Impact of COVID-19 on Visual Arts Workers

Summary of findings

May 2020

earthen lamp.

Contemporary Visual Arts Network

Introduction

This study aims to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related lockdown on the visual arts sector. It was commissioned by *Contemporary Visual Arts Network (CVAN),* working with *Artists' Union England, a-n The Artists Information Company, ArtQuest London, AxisWeb, Curator Space, DACS, Engage,* and *Guild* as a rapid action tool. It was initiated to understand the position of the workforce dependent on freelance gig economy in the visual arts sector in the UK and investigated their response to emergency sector support measures announced by *Arts Council England (ACE)* and *HM Treasury*. The study included responses from a range of individuals that work in the visual arts sector - from artists and makers to technicians and fabricators, from curators to consultants.

An online survey was circulated to visual arts workers through established networks of the partner organisations. Efforts were also made to reach individuals in the population of interest who are not digitally active. The online survey was live from 9 April 2020 to 25 April 2020 and a total of 1,038 completed surveys were received. The study was delivered by *Earthen Lamp* who have compiled an overview of the key findings from the study in this summary. More detailed findings are available in the full report. These findings will inform how best to support the sector and individuals working within it over the challenging time ahead.

Immediate impact of the pandemic

Respondents were asked about the impacts they were experiencing of the pandemic and related announcements.

| Impact	Percentage
Ability to get future work	58%
Postponement of contracted work (indefinite)	51%
Loss of contracted work	44%
Loss of commission	31%
Postponement of contracted work (definite)	29%
Loss of full time or part time employment	22%
Other	17%
None of the above	3%
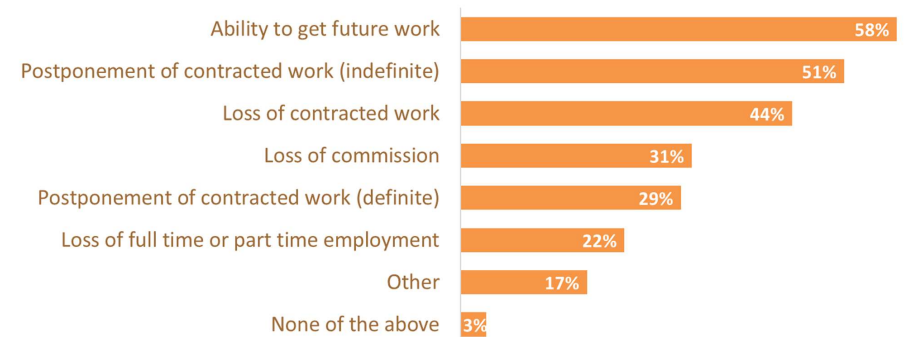
- 58% are worried about their ability to get future work.

- 44% of visual arts workers have permanently lost work since the announcement.

- Other responses included loss of access to spaces or collaborators due to travel restrictions.

"Most of my earned income has come from the community and participatory arts sector, which at the moment and for the foreseeable future has been shut down. But also, as an artist, the galleries are closed, so there's little opportunity to see art, let alone exhibit, and socialise with other artists, networks etc. It's still early days, but I'm already feeling a form of cabin fever."

The need for support

- 47% of respondents are trying to find out which of the support measures apply to them.

- 20% feel they are not eligible for support, related to diversity in forms of employment and complex income sources of respondents.

- 8% are not currently looking for support.
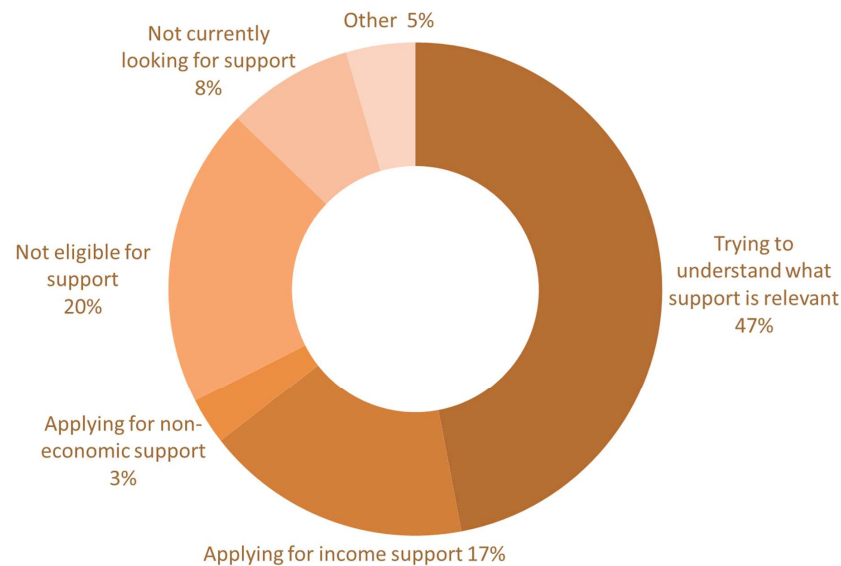
- 34% believe the measures announced so far are not useful to maintain their creative practice, while 24% believe that they are useful to them.

- 74% are not satisfied with the variety of support measures announced by the sector

- Respondents requested clarity and consistency of information about support available to them, with more timely distribution. At times the application processes appeared competitive which complicated the process for them.

Awareness of support measures
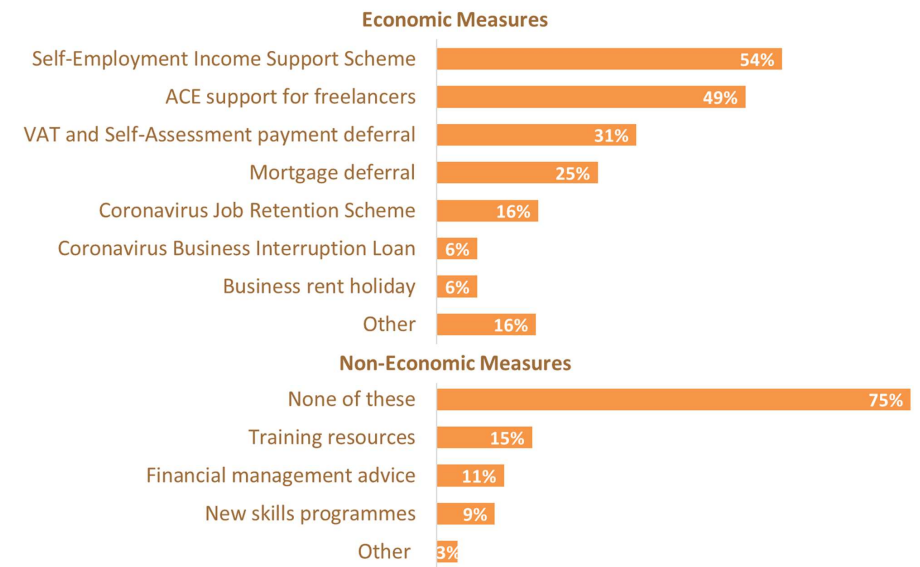
- 54% feel that the HMRC self-employment support measures are relevant to them while 49% feel that the *ACE* support is relevant.

- 6% are hoping to access Business Rent Holiday and a similar percentage, Business Interruption Loans.

- Other support measures being accessed included Universal Credit and grants from local councils.

- 75% are not aware of any other (non-economic measures) put in place by professional bodies and support organisations.

- 15% are aware of training resources being made available while 11% are aware of financial management advice during the pandemic and lockdown.

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Impact on life and practice

When asked about the impact of the pandemic, by far the most frequently recurring impact was on individuals' wellbeing and mental health, with 43% of respondents including some level of detail on this. The vast majority of this was negative and sometimes very concerning. Some framed this as a positive opportunity and referred to pre-existing conditions such as social anxiety that had been eased. Stress, isolation, and anxiety were the most frequently mentioned issues contributing to mental health and wellbeing pressures, although some respondents did note that working in isolation or remotely is not uncommon for them as artists.

Around a third discussed the immediate and longer-term loss of income, either from cancelled commissions or from postponed work where there had been 'sunk costs'. Additional loss of income had been experienced from non-arts work that had been offsetting respondents' visual arts practice (often in education and health or support settings). Some respondents referred to the precariousness of their existence as visual arts workers and noted that they tended to operate without a financial safety net.

Many responses were connected to freelance and self-employed status and the support available from government (23%). Within this total respondents stated clearly that there were no schemes available for their art form or status, others reported that they didn't understand eligibility criteria, and some were finding it difficult to find time to sift through multiple options for support and grants to find relevant sources of support. Across the piece there were references to there being lots of information in different places, which led to confusion. All of this was played out against a backdrop of stress and anxiety caused by the current circumstances which have decimated working opportunities and increased caring responsibilities and role conflict in many cases.

Over a quarter of responses discussed the current situation having some form of impact on their practice and productivity. Many of these responses referred to a lack of motivation to work. Others had responded to the situation by revisiting plans and administrative tasks that they had not previously had time for, and still others were redesigning their approach to practice to take into account the other demands on their time, lack of studio access, or a shift to online models of delivery and sales.

"One area that needs addressing is the pressure on creatives to be ready, to race to get a response quickly and online. Yet we also have family and care responsibilities as well as needing time ourselves to consider this extraordinary situation."

There were references, both implicitly and explicitly, to the 'role' of arts and culture, particularly in a time of crisis. Within this there was frustration at the expectations placed on art, and artists, as a way to support people to 'cope' with the current circumstances – seemingly without consideration that artists are also trying to cope and that offering this support comes at a financial and sometimes personal cost.

Loss of momentum was specifically referenced by 6% of respondents but is worth drawing out as one of the wider implications for the sector. The impacts of this were felt from early career and emerging artists through to established practitioners who had invested time and resources in developing networks, collaborations, and trust. In 5% of all responses there was specific reference to artists reconsidering their work in the field and either retraining or giving it up. Over a third of responses referred to the unclear future, particularly economically, and the impacts of this on getting future work. Some respondents framed this as an opportunity to reset and consider a new system that addressed some of the existing systemic challenges, although they were not optimistic that this would take place.

"The current situation is having an impact on my mental health too as I worry about sustaining any kind of career in the arts in future as there will inevitably be huge cuts to public funding and organisations closing over the next few years without a huge investment from government. I feel a 'brain drain' may be the case for many in the arts across all levels of career stage as we have to look in different sectors for work."

Positives and the unexpected

Respondents were asked to illustrate positive or unexpected impacts they had noted of the pandemic and lockdown. While some reflected on the positive outcomes on themselves and their lives, others focussed on the impact of the current situation on their practice. The most frequent terms used to illustrate the impact was "time". The availability of time to slow down and spend with children, friends and family, on gardening or exercising was seen as a positive as was the time and head space available to spend on their practice or profession. Respondents took time to reflect, declutter, organise, and archive, practice, develop skills and respond to training opportunities. Some used the time to re-connect with other artists and professional networks.

"Appreciating what I have, learning to take time, slow down, use my garden as inspiration, make and do, use to-hand materials more than ever. Use the solitude for reflection. Appreciate nature more. I've learnt new digital skills, created slideshows with audio and shared on social media, connected with people via Zoom, done an online live-stream recorded artist talk with public participation. Learnt new routines, learnt not to rely on travel to do things. Learn to make food last longer, growing my own veggies from seed. Learn to be resilient."

Digital manifestation and collaborations were mentioned by many respondents as an unexpected outcome of the situation. More respondents created work digitally, with some receiving specific grants to undertake such work. For some, working digitally to undertake workshops and collaborating was a new experience and they have used the lockdown to learn new digital skills. The digital sphere unexpectedly allowed respondents to reimagine their work and create new and interesting art. However, it should be noted that not all artists are happy about the profusion of digital artistic content and the reliance on online media to keep their practice alive.

Around 3% of respondents also mentioned the unexpected impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning opportunities. While some indicated that they have now started to teach online, others who were already teaching (physically or digitally) have had more opportunities and inquiries to teach. Many respondents highlighted that they were attending free workshops and other learning opportunities online.

With regards to specific initiatives, #artistsuspportpledge was mentioned by 3% of respondents as something that has provided a "motivational boost" and an opportunity to sell work online at a time when other avenues for sales are not possible. That said, not everyone has had a positive experience of this initiative as for some this has not resulted in sales.

Finally, respondents discussed the unexpected impact and interaction with their community as a positive outcome. Many respondents have volunteered for the NHS or used their skills and time to benefit the communities they live in or the artistic community they belong to. This has ranged from helping the NHS as volunteers, neighbours through Mutual Aid action groups and using skills to make banners and sew scrubs.

"A lovely and very successful artist that I hardly know has volunteered to help my stepmom and dad as I am too far away to help - they are in Canterbury and I am in London. He lent her books which was massive for her as she's 87 and not at all digitally /technologically connected. A general generosity with artists - but never surprised by that - that's what we do...."

It should be noted that one in five respondents felt that there were no positive impacts of the current situation.

Profile of respondents

- 69% of respondents identified their primary profession as artists or maker.

- 5% are involved in education learning or participation through visual arts while 2% are technicians, art couriers or facilitator.

- 64% have worked in the visual arts sector for over ten years, while 10% have for less than three years

- 45% are fully dependent on the sector for their income while only 13% are dependent on it for less than a quarter of their overall income.

- 17% were under 35 and 8% were over 65.

- At least 15% of respondents identified as deaf or disabled.

- 63% of respondents are happy to be contacted in the future for further research.
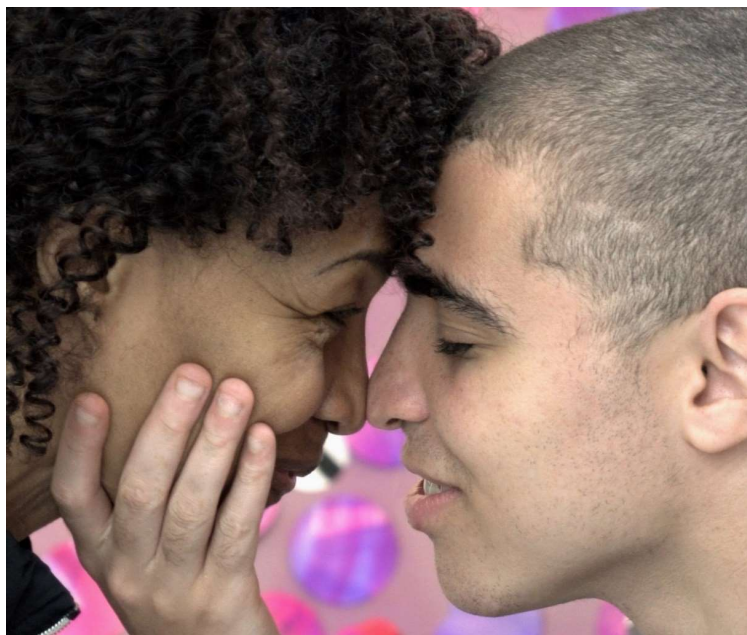
Reflections

The precarious nature of working in the sector was highlighted, including the fact that the pandemic outlined the structural inequalities embedded in the arts system. Disabled artists expressed difficulties in having lost support structures for day-to-day life as well as arts specific support. Lockdown circumstances were also noted as being difficult for parents and for those with gender dysphoria or living with domestic violence, for example, where the inability to travel or seek external support was potentially damaging. Some respondents pointed out that their working models or family circumstances meant they were relatively unaffected as they did not rely solely on the visual arts sector for their income. Others expressed frustration that these types of circumstances represented an alternative form of subsidy, and that consequently it was unfair for visual arts workers who were not in need to apply for grant funding and other support. Respondents noted that whilst they were grateful to *ACE* for the rapid efforts they were making to support the sector, the work required to navigate the bidding process was significant and time-consuming. For some the funding opportunities felt like a lottery, and others noted that the support was being directed to those who had a track record of funding, and that these individuals and groups were not the only ones in need.

For some the circumstances have prompted an emerging sense of community and collaboration, and for others the possibility of a new model and understanding of the sector and how to support it. Others were hopeful that there would be a broader discussion around the meaning and value of art to society, particularly given the messaging around creativity and participation as a coping activity. Feedback received suggested that the focus of support ought to be on the 'rebuilding' phase after the immediate crisis, with several respondents noting that medium-to-longer term challenges to practice and funding will be more significant than the current timeframe.

Many respondents took this opportunity to say thank you for the chance to express their particular concerns, and to express their gratitude that these questions were being asked, in order to advocate on behalf of the sector.

"Thank you for doing this. Hope it brings about some useful data. I think it would be really useful to try, somehow, to assess how beneficial institutions and 'general public' believe the arts & culture sector to be. Is it integral to health and wellbeing, for instance, or policy making, or research? This may help build a case for future financial support."

Earthen Lamp exists to bring bright thinking to cultural and heritage organisations and creative businesses. What sets us apart is our straight-talking approach, our experience, and attitude to tackle any challenge with gusto. We believe that simple ideas and solutions can light up the darkest corners and solve complex issues.

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Page 8: susan pui san lok- Sister O Sister 2019, Medium recycled cardboard, window vinyl, bowls, salt. Installed at Firstsite as part of her show A Coven, A Grove, A Stand. EVAN/East Region.

Page 9: Mikhail Karikis, I Hear You 2019, Installation video still. Commissioned by De La Warr Pavilion and Project Art Works. Image courtesy the artist. CVAN/ South East

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