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Manchester
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Validation beyond the gallery

How do artists working outside of the gallery system receive validation of their practice?

A qualitative study

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For Axisweb

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Axisweb



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Executive Summary

This report presents results of research investigating how artists operating mainly outside of the gallery, gain traction and visibility within their chosen idiom and field.

Through interviews with producers, commissioners and artists, the researchers sought views on current routes to validation and asked opinions on whether existing structures enable, or impede, artists' visibility and externally-affirmed success.

The findings reveal an ad-hoc and informal approach to validation in the field. The commissioners, producers and artists interviewed agreed that the responsibility for seeking and maintaining validation falls largely to artists. While this was accepted as the norm, the majority of artists perceive a lack of support structures to help those operating outside the gallery system achieve and maintain external validation.

Artists working outside of galleries are not a homogenous group. Practices, terminology and attitudes differ. The majority put high value on self-direction and "learning on the job". Whilst there is fluidity between gallery and non-gallery contexts, most artists differentiate between their own value systems and those of galleries. Many believe that public gallery commissions command higher status than the majority of "community" commissions; several experience "second-class citizenship" in the mainstream art world, finding their practices side-lined when positioned in gallery and museum education contexts; most do not view gallery validation as a good fit for their values and practices.

The report points to specific gaps in the ways these artists are currently validated, including a lack of critical writing, art reviews, mentoring, website exposure, commitment by organizations to artists as opposed to commitment to fixed term projects, and lack of funding streams for those working outside galleries.

The report concludes that the difference in values and ways of working between this field and gallery culture, demands a new and different structure of validation, one based on in-depth consultation with artists, participants, producers and commissioners.

“I’m not interested particularly in the market so the idea of making things just to sell them doesn’t appeal to me. I suppose I’m choosing to step out of something that I was never even given an open door to, and I’ve made that choice for ethical or moral or whatever reasons.”

Purpose

- 2 Validation beyond the gallery reports on research undertaken by Lucy Wright and Amanda Ravetz (MSA/Manchester Metropolitan University), in association with the charity, Axisweb¹.

The research investigates how artists operating mainly outside of the gallery system gain traction and visibility within their chosen idiom or field.

Through interviews with producers, commissioners and artists, we gathered views on current routes to validation and solicited opinions and experiences about whether existing structures enable or impede artists' visibility and success. Mindful that our respondents might have different ways of conceptualizing success - possibly even rejecting this category altogether - we used semi-structured interviews (lasting approximately one hour each) to capture differing values. We wanted to hear how artists conceive of success and visibility and about their own experiences of validation. The term validation was chosen to emphasize external recognition – public and institutional confirmation of the credibility of artistic work.

The research was conducted in two phases. Phase one (April 2015) involved semi-structured interviews with selected commissioners and producers working in national and international arts organizations in the UK and Ireland. At the end of each interview, the respondents were asked to suggest three or four artists to take part in phase two. Our rationale for using this 'snowball' technique was to focus on artists who already have national or international validation, thereby capturing first hand experiences of the validation process. Phase two involved interviews with 13 artists who responded to our invitation, selected on the basis of who could take part within the given timeframe. The second round of interviews happened during May 2015.

¹ Axisweb is a UK contemporary arts charity, agency and platform helping artists thrive in a digital world, by presenting their amazing talents, through connecting them with audiences and opportunities and amplifying their value to society. www.axisweb.org

Context

The research responds to a potential paradox within professional visual arts practice. Although there has been rapid growth in the demand for artists to work across a range of public sectors², the role and value of art practice taking place outside of galleries is often misunderstood, something that arguably impacts on the value and status attributed to work of this nature.

Work “outside of the gallery system,” describes a diverse range of practices and approaches, including being a (professional) practice in its own right, a supplement to studio-based work, or a combination of the two. The term “socially-engaged” art is often employed in a broad way to describe a wide range of practice, including but not limited to: collaborative, participatory, interactive, public and live art. Artists use and interpret these and other terms in a variety of ways, representing different stances and degrees of engagement with the art market and gallery system. This system is itself diverse, comprising commercial and public galleries and different routes via which artists might be assimilated into it. This can include being “represented” by a gallery or conversely “employed” within an education wing. The research explores the suggestion that recognition for such work is marginal in comparison to practice supported by galleries, and that routes to validation for artists working outside of the gallery system remain uncertain.

Investment in visual art from Arts Council England (ACE) is largely gallery-based, with only one organization that currently specialises in socially-engaged art (Artangel) making it into the 31 highest funded visual arts organizations in the UK.³ Many arts organizations generate income from outside the arts in order to facilitate their collaborative, socially-engaged art projects rather than relying on arts-specific sources of funding.⁴ While socially focused sources offer validation in terms of the extrinsic value of the work commissioned, given their priorities they are arguably less likely to promote the artists themselves or the intrinsic value of the work as art.⁵ In what appears to be the absence of well-established models for recognizing success for the large majority of artists positioned outside of the gallery, it becomes hard to know how those making exceptional work in this field achieve status and visibility.

While a number of scholars and practitioners have sought to circumscribe the field and provide a critical framework for delineating various kinds of art practice outside of galleries (Hull, 2006, Kravagna, 1999), little research to date has directly questioned how producers, commissioners and artists working in this way understand processes of validation – for example how such validation is conceptualized, experienced, acquired, and maintained. Existing research (Burns, 2015) does however imply that gaining validation in this sphere is highly challenging due to a) a lack of value placed upon such work and b) the informal and fluid character of networking processes through which validation might be assumed to occur.

² For example health, education and criminal justice has led to significant numbers of artists generating income from work with communities (Burns, 2015). Prestigious awards for socially-engaged practice such as the Leonnora Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change now exist. And commissions for artists such as Jeremy Deller and Theaster Gates have raised the profile of art conducted outside of galleries.

³ See www.a-n.co.uk/news/arts-council-england-visual-arts-national-portfolio-organizations-2015-18-2. Accessed May 30th 2015.

⁴ For example FACT which has a solid reputation for its collaborations programme and comes 7th in terms of ACE/NPO investment during 2015-18 with a projected spend of £47,000 will also generate £235,000 from elsewhere (Health sector, Housing Associations etc).

⁵ While non-art sources of funding validate artists' work in terms of providing funding for programmes, they are usually interested in the extrinsic value of the work they commission but have less interest in promoting artists themselves.

Interviews with producers and commissioners

4 Existing research about artists working outside of galleries takes two main approaches. The first comes from an academic and art historical tradition that questions the conceptual underpinnings of non-gallery artwork, critiquing its histories, theories and practices. Important exponents of this approach are Grant Kester (2004, 2011) and Claire Bishop (2012, 2004) whose work provides the beginnings of a critical discourse around art practice taking place outside of galleries.

The second approach takes a broadly ‘arts policy’ perspective. Typically commissioned by charitable trusts or small arts organizations, the research in this strand specifically related to this report, seeks to better understand the conditions in which non-gallery artwork is made, to establish the value of this way of working and to advocate for training and better infrastructure to improve the quality and experience of the work. This second approach usually seeks to influence policy in response to its findings. For example, *ArtWorks, Reflections on developing practice in participatory settings* (Burns, 2015) reports on a large four year programme funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF), with additional funding from ACE and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), that set out to support partnership working across the sector, to ensure that training and continuing professional development (CPD) are embedded in participatory work; to support better understanding of quality and more sharing of best practice; and to disseminate compelling information of positive impact. The programme was based on the premise that:

...artists involved in this evolving practice lacked the strategic support they needed to respond to the rapidly developing range of practices and opportunities that were opening up. We wanted to fill this gap with ArtWorks (Ibid:12).

Research to come out of ArtWorks comprises the largest UK study to date looking at how artists are supported to produce quality work in participatory settings. As such it forms a key point of reference for our own research. Nevertheless the programme does not draw an explicit connection between the quest for better quality and current structures of validation, nor does it investigate commissioners’ and artists’ experiences and attitudes towards validation in non-gallery contexts – the means and structures by which artists come to be known and respected for their work.

This report attempts to fill this gap by focusing on routes to validation, asking whether commissioners/ producers and artists find current structures of validation to be adequate. Our rationale is to see validation as an essential component of what artists need when working in settings such as those described in the ArtWorks reports. Without validation, quality work may not be known about or adequately supported. Where ArtWorks starts from the position that quality needs to improve, this research questions whether those working outside the gallery have similar access to validation as those attached to galleries. If not, what are artists’ and producers / commissioners attitudes towards this? And what is the impact of this on the artists working in this field?

The report *New Model Visual Arts Organizations and Social Engagement*, (Froggett et al, 2011) highlights the important role of producers and commissioners in supporting arts practice outside of galleries. Following on from this, phase one of this research involved approaching organizations that support artists who work predominately outside the gallery system, to interrogate producers’ and commissioners’ perceptions of the routes and structures that lead to visibility of such work. The aim was to find out how respondents understand routes to validation and their views on the advantages and disadvantages of current models.

Methods and methodology

A list of possible organizations was drawn up using dual criteria – that interviewees should either work for organizations, or as freelancers specializing in supporting non-gallery artists, and that they should be experienced (around ten years) in producing or commissioning such work.

The commissioners/producers from eleven organizations⁶ were asked about their role, their method for selecting the best artists to work with, their perceptions of routes to validation and visibility, and any advantages and disadvantages associated with these routes. The questions were designed with brevity, simplicity and directness in mind, in order to stimulate wide-ranging and open-ended interpretation and discussion, without over-influencing views about validation, while simultaneously ensuring a focus on the aims of our study.

We asked:

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What is your role in supporting artists working mainly outside the gallery system?

How do you decide who are the best artists to work with?

How do artists working outside the mainstream gallery system, achieve visibility and reputation?

What do you feel are the main advantages and disadvantages of the current system?

Finally, the respondents were asked to nominate up to four artists they felt were particularly successful in the field, who might be willing to be interviewed during the next phase of the research.

Can you suggest up to 4 artists who have achieved success in this field? Would you feel comfortable in us telling the artist you have nominated them (we are interested in speaking to them about their experiences of validation)?

The producers and commissioners approached were:

Rachel Anderson	(Artangel)
Susanne Burns	(Artworks PHF)
Nicky Childs	(Artsadmin)
Claire Feeley	(Situations)
Matt Fenton	(Contact MCR)
Lindsey Fryer	(Tate Liverpool)
Dawn Giles	(Bedford Creative Arts)
Gabrielle Jenks	(Abandon Normal Devices)
Lois Keidan	(This is Live Art)
Aibhe Murphy	(Create Ireland)
Laurie Peake	(Canal and River Trust)

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed.

⁶ We also conducted a scoping interview with Patrick Fox from Heart of Glass to establish some of the parameters of the research.

“Sometimes I think of it like being an artist's best friend, and then also a critical friend.”

“It's like a matchmaking thing, trying to find artists whose work is going to be relevant for the context we're commissioning in.”

6 Phase One Findings

Organizations contacted during this research reported performing a variety of roles: some focus primarily on assisting artists to realize their ideas in public spaces/participation, others focus on bringing art to new audiences and spaces, others on supporting artists to develop the skills to work socially for the first time, and others offer a platform for experienced “socially-engaged” artists to develop long-term collaborative projects in communities.

Role supporting artists

Organizations play a range of roles in supporting the development and promotion of art practice outside of galleries. For some this means providing alternatives to gallery engagement, while for others, such support takes place within or alongside a gallery context.

Key differences were identified at the outset between those organizations who specialize in work with artists with an established participatory practice, and those supporting artists to develop their work in this area, sometimes for the first time. A small number of organizations specifically work with artists who have already experienced some success in the field (2 of 11), while others (4 of 11) focus on facilitating early and mid-career artists to realize their ideas to work in social or participatory ways.

Around a quarter of the organizations focus primarily on the provision of education and training opportunities for artists, either via partnerships with art schools and universities, or through the development and/or delivery of programmes catering specifically to socially-engaged/participatory art. For one organization, the provision of career development opportunities represents a response to a perceived paucity within traditional art school training:

They're graduating almost totally and completely in gallery practice... They don't have any kind of preparation for interaction, for working with people, and yet the...chances are that a lot of their income... [will] come from participatory work.

(Susanne Burns)

Some organizations (2 of 11) also mentioned that they offer support in an informal way, through telephone, online and face-to-face advisory services, which can be accessed by the artist without prior invitation. One focuses more on the wider promotion of socially-engaged or live art, via publications and multi-media documentation, also fostering critical discourse in this area. Others offer specific commissions for artists working with communities/in participatory ways, or assist artists in securing funding to work outside of galleries.

Although several organizations work with large numbers of artists on a relatively ad-hoc or self-selection basis, others use a producer model, developing one-to-one relationships with a small roster of selected artists over an extended period of time:

Sometimes I think of it like being an artist's best friend, and then also a critical friend.

(Claire Feeley)

Although most respondents acknowledge an advocacy aspect to their role, many suggested that this is supplementary to self-promotional activities that they expect artists to undertake by themselves:

Other people need to know you exist. I think the hardest thing I find is that artists don't really realize how hidden they are.

(Dawn Giles)

Producers and commissioners deciding on artists to work with

The selection of artists by organizations is undertaken in two main ways; via open-calls and more structured partnerships with universities and art schools, and using very informal models around word-of-mouth and reputation. Several organizations use a mix of different methods and approaches to develop new relationships, however, most respondents acknowledged that awareness of an artist by name or reputation often plays a key part in their decision to work with someone or not.

It's happening through a lot of word of mouth, it's very difficult for a new artist, you know an emerging artist to actually break into some areas of employment because they're not known and they're not on the list so to speak and so you know a lot of opportunities aren't advertised.

(Susanne Burns)

Some respondents reported taking a highly proactive role in searching for artists, while others suggested that it is artists who tend to make the first introduction to working with an organization.

It's like a matchmaking thing, trying to find artists whose work is going to be relevant for the context we're going to be commissioning in.

(Dawn Giles)

People tend to come to us rather than us going out to find them.

(Nicky Childs)

In accordance with the organizations' position towards the importance of “social-engagement” as an established or emergent practice, commissioners and producers have different preferences about the kinds of artists they wish to work with:

We want people with a really strong studio practice...most of the artists that we work with probably don't describe themselves as “socially-engaged.”

(Dawn Giles)

I'm less interested in people who are just coming to this, because actually I think it needs years of going wrong... There's not that many artists I think that know this territory that well...

(Rachel Anderson)

Routes to success outside of galleries

Respondents agree that there is no established model for ensuring success as an artist working outside of galleries, and important differences were highlighted between artists pursuing a career around their specific, participatory practice and those working in communities to support their studio practice.

Being an active part of a community of artists, with strong peer-to-peer networking skills was felt by many to be important, particularly in terms of tapping into opportunities that might not be widely advertised. Some pointed to significant opportunities that would be highly beneficial to an artist's career and reputation, while others highlighted the gradual nature of becoming visible.

They just slowly achieve visibility without much intention, like they kind of don't pursue it, they just work hard and do the work for their own reasons and with time it starts to be noticed.

(Rachel Anderson)

For some respondents, this was perceived as a condition of work outside galleries, linked to the difficulties of making non-object-based art practice marketable and saleable.

At the end of the day, even though their work may work in a gallery context, most of it is not sellable.

(Nicky Childs)

This was almost universally agreed to imply a significant hierarchy of value within the art world. However, conversely, some suggested that working in this way possessed its own cache:

There's a status implied by probably the budgets and the coverage that one gets compared to the other, but I also think there's a kind of reverse status which is around where the energy is and where the excitement is.

(Matt Fenton)

Phase one: conclusions

8 A number of representatives questioned the value of visibility in its own right, particularly in the context of work with a social focus. The notion of mainstream success and reputation were questioned, with several respondents suggesting that socially-engaged work outside of galleries rests upon a different set of criteria. Others felt that artists' perceptions of success is linked to the freedom of opportunity to pursue a personal practice and make a living:

My question is why do you want it or need it? ... What does visibility do or give you, and what does it look like, what is it?

(Rachel Anderson)

However, others felt that artists working in this way are disadvantaged in comparison to artists in other fields, and thus require more support from organizations and funders:

It's such a lot of work and for an artist to take that on their own... they are not being funded enough as they should do, given the amount of time that they take to get up and running.

(Nicky Childs)

Possible solutions offered included the introduction of a programme of accreditation for artists working outside of galleries and further prioritised work within organizations. Some felt that the situation is already improving for artists working in this way, with galleries and organizations becoming more aware and sensitive to the needs and value of work produced with communities:

I think for years there just simply wasn't any of those markers...in the way that there are contemporary visual arts for example...but I think it's changing a little bit for socially engaged practice.

(Ailbhe Murphy)

At the same time it was also agreed by many that more could be done to promote and champion the work of artists outside of galleries:

There are crude mechanisms in place, it's not evolved yet, not sufficiently sophisticated to capture some of the complexity of the field.

(Ailbhe Murphy)

1. From the perspective of arts commissioners/producers, routes to validation outside of the gallery system are characterized by diversity and informality. There is no singular formula for gaining visibility as a practitioner in the non-gallery sphere and neither is there a uniformity of attitude amongst those interviewed towards the nature and role of validation in an artist's career.
2. Different organizations specialise in working with different aspects of social art practice, but on the whole those interviewed felt that the distinctions are badly understood, and thus not always adequately supported by organizations, communities, or the art market. Commercial representation is beginning to open up to socially-engaged artists, but does not always constitute a good fit for artists wishing to work socially. Not all artists choose to be defined by one system or the other.
3. Common ways in which artists come to be part of an organization's programme/roster were reported to be:
 - Self-selection – artists approach some organizations with ideas/for support with projects
 - Recommendation by other producers/commissioners
 - Artists' attendance at events hosted by organizations, i.e. discussion panels, festivals, leading to further exploration
 - Chance encounter, sometimes through producers/commissioners attending work or through informal 'scouting'
 - Selection panels – peer selection from responses to an open call for artists
4. Significant parts of the process of emergence/recognition as an artist working outside of the gallery system therefore take place via informal channels, e.g. networking with peers and others working in the field, attendance and participation at festivals, conferences and networking events.

5. Artists are felt by producers and commissioners to be largely responsible for their own approach to validation/visibility, and this is perceived to be an on-going process which needs to be maintained, rather than being 'fixed' once and for all, for example by a specific, one-off event (a possible exception would be an Artangel commission which is seen to have the potential to make an artist's career, but such opportunities are rare).
6. Producers and commissioners suggested that not all artists working outside of the gallery system are interested in visibility or recognition from the art world, or they may feel that they receive adequate validation in other ways through their practice.
7. Challenges of producing work outside of the gallery system are primarily perceived to be around time, funding and managing expectations around outcomes. Longer time-frames are felt to be required for socially-engaged work, leading to higher project costs, while a final, tangible object may not be the outcome of a work (some concern was expressed about the difficulties of marrying a high quality process with a high quality output and vice versa). Gaining validation and visibility was also felt to be a slow process for artists working outside of the gallery system. Producers and commissioners suggested that some artists find themselves side-lined into education, although this is not always perceived as a disadvantage.
8. Although difficulties around gaining visibility and validation of work outside of the gallery system were identified by a number of the interviewees, most volunteered that the situation is improving, i.e. that there are more mainstream opportunities, support and awards for socially-engaged art practice, and that there are significant advantages of choosing to work outside of the gallery system for those artists interested in working collaboratively. Some suggested that we should not think of a singular art world, but of many art worlds, with gallery representation being just one way in which art might be validated, while others felt that the differences between socially-engaged and gallery-based work were overstated and that many artists were able to move skilfully between the two.

Interviews with artists

10 Phase two involved finding out from artists working in this area how they understand routes to validation and the advantages and disadvantages of existing ways of growing recognition and success.

Methods and methodology

A list of artists was made from those suggested by commissioners and producers during phase one of the research. The criterion was that interviewees should have been recommended by those who had taken part in phase one, on the basis of having achieved some prior success in their field.⁷

The artists were asked about visibility and validation in their field, about measures of success, the comparative impact on an artist's career of gallery and non-gallery commissions, training received for the kind of work they make, routes to visibility of their peers and satisfaction or not with how artists working outside of the gallery are validated and championed.

We asked:

What do you think are the main routes to visibility and a nationally successful career for artists working outside the gallery system?

For a project outside the gallery context, what different aspects might be used to measure success?

What would have the most impact on an artist's professional status - a top tier gallery exhibition, or a significant project in a non-gallery context, for example working with communities?

Have you had any institutional training to prepare you for the way you work and if so what and where?

How have you come to know about the 'top players' in your field?

Are you satisfied with the way artists working outside the gallery system are validated / championed and if not, what do you think could be done to improve things?

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed for interpretations of validation routes available to artists working outside of the gallery system and suggestions of ways in which current structures might be improved.

The nominated artists who we interviewed were:

Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey
Ania Bas
Sarah Browne
Tim Etchells
Sheila Ghelani
Maud Hendricks
Laurence Payot
Geraldine Pilgrim
Poly-Technic (Kate Genever and Steve Pool)
Anthony Schrag
Joshua Sofaer

Phase Two Findings

Main routes to visibility and national success

Respondents agree that working outside of galleries demands an on-going and fundamentally self-motivated approach to getting a practice known and seen. They stated that there were few, if any, easily identifiable or established routes to success in the field, describing a range of contrasting – and often highly personalised - experiences of career trajectory, suggesting that there is significant diversity in approach and opportunities to practice outside of galleries.

There isn't a template, and there's so many situational factors.

(Sarah Browne)

I suspect what we have done is we have a huge skill set and contact list based on years of experience freelancing and what we've done is drawn on those in order to move forward and then build this practice that has managed to draw down external funding.

(Kate Genever, Poly-Technic)

Examples of successful or beneficial career progression practices included:

- the use of documentation
- social media
- print media
- responding to open calls
- networking and word of mouth
- developing new audiences
- cultivating key partners and institutions
- conference attendance
- festivals
- commissions
- awards

A number of these practices could be described as informal. In keeping with this, a strong network of peers was thought by many to be crucial to an artist's visibility and success.

Significantly, not all artists perceived a strict separation between their work inside and outside of galleries, several preferring to pursue projects on a case-by-case basis. Such artists reported the regular reassessment of the most appropriate contexts and positioning for their work:

I feel equally happy in the context of a museum, gallery or a theatre... I'm working between those different contexts regularly.

(Joshua Sofaer)

Some artists mentioned that while they sometimes work within the gallery system, this is most often as part of the education department. While for some, this is pragmatically viewed as the most appropriate site for the kinds of work they wished to pursue, many felt side-lined, sensitive to a perceived hierarchy between educational work and work displayed in galleries, and questioning how such galleries were using their skills to boost audience numbers:

If you start with how the work is seen in a gallery programme...the main exhibition is the work the gallery wants to showcase, and whatever happens through the learning door seems to be on page 15!

(Ania Bas)

If you're just engaging artists to boost numbers then that's just marketing and that's not art.

(Anthony Schrag)

Most respondents reported positive experiences in working with organizations and one commented that success is dependent on the support of an institution with resources:

You can't really be an artist and a successful one without those institutions behind you to support you, because those institutions are the ones that have the resources...they're going to be the ones that give you permission to do things.

(Anthony Shrag)

However, others expressed discomfort with the notion of visibility as a marker of success, one describing her ambitions for a highly visible practice, but not for herself as an artist:

I don't actually like being visible. That might sound very strange, and what I mean by that is that I absolutely want my work to be visible...but I personally don't like being visible.

(Geraldine Pilgrim)

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⁷ With one exception – Poly-Technic were recommended via one of the researchers and The Hepworth.

“When things work there’s not really an unpicking, there’s a knowingness.”

“I really truly believe in learning by doing, always have done.”

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Aspects used to measure success

Measures of success suggested were mainly socially-orientated and/or intrinsic: artists preferred to make relational judgements about the extent to which they had achieved quality, through measures such as how much participants are impacted by work, ability to co-produce the work with participants, knowing people feel proud to be part of it and potentially effecting change for individuals or communities. Several openly challenged the terminology and quantification of success.

Successful for who? ... It's not vocabulary I would even think of... I find it too bureaucratic and too funding-application-like, the language of fundraising and I try to escape it in my practice.

(Ania Bas)

...when things work there's not really an unpicking, there's a knowingness.

(Steve Pool, Poly-Technic)

Many artists spoke of success as related to quality, linked to asking difficult questions and challenging norms. For some, this reflected a commitment to art as an agent of social change, while for others, it was a catalyst for the development of the practice.

Most acknowledged difficulties around non-object making within the commercial art world.

The gallery system is predicated on making a profit through the artist, even if it's in the long term, even if individual projects don't make money, whereas I think that all the projects I do lose money.

(Joshua Sofaer)

At the same time, economic measures were invoked by several in terms of the success of being able to make a living through professional art practice:

I regard it as successful that I can live by doing this kind of work... I don't earn a huge amount of money, but I do what I want to do.

(Anthony Schrag)

Media coverage and social media were considered to be an ambiguous measure, with some artists actively engaging with it, while others felt that press coverage was an unreliable measure of success, due to being a purchasable commodity in its own right, or inherently unreliable.

Thousands of people could hit on the blog but that doesn't mean anything I suppose, because you don't know what they're looking at or its just because we've titled a blog entry that looks like a sex site...

(Kate Genever, Poly-Technic)

However, participation in critical discourse and inclusion within certain kinds of scholarly and print media were considered to be potential markers of success that might be widely denied to artists working outside of galleries. Other important factors that were felt to be strong indicators of success within the field itself included peer assessment and the subsequent life/afterlife of individual works, whether or not the work achieved mainstream notoriety.

Most impact on professional status – gallery show or non-gallery context?

A majority of the artists (8 of 11) answered that a high profile gallery show would have more impact on an artist's career than work made in a non-gallery setting. The question solicited a degree of ambivalence from most interviewees, with gallery backing felt by many to be more meaningful to others than to the artists themselves, and representing a very particular kind of success.

People seem to perk up and they think your work is suddenly of more value just because of the name attached.

(Sheila Ghelani)

I think the [gallery] system of validation has got narrower and narrower so it does validate the work, but in a smaller and smaller sphere.

(Steve Pool, Poly-Technic)

On the one hand, respondents reported feeling excluded from the gallery system, lacking the established routes or languages for entry, while on the other, they had made active choices to eschew these structures, either perceiving them as inappropriate to the work they made or simply inaccessible and therefore, unimportant.

For the work that I want to make, or the type of questions I want to raise, it feels at the minute more productive in the learning or education departments than to aim for having a show in a gallery.

(Ania Bas)

This question also solicited discussions about whether the idioms of art practiced outside of galleries should or should not be segregated from a holistic understanding of art and culture. Although some artists expressed the opinion that there should be more specific awards and opportunities for socially-engaged or participatory art, others would prefer existing structures to open up to different kinds of practice, thus avoiding the application of limiting labels and categorisations:

I choose to engage differently...but certainly don't want to be labelling myself as a different type of artist. I don't think it's productive.

(Ania Bas)

Training

Most respondents with art school backgrounds reported that their formal training had been predominantly object-based and gallery-focused, (or in much fewer cases had involved performance art).

Object-based training was not necessarily perceived as a negative, however, as it was felt by some to provide a broad-based cognitive skillset which proved relevant and applicable to later work in a range of contexts.

There is something about the art college experience that goes with people who work in this kind of way...people who are focused upon a practice, focused on internal decisions about things without the external validation, focused

on not expecting to have a normal career, focused on being self starters and self critical processes, so I think it would be unfair to say art college did not prepare me to do what I have ended up doing...

(Steve Pool, Poly-Technic)

Others had little formal training in art, having come from a different discipline, such as human geography or education, while several had a mixed background, having trained in more than one field. Most felt that they had primarily learnt on the job and expressed a strong belief in the value of learning by doing/self-organised learning.

I certainly didn't have any training in participatory work... I really truly believe in learning by doing, always have done.

(Geraldine Pilgrim)

Many respondents took a strongly pro-active position towards their own continuing training and development, regularly seeking new opportunities to enhance their skills, although not necessarily within arts institutions/organizations. A number of respondents were highly sceptical of continued professional development, associating this with instrumentalization of the arts and attempts to further divide different idioms of art from one another. One artist suggested it might be the institutions that needed training and not the artists.

I would be highly hesitant to require that people who work in a public realm learn the right way to do it... I don't think it's necessarily about the artists that need training, I think it's about the institutions that need training. I don't mean that they're doing it wrong, I just mean that it's new... Let's talk about what is possible within this type of work and actually what's interesting about it.

(Anthony Schrag)

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“One of the reasons I was drawn to working with participation is because it did have a different set of value systems and value judgments.”

“I think the focus from the main arts bodies should be about creating art.”

14 **Knowledge of top players**

Although the notion of ‘top player’ was met with resistance by a number of those interviewed, most artists agreed that awareness of the field and identification of a peer-group was primarily conducted through informal channels. The use of social media, reviews, word-of-mouth, and regularly going to see work were commonly described.

You’re continually educating yourself, you’re continually going to see work, you’re continually talking to other artists...
(Sheila Ghelani)

The answers also reflected the more general finding that this field demands a high level of self-direction – not only in terms of developing a profile but also keeping up-to-date due to the lack of art criticism or inclusion in mainstream art journals. The social nature of much networking was identified as something that potentially disadvantaged those involved in parenting, with these artists reporting significant difficulty balancing competing demands.

I think I don’t know enough about them! ... I’ve got a family of three children and I’ve got the work and I’ve got very little space to roam around in between those two things.
(Maud Hendricks)

In addition, artists were concerned that a general lack of visibility hampered their work reaching a wider, less actively engaged audience.

Sometimes you wonder how much people really do know about you. Word of mouth is a force unto itself. Great when you meet someone new who’s seen your work.
(Heather Ackroyd)

Organizations were considered to be key for most artists in developing current knowledge of the field. Although some mentioned the initial challenge of identifying appropriate organizations to support their practice, for others success was defined by top institutions programming and commissioning work, rather than this being a measure applied to artists.

Top players? I’m trying to think who the top players in my field are. Are there top players? ... I would look at it differently. I would say there’s institutions I want to work with, top institutions...
(Anthony Schrag)

Satisfaction with how championed/validated and possible improvements

With some qualifications, respondents were universally dissatisfied with how artists working outside of galleries are championed and validated.

I don’t think that artists who work outside of the gallery system are validated or championed very much, so there would definitely be ways to improve things.
(Ania Bas)

This was primarily attributed to a lack of comparable channels for the promotion of non-gallery art alongside object-based, gallery work. For most, the non-object-based, non-commercial nature of this kind of practice represents an inherent challenge to visibility, although others cited the highly public nature of the work as pivotal to a different kind of visibility. One respondent felt that artists working professionally outside of galleries tend to develop key skills in negotiating these issues to the benefit of their practice:

I feel like artists who do work outside of the gallery...tend to be quite independent. They’re quite good at pushing themselves and finding money to do things.
(Laurence Payot)

However, others suggested that unhelpful distinctions between different kinds of gallery involvement lead to lower status for artists working with communities, which some reportedly sought to conceal in their CVs and websites.

A lot of artists that I know...don’t talk about any work that they would do for the education department...in fear that this would mean that they would never...be invited to do a show in the gallery.
(Ania Bas)

Despite this, many were ambivalent about the idea of being validated according to existing gallery-centric norms that were felt to conflict with values and political ideals.

Amongst me and my peers, we might consider somebody that goes towards gallery representation, starts making discrete objects as somebody who has sold out. Other people might think they’ve arrived.
(Joshua Sofaer)

A number took the view that they work outside the gallery because of the different values and judgments attached to those ways of working.

One of the reasons I was drawn to working with participation is because it did have a different set of value systems and value judgments.
(Anthony Schrag)

I’m not interested particularly in the market so the idea of making things just to sell them doesn’t appeal to me. I suppose I’m choosing to step out of something that I was never even given an open door to, and I’ve made that choice for ethical or moral or whatever reasons.
(Kate Genever, Poly-Technic)

Suggestions for improvement include:

- the provision of more awards
- increased critical discourse (within established arts journals and magazines, or in new independent publications)
- more commissioners committing to artists over a period of time (rather than to discrete projects or works)
- a centralised website for practice outside of galleries
- different funding strands
- better mentoring opportunities with other practitioners

Most respondents expressed the opinion that the commercial, numbers-led art world was potentially detrimental to the development of high quality and original artistic practice.

I think the focus from the main arts bodies should be about creating art.
(Maud Hendricks)

Phase two: conclusions

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1. There is no singular route to validation/success for artists working outside of galleries, and a range of routes are described. These appear to differ over time. Adaptability, diversification of practice and perseverance are frequently cited attributes required for the artist to develop a career.
2. (Appropriate) structures to validate and champion art outside of galleries are lacking. Most artists do not question their responsibility to self-promote, although few expressed satisfaction with the current situation for artists who do not produce marketable objects.
3. The professionalised art world is a hierarchical space, and while some improvements are being made, gallery backing is perceived as the key to success and visibility for most artists. Art produced outside of galleries is often perceived to be of lower status, and can be “tainted” by art conducted by those who are not professional artists (sometimes referred to by interviewees as ‘community art’).
4. Artists working outside of galleries are not a homogenous group. Language used to describe such work is highly contested and often leads to misunderstandings. Some artists choose not to work with galleries for ideological reasons, some do not feel their work is appropriate for galleries, others that their work would not be accepted in galleries. Some work between galleries and outside of galleries. Some work in the educational departments of galleries, but do not show objects in the gallery. However, most believe that public gallery commissions command higher status than the majority of “community” commissions.
5. Artists display different attitudes towards the documenting of their practice, and the status of such documents. A binary is sometimes drawn between object makers and non-object-makers, but artists working predominately outside of gallery contexts did also report producing art objects on occasions.
6. Artists frequently reject/mistrust institutionalised/ bureaucratic definitions of success. Many stressed alternative value systems which are less obviously measurable/quantifiable. There was a perception of the gallery system as one more suited to the measuring of work.
7. Although specific training opportunities are rare, many artists express a preference for “learning on the job”, independently identifying areas of weakness to address through training outside of art institutions. Several interviewed expressed concerns about the standardisation of education for artists outside of galleries, suggesting that it is based on mercenary ideas, and would hamper the process of artists.
8. Although most artists felt that established art world channels need to open up to work produced outside of galleries, most were concerned about creating a sequestered space for socially-engaged art that segregates it from other kinds of art making. Most want the work to be recognized as part of the wider art world, with its own specific contribution. At the same time it is not easily measurable by the same criteria as object-based art making.

Overall Conclusions

The research set out to discover how artists operating mainly outside of the gallery system gain traction and visibility within their chosen idiom or field. We interviewed commissioners and producers in phase one of the research and artists working predominately outside the gallery in phase two.

The findings from the two groups concur on the majority of points. They reveal that there is no uniform approach to validation for those working in non-gallery contexts and that continually building and maintaining networks and relationships with peers and supporters is absolutely crucial for artists working in these ways. Though interviewees from both groups believe that support from different organizations is essential at different stages in an artist's career, they also agree that the responsibility for gaining and maintaining validation falls largely to the artist at present. This was accepted as the norm, but also queried, particularly amongst the artists. Artists are keenly aware of the lack of support available to help them achieve and maintain validation.

The main difference between the two groups concerns their satisfaction - or not - with the current routes to validation. While most producers and commissioners believe these routes are gradually improving, the artists, with some qualifications, are universally dissatisfied with how things stand. They cite various gaps in the structures of support as problems: lack of critical writing, art reviews, mentoring, websites, commitment by organizations to artists as opposed to commitment to shorter term projects, and funding streams. Many of the improvements they suggest come with the caveat that these should be responsive to artists' need for self-determination, given the diversity of practices that make up the field and artists' requirement to ground or embed continuation, learning and change within their individual practices.

The strongest message to emerge from the research is that the majority of artists working in this area are motivated by different value systems from those they see underpinning mainstream galleries and the work shown there. Many chose non-gallery contexts in order to ask critical questions about social worlds, rather than to make saleable art objects. This choice can result in what is experienced as a form of “second-class citizenship” in relation to the mainstream art world. Despite some fluidity between galleries and non-gallery contexts, artists may experience their practices being side-lined when positioned in gallery and museum education contexts.

To conclude, we suggest that the diverse values artists bring to their work in this field must be carefully listened to and taken account of if there is to be a rethinking of systems of validation for those working outside of the gallery system. Any new provision should be artist-led and/or developed in close consultation with artists who have achieved a range of different kinds of validation already. Without this, artists could be disenfranchised through external values being imposed upon them in “top down”, regulatory ways. This in turn might undermine the existing quality and nature of artists' work occurring within the broad category of socially-engaged / non-gallery art.

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