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"It's Like Trying to Crawl Up a Helter-Skelter": Amplification of Precarity in Creative Labour by Austerity Measures and the UK Welfare System

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Abstract

This paper explores how austerity measures (2010-present) and altered mechanisms of claiming benefits have exacerbated inequalities for those working in the cultural and creative industries. Such research addresses a lack of data focusing particularly on the effects of welfare reform in the context of over a decade of UK government spending cuts the praxes of artists and creatives.

This paper documents interviews with Tate gallery staff who also work as artists. Along with data from a union survey of 1000 culture sector employees, interviews reveal how austerity and welfare reform have shaped contemporary creative practice. Findings mirror other studies concerning barriers to entry and precarious conditions for workers in the Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs), whereby gender (Conor et al., 2015), social capital (Oakley and O'Brien, 2016) and ability to undertake unpaid labour (Gandini, 2016; Brook et al., 2020) influence artist success.

The research also indicates that artists claiming benefits are subject to a welfare environment which does not accommodate the instability of creative working patterns. Some artists receive incentives to register as self-employed with no business skills training provided. This occurs in a context where spending cuts are removing supplementary avenues of employment for creatives in social, healthcare and education settings, and institutions are expected to produce more activity for considerably smaller budgets.

Disruption to the CCIs by the pandemic has brought the impact of this lack of support into stark relief. The UK welfare system does not suitably mitigate the inherent instability of creative labour. This instability contributes to perpetuating the existing problems of an uneven workforce dominated by the middle and upper classes (Friedman and Laurison, 2019) thus contributing to the problem of representation and uneven arts participation (Warwick Commission, 2015).

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Introduction

UK creatives contribute to an industry celebrated for economic growth (DCMS, 2020), social benefits (Lawton et al., 2020) and personal satisfaction through self-actualisation (McRobbie, 2016). However, creative agency is bestowed at a cost: security traditionally afforded to skilled workers is replaced by precarious employment and insecure income, with success dependent on economic, social, and spatial factors. The disruption to the Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs) caused by COVID highlighted how health and social allowances shape artistic practice: factors such as gender and disability significantly exacerbate this precarity in the face of public health crises.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, Western governments have operated under the premise that cuts in spending can mitigate, or avoid, future crises (Peck, 2012). Previously, CCI working norms of freelance, project-based work, low pay and London-centric focus had been associated with Florida's footloose "creative class" (Florida, 2002). However, austerity measures which began in 2010 and are ongoing over a decade later have exacerbated differences in economic and geographic mobility, thus restricting access to the cultural sector to those with less privilege.

A large body of data highlights barriers to entry and precarity within the CCIs, bolstered by COVID-specific research which highlights the problems of insecure employment in times of rupture (Comunian and England, 2020; Eikhof, 2020; Banks and O'Connor, 2021). However, notable gaps in scholarship exist, including a lack of data on the impacts of stringent benefit changes on artists and CCI employees.

This paper examines how austerity policy – in particular welfare reform – affects artists, and how this shapes the sector. This is relevant because the CCIs were influential in normalising the precarisation of work, the gig economy (Friedman, 2014), and cohorts of highly skilled workers not represented by unions (Coles, 2016). In this respect, the CCIs shape labour market trends, and data concerning cultural workers might act as a springboard for theorising about the conditions of other casualised labour. This is also important because the CCIs as a sector are demographically unrepresentative of the general population, yet influence political, cultural, and national discourse. As such, representation is important (as per Hall, 1997), and economic factors, amongst others, contribute to certain demographics facing greater barriers to being creative. While acknowledging that the state has no obligation to fund the arts over any other social function, this paper works on the premise that the CCIs would be richer – economically, in terms of reach and influence, in implementing care and justice – if barriers to entry were removed. Adequate provision of welfare is a facet of this removal.

This paper articulates the experiences of artists who make creative contributions to the cultural field through their personal artistic practice. However, their economic contributions to the CCIs are primarily made through other, precarious work in cultural institutions. Interviewees inhabit the ambiguous space between the favourable discourse of economic growth and personal empowerment through creative participation and the realities of trying to make a living through art.

The UK as welfare state

The implementation of Beveridge's welfare state following World War II aimed to provide universal access to housing, healthcare and education, thus protecting against economic instability (Marcuzzo, 2010, p.198). This took the form of unemployment benefits, social housing and free healthcare, subverting the century-old notion of the "deserving poor" derived from the Poor Laws of 1834 (Golightly and Holloway, 2016). While the model was contemporaneously criticised as giving "something for nothing" (Jones and Lowe, 2002, p. 3), and later for a focus on white, able-bodied men providing for a nuclear family (Williams, 1989), the project nonetheless resulted in better health, education and economic outcomes for the majority of Britons (Goldthorpe, 2012). Social mobility associated with these health and educational outcomes opened up new career options to working-class children, leaving a wider demographic free to pursue careers different from their parents and peers.

Welfare and culture

Accounts which appear in the media from artists who entered the CCIs between 1970-1999 contribute to the notion that the state provides support for struggling artists in the form of training grants, welfare support and accessible (or alternative) housing.

Actors Lorraine Stanley and Julie Hesmondhalgh, who appeared in UK soap operas *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street*, have noted that grants made it possible to attend drama schools in London (Williams, 2018; Hutchison, 2016). Ceramicist Grayson Perry accessed free training which ultimately became his principal practice:

> "When I came out of [art] college… a friend who I was squatting with… was a trained potter and went to evening classes to keep her hand in… Evening classes were free then, if you were on the dole… I went along and quickly realised that it was a way of making something tangible, saleable and exhibitable" (Newton-Ingham, 2006).

In her memoir, The Slits guitarist Viv Albertine refers to an accessible housing market in which squatting was widely accepted and practised by her punk associates. She remembers 1976:

> "I've moved… into a huge artist's studio in Fulham … It's only £10 per week rent because it's subsidised for artists. It's as big as a bus garage with a double-height ceiling, huge doors onto a courtyard and no windows or furniture" (Albertine, 2014, p. 113)

Albertine adds that she and many stalwarts of the punk scene were reliant on benefits. Hesmondhalgh echoes this; in 1991 she set up an independent fringe theatre in London with Rufus Norris, currently Artistic Director of the National Theatre:

> "I signed on [to jobseeker's allowance]… I couldn't have done it without that. Now they would be making me go and do other jobs, but I was saying: 'This is my apprenticeship. This will stand me instead for the future,' and that was enough then" (Hutchison, 2016)

Hesmondhalgh "was able to stay in London because I had housing benefit" (Smirke, 2016).

The welfare state facilitated the inclusion of artists from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the culture sector. The sector grew to become the CCIs, which marketized creativity and became a site of both economic growth and soft power for the UK (see Nye, 2004).

Austerity and welfare reform

The attempted dismantling of the welfare state by Thatcher (Pierson, 1994) was concretised by New Labour's "Third Way" (Blair, 1998), which abandoned the socially focused model implemented by Beveridge and embarked upon reforms led by market forces (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2004) and "active welfare citizens" replacing the previous "passive welfare beneficiaries" of Berveridge's system (Williams, 1999). This connected the welfare system to the wider economy in the minds of the public and was used to legitimise punitive measures and a shift to individual responsibility (see Wacquant, 2009).

Since 2010, UK austerity has hollowed out public services. There has been widespread criticism of the punitive measures and their uneven application, with the United Nations condemning the disproportionate effects on the vulnerable (United Nations, 2016). Reforms are borne from long-term political and media efforts to position economic participation as vital (Ingold and Etherington, 2013), and in doing so vilify those in receipt of benefits as "scroungers" (Garthwaite, 2011), reinvigorating the trope of the underserving poor. However, discourse does not reflect complex realities. The notion that "work pays" is contested by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, finding that 57% of people in poverty are living in a household where someone is in paid work; up from 35% in 1994-1995 (Joyce, 2018).

An extensive programme of welfare reforms left thousands of households worse off. Reforms include reductions in Tax Credits, which support those on low incomes and those with children, and more stringent testing for Personal Independence Payments, which support disabled people. Additionally, freezes on housing benefits have taken place in the context of rising housing costs and a deficit in social housing provision (Wilson and Barton, 2022). These measures disproportionately affect women (Bennett and Sung, 2013; Ingold and Etheringon, 2013), the disabled (Roulstone, 2015), parents (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016), and those in inner London, post-industrial towns, and less prosperous seaside towns (ibid.).

Sanctions which exacerbate financial pressures on claimants have been more widely applied since 2010. These sanctions punish claimants for signing on late, or not doing enough to search for work: claimants are expected to spend 40 hours per week looking for employment. Despite making negligible savings to the national welfare bill, sanctions add to the dehumanising narrative around reliance on benefits (WelCond, 2018). Furthermore, delays in Universal Credit payments left 70% of recipients in debt and 57% experiencing health issues (Jitendra et al., 2018, p. 3).

The next section looks at how these conditions have affected the Creative and Cultural Industries. This is not because artists are more special or deserving of welfare or public spending than other workers. However, working practices in the CCIs were arguably a precursor to an increasingly precarious modern labour market and thus provide a lens for the wider effects of welfare reform on wellbeing and social mobility.

How this affects the CCIs

The rapid growth of creative industries paved the way for a broader labour market based around casualised labour. A variety of sectors replicated the CCIs reliance on a skilled but precarious workforce. While casualised jobs with conditional pay have always existed, particularly in manual roles such as mining, the sharp decline in unionisation after the millennium (Bryson and Gomez, 2005) and increasingly individualist perceptions of work facilitated the transfer of these conditions onto a class of worker traditionally associated with higher levels of education, greater stability, and higher pay. Moreover, the longstanding positioning of cultural labour as a matter of social benefit (see Matarasso, 1997) has arguably exacerbated expectations for creative workers to work in sub-par conditions.

Unpaid work is common for creative practitioners (Neelands et al, 2015; Gandini, 2016; Brook et al 2020) with only those with a financial safety net able to take on free labour which might lead to future paid work. Low pay is also a "constant feature" of creative labour (McRobbie, 2016, p. 43), with creatives often seen as hobbyists (O'Brien, 2014) or supported by a partner or inherited wealth which sustains unprofitable artistic practices (Oakley and Ward, 2018).

Additionally, creative work is frequently precarious, with multiple short contracts without worker protections seen as the norm (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; Cuenca, 2012) and referred to as the "portfolio career" (Flew and Cunningham, 2010). A recurring theme is a fear of not receiving future work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; Gandini, 2016; Friedman et al., 2017), which shapes interactions in the sector. Notably, the welfare system facilitates traditional working patterns of semi-skilled, specialised, and regular labour which is ill-suited to the conditions in the modern creative industries, and casualised work more broadly.

Such precarity and low pay disproportionately affect women, unsuited as it is to maternity leave and childcare provision (Conor et al., 2015). Female-coded creativity is frequently overlooked in favour of more traditional forms, with women earning less, struggling to win contracts and tenders, and using their skills in 'gendered' ways, for example by teaching (see Gill, 2002). McRobbie argues that the current conditions are being used "to pave the way for a new post-welfare era" (2016, p. 35), describing this acceptance of precarity as "labour reform by stealth" (ibid., p. 53). This inequality in the industry, coupled with the disproportionate effects of welfare reform, may place creative women from less-privileged backgrounds in very insecure positions.

Success in creative careers is frequently contingent on extraordinary levels of social capital and "self-cultivation" (Oakley and O'Brien, 2016, p. 478), and unfettered mobility (Lee, 2012). The requirement to be extraordinarily skilled for very low wages is not reflective of traditional work but is increasingly prevalent in modern labour. Art schools increasingly offer training in marketing, accounting, and branding to address the imperative of students burdened with large loans finding gainful employment upon graduation (Hjelde, 2015), but creative success is still dependent on adequate social and cultural capital.

The creative and cultural sector has responded by reducing education and community offerings, cutting staff numbers and hours for casual staff, and focusing resources on commercial activity such as food, beverage and retail to offset the effects of cuts representing up to a third of institutional operational budgets (Newsinger, 2015). This is exacerbated in poorer local authorities, where culture spending has been slashed (Harvey, 2016, p. 11). This

extended to health and social art projects being scrapped when they had previously been a key part of artists' livelihoods (TBR/ACE, 2018). Attempted mitigation by Arts Council England's 'Creative People and Places' scheme is limited to twenty-one project-specific locations (ACE, 2017). Pressures on organisations inevitably affect employees: Jones and Warren note that creativity "is being squeezed out by the banal, but insistent, everyday demands of… keeping creative enterprises ticking over in a hostile funding climate" (2016, p. 291).

There are also spatial elements to accessing creative work. London is the key site for the nation's creative and cultural businesses (O'Brien, 2014; Mateos-Garcia and Bakhshi, 2016) and creative education (Oakley et al., 2017) with "those employed in London's cultural sector… from significantly more privileged backgrounds" (ibid., p. 1519). The concomitant expense of living in or travelling to the capital automatically excludes many creatives from accessing its resources.

Data concerning the effects of welfare reform within the CCIs remains lacking. Banks acknowledges a precariat, "barely supported by corroding systems of social security" (2017, p. 109), and the Warwick Commission suggests that changes to the Independent Living Fund compound the dearth of disabled employees in the CCIs workforce and exacerbate a lack of diversity (Neelands et al., 2015, p. 35). McRobbie (2016) notes that Berlin artists benefit from the "buffer" of welfare, which protects from the "hard edge of poverty, eviction and social marginalisation" (2016, p. 129), creating a system like that which produced a generation of artists including Hirst and Emin in the UK.

In contrast to the established artists who documented the career support provided by the welfare state, Jason Williamson of the UK indie band Sleaford Mods speaks of his experiences claiming welfare under austerity measures:

> "Any notion about musicians surviving on the dole is … a myth. Today it's very difficult to maintain the lifestyle for a lengthy period, given the amount you draw on Jobseeker's Allowance… the liaising you now have to do with the Jobcentre makes it very hard to focus on your art… It sucks the life from you and leaves you with very little to survive on" (New Statesman, 2015).

Considering a gap in knowledge concerning the effects of welfare reform on the CCIs, this study sets out to gather data from artists supporting themselves with precarious creative roles, in particular, to demonstrate the importance of supporting artists who represent a variety of backgrounds, and the current unsuitability of the welfare system to support this.

Methods

Between 12–31 July 2018, eleven Tate employees working in roles ranging from retail assistant to curator took part in semi-structured interviews, as part of research for a Masters' thesis. All respondents worked as artists or creative practitioners alongside their employment at Tate. The author was also a Tate employee and union member in 2018.

Interviews were requested via staff intranet and email groups. Sampling was purposive in targeting employees who sustain individual creative practice outside of Tate. The research received clearance from the Liverpool John Moores University ethics committee.

Table 1: Interview participants

Name	Location	Sex	Age	Artform	Claimed Benefits
Sophie	Liverpool	F	23-34	Ceramic Artist	N
Helen	Liverpool	F	23-34	Digital Artist	N
Jill	Liverpool	F	50+	Fine Artist	N
Heather	Liverpool	F	50+	Printmaker	Y
Jessica	London	F	23-34	Performance Artist	Y
Sarah	London	F	35-50	Community Artist	N
Ben	London	M	23-34	Audio-visual Artist	Y
Lauren	Cornwall	F	23-34	Community Artist	Y
Eleanor	Cornwall	F	35-50	Fine Artist	N
Maria	Cornwall	F	35-50	Ceramic Artist	Y

Interviewees worked at Liverpool, London, and Cornwall galleries, eliciting views from a variety of spatial contexts. The number of interviewees was small, and respondents were all white, British, and able-bodied. This was not representative of Tate's workforce, which at the time was 13% BME & 4% disabled (Tate, 2017), and might be attributed to the fact that many employees in these categories work in lower grade bands, which are predominantly customer-facing without regular access to internal communications. In an attempt to mitigate the unrepresentative sample, the author made word-of-mouth enquiries and contacted BAME staff network representatives, but time and resource constraints limited the data collection period.

As detailed in the table, half of the respondents had claimed, or were claiming, benefits. This provides an admittedly limited insight into the experience of artists in the welfare system. Nonetheless, the data remains useful to build a preliminary qualitative picture of austerity conditions and welfare reform for artists. Interview data intimated lived experiences of artists working multiple jobs, and the practicalities of claiming benefits as a creative. Findings were triangulated with data from a 2018 Prospect union survey of 1000 museum and gallery workers concerning the effects of austerity on the sector. The author was granted permission to segment the data to show Tate-only responses, allowing comparison with the wider sector. Key themes in the data were drawn out using content analysis.

Discussion of data

Artist experiences of the benefit system

Half of the interviewees had claimed Jobseeker's allowance at varying points in the past, three still received Tax Credits.

Unfamiliarity with creative employment by welfare advisors resulted in uncomfortable interactions for the artists. Maria recalled a job centre employee "laughed and said I would never get a job… When I complained… they brushed it off". Lauren, who claimed JSA in 2010

felt "persecuted" by the process of signing on, where there was not a category for artists or educators in the job search algorithms. She remembers:

> "one week I couldn't make my appointment… because I'd had a private view of an exhibition of my works and been shortlisted for a prize, and the woman in the JobCentre … said well if you want to get your JSA you need to be here and signing on. At which point I just said forget it and walked out… So, after that, I felt terrible and I've never claimed JSA again."

Ben corroborates this, describing the claims process as "aggy" and "really intensive". Jessica notes her part-time job affords her more time to make art because the required 40 hours of job applications to receive benefits meant that she "was always looking and you have to fill in these things which make absolutely no sense and have no meaning". While it might be argued that this is a sign of the benefits system working properly by encouraging people to seek paid employment, it disregards potential income made through creating art, thus entrenching a two-tier system where those with greater distance from economic necessity (as per Bourdieu, 2010) can spend time making potentially profitable art, while those bound by economic and temporal restraints cannot.

Nor is the benefits system friendly to those undertaking casual work. Interviewees noted increased reliance on Tax Credits, the concomitant requirement to predict income for the coming six months despite working a zero-hour contract, and repeatedly having to explain to welfare administrators why payments from multiple employers appear:

> "When I was re-jigging things and you had to phone them up, and I'd have to explain every time that on my payslip "Tate Enterprises" from my shop job and "Tate Gallery" from my visitor assistant job were different and they'd ask every time what I meant by "casual"" (Heather)

This real-life iteration of the portfolio career demonstrates the problems brought about by a welfare system which ascribes assumptions of a Fordist work model in which work is regular, bringing in stable pay from a single, long-term employer.

Lauren notes that, due to an administrative error leading to overpayments, she now receives £2.70 per week in Working Tax Credits, which "feels kind of insulting". The perception of hostility and additional administrative pressures in claiming support suggests that the welfare system is not equipped to accommodate casual work and in particular creative labour.

Artists have been given cash incentives to "sign off" under the New Enterprise Allowance scheme (discontinued as of January 2022). Jessica described this initiative as positive, but "it took… 6 months before somebody mentioned that to me". Ben notes that his path to self-employment was more pressing: "they were really keen to get people to start their own business, so they gave me some money and also said 'we'll give you £100 now if you phone the jobcentre and sign off'". It is surprising that artists would be aggressively incentivised to start businesses, as interviewees admitted that they were under-skilled for business management. Maria acknowledges that "as a creative, it doesn't mean you're a brilliant business person, so… that is a barrier". Helen observed that "if I had a big name and I could get royalties on my products I'd be able to support myself, but I don't really know how to go about making that name", demonstrating the difficulty artists have in marketing their own

work, and the short-sightedness of welfare administrators eager to have artists out of the benefits system. Self-employment without additional training is not likely to fix this, and the Tax Credits which many become entitled to due to a lack of sufficient income continue to cost the state.

There is a discernible difference between Heather's experience of claiming benefits in the 1990s and accounts of making benefit claims post-austerity by both Heather and other interviewees. This tallies with the experiences of established artists in the press. Heather describes having art college fees paid and receiving a cost-of-living grant in the late 1980s. Upon graduating in 1993, "when you'd sign on it was kind of like automatic that you were looking for work, but there wasn't the bureaucracy … you might have a meeting once every two months". She noted recognition that claimants wanted to work: "it felt like… they had bigger fish to fry, dealing with the long-term unemployed. I was a young artist just doing my thing to get by, I wasn't workshy". Heather also received a housing association flat upon relocating to Liverpool. This is not reflective of more recent accounts: while older artists dipped in and out of the welfare system as required, younger artists claimed over a single period, often short-lived due to antagonism from administrators, inflexibility inherent to the system and encouragement to devolve responsibility to oneself by starting a business. This suggests that the reformed welfare system is unsuited to the fluctuating nature of creative work, and by extension, all casualised work.

Low pay and casualisation

Eight of ten interviewees work multiple jobs in addition to their part-time work at Tate, including teaching and facilitating workshops, "a retail job I dislike" (Maria), and hospitality. 60% of Prospect respondents believed their organisation was increasingly reliant on freelancers. Yet, interviewees felt that freelance opportunities were not assured. Lauren noted: "I work very little for the Tate, probably two shifts a month: I'm on their casual education rota. It's fairly unusual to be offered more". Heather describes applying for twelve casual roles at Tate over a decade and being successful in ten of those applications before getting a permanent, part-time retail position. The repeated, labour-intensive application process, and competition against friends and colleagues "can be a bit of a strain".

Sophie observes that long-term casualisation left her under enormous pressure:

> "working a zero-hour contract is so hard… we don't choose to have three of five different jobs because it's exciting! That's what we've got to do to pay our bills. And it means that one week you're working ten days on the trot and another week you're working two days… it's hard to find a balance or a rhythm or a routine… it's difficult mentally to keep going in that vein with any longevity."

Interviewees who did not work such long hours did not consider themselves to be ambitious or successful, so entrenched is this belief: "to be really successful you have to give everything to that, which is what everyone who wants to be successful should do but I don't necessarily think I'm one of them, who's that driven" (Helen). This suggests the pervasive effects of economic imperatives on the individual, reflected in both the JobCentre expectation of intensive job searching and high-pressure work in the culture sector.

Low pay was accepted as a permanent attribute of creative work. A Tate respondent to the Prospect survey notes that "AHRC studentships are now better paid than permanent members of staff" (Prospect, 2018, p. 4). Lauren discusses living "on a shoestring", mirroring McRobbie's notion of being "willing to live on thin air" (2016, p. 86). The wider population lacks understanding of the extent of low pay in the CCIs: "Someone who is in quite a good job once said to me 'if you enjoy your job, it's worth £15k off your salary' and it's like… 'that's double my salary'… it's a totally different world" (Sophie).

A source of frustration for interviewees was the expectation of working for free. Six in ten survey respondents said their organisations increasingly relied on volunteers and interns (Prospect, 2018, p. 7). Helen observed that "a lot of people are asked to do things for free, or as a favour… A lot of people do it to get their names out there.". Other interviewees noted that this did not guarantee paid work. Sarah noted:

> "I've been offered quite a few unpaid jobs… I did a war mural at a mental health charity, and I wasn't paid for it, but that was fine… [but] The charity got in touch and said the person who runs our art offer is no longer able to do that, will you consider running it? We had a half-hour conversation and then she said "but we don't have a budget to pay you"… I couldn't believe [it], especially given that I'd already done a free piece for them"

These findings mirror the literature, showing that while art is ostensibly valued this does not result in guaranteed employment or adequate remuneration for skilled labour. Equally, the welfare system does not consider unpaid work as job hunting, despite the perceived necessity of gaining exposure, and thus artists can be penalised for taking it on rather than seeking paid work. While this theoretically protects artists from exploitation, in reality, artists with economic means can afford to make a name for themselves while those who rely on benefits cannot.

Working in community and learning settings was a valuable source of income for artists prior to cuts. A Prospect respondent observes: "In the climate of cuts, learning budgets and staff have been slashed dramatically, as has our ability to create innovative and engaging learning programme (despite huge efforts of the team)" (2018, p. 15). These cuts were noted by interviewees who worked in social settings. Lauren noted with sadness that "I've had my funding cut for projects continuously, I feel like there's occasionally start-up money to make things happen, but it never follows through in terms of longevity of provision. I've been made redundant twice". Similarly, Sophie has lost a significant stream of income as "so many colleges are closing down… I used to teach for the council, but they don't offer [pottery classes] anymore because it's a pleasure course". Artists working in social settings noted that they were not paid for the significant prep time required to facilitate workshops. Much-needed funding for artist-led projects is becoming more difficult to access, particularly for regional artists:

> "There's more competition from people who've lost Local Authority or other regular funding" (Jill)
>
> "the old funding streams which would support the creative arts for mental health… feel really tenuous at the moment" (Maria)

As creatives are increasingly expected to derive a living from freelance projects without the safety net of welfare, a reduction in work in social settings may prove devastating. Diminished community provision also affects diversity, as community settings may be the first place that marginalised groups encounter art:

> "a lot of people on my course had… severe epilepsy or medical problems, they couldn't ever work, and the courses they were offered once things like pottery were removed were things about employability, which isn't fair because not everyone can be… employable" (Sophie)
>
> "I've had my funding cut for projects… often when working with really vulnerable young people doing brilliant creative projects, and that's really debilitating for them" (Lauren).

These findings mirror existing literature, which finds that low pay, casual working patterns, expectations of working for free favour creatives with economic, social, and cultural capital. This is compounded by loss of work in community and social settings, and welfare conditions which do not facilitate creative work, thus excluding various demographics from participating fully in the CCIs.

Lack of security compounds lack of diversity

Much of the data corroborated existing literature on the lack of diversity in the creative industries and suggested that lacking welfare support compounds many of the inequalities in the sector.

Gender conditioning affects women's belief in their creative validity, which impacts their ability to make money. Nine of eleven respondents were female and a common theme in interviews was difficulty pricing work accordingly and even calling oneself an artist. Maria discussed "imposter syndrome", which has often been considered to disproportionately affect women (see Bravata et al., 2019), while Jessica noted:

> "I find it hard to fill in an application because they ask about your previous achievements and… stuff like that makes me really self-conscious… thinking about "how great you are".

Hesitance to acknowledge ones' skill can lead to undervaluing of time-consuming work:

> "I sold my first work in a while the other week and it was only for £55 … It's always difficult to price work, because you have to think about how long it's taken, to justify the money, but because I don't exhibit very often there's an emotional attachment to each work" (Heather)

Such undervaluation of skill might be magnified for artists from other marginalised groups, suggesting that certain groups may become more reliant on state support which does not support casual work, thus further embedding the problem of a comparatively homogenous sector.

Only two interviewees were parents, and accessed Child Tax Credits as such. Two of 22 Tate Prospect respondents paid for childcare, although it is not clear whether this means that only two respondents are parents, or that more are reliant on family for childcare to avoid paying fees, as was the case for Maria. Nonetheless, this suggests that parents are underrepresented in the culture sector, which disproportionately affects women as primary caregivers and further imbalances representation in the sector. More than half of regional interviewees noted family connections which provided some financial support and help with childcare. Considering lacking welfare support, moving back to towns and cities of origin may become increasingly common for artists. The need for family to provide affordable childcare can limit mobility and affect professional flexibility, with detrimental effects on career paths and artistic practice given the London-centric nature of the CCIs.

The recurring notion of fitting a certain, narrow profile to succeed has far-reaching effects "you've got to have a certain background… people are told [furtive whisper] oh, you should go for this!" (Sophie); "you've got to jump through certain hoops to experience success… Tate is just a stage of that, so you've got to be somewhat established. It's like trying to crawl up a helter-skelter to get there" (Ben). This also affects artists' ability to source essential funding: "you get this feeling that if you don't tick all the right boxes with the actual language then it just gets chucked in the bin" (Heather). Related to this notion of adequate social and cultural capital predicating success was the evocative notion of "the carousel", whereby the same artists repeatedly experience success:

> "you see… the repetition of the same biennials… which are all of the same artists and you sort of think… "is that a good thing or has everyone chosen the same thing that somebody else as already deemed good?"… it's the same people on the carousel." (Eleanor)

The findings suggest that lack of welfare support for casual labour, and in particular creative work, contribute to a sector which undervalues the work of women and excludes those with parental responsibility. This reflects the literature (Gill, 2002; Conor et al., 2015). More research is needed on how these factors intersect with characteristics such as ethnicity, class and disability.

Spatial implications

Artists in London benefit from increased opportunity for employment, greater access to private and public funding, and larger potential audiences for work. However, these opportunities incur significant living expenses. Sarah noted "London is really prohibitively expensive", and that "finding ways around that requires privilege… you have to know people who can give you cheap rent". Ben lived in a kitchen: "it sounds worse than it is. I like to think of it as a studio apartment. When I tell people they're like "what the f*ck?" but then when they come round they say it's alright, actually… my housemate has the bedroom and I'm in the kitchen diner thing with a bed". Insufficient social housing, private rent rates outstripping housing benefit and increased use of affordability assessments for tenants (Preece et al., 2019) exacerbates these problems in London, thus excluding artists without connections or sufficient capital from participating in the London art scene.

London creatives also noted that their practice is characterised by lack of studio space. Jessica notes that her peers "just have a studio in a corner of their flat because nobody can afford studio space". Sarah and her partner, also an artist, work mainly "from the kitchen table". Ben's collaborator lives "in a warehouse space as a property guardian so we've got more space there to make stuff". A property guardian pays a small amount to act as temporary, live-in security in unused commercial premises, a way of living characterised by flexibility and inherent instability (Ferreri et al., 2016), suggesting that some artists are willing to accept insecure living conditions for sufficient space to practice. For artists living and working in cramped, poorly equipped, or precariously tenured accommodation, the rich London cultural circuit may be less easy to exploit for the benefit of one's practice.

Cornish artists contend with different issues to those in urban settings. High numbers of second homes mean that "It's expensive – for Cornish people, local people… it does have that skewing effect that aren't reflected in local wages" (Eleanor). Eleanor adds that she knows other artists who sleep in their studios – "you're not supposed to, but they do" – as affording both rent and studio space is out of the question. Lauren notes that poor transport infrastructure in Cornwall poses problems: Tate is "a 40-minute drive away which is quite an additional cost and it's really hard to park in St Ives and it's quite stressful getting there… the cost of petrol and parking sometimes makes me question if the session is even worthwhile but of course I need to stay on the books".

Meanwhile, the relative affordability of housing in Liverpool meant that three of the four Liverpool artists, two of whom are aged under 40, had mortgages on properties which they own. The Social Mobility Commission notes that owner occupation is "one of the foundations for higher levels of social mobility" (SMC, 2017, p. iii). All Liverpool interviewees either practiced in studios or had dedicated space at home to work.

The varying experience of artists according to location suggests that access to affordable housing and workspace is a key factor in artists being able to practice. While London is the centre of the culture sector, lack of affordable housing and studio space, and reduced availability of social housing and housing benefits, mean that the London scene is not accessible to those without economic means or capital. While artists can make alternative livings elsewhere, reduction of the welfare support that previously allowed artists to carve out a career in the capital (see Albertine, 2014) now results in reduced choices for the less privileged, or those with caring responsibilities.

Effects on morale

The corollary of these findings was poor morale amongst interviewees. This reflects Prospect survey results which described morale in the sector as "abysmal…"; "dreadful", and "hopeless and grim" (2018, p. 17). Lauren said:

> "I've spent the last decade struggling to make enough money to survive, and I'm getting to a point where I'm not sure that I can do this anymore … because I can't hit my head against this brick wall for much longer… there can be challenge but there has to be a degree of stability knowing that you can eat and live somewhere and feed your family."

Similarly, Ben recently had "a massive crisis about making work at all" because:

> "I think the art world is utterly corrupt and… I find it increasingly difficult to justify making artwork. Having worked at Tate there's a lot of stuff… brought into focus: the whole thing is utterly corrupt and disgusting to me"

With widespread low pay and casual contracts, many artists need to utilise the safety net of state welfare at points during their careers. While Lauren agreed in principle that "austerity and challenge can create the need for huge creativity, and I've seen massive amounts of creative thinking and creative work produced…" she encountered significant difficulties without the security of a partner's earnings, which she poignantly described as "a lonely struggle". This demonstrates the extent to which the removal of the security of welfare has affected the wellbeing and practice of artists without certain levels of privilege, which now seem essential to achieve self-sustaining success.

Conclusion

Cuts to cultural spending post-2010 have been at a comparable level to wider cuts (Newsinger, 2015), however, the protean nature of creative employment means that workers also make livings in sectors as varied as community and social work, education, and professional services. As such, ubiquitous cuts have affected the ability of artists to make a living from creative work.

The data builds a picture where the CCIs are affected disproportionately by welfare cuts and austerity. Structural factors and spatial imbalances polarise the cultural workforce: interviewees perceived that the same small pool of artists and creators are consistently experiencing success. As in many walks of life, the essential ability to network, consistently upskill and constantly self-promote is easier for those privileged with the requisite economic, social, and cultural capital. In creative work, this inequality intersects with longstanding conditions such as insecure portfolio careers and the expectation of high skill for low or no pay, welfare reform over the last decade has certainly impacted artists' ability to support themselves and establish successful careers. This entrenches the underrepresentation of artists from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the sector.

The complex realities of life as a benefit claimant do not reflect the simplistic ideology of work paying. Misunderstandings of creative and casualised work contribute to ongoing difficulties for casual employees in all industries, with the welfare system set up to support more traditional modes of employment. Experiences of older artists show that along with grants for study and free training, pre-reform welfare systems were better equipped to provide a period in which the state accepted that artist income would be sporadic and provided an adequate safety net. While it might be argued that this support bolstered a much smaller sector, it resulted in exponential growth and a cultural scene in which working-class creativity was represented.

Artists now are not so lucky. There was no evidence from those interviewed of being able to easily dip in and out of the contemporary welfare system as needed, and there were accounts of perceived hostility to artistic careers. An eagerness to get artists out of the benefits system

results in incentives to become self-employed despite many artists feeling that they are missing essential business skills. This contributes to the exclusion of artists without the necessary economic, social and cultural capital from professional practice,

Temporary measures and benefit uplifts put in place at the beginning of the pandemic, along with Ireland's recent announcement of a universal basic income for artists (TCAGSM, 2022), suggest that a state-provided safety net for those in insecure employment is possible. This paper does not argue for unilateral state support of artists ad infinitum. However, the UK's "celebratory rhetoric" (Belfiore, 2018, p. 384) surrounding growth and soft power in the CCIs suggests that the sector has value and thus workers should receive some support in pursuing a career. Such support may address the problems of an unrepresentative sector while providing a model for casualised work more broadly.

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