

**“Cultural capital won’t pay my rent...
On the importance of redefining artistic labour as work”**

A provocation delivered as part of a Theatre Mundi workshop ‘Infrastructures of Making’, 10th of November 2016 at SPACE.

I need to say at the beginning – I’m not representing Artists’ Union England’s position on these matters. We don’t have a formal position on the Major’s cultural infrastructure proposals. So I am speaking from my own perspective...

What I am about to share is both political and personal. It’s about my motivation in being a founding member of Artists’ Union England. It’s about some of my own challenges in trying to build a sustainable arts practice.

Some headlines about Artists’ Union England
AUE formed in my living room with 10 female artists in 2014. It came out of 2 years of conversations between 3 of us - Angela Kennedy, Sally Sheniman and myself. It launched publicly on the 1st of May 2014. It now has just under 300 paying members, and has started to offer benefits like legal representation to members. We recently affiliated to the TUC and have been recognised by Arts Council.

We’ve not been universally welcomed - there is a fear of professionalism – often perpetrated by well-established artists who went to art school in the days of grants and left with no debt, who could live in a squat, and then were able to buy a house in Hackney when they were cheap.

Today we don’t have the luxury of being unprofessional.

We spend 75% of our income on average on rent. If making art is a hobby then it’s easy to justify not properly remunerating people who make it. If making art is something that people don’t need to be paid to do then only an elite are able to do so, and then only an elite will be interested in it and so on...

One of those first 10 members of Artists’ Union England was awarded a prize to have a solo show at a prestigious contemporary art gallery in Wales. The award came with a small artists fee of £5000 and a production budget. Although the show was going to take most of a year to produce the artist really wanted to make the most of the opportunity so agreed on those terms. Halfway through the production period – the gallery turned round and said that due to local authority cuts to their budget they were reducing the artists fee to nothing.

Most artists based in the UK earn less than £10,000 p.a. from their practice. In 2014 71% of artists exhibiting in publicly funded institutions received no fee for their work.

The totally unequal power dynamics - Individuals versus institutions.

Precarious working conditions totally normalised.

Artists' fees are seen as a soft target for cuts because artists are expected to work in exchange for perceived cultural capital. The only people who can afford to take advantage of this working culture are people who are independently wealthy, commercially successful or have long term permanent teaching positions within art schools. They are over whelming male and white.

It's interesting to me that 70% of the membership of AUE are women and 60% of the membership have children under 18. It's women and children who have borne the brunt of austerity and we are the ones organizing.

If we redefine artistic labour as work – rather than a priviledged pursuit by an elite – then we can start organising with other low paid workers.

Artists and other low paid workers share similar concerns

- Can I afford private rents? (No – but I have to)
- Do I qualify for social housing? (Yes – but the waiting list if you are *homeless* is 18 months)
- Are my conditions at work exploitative? (Yes but I don't want to damage any future income by making a fuss about it)
- Can I afford to have a pension? (No but I can't afford not to have one either)
- Can I afford to have a child? (No but screw you with your social engineering)
- Can I afford childcare? (No but I need to find a way)
- How sustainable are my precarious living and working conditions?
- What toll is this having on my mental health?

As I've been thinking about the proposed creative zones – I've been in two minds. Yes I do think spaces for the production not just consumption of art need protecting. But I don't know that this should happen at the expense of other types of essential space such as affordable housing.

Studios need to be:

Long term

Accessible - lifts or level access

Warm

Safe and secure

Close to amenities

Have internet access

The thing is that this checklist applies exactly to housing. There's no point having a studio with all these things if you can't find anywhere to live.

My concern is that this initiative to protect artistic production space is a whitewashing off the underlying critical issues at the heart of gentrification... especially if affordable housing isn't properly tackled...

If a private rental cap is dodged...

If more social housing isn't rapidly built....

If access to quality affordable childcare isn't sorted....

If unpaid internships are allowed to continue....

If we continue to operate in a context where the market is the overwhelming logic....

These things are perpetuating structural inequalities and we are letting them.

If none of these issues are addressed but we ringfence artists' production space – then the only people who will be able to be based in London and use it are the people who don't really need it protected as they can survive the existing conditions.

Tackle precarious living and working conditions for all low paid workers. Then artists will stay. And not just the rich ones.

*Of the studio spaces I've used since I graduated my BA in 2006...

Warehouse – freezing cold, owned by property developer, temporary

Derelict pub – freezing cold, private landlord put rent up after the first year so we had to move out (this was the first iteration of the Royal Standard)

Corridor – temporary storage whilst we tried to find another space

Purpose built studio as part of the Bluecoat redevelopment – warm, dry, secure and long lease

Ex biscuit factory – freezing cold, run by supportive artist-led studio but building was sold to... property developers who despite assurances took up the break clause in lease and we were kicked out with 6 weeks notice – same studio as Phyllida Barlow and she was making her work for her Tate Britain Duveen show at the time.

Ex motorbike factory – V22 again – not too cold, secure but again – short term lease.