

Putting the workforce first...

Dr Susanne Burns, Churchill Fellow 2017, is an arts and cultural sector consultant from Sunderland who travelled to Australia and the USA to study models of supporting artists whose work enables others to participate in the arts. Here, reflecting on her journey, she asks some critical questions

busy self-employed career with the support of a Churchill Travel Fellowship to visit the USA and Australia to look at ways in which self-employed artists are supported. I discovered that there were no easy solutions, no silver bullet, no quick fixes and that we were all grappling with similar issues. I was asking questions about how we can collectively ensure that artists are better supported. Can our sector be sustainable if our organisations are dependent on a pool of self-employed / freelance/ contract artists whose careers are not sustainable and who are only just surviving? As one Australian interviewee put it:

“Our industry is being propped up by independent artists who are not being properly paid, who have no security, no superannuation plans and whose health and well-being are suffering.”

These seem to me to be critical questions to be asking as we are living in times when the role of the artist in civil society is perhaps more important than ever before. Artists are on the front line of the group of nuanced practices we could loosely define as ‘participatory’ and in our current social, economic and political climate this work is becoming more and more important. But if artists are marginalised from the decision-making structures and systems that directly affect the way the work evolves and develops, aren’t we missing a trick?

For my Fellowship, I wanted to make connections with artists, key leaders and practitioners engaged in developing and supporting artists who >



San Francisco. Photo: Susanne Burns

It will come as no surprise to **Animated readers that workforce research from Australia recently estimated that less than 25% of all artists are ‘employees’ on a permanent or casual basis, being paid a salary or wages (1).** The remaining three-quarters operate as freelance or self-employed portfolio workers or micro businesses. Although we have no current research to compare to this in the UK, it feels about right to me. As a self-employed portfolio worker myself, I must state upfront that I embrace the many positive benefits of this independent and ‘hybrid’ form of working – flexibility, independence and

variety, challenge and stimulation, to name a few – but there are also many shortcomings.

The self-employed condition brings a lack of economic and social stability, often involves long hours working across multiple projects and roles and it can be very lonely working alone and with little support. Further, because we exist outside of the parameters of major institutions, we operate within rapidly changing systems and policy and political frameworks with very little power to lobby for change or to have our voices heard.

A year ago, I was privileged to be able to take two months out of my

carry out participatory arts practice. I wanted to explore business models, institutional models of support and support structures from which we in the UK could learn. I wanted to consider the issues and challenges through the lenses of the artists, institutions, educators / trainers, funders and policy makers. My trip started in mid-September 2017, in New York and I then travelled to Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles. From there I moved on to Australia where I visited Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane before returning to the UK in mid-November. Across the seven cities, I met a total of 90 people face to face. The learning was rich and I am still in a process of synthesising it.

It seems like an obvious thing to say but artists can only play their role if they are supported by the other players in the system – the funders and policy makers, commissioners and employers and institutions. As a complex ecology no player can operate in a vacuum and thus, social and civic impact can only be achieved when all components are working to the same end. All too often this is not the case.

This seems to me to make it imperative that as a sector we find ways to render artists' working lives more sustainable, stable and supported. A sustainable artist's career is dependent on several things but perhaps most importantly the practical conditions which enable them to earn enough to live and the presence of support for their emotional wellbeing. One interviewee expressed it as follows:

"I think sustainability is about the artistic sustainability of the artist's own practice, the emotional sustainability (and cost) of their work with people and the financial sustainability of their living conditions." (Employer)

I came across models that were artist-led where artists have taken solutions into their own hands and are working collectively to reach solutions. I was stimulated by activists and those engaged in developing collective and supportive movements, including the Creative Recovery Network in Australia and Artists U, based in Philadelphia:

"We are the agents of change that we need and we need to start valuing ourselves more." (Artist)

But, in addition to this 'self-care', I believe we have a responsibility to adopt an approach to 'shared care' that is sector wide. There was a recurring theme in my research of moving beyond individual to collective impact. In both the USA and Australia there was a recognition that the new paradigms needed within the field required a move away from the competitive to the collective; that the systemic changes needed in the sector were not going to occur without this recognition; and that we are interdependent and that no one institution exists in a vacuum.

"Moving beyond competition to a more ecological approach, moving to places where our common interest and concern leads to shared solutions, where collective impact and collaborative solutions create the key shifts that are required in the field must be our goal." (Employer)

I found many organisations making deep commitments to their artists in supporting training, providing health insurance, issuing part time contracts that provided security and, in some cases, providing retainers. It seems clear that we need individual organisations to take responsibility for the pool of artists upon whom they depend, ensuring that duty of care is taken and professional development is available and accessible.

However, there are issues around responsibility when so many artists are working across organisational boundaries and for multiple employers:

"...whose responsibility is it to address those challenges? Given that artists work for more than one employer – which one?" (Employer)

"Industry impact is key. We need collective conversations about the workforce. Competition is the key mode because of funding but we have to move beyond this. Artists are struggling in Australia and they don't just work for one organisation but across organisations. We are underfunded and potentially set up to fail because of our dependency as a sector on public subsidy, which breeds competition and not collaboration." (Employer)

In September 2018, a year on from my travel Fellowship, I attended the fourth International Teaching Artists Conference (ITAC 4), in New York. The

theme of the conference was Artist as Instigator. The conference explored the role and responsibility of the artist in society and so this resonated deeply with the questions I have been asking. How can artists instigate if they are not in the room? How can they instigate if they are not able to contribute to programme design and development? Power and agency must shift. A total of 250 delegates from 35 countries celebrated the need to instigate change and to place the artist at the centre of the conversation.

It seems to me that, back in the UK, we need a change in our employment practices that ensures the artists who are our front-line contact with society are informing our decision making, policy and practice. We need our funders to place the needs of our independent artists centre stage in recognition of the fact that we depend on them. We need our employers and commissioners to take responsibility for the development and support of artists they engage.

In the dance field we already have a 'movement' which is brilliantly supported by People Dancing; we have long traditions of field-wide partnership working, communality, collaboration and collective action in our sector. We are well placed to generate traction. In autumn 2018, there will be public consultation on Arts Council England's new ten year strategy – the early report on phase two of the research makes no mention of the needs of the workforce other than in relation to the imperative for it to be more diverse. Is it time for a collective conversation about our dance workforce?

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Full Report: www.wcmt.org.uk/fellows/reports/seeking-entrepreneurial-solutions-artists-working-participatory-settings

Blog: supportingartistsblog.wordpress.com

References

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