

Scottish Artists Union Report to the Cultural Commission August 2005

The Scottish Artists Union lobbies on behalf of visual artists, including applied artists, and protects and extends artists' rights. It is the only representative voice for Visual artists in Scotland

SAU is open to professional visual artists of all disciplines as Full members, and arts workers who can become Associate members.

We are registered as an official Trades Union and are currently researching the possibility for affiliation with a larger Union.

SAU is the only new Trades Union of the 21st century.

The Union receives no outside funding but is supported entirely by membership subscriptions.

Part 1

In order to focus on the position of visual artists within the cultural sector, it is necessary to address some wider questions about culture itself in order to give context to our position, we ask four questions

1. What is culture?

Culture is a mirror that society holds up in order to see itself reflected back from new angles so that it might know itself better. This includes a wide spectrum of views from the flattering, comforting, re-assuring view which might be quite popular, to more challenging perspectives that might pose difficult questions we prefer not to hear.

WE argue that the full range of this cultural activity is necessary, and is indeed intrinsic to society, and that the outer limits are important in defining what culture is, as distinct from entertainment and recreation.

We do not believe that any government should choose to support only those sections of culture with an apparent 'use value' in delivering their own political objectives. This is short term, because Governments and policy change, and is destructive to a long-term commitment to safeguard our culture.

A robust society needs a complete culture and should SUPPORT it in all its forms not just the most useful or the most popular.

2. Who are the artists, where do they fit into that pattern?

Artists are individuals within society with particular sensibilities, talents, skills and training (70% are trained to post graduate level) who become the professionals who, to put it simplistically, hold up the mirrors by utilizing a very wide range of contemporary arts practice.

Artists do not need to be 'brought-in' to the community they ARE community, they are already here they couldn't do their job otherwise, but they need to be noticed, valued and rewarded

3. What is the Visual Arts infra-structure

It falls into two categories working in conjunction to a greater or lesser extent.

1. VISUAL ARTISTS. They usually work as individuals; they work creatively across a wide range of media and creative platforms, sometimes collaboratively with artists in other sectors. They engage with communities and audiences across Scotland and internationally.

2. The enabling and provisioning visual arts infrastructure. This group is very large and includes cultural ministers and conveners, local authority officers, arts administrators, arts officers, curators, directors, educators, gallerists, arts writers and publishers, accountants, researchers, office managers and staff, invigilators, security staff, cleaners and no doubt many more, plus the buildings they occupy. This infrastructure absorbs about 90% of the visual arts funding. They enable art, its presentation, its critical position, and its education but they are all dependent on the creative output of artists for their employment. Workers in the infrastructure enable art - often in partnership with artists - BUT they do not create it.

4. What are the relative values?

Given the above situation, is it right, and does it make sense, that those working in the larger infra-structure all receive a living wage, yet the people they are dependent on – the artists- are not only the worst paid and the least valued in the visual arts sector, but across all arts platforms

An estimated 5,000 visual artists are practicing in Scotland and a recent Artists' Audit conducted on behalf of the Scottish Arts Council showed that 82% of visual artists in Scotland earn £5,000 or less from their artistic practice, 8% earn £10,000 while 28% of artists make nothing from their practice. Compare this with a national average wage of £25,000.

The Scottish Arts Council spends £3.2 million annually on visual arts including all core-funded organisations. By comparison (assuming there to be 5,000 artists practicing in Scotland and extrapolating the figures from 500 surveyed) £22 million is spent by artists on the material needs of their practice.

The Scottish Artists Union's requirement for a robust, healthy & forward-looking Visual arts sector is PARITY for artists. Indeed we believe we cannot achieve a robust sector without it. How can these two essential groups (the infrastructure and the creative producers) work together productively when they are rewarded and valued so differently?

Part 2

What does Parity involve?

Achieving Parity will include addressing financial reward, acknowledgement of the role played by artists, TRUE value rather than 'Use value' accorded to Artistic practice, and support for the specific and unique working practices of artists.

The Scottish Artists Union is currently addressing the working practices of Visual artists and list below specific areas of research and their current findings.

1. Income

There is no single model for artist's income. Artists generally obtain income from fragmented sources, which can change according to the availability of work and the need to have periods of undisturbed studio practice. Income can be derived from short term contracts within the community, health and education sectors; part time teaching within art schools and community sectors; part time, short term administration posts; gallery invigilation; sale of work in commercial galleries; commissions; exhibition payment rights; funded residencies; project funding and artists awards; and the Dole - this last being crucial for very many artists in the years immediately following art school.

It will be obvious that such an irregular and disparate form of income gathering, does not allow normal life planning – like mortgages and starting a family, it creates a sector of individuals who feel disenfranchised and insecure, and who spend much of their life seeking employment and juggling their finances. They usually remain without insurance or pension provision. Some artists do establish a measure of regularity within this system, but the majority do not and as the SAC audit showed, are often dependent on support from other members of their family to continue creating.

A further issue is that there is no regulation on rates of pay or working conditions across so many forms of employment. There are numerous reports of underpayment and poor working arrangements and contracts.

We believe that the adoption of a minimum rate of pay across all these sectors, which values artists as professionals would have immediate benefit. To this end the SAU have produced a Rates of Pay document for sessional and short-term contracts, which it is currently promoting.

Because of their low income levels artists have been dependent on SAC artist's awards and project funding. The inadequacy of funds to meet the needs in this sector has been apparent for several years, and perhaps even more importantly, the linking of awards to the Scottish Executives 'button pushing' political objectives has been seen as totally detrimental to the full development of artistic creativity.

Currently 10 –25% of applications by artists to SAC receive awards, but up 75-80% of applications are said to be eligible and of sufficient merit. Clearly this represents serious under funding.

WE believe that generously funded artists award schemes, broadly delivered according to artistic value rather than the fulfilling of political objectives, are paramount in addressing financial Parity for artists. We believe that artists should be fully involved in award making decisions. The removal of SAC selection and appraisal committees which included artist representatives is seen as a totally negative move designed to remove evaluation from the sector itself, putting the base value further back onto data and management.

2. Selling

Artists selling their work through commercial sources are currently severely disadvantaged by an anomaly in the VAT system. We understand that VAT is a reserved issue, but a recommendation could come from the Scottish Executive to investigate changes to the system.

When the total selling price of an artists work, from all sources, reaches £58,000 the artist must register for VAT. However that selling price includes gallery commission, now normally 50%, so the artist must register when their actual income is only £29,000 that represents an actual pre tax income of approximately £15,000. So just when that

artist reaches a point where they could see an income being established, they are faced with an immediate increase in sales price and the additional burden and cost of implementing a VAT system.

WE believe that artists would significantly benefit from VAT being implemented on their sales income calculated after deduction of gallery commission.

Tax - although very many artists in Scotland do not pay personal tax due to their low-income levels, specific systems to support artists in countries such as Ireland and Sweden should be examined as possible role models. This might also include tax breaks for companies' supporting/sponsoring the arts and gallery purchasing schemes. Currently publicly funded galleries do not cultivate a market for so called 'more difficult' work. This work is not found difficult in other countries where a market exists for contemporary practice.

We believe that core funded galleries should be required to develop marketing strategies for living artists work. Providing incentives for private purchase schemes such as national purchase Plan or Percentage for Art would assist artists to personally increase their income. However pushing 'enterprise culture' where artists are seen merely to be commercial producers must be fought against. The integrity of art must be preserved

3. Community Practice

The support structures for artists working in community situations are currently a matter of pure luck. There are no guidelines on appropriate levels of training and support for artists who can be asked to work with groups as disparate as long term prisoners, groups with severe mental health problems, outsider youth groups or epileptics. In addition because they are not professionals in that sector, they are frequently paid as temporary staff rather than the professionals they are. As self-employed individuals they are also generally required to have their own public liability insurance to a level of £3 million. They cannot afford this, and often cannot even obtain it.

WE recommend that a form of best practice for the employment of artists is urgently established and implemented across all sectors as a requirement of funding. And that Insurance should be provided by the employer.

To further integrate art and community, a scheme that would also benefit artists would be the provision locally, across the country, of exhibition spaces to showcase the work of local artists. Local Authority owned shop or other property could be made available for this purpose that would give added value to any town or village centre and act as a resource for community sectors wanting to work with local artists. Local forums could be set up regularly, allowing artists, galleries, council members, teachers, and business interest to discuss and better understand each other's needs

4. Studio Work

If society is to benefit from the integration of artists within community life, then it MUST be understood that an artists own practice is an integral part of that process. Studio work is the time when artists regenerate their creativity, develop new skills, and refine their ideas. This is the research end of their professional practice. This must be universally understood and valued. Without this there will be no continuity of the excellent work currently being undertaken in the community.

Artists require support and assistance, particularly at local Government level for the provision of reasonably priced studios in rural areas and in central urban locations.

The need to sustain studio practice must be understood and valued and provided for.

5. Education

Visual artists are increasingly providing art projects and events within the broad educational sector, in schools and community.

Artists must be remunerated as professionals taking experience into account. Best practice and working conditions must be established. For example artists should not receive lesser rates for setting up time.

Artists themselves need on-going developmental mentoring and professional development training. However artists can also be employed to DELIVER such training.

Part 3

Answers to specific questions posed by the Cultural Commission.

Encouraging creativity: What is the best way to maximise the creative potential of the people of Scotland?

The most straightforward means of stimulating people's creativity is to allow them DIRECT contact and dialogue with peoples who are themselves highly creative, i.e. artists and professional creative practitioners. This can be done through informal work with galleries, schools and community groups, where the artist makes personal and inspirational contact encouraging interaction with the world through creative skills in an all encompassing manner.

In addition formal and more deeply researched and structured partnerships can bring a creative, positive, imaginative influence to the thinking processes within areas of business, education and public sectors. Artists have the most astounding powers of resourcefulness, sustainability, problem solving, conflict resolution and personal stamina to offer society, but in return ask to be valued and rewarded in line with other professional workers.

Artists should be consulted during policy-making on subjects that concern them and their practice; the current dialogue between creative people and the Scottish Executive, should be an on-going and constructive debate to broaden our horizons and set far higher goals for society and its full cultural activity.

Pouring money into infrastructures does not in itself generate creativity. Support for risk taking and good ideas do.

Education: How do we develop artistic, cultural and social skills and provide cultural knowledge?

- Positively integrate the teaching and appreciation of the visual arts into the schools curriculum starting at primary school.
- Support and encourage imaginative contemporary art practice in schools beyond standard curriculum requirement.
- Allow children to openly experience art galleries, museums and arts practices as a basic building block to understanding how their society works.
- Ensure the emphasis of creative learning in art schools is balanced it should be a place where students can take risks and fail as part of a route to success.
- Encourage students to investigate creativity through mediums and process¹ in physical workshop and studio activities - rather than moving towards a purely measurable academic approach.

Art schools should develop an extensive learning program covering all practical aspects of arts employment and then should genuinely integrate its teaching throughout the degree course.

Arts training in specialist subjects should be made readily accessible and available to most communities through open workshops.

Artists should visit and teach in school environments as professional practicing artists and not as stand-in art teachers. Artists have a unique approach that they can bring into any teaching environment and this should be valued.

Marketing and promotion: How to increase and broaden the profile of the audience and the public engaging with cultural activity in Scotland?

Start by supporting the existing grass roots arts activity. Artists are already working independently with arts activity in unused shops, their own flats, empty local property, and environmental spaces. They are independently increasing the profile of artists and the arts at ground level.

The grass roots activity utilizes huge amounts of creative energy, is diverse and pluralistic in its activity and is beginning to spread outward from the central belt into rural and remote areas. It is madness NOT to support this energy, which is already providing much of what the Scottish Executive claims to be seeking.

Promote 'intelligent' coverage of the contemporary arts by the media who, within the visual arts anyway, seems attracted only to the sensational.

The institutional infrastructure: How best to organise and support the cultural sector in Scotland to deliver the maximum value in the most effective manner?

SAU believes that a Ministry of Culture separated from Sport and Tourism is essential. That a cultural civil service sector with established and professional knowledge of the arts infrastructure that can be carried between changing ministers or governments would be valuable.

We believe that arts funding should be administered at arms length from Government directives. The arts should not be a tool for the implementations of political objectives.

We suggest a central administrative agency, which could allocate ring-fenced funds to the community and public sectors for the administrations of their own cultural agendas. This would in turn be dependent on maintaining proper payments and working practices for artists across all platforms.

Funding can also be allocated to local authorities for local initiatives. Such a system would create a knowledgeable central agency working in partnership with other sectors, while leaving scope for local initiatives to respond to local need.

A central award-giving agency for artists should be supported in its decision-making by artists representing all disciplines and geographic locations. It would be beneficial for the central agency to have some parts of its activity based out with the central belt.

Politicians are keen to point out the high international standing of visual artists from Scotland. The majority of these artists have reached this standing through their own initiatives, totally unfunded from Scotland that has no funds available to support artists working abroad.

Any international funding coming online in Scotland MUST acknowledge the activity of artists by having open applications funds rather than supporting only closed enterprise type initiatives.

What is maximum value? What is value?

Recently published papers written by senior managers within the cultural sector, show a clear opposition to current political directives for culture.

Their opposition centres on the fact that values currently applied to the arts are based entirely on economic factors, the belief that there must be quantifiable value for money. Quantifiable means data and this is being collected in ever greater amounts on ever more topics usually relating to such factors as audience profiles and education targets, but never asking the most relevant questions about the work being presented or the personal benefit for the audience. Not only is this creating an escalating financial burden and workload on organizations and individuals, but also it is seen to fail totally to assess 'real values'. As one writer says it 'only quantifies that which is quantifiable'. In other words this burden has a demoralizing and flattening effect on the arts without ever attaining its stated purpose. Whilst we do not doubt the value of the arts within society or oppose genuine expansion of the connections between artists and the community, we also have to fight against that as the sole economic value system by which all arts funding and artistic value is measured.

However where this added value from the arts for the community sectors is acknowledged, then there must be strong parallel commitment of support for the arts from those sectors.

We say

Give artists parity with other arts professionals, support artists' grassroots creativity and energy and increase financial support to culture in line with the great aspirations the government has expressed for it.