Artists, with their significantly lower-than-average incomes, along with the additional need to find or rent space to work, are sharply affected by this.

Studios:

In contrast to the persistent trope of the artist toiling away in a studio, only 36.9% of AUE members who responded to the survey actually work from one. For the majority who do not, however, this isn't a choice spurred on by dematerialised art practices or a desire to break with tradition.

Of the AUE membership survey respondents who do not rent a studio:

54.5% said this was because they could not afford one
63.4% work from home or elsewhere
13.5% cited a lack of suitable studios available

The comments from those working without a dedicated studio space built a picture of cramped working and living conditions, along with the negative mental health impacts of being unable to 'leave' work. 40% of members who said they were privately renting their living space were also working from home, leaving the stability of both their home and workspace dependent on the whims of one landlord.

"I share a home with other family members and we all rent together, so there is very little space for work, no studio access and no ability to create large scale works."

"Rents are high for small rooms in London, ideally I would rent a studio for prep work for workshops but I cant afford that at the moment. I am in a large room now but the landlord is selling and a lot of rooms I am seeing now are beyond my budget and also hardly any space. I've set down roots here and do art work with community groups here, it is very likely I will have to go wherever I can afford and completely start again with building networks. Most landlords

do credit checks now or want to see payslips - also terrible for freelancers still building up work. No safety nets! Feel like giving up creative work completely."

"I gave up my studio as I could not afford housing and a workplace. In 2020 I converted domestic spaces into office/ studio spaces and have not been able to earn enough to change this arrangement. While I am privileged to have a secure housing situation, I can't ever escape from my work and feel this has impacted detrimentally on my mental and physical health. My practice has lost much of its joy and often feels like an addiction that I can't kick."

"My current income from my practice is nowhere near enough to cover any kind of rent, mortgage nor studio. I live and work in my elderly mothers' house, where my 4 x 3 m room is bedroom, studio, workshop, office and store-room. It severely restricts what I am able to do and make, but still I strive to continue in my practice"

The image of Quest in *Poor Artists*, living and working beneath the floorboards, never feels far away under these confines. Hemmed in by financial insecurity and the lack of safety net, artists are forced to make their work and their lives smaller. Even for AUE members who were currently able to afford a studio space, the future is uncertain:

Of the AUE members who responded to the survey:

38.6% felt confident they would be able to continue to afford their studio rent in the next two years

12.3% felt they would not

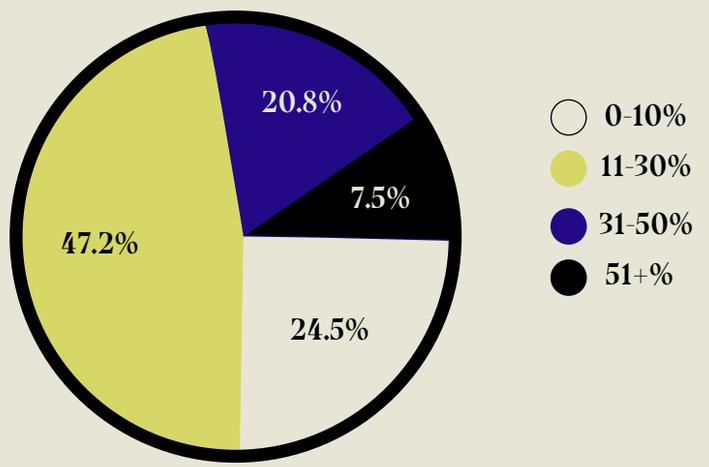
49.1% were uncertain

Artists who have been working and studio-hopping for a few years will be all too familiar with the current state of artists' studio provision. Many will have worked in a combination of the following: a patchy assortment of 'meantime spaces' – carpet-tiled temporary office-block conversions, emptied-out high street shops, council buildings that have fallen into disrepair and are awaiting private 'investment', former industrial spaces facing imminent redevelopment. A few will have experienced more stable but often substandard and barely affordable spaces leased by major studio providers, and (occasionally) secure purpose-built studios under unaffordable new-build flats in former industrial areas.

A 2024 audit by LAASN (The London Affordable Artists' Studios Network) found that the average studio size has more than halved since 2020, reducing from 500 sq ft to between 200 and 250 sq ft, as artists are forced to downsize by the accelerated costs of living and working.[60] For AUE members who are renting studio spaces, a significant proportion of their income was taken up by these costs. For 47.2% of respondents, 11-30% of their income was absorbed by studio rent, with a further 20.8% spending 31-50%. For 7.5% of respondents, their studio costs took up over half of their income.

[60] Anita Chaudhuri, "'My studio costs half my income': can British art survive soaring rents and property developers?", *The Guardian*, June 24, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/article/2024/jun/24/studio-costs-half-income-can-british-art-survive-soaring-rents-property-developers.

Percentage of income AUE members spend on studio rent



"The building is unsafe, toilets don't work, running water is unclean, no locks on doors… the building is not really maintained or sanitary in any way."

In return for these high costs, many members indicated problems with the condition of the spaces they were renting, citing lack of accessibility; sanitation, ventilation, and security issues; lack of heating, as well as

leaks, damp, mould, pests and rodents. A narrow majority of studio holders (51.9%) said their spaces were not accessible to disabled people.

The precarious, dilapidated, and expensive reality of artists' studios is not something that can be fixed by good will, codes of practice, and affordable studio schemes alone. The problem is deeply rooted within the UK's highly financialised, asset-driven economy and the machinations of capitalism at large.

Cultural capital, real capital, and social cleansing

The current state of studio provision, driven more by the demands of capitalism than our needs as artists, marks the ways we are specifically instrumentalised to grease the wheels of capitalist urban planning. Matthew Noel-Tod has noted that landlords and developers of commercial properties have increasingly taken up the tactic of using property-guardianship style schemes ('financialised squatting') to turn their buildings over to temporary workspaces for artists in order to avoid paying business rates while still collecting rent. He also highlights a tendency for studio providers dealing in meantime space to position themselves as explicitly acting 'in the service of capital'. Often presenting the schemes as a 'win-win' for artists and developers alike, the copy on the websites of those acting as intermediary landlords for artists often gives the game away.

Projekt, for instance, which operates in London and the South East, calls itself 'a forward-thinking affordable work and event space provider that works with some of the biggest developers, housing associations, local authorities, government bodies and agencies to shape the character of new communities and revitalise unloved spaces.' They boast that by 'filling spaces with artists, creatives, start-ups and entrepreneurs' they add 'value to developments'. They claim that 'Projekt's work positively impacts the bottom line and delivers significant social and cultural capital'.[61] By aligning their mission with gentrification and presenting artists in the same neoliberal category as entrepreneurs and startups, they explicitly position artists as 'cultural capital' that can be used to bring in *real* capital for major developers.

[61] "What we do", Projekt, accessed January 16, 2025, https://thisisprojekt.com/.

This means that artists are used to push up the price of housing, putting us in the position of being complicit in our own eventual marginalisation. Where artists live and work in the same area, this is doubly true. As Dr Stephen Pritchard puts it, 'artists are expendable, intangible assets – pawns – who serve to artwash their corporate exploitation and the displacement of local people and small businesses'.[62] Our presence often becomes an accelerant in the processes of gentrification which will ultimately price us out, along with the communities we are part of (or at least work alongside), leading to social cleansing.

[62] "Artwashing London – 'Artist-led' Studios, Library Takeovers, GLA Cultural Advisors, Property Developers & Offshore Tax Havens", Colouring in Culture, accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.colouringinculture.org/blog/blog/v22#:~:text=They're%20huge%20corporate%20property,local%20people%20and%20small%20businesses.

Tenants' unions are in the ascendancy, with Acorn, London Renters Union, and Greater Manchester Tenants Union gaining traction in the UK. The case for tenants unions as a crucial vector of organising in the years to come has also recently been made in print in *Abolish Rent* by organisers from the Los Angeles Tenants Union. Breaking the cycle of the artist as both participant in, and victim of, gentrification demands that we stay vigilant to the ways artists are made complicit in social cleansing, going beyond calls for affordable studios to fight for safe and secure housing as a universal right.

CONCLUSION:

AGAINST PRECARITY AND IMPERMANENCE: ARTISTS' UNION ENGLAND AS PART OF BUILDING A PERMANENT STRUGGLE FOR A TRANSFORMED (ART) WORLD

"When art workers assemble together, they have to learn the tough art of maintaining the struggle, despite their own tendencies and structural pressures." [63]

The membership survey interpreted by this inquiry was carried out in order to help set the agenda for AUE's future work. Taken together, the key findings we have drawn from it develop a sense of precarity at levels both specific and non-specific to us as artists. The overlap between these areas of precarity begins to indicate the sorts of campaigns and coalitions an artists' union can build towards in order to overturn these conditions – for artists and for everyone.

[63] Szreder, *The ABC of the Projectariat*, 118.

Working through the data from the membership survey, we have noted how AUE members (and other artists by extension) share the material conditions of tenants faced with spiralling rents and poor housing conditions, other self-employed workers struggling with little to no savings and pensions, workers navigating the gig economy and zero-hours contracts, and those claiming benefits who are subjected to ever-more stringent cuts and restrictions. To fight for the collective demands which arise from these needs means composing ourselves as a class of artists – as workers and citizens – who demand a good life for everyone: from 'hand to mouth' to 'bread and roses' for all.

THE NEXT 10 YEARS OF ARTISTS' UNION ENGLAND

As a union of artists, over the second decade of AUE's existence as a union, we will need to ramp up our organising to attend to both the general and specific kinds of precarity we collectively experience.

As we grow and increase our capacity for paid roles within the union, we will need to establish and strengthen our structures to enable and encourage the full participation of the membership. Borrowing from Ian Allinson's helpful summaries of types of union in *Workers Can Win,* this will mean the union is able to progress from its current position as largely a 'servicing' (we offer you help) and 'advocacy' (we speak up for you) union, to a position of 'mobilising' (together we can act) and 'organising' (we can build a fighting union).[64]

Allinson continues to explain mobilising and organising as follows: '[mobilising] makes collective action central and sees workers as the union rather than being its customers. It can be very militant. Organising goes further – winning over new people, building our movement's power rather than just skilfully deploying it'.[65] A crucial part of developing our union will be working out the levers of power we can pull as artists, and finding collective ways to do this in order to deploy and continue to build that power. This long term work – and attending to our general and specific conditions of precarity – will involve deepening our ties with trade unions (especially those representing culture workers) and community unions, and actively working with the other artists' unions in Britain and Ireland.

[64] Ian Allinson, *Workers Can Win* (Pluto Press, 2022), 45.

[65] Allinson, *Workers Can Win*, 46.

To address artistic precarity specifically over the coming years, AUE has a clear role to take on in demanding direct funding to artists. Despite the current dearth of Arts Council England funding for artists to use on their own terms, the recent report *Framing the Future: The Political Case for Strengthening the Visual Arts Ecosystem* (commissioned by CVAN and John Hansard Gallery in partnership with DACs, a-n, Plus Tate and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Visual Arts and Artists) made no mention of increasing direct funding to artists as part of its recommendations, despite paying lip service to their importance. All the funding recommendations they make would apparently go to arts organisations to administer, therefore continuing to abandon artists to the failed neoliberal 'trickle-down economics' they have been subjected to.

Collapsing the art pyramid will require direct funding to artists at the *real* grassroots of culture. It will mean ensuring artists (and all people) have access to universally free and accessible services, along with a basic income in order to guarantee a decent standard of living for all. As a union of artists, we must robustly and unapologetically make these demands and organise towards them.

ORGANISED WILDCATS

As we have seen, precarity and transience pervade all aspects of our lives and work as artists. Fluctuating (and low or no) wages, working on a project-to-project basis, temporary workplaces, unstable housing and studios, and an expectation of constant availability for networking, travel,

and residencies all contribute to this condition of instability. The tendency towards impermanence encouraged by the sector has led Kuba Szreder to describe organising artists and artworkers as being 'like herding cats'.

Our flexibility and imagination as artists, however, means that we can cut against the grain too. Szreder notes that the black cat is also a symbol of the wildcat strikes 'adopted by anarchist trade unions and collectives to underline their untamed yet ferocious character'.[66] By dedicating some of our artistic 'wildcat' energy to long-term organising (instead of endless projects in which politics are written in sand and washed away by successive tides of countervailing activity), we can counteract this state of transience and atomisation. As Szreder continues: 'By acting upon their own interdependence, [artists and artworkers] turn atomised and fruitless networking [...] into a weapon. Just as they are able to proceed, gradually, from independence to interdependence, they might be able to turn mere socialising into a cradle of socialism'. [67]

[66] Szreder, *The ABC of the Projectariat*, 118.

[67] Szreder, *The ABC of the Projectariat*, 122.

Artists' unions are a crucial part of this long-term organising. As they gain members and gather strength, they can become permanent yet flexible structures through which we as artists can foment and sustain the 'good trouble' needed ultimately to overturn our current conditions. They are a space of solidarity, which can collectivise both the joy and the pain of living and working as artists. Through this collectivity, we can build the power to wrest back control from the hypercapitalist and repressive interests that dictate the terms of our lives.

Organising against Israel's genocide in Palestine over the last 20 months has prompted a resurgence in worker organising in the the arts sector, and a renewed awareness of our potential power to effect change when we organise together – both around our immediate needs and our wider political demands. Where institutions have resisted the calls of artists and workers to engage with their demands and divest from connections with Israel, it has become clearer to those at the grassroots how they prop up the status quo; aligning with the interests of donors rather than their workers, artists, and publics.

All of the artists' unions in Britain and Ireland (AUE, SAU, Praxis) have passed motions committing to work for the rights of Palestinians, and groups like Artists and Culture Workers LDN (artistsandcultureworkers.org) have cohered to connect conversation and action between freelancers and workers (both unionised and currently un-unionised) on Palestine and beyond. The connections and modes of organising developed through the urgency of this period have forged the groundwork for fighting the struggles of the future, too. We may be unpredictable and sometimes difficult to herd, but we are getting organised and we will win!

Imagine, in the next few decades, an artists' union with a bricks-and-mortar presence and a network of committed and mobilised members beginning to stretch out across the major centres of artistic activity in England. Embedded in our communities and community organising, such a union could muster its resources to build something like the centro sociali and culturali that thrive in the gaps in urban planning in Rome,[68] or a complement to spaces like Pelican House that sustain political organising in London, against the grain of continually eroding public space.

Alongside office space for union staff and organisers to conduct in-person casework support and organising meetings, there could be a programme of political education and cultural events. There might be onsite childcare and support to help people access the programme, and a communal space for artists to come together in person and make and show work together. Perhaps there would be bookable space for artist members who don't have the resources for a permanent or large enough studio, 24-hour access, and a cheap bar and canteen for members and communities to meet and socialise in.

Such a space could help meet the material needs of members and communities by connecting them with resources, community unions and social movements. Maybe it would also hold an archive of artists' unions and artworker organising to build our institutional memory and sustain future struggles.

This union might not yet exist, but together we could build it…

[68] Jack Harmsworth, "Dreaming the Socialist Tripadvisor", *Tribune*, 25 April 2025, https://tribunemag.co.uk/2025/04/dreaming-the-socialist-tripadvisor.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1:

Membership survey questions

A copy of the full membership survey questionnaire can be accessed here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/18zmsTLLPdFpBpc0JURryJ8a3zZYrDZtG/view?usp=sharing

APPENDIX 2:

Pay and hours:

This report has been prepared in our capacity as Industria, as well as a voluntary extension of our positions on the AUE NEC. As Industria, each of us received 5 x AUE day rates of £345.11 from the union as a contribution to our work. An additional 2 day rates each were covered by our small reserve of income as Industria from our Patreon supporters. The remainder of the work was undertaken as voluntary solidarity work for the union. We worked on the report for a total of 19 days over the course of the year, giving us an overall 'solidarity pay rate' of £15.89 / hr.

For the design of the report, 2 day rates of £345.11 covered Rose Nordin's work in adapting her design for *Structurally F-cked* and typesetting the new report.

Proofreading was carried out by the Social Media Manager for AUE, at a rate of £25 / hr for 13 hours.

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industria

From
"HAND TO
MOUTH"
to BREAD AND
ROSES