

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

ARTS FUNDING INQUIRY

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I am a full-time writer and performer, who also works as Co-Director of the performing arts producer Anatomy Arts and as a Creative Writing teacher at the University of Stirling. The following is a personal perspective on arts funding, as someone with ten years of experience working as a freelance artist and managing arts organisations in various roles, outlining some of the problems with arts funding in plain language, and suggesting policy solutions that could open up the conversation:

SOME MAJOR PROBLEMS FOR ARTS FUNDING

- 1) **Most artists I know cannot make a living wage from their work.** The younger they are, the more likely they are to be indebted, precariously-employed, and private renters, unable to access the social and economic capital of previous generations. Whereas previous generations of artists were to some degree subsidised by unemployment and other benefits, these routes have been cut off to most. This has a knock-on effect on diversity, as racialised and other minoritised people are even less likely to access support for their work economically, and face other social barriers as well. The result is an arts scene dominated by middle- and upper-class white people, still, at all levels of production and management, but increasingly-so further up the hierarchy.
- 2) **This means in turn that marginalised voices are tokenized and put into their own boxes:** the queer artist is only able to get paid to make art about being queer, for example, or the organisation that does good accessibility work is shunted from the “Performance” panel to the “Diversity” panel (this happened to one of mine). Marginalised voices are more likely to have to rely on crowdfunding, self-exploitation, non-arts jobs and so on in order to make the work they want to make.
- 3) **Publicly-funded arts do not command mass public support.** We are luvvies. We are seen as an indulgence. Not enough people see the link between publicly-funded arts, community and education arts, and private sector arts (e.g. an actor in a West End musical may make most of their money in the public sector; a school poetry workshop is only possible thanks to a public support infrastructure). Some of the blame for this must lie in which arts are funded: arts enjoyed broadly by richer people, such as opera and ballet, get the most funding support, whereas arts enjoyed broadly by poorer people, such as hiphop and videogames, get the least public support and are expected to survive in the commercial sector alone. The result is that when public spending cuts come the arts are often the first to go and the worst punished.
- 4) **Arts organisations are riven by multiple economic inequalities.** The gap between the wage earned by the Artistic Director of a national theatre and that earned by an actor in

that theatre is shameful. Those in administration and management have the most stable jobs and wages, while those actually making art have the least access to jobs and stability, with producers somewhere in the middle. That is, the arts model the inequalities of the wider employment sector, with executives consolidating their power, trickling up wages to the top, and exploiting the labour of those who actually make the commodity. This is also linked to and runs through the problems of points one and two, meaning that those marginalised by factors like disability and race are also hit by these inequalities.

5) There is no clear understanding of or approach to the gradients between “professional” and “amateur” arts. Far more people want to be involved in the arts than can currently find employment in the arts. Submitting your art to a wage-relation also destroys the pleasure of art for some. By necessity or choice, there is a large unpaid arts sector, from community drama groups to volunteer orchestras. This is a vital part of cultural life, but who has access to capital to support that culture is shaped by all the factors previously discussed: the more marginal your voice, the more likely your art will be seen as amateur and undeserving of support. It also creates a greyzone for all artists: as one moves from amateur to professional, because there is no formal apprenticeship (even arts qualifications usually do not lead to immediate employment), one takes on many free and underpaid gigs, and institutions are liable to exploit this to sell art and undercut wages. Support for “community” and “professional” arts is intertwined in fact but not in practice.

6) The ability to earn a living as an artist depends on a number of skills and capacities entirely unrelated to artistic ability, e.g. networking, application-writing, volunteering availability, interview technique, &c. These skills are also distributed along vectors of marginalisation, reinforcing social hierarchies. In particular, public funding is closed off to independent artists who cannot speak the language of funders and write a funding application; at present, support for them is mostly available through other freelance artists lending help. Meanwhile, full-time organisations often employ fundraising officers to help them access both public and private funds. The result, again, is that power and capital consolidate to themselves: it's easier to get money if you have money, and the cycle continues.

7) In Scotland, and most of all in Edinburgh, the festival model dominates the arts. In this model, employment for artists and art for audiences is made available only seasonally in order to concentrate a marketing push. In some cases, festivals market themselves as an opportunity artists must pay to be part of. As a result, the precarisation of the arts, and the ability of landlords and financiers to be parasitic on the labour of artists to the point of emptying it entirely of wages, is deepened, while the ability to create year-round arts institutions and community-embedded arts practice is weakened. Moreover, the arts become a special thing that happens in a specific place and time, rather than something threaded through life.

8) We don't know what arts funding is for. Is it to support art that cannot survive in the commercial market? To make the art that doesn't sell? Is it to ensure artists can make a living? Is it to diversify the cultural scene? To enable anyone from any background to access any artform, as artist or audience? Is it to strengthen the sustainability and economic potential of the Creative Industries? To invest for a greater return? Because

these different and sometimes mutually-exclusive aims are muddled together, we have a muddled and directionless approach to arts funding.

SOME IDEAS WHICH ARE NOT SOLUTIONS BUT MIGHT HELP FIND SOME

- 1) Artists' unions to negotiate pay rates with funding bodies, and funding bodies to refuse funding to any organisation which does not meet those rates at every level.
- 2) Arts executive pay for funded organisations to be capped at a 3:1 ratio to that of the lowest-paid worker (including maintenance staff).
- 3) For every administrator or producer employed by a funded organisation, an artist must also be given a full-time job making art. Alternatively, funded bodies must dedicate at least 50% of their annual budget directly to artists.
- 4) Professional and community arts to be managed by the same public agency, with a ratio of funding to be determined following research (but 50:50 seems like a good one to aim for to me). That is, for every £1 spend employing someone within a professional arts organisation (i.e. one that employs artists), £1 is given in to a community arts organisation (i.e. one that provides free/supercheap access to creative activities).
- 5) Funding bodies to have explicit policies to favour workers' co-operatives, i.e. arts organisations which are owned and democratically-managed by their workers. At least, as an interim stage, funding bodies to support the development of workers' co-operatives through training, starting with their own staff.
- 6) Artists' unions to establish new closed shop venues and publishers, &c., or to negotiate with existing organisations to establish closed shops, where only union members can work and pay and benefits are fixed.
- 7) Funded organisations to meet robust diversity quotas for employees, artists and audiences or face defunding. Quotas should be in excess of demographic proportions.
- 8) Funding bodies to make at least a third of their funds small grants (£1-5k) directly available to artists, with ultra-low entry requirements and monitoring. The "failure" of many of these grants to be accepted and celebrated.
- 9) Governments to invest in rent-free housing available to artists on application with ultra-low entry requirements.
- 10) Government-backed arts apprenticeships established, whereby one works at subsidised wages for 1-3 years learning acting or marketing with a guaranteed job at the end of it.

11) Any funding officer in a publicly-funded organisation is seconded for 25% of their time to an organisation any freelance artist can access to help write their funding applications.

12) Arts organisations and non-governmental funders to have an explicit policy of campaigning for unemployment, disability and other social benefits, in recognition that these are a crucial form of arts subsidy.