FROM NET—WORK TO MESH—WORK

VALIDATION FOR SOCIAL
PRACTICE ART AND ARTISTS

A REPORT BY
AMANDA RAVETZ AND LUCY WRIGHT

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"I don't feel very validated…"

"...unless you put those supports in for yourself, they don't really exist."

(ARTIST, 21A)

Foreword

by R.M. Sánchez-Camus

Envisioning and developing spaces of care for social practice is a radical act of reimagining the framework of society. The artists and organisations who support this movement are working at the forefront of a creative practice that is urgent and timely. The intelligent and articulate enquiry in the following report offers us a series of new definitions, of critical enquiry and is in itself an act of validation and a call to creative arms.

This is no small feat in the context of contemporary Britain where the wealth gap has increased to record highs,[1] with the knock-on effect of widening the health gap.[2] This has been further exacerbated by the policies of austerity which a special UN report found to be 'a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one'.[3] We envision culture to be a direct reflection of the times we live in, so when tremors such as these rock our society, how do the arts respond?

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1   Philip Inman, 'Gap between rich and poor grows alongside rise in UK's total wealth' (last accessed 13th March 2020) https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/dec/05/gap-between-rich-and-poor-grows-alongside-rise-in-uks-total-wealth

2   'Health gap between rich and poor has widened' (last accessed 13th March 2020) https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/jan/health-gap-between-rich-and-poor-has-widened

3   Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights' (last accessed 13th March 2020) https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM_GB_16Nov2018.pdf

This is a tricky question in an era of late hypercapitalism when the CEO of the world's largest shadow bank, Blackrock, declared that the 'greatest stores of wealth internationally today is contemporary art…'[4] This highlights a huge disparity in how we value our cultural outputs in relation to the pool of capital, while suffering its inaccessibility.

Step in Social Practice.

Here we find the radical creatives who have taken this system of value and usurped it through their focus on dematerialised practices that sit outside the market economy. To support this is to join a creative movement that offers an antidote to the stranglehold of validation from market forces. This 'radical imagination' as political act is defined by Khasnabish and Haiven as 'a driving force in the dynamics of our political moment…not an individual possession but a collective process… that social movements depend on it to navigate our rapidly changing times.'[5]

To delve into this meshwork is to begin to understand what I see as the true form of the avant-garde in today's art world. Saint Simonian Olinde Rodrigues first offered us the call to arms in 1825 to use the arts as a tool for socio-political reform

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4   Robert Frank, 'Art and real estate are the new gold, says Blackrock
        CEO' (last accessed 13th March 2020) https://www.cnbc.com/2015/04/21/
        art-and-real-estate-are-the-new-gold-says-blackrock-ceo.html
5   M. Haiven, and A. Khasnabish (2014) The Radical Imagination: Social
        Movement Research in the Age of Austerity. Zed Books Ltd. London.

announcing 'It is we, the artists, who will serve you as avant-garde: the power of the arts is indeed the most immediate and the fastest. We have weapons of all kinds: when we want to spread new ideas…for the force of the imagination is incalculable, when it springs up in a direction of public good.'[6] Almost 200 years later we continue in this tradition of challenging dominant conventions as a call to social action.

Axisweb along with Social Art Network are leading the way to connect the various voices of practitioners across the country, offering platforms for mutual discovery and appreciation. *From Network to Meshwork* offers us a way in to understand the complexity of the field and lays the groundwork for how we can better create and collaborate in the arts. Ravetz & Wright build upon their 2015 study of artists working outside the gallery system to offer the wider sector a powerful testament to social practice that is embedded with practitioners' collective voices.

The words written here are not just for you, or about you, but aim to be together with you.

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6 Saint Simonian Olinde Rodrigues, 'The Artist, the Scientist and the Industrialist' (last accessed 13th March 2020) http://www.artandpopularculture.com/L%27artiste%2C_le_savant_et_l%27industriel

Executive Summary

This report is a summary of the first sustained programme of public research into validation for social practice artists. It is about the challenges artists face in accessing critical support, acclaim and development opportunities for social practice, essential ingredients of validation.

The report makes eight recommendations for how to create a new model of validation, scaled up to benefit as many artists as possible through a meshwork approach to organisational structure.

It is written for artists working in social practice, but also for cultural organisations who support and engage them and for funders and commissioners working with influential institutions such as ACE and the NHS, who might wish to know more about social practice artists' current experiences of validation and to influence policy accordingly.

During the research we encountered debates and disputes about terms and definitions. Definitions involve drawing borders. For example, Francis Matarasso (2019: 46) writing about participatory arts practice, argues for tight definitions, as

"…without a clear definition, it is impossible to distinguish good practice from bad, or to protect ethical principles and ways of working from external pressures, such as institutionalisation or appropriation."

At the same time Alison Jeffers (2017: 18) cautions that

"…the person who holds the 'umbrella' [of definition] is implicitly allowed to shape the narrative, they maintain control over definitions and frames, getting to say what makes up the umbrella and what is allowed to shelter under it."

How then to make judgements about quality and ethics without excluding difference?

When beginning this research, we used the term 'socially engaged art' (SEA) as an umbrella for a wide range of artistic social practices. It was later suggested that SEA *can* imply the use of art to provide social fixes — an interpretation we resist.

We have chosen 'social practice' as our umbrella term instead, defining this as follows:

*Social practice artists work closely with participants and/or audiences. They make social relationships and structures **the primary medium of their work,** instead of, or in addition to the use of material and digital media.*

The solution is imperfect. We envisage social relationships and art practice as reciprocally and materially entangled and we want to challenge binaries. But to some, social practice implies the exploitative use of people as art materials in artworks.

Taking control of the definitions raises further questions of visibility and power.[1] The reduction of complex practices to a word or phrase is fraught with potential misunderstanding; critical responses and live debate are needed to counter this. It is for this reason we advocate a move from network to meshwork, in which connections appear not as rigid points in a grid, but ever emerging 'thread-lines' out of which relationships occur.
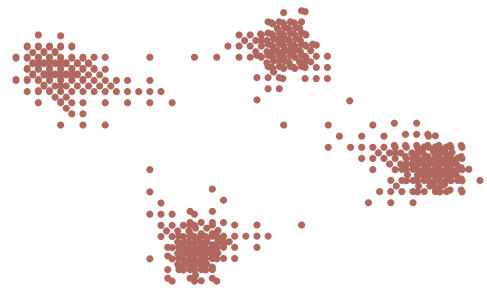
1   Jeffers and Moriarty, (2017: 18)

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Validation is defined in the report as the accumulation of critical acknowledgement and associated opportunities that act to endorse contemporary artists' work. Whilst self-validation — an artist's personal belief in their work — is essential to the development of an enduring, robust practice, external validation is also necessary to establish and maintain a professional career in the arts. In the art world this is often understood to take the form of critical reception by critics, peers, participants and audiences, access to sales and paid opportunities via commissioners and funders, and access to professional mentoring schemes and other forms of training and artist development (Thornton, 2009).

However, the art world means different things to different players. The sociologist Howard Becker characterised it in 1982 as a network in which people's cooperative activity and joint knowledge of shared conventions leads to the kind of art the art world is known for — in many ways a self-perpetuating and tautologous system. For the majority of contemporary artists, endorsement of their place in this system comes from gallerists, dealers, collectors, curators, peers and gallery-going audiences. But for social practice art where much commissioning, funding and audience participation goes beyond this network and where art work is unlike that produced in other art worlds, this endorsement can be elusive and difficult to access.

Social practice art is often commissioned and funded by an array of 'non-art world' organisations and individuals, for example primary, secondary and tertiary educational establishments, local authorities, healthcare providers, heritage bodies, rivers and waterway trusts, non-art charitable foundations, as well as being artist-led or self-initiated with the artist(s) raising funds themselves (e.g. Portland Project, Stoke on Trent; Poole and Genever); and by artists who are social activists living in and part of their particular communities (e.g. William Titley, Nina Edge). Combined with the conceptual, ethical, artistic and practical specificities of social practice art, it is the diverse and fragmented character of this provision that partly explains why artists working in these ways are not being professionally validated.

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The research adopted an 'action research' methodology to investigate the existing landscape for social practice artists, commissioners and funders, while simultaneously developing and testing a new model of validation. We privilege participants' voices in the report, resisting theorising as a form of validation at the expense of the living knowledge that those quoted here so clearly possess and demonstrate.

We worked with social practice artists to explore issues they faced in relation to validation and discussed what model might serve them better. 40 interviews were conducted with artists, commissioners and researchers; surveys were run with a stakeholder group that grew to 160 people; and a programme of artist-led commissions was designed and group members invited to apply to it.

Through the interviews and surveys, we identified five interlocking issues facing social practice artists:

- difficulty articulating social practice, including creating definitions and negotiating roles and values;

- unrealistic / unreasonable expectations from project partners (e.g. commissioners, participants, members of the public);

- lack of support and infrastructure for social projects;

- perceived second class status of social practice in the art world;

- uncertainty about the validation process aka 'validation gap' (how artists receive acknowledgment from appropriate networks).

The four-stranded commissioning programme 'Social Works?' responded to these issues as follows:

a. To provide a platform for social practice artists' critical writing and debate, the first issue of a new journal called 'Social Works? Open' was published.

b. To combat isolation, four artist-led network gatherings called 'Social Works? Get Togethers' were commissioned.

c. To explore specific issues (in this case paid commissions and arts and health), two artist-led 'Social Works? Workshops' were commissioned.

d. To create opportunities for informal conversations between the wider stakeholder group through a festival of social art, 'Social Works? Live' was held at Manchester School of Art in April 2019.

The research led to a range of outcomes designed to benefit the industry partner (Axisweb), as required by the gateway funders Innovate UK. Primarily, this involved the development of an online platform hosted by Axisweb (due to launch Summer 2020), which aims to contribute to the new model of validation outlined in the report. The research also changed how Axisweb operates as an arts charity, by integrating rigorous research methodologies into organisational structures and catalysing new collaborations with other organisations committed to social practice, including Heart of Glass, Social Art Network and Social Art Publications. The research developed an artist-led and artist-enabled approach to validation, distinct from dominant art world networks (and amongst some funders), that tend to artificially

buffer artists from the instrumental workings of commerce, thereby reducing artist-led influence on those markets.[2]

The research confirmed findings of an earlier pilot project by the same authors that suggested social practice, which is currently emerging as a very significant part of the artistic landscape, suffers from lack of recognition and support. It found that various creative organizations are active in the space, but with an overall fragmentation in the sector that decreases internal capacity. Further, it showed that the funding landscape for this area of practice is largely unresearched and that respondents have a strong preference for an artist-informed model that enables validation to happen through a flattened, rather than hierarchical, organisational structure.

The findings were then reformulated as four key challenges:

• **External roles & awareness:** there are challenges in defining, conceptualising and articulating social practice, its roles and purpose, its typologies, its constituencies and workings.

• **External commissioning & participation:** there are sometimes unrealistic/ uninformed expectations from project partners (e.g. commissioners, participants, members of the public) and low levels of funding for the tasks required and time needed to deliver excellent outcomes; there is a lack of knowledge and overview of the social practice funding landscape.

• **Internal support and resources:** there is a lack of support and infrastructure for social projects; provision is not joined up, artists working in social practice don't have access to the levels of validation typical of other areas visual arts sector.

• **Internal capacity building:** there is a lack of skills and training, network functions, and professional support systems for social art practitioners and stakeholders.

Eight actions are suggested to meet these challenges. We see these being led by artists, with the necessary support of others who have a stake in the work — e.g. commissioners, funders, other representatives of influential third sector organisations, participants and audiences.

1. Production of a journal-as-forum, specifically for social practice (the exemplar produced during the research is available in hard copy and as an

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2 It is interesting that the term artist-led is not used in Arts Council of England's 2020–30 policy. Mentions of 'artist' come together with 'librarians and museum curators' with 'creative practitioners' seeming to be the preference over the term artist.

online pdf here https://www.axisweb.org/models-of-validation/content/social-works/2018/social-works-open/)

2. Social library/centre, offering resources and live project opportunities to social practice artists and other stakeholders

3. Directory of social practice artists for use by funders, commissioners, participants and artists

4. Training/skills and other kinds of artist development specifically relevant to social practice

5. Research programme looking at social practice systems & communities, with particular reference to the funding landscape

6. Identifying, mapping and strengthening communities of practice

7. Partnership building between communities of practice and gatekeeper organizations

8. A social practice meshwork able to support and promote social practice art, involving different constituencies and communities of practice in an accessible, horizontal exchange structure

Given that respondents indicated a strong preference for a flat and emergent model of validation, we recommend that actions 1–7 are carried out through the approach and ethos of recommendation 8, a meshwork structure.

A meshwork is an interweaving of growing, moving lifelines (Ingold 2014). It has knots of encounter where lines entangle. Thought of as an organisation, a meshwork is a correspondence of lifelines that require attention to, and care for, its concurrent movements.

This can be distinguished from a network, visualised as a fixed array of more and less powerful nodes interconnected by geometrical lines that communicate point to point. By contrast, a meshwork grows in relation to its capacity for concurrent movement and mutual correspondence.

As just one example: Axisweb and Social Art Network showed meshwork tendencies in how they nurtured a common purpose during the research, beyond a transactional notion of what either might get from the encounter, thereby adopting an ethos of care for the larger social environment.

This approach can also be informed by current theories of social change (such as Wheatley and Frieze, 2006) and enabled through the leadership styles, use of resources and principles of cooperation adopted by social justice organisations.

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By way of conclusion, the report suggests that in the short term, these recommendations be the subject of further consultations which could take the form of:

- smaller organizations such as Axisweb, Social Art Network and others being funded through national sponsorship to develop communities of practice via all or some of the suggestions outlined above (e.g. journal, artist development, research, networking, skills development etc.);

- funding bids developed by researcher/ social practice partnerships to tackle issues on which we currently have only anecdotal or limited evidence – for example levels, types and extents of funding supporting social practice; models of best practice for social practice artist development;

- a partnership of artists, communities of practice and influencers (e.g. ACE, NHS, LAs, charitable foundations) to consult on the report recommendations via artist-led deliberative enquiry.

1

THE CONTEXT
FOR THE REPORT

BACKGROUND

This report is a summary of the first sustained programme of public research into the challenges of validation for social practice artists (for discussion of definitions see below and FAQs, Appendix A, page 74). It is written for artists working in social practice, cultural organisations who support and engage these artists and for funders and commissioners working with influential institutions such as ACE and NHS, who might wish to know more about validation and social practice artists' experiences, and to influence policy in accordance with this.

The research was supported by a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP)[1] between Manchester Metropolitan University and the charity and online artists' directory Axisweb. Called Models of Validation, the research programme was funded by AHRC/ESRC/Axisweb via Innovate UK and ran between May 2017 and November 2018 full time, and from January 2019 to January 2020 part time.

The project built on a pilot study by the same authors, commissioned by Axisweb in 2015[2] when an audit of members' online profiles identified that approximately 60% of artists were working in social contexts some or all of the time. The charity commissioned ManMet to research the validation of social practice, to support members' social practice and help make it more visible.

The pilot study interviewed 24 successful artists and commissioners about their roles and methods for selecting artists with whom to work, the artists' routes to validation, measures of success, training received, and the comparative impact of gallery and non-gallery commissions on artists' careers.

The findings suggested that although the collaborative potential and societal benefits of social practice make it an increasingly valuable commodity in the public funding landscape, the existing model of validation fails to meet the needs and values of many social practice artists. For artists, a desire to make art that might help to 'improve the conditions in a particular community or in the world at large' (Helicon Collaborative, 2017; 4) is one of the key motivators for working in social practice; but the growth of the field is also directly connected to the fact that the dominant art world provides little or no income for most artists and at least some income can be derived from doing projects with people/in social settings.

a-n's research (Big Artists Survey, 2011) concluded that while 52% of artists used residency/engaged practice regularly or occasionally, only 18% exclusively did that. The same survey reported 62% of artists using community arts in the same manner. One reason for this is economic. A skills gap analysis report commissioned by Creative Scotland from Consilium Research and Consultancy (2012: 15), found that 84% of practitioners take on participatory arts within a portfolio of work for financial reasons. *Artists work in 2016* (Jones, 2017) also demonstrates that public art and residency budgets are superior to arts organisations budgets.

But whilst social practice offers some artists some form of livelihood, those working in the field are not being sufficiently validated — i.e. critically acknowledged and supported — by relevant professional organisations and ecosystems. While the gallery model of validation is based on an artist's positioning in a network of dealers, collectors and curators and on the value and prestige of commissions, exhibitions and sales (Thornton, 2008; 2009), social practice artists' requirements and desires for validation diverge significantly. Social practice artists have less influence within these networks; the commissioning practices, funding streams, artistic and ethical values, outputs and outcomes of social practice are not fully compatible with those of the contemporary art world and art markets.[3] This lack of validation limits artists' and commissioners' abilities to produce good work and to contribute to excellence in the field.

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1   The Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) scheme helps businesses in the UK to innovate and grow. It links them with an academic or research organisation and a graduate. KTPs bring in new skills and the latest academic thinking to deliver a specific, strategic innovation project through a knowledge-based partnership. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/knowledge-transfer-partnerships-what-they-are-and-how-to-apply#what-is-a-knowledge-transfer-partnership

2   '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.' Ravetz and Wright, 2015

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3   Ravetz and Wright, 2015.

DEFINITIONS

In our report for Axisweb, *Validation beyond the gallery*, (2015: 3) we used the phrases 'beyond the gallery' and 'work outside of the gallery system' to indicate the group of artists that our research found lacked access to validation. We also referred to socially engaged art as a broad umbrella term used to describe a wide range of practices in this area, including collaborative, participatory, interactive, public and live art.

In this report, we opt for the term 'social practice' to emphasise artmaking in which social relationships are *integral* to the work. We stop using the term 'socially engaged art' (with which we began the research) in an attempt to get away from the suggestion that art and social life are separate entities unless and until they are sutured together.

At the same time, we recognise that there is no perfect terminology and below we list some of the other terms that expand, co-exist alongside, or cut across our use of social practice.[4] The discomfort and often times disagreement about these terms demonstrates how labile are the experiences they attempt to name and how important ongoing dialogue, cooperation, agonism and dissent remain. The challenge for the field, and any research we would argue, is how to achieve sharp analysis of moving phenomena to support well-informed policy, whilst remaining equitable.

Socially Engaged Practice

1. **Flexible and encompassing a wide range of public practices and engagement levels**

"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." (Ravetz and Wright, 2015: 3; emphasis added)

2. **Co-authorship/co-production**

"When referring to the term socially engaged photography, we mean *activities or projects where photographers and communities | individuals come together to co-author or co-produce visual representations of the world around us.* The process behind the work produced is often as important as the final photographic work, and projects are often reliant on collaboration and discussion. The work often reflects *multiple voices* about a particular social, political, economical (sic) or

environmental issue, rather than that of a single artistic voice. (Socially Engaged Photography Network (SEPN).[5] Open Eye Gallery; emphasis added)

Participatory Art

1. **Wittingly or unwittingly disruptive**

"Operating at the edge of normative social structures, *participatory art confronts us with new questions. It disrupts the concepts and disciplines within and between which it works,* abandoning the security of those existing forms and so challenging us to become more self-aware. The disruption is not always conscious or deliberate, but it is the unavoidable result of stepping into no man's land." (Sholette, 2010: 27. Our emphasis)

2. **Act of joining in**

"…emphasises the act of joining in" and "…the creation of art by professional artists and non-professional artists." (Matarasso, 2019: 47)

Community Arts

1. **Culture shaped by the creativity of all**

"[…] aimed to give shape to the creativity of all sectors of society, but especially to people living in areas of social, cultural and financial deprivation." (Bishop, 2012: 177)

2. **Artistic activity characterised by dialogue with a community**

"Community art is artistic activity that is based in a community setting, characterised by interaction or dialogue with the community and often involving a professional artist collaborating with people who may not otherwise engage in the arts." (Tate Art Terms)

SOCIAL PRACTICE ART AND ARTISTS

Social practice artists work closely with participants and/or audiences. They use social relationships and structures as the primary medium for their work. Their practice is characterised by how it brings together social and artistic values. At best, social practice achieves artistically powerful results, leads to new awareness of social conditions and can on occasions stimulate beneficial social change. Much of this happens despite a lack of beneficial infrastructure, and does so on restricted budgets.

Social practice covers a wide range of different concepts, skills and approaches. When asked to describe the routes they had taken to working in this way, the artists who took part in

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4   Adapted from Susan Jones, personal communication, in response to an earlier draft of this report.

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5   https://openeye.org.uk/socially-engaged-photography-network/

Beauty in Transition,
Jody Wood, 2014.

The U.S. artist Jody Wood, (a member of the research stakeholder group), invited people experiencing homelessness into a pop-up mobile hair salon to benefit from beauty care and conversation in a recuperative environment. The artwork, *Beauty in Transition,* offered a form of care usually denied people without a home whilst also challenging reductive understandings of homelessness.

the research talked about further and higher education in the arts and humanities, curatorial and educational practice, arts administration, activism, music and community work. Asked to choose from a list of descriptors, most artists chose "collaborative" with 96% of respondents identifying their practice in this way. When asked which other terms they used or felt were appropriate to their practice, 87% identified with the term "socially engaged", with 82% selecting "participatory" and 78% "social practice". A range of other terms were also used by smaller percentages of respondents, including "community", "agonistic", "activist", "pedagogical" and "therapeutic" art.

VALIDATING SOCIAL PRACTICE
AND THE ART WORLD–AS–NETWORK

Social practice 'stakeholders' — those invested in this field — include artists, participants, audiences, commissioners, curators, producers, funders, educationalists and researchers. The funding for social practice comes from a wide range of art and non-art providers including arts and heritage, charitable trusts, health and social care and the private sector. It is in part the disconnect between the art world-as-network and non-art world commissioning, that causes what we identify in this report as 'the validation gap'.

For sociologist Howard Becker, the art world is "the network of people whose cooperative activity, organised via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce(s) the kind of art works that the art world is noted for" (1982: x). Validation can thus be understood as the result of the art world-as-network acknowledging and rewarding artists for producing 'notable' work. More than a fixed stamp of approval, validation is a process, one that actively shapes reputation, opportunities, demand and ultimately, for those whose livelihoods depend in part or in full on this work, economic survival for these artists.

Social practice faces two linked problems with regards to its relationship with the art world-as-network and the role of that network in validating artists. First, social practice is in many ways a poor fit with the dominant art world-as-network's "joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things." This emerges in its choice of medium, its social-processual rather than market-production aesthetic, its democratising rather than elite impulses. Second, because social practice extends a long way '*beyond the gallery*' and its operations, the dense, well-versed and powerful network that Becker, and more recently Sarah Thornton observed in their studies of the art world, is currently ill equipped to fully validate it. Artistic practice is largely developed through habitus (Coessens, 2011), which in turn affects the art world-as-network. The habitus of social practice however, because of how it crosses beyond art borders, is poorly understood by this network. Whilst there are examples of social practice artists who flourish in existing networks, and pockets of social practice skill and excellence that manage largely outside this network, the serious knock-on effects of

this for many artists working with social practice include a lack of critical acclaim and championing for social practice art and artists, a lack of appropriate artist development provision, and a similar lack of familiarity and visibility inside the established art world-as-network and amongst wider publics.

Our report details how this validation gap manifests itself, why it matters and what can be done about it. Our findings are based on a programme of action research consisting of detailed analysis of 40 interviews with artists, commissioners and researchers; surveys administered to a stakeholder group of artists, funders and commissioners and participants; and a social art commissioning programme carried out between May 2017 and January 2020.

In the next section we summarise the research background and methods. Following this we turn to the interviews, drawing out five linked issues of concern, illustrated with interviewees' quotes, as a way to keep centre stage our pilot study's call for an *artist-led* or *artist-informed* model of validation. Next we describe the commissioning programme, the aim of which was to provide a platform for social practice artists' critical writing and debate, combat isolation amongst artists, explore some of the specific issues and gaps that artists were facing, and create opportunities for informal conversations between the wider stakeholder group. Discussion of the insights gained through this process follow. We end the report with eight recommendations and a proposal for what comes next.

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METHODS
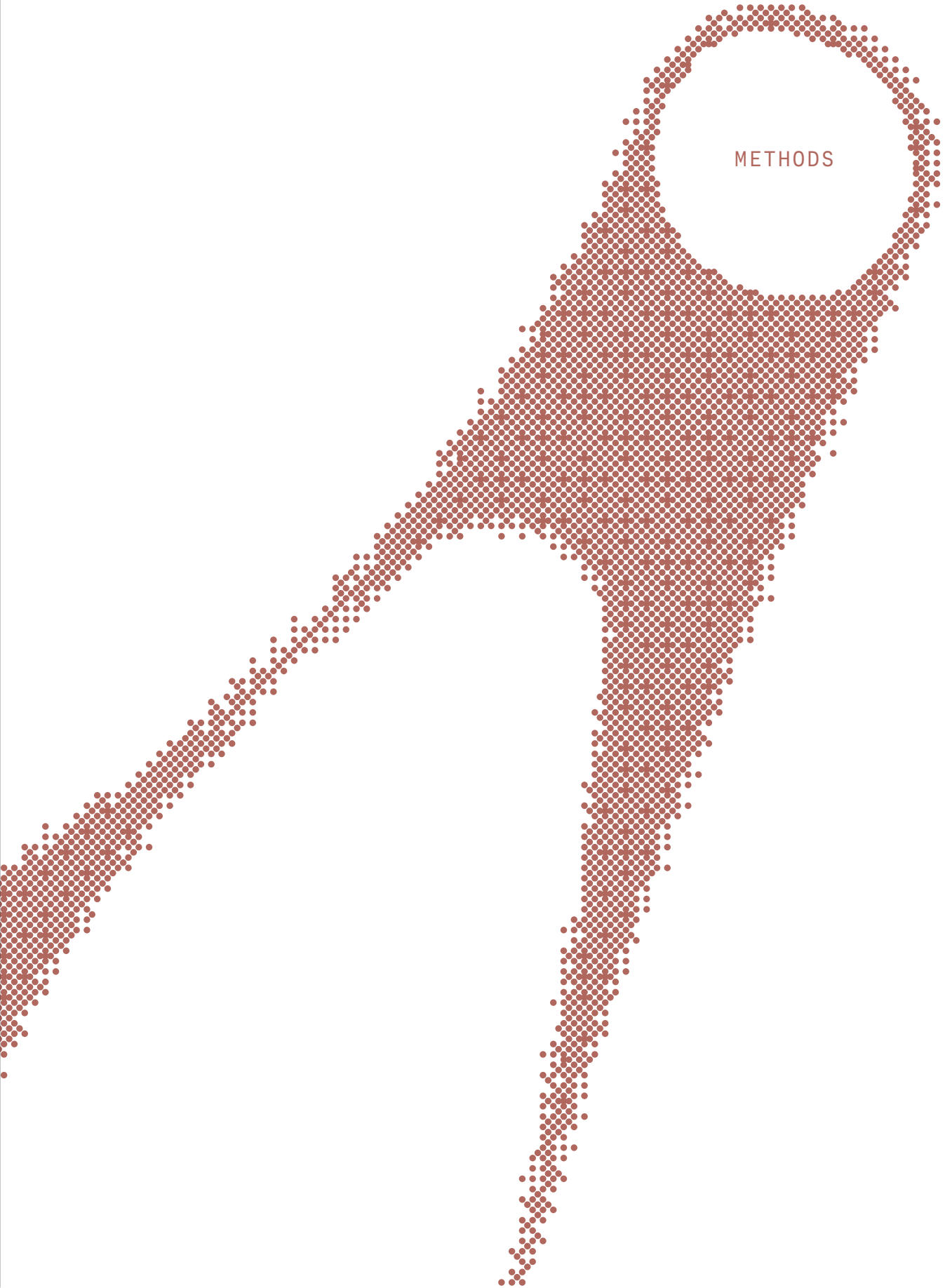
The research set out to confirm, contradict or expand the pilot study findings, and more specifically, to produce 'an extensive body of research into models of validation for collaborative and socially engaged practice' to help artists 'make work and build sustainable long-term progressive relationships with different parts of society.'

Artists Sharon Bennett and Sarah Dixon, founder members of the Women's Art Activation System (WAAS) presented the Bureau for the Validation of Art at 'Social Works? Live', an event set up as part of the research underpinning this report. By playfully appropriating models from institutions such as corporate business, government, healthcare, and the military, the WAAS seeks to develop systems for the activation of women's art that can be applied in many different cultural, temporal and physical settings.
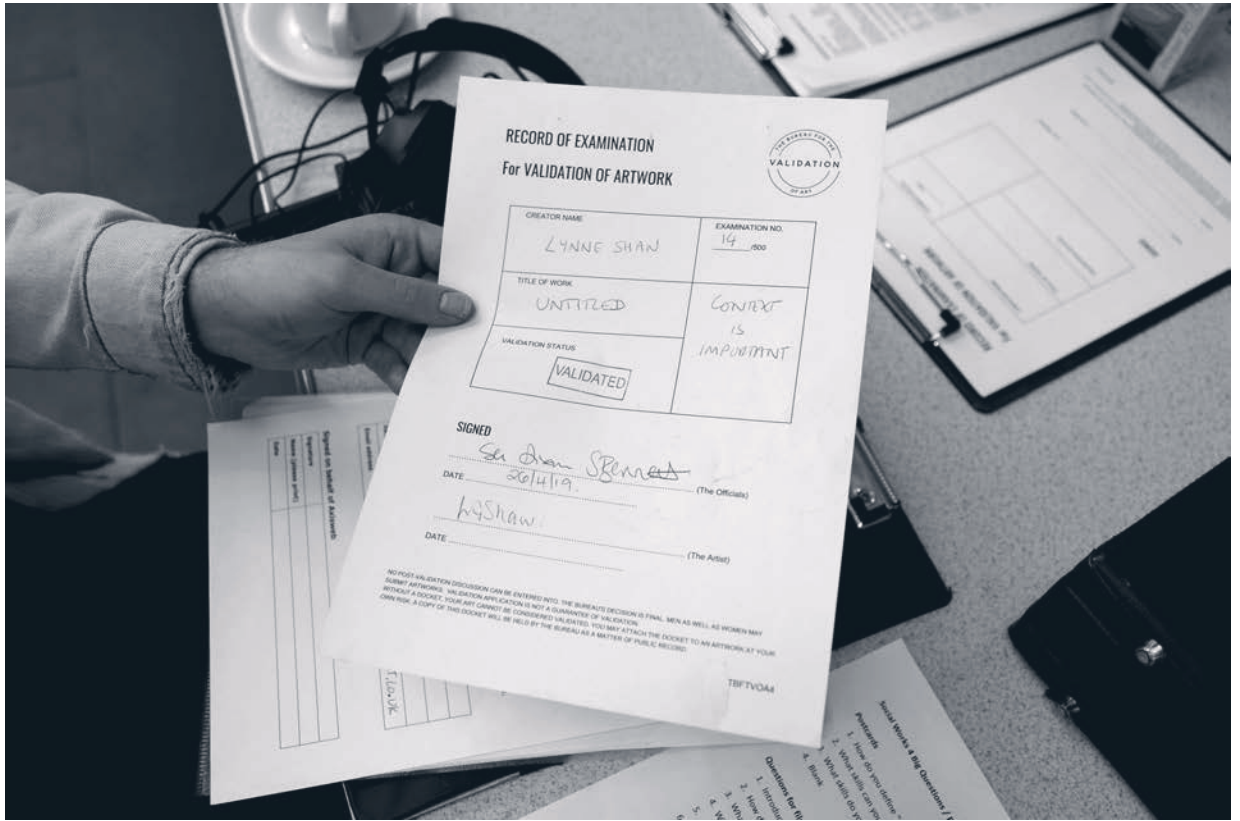
WAAS, Bureau for the Validation of Art
at 'Social Works? Live', 2019.

AIMS AND DESIGN

As is standard in a Knowledge Transfer Partnership, the programme was structured around given roles — a lead academic from the knowledge base partner (in this case Amanda Ravetz, ManMet) a supervisor from the company partner (in this case Mark Smith from Axisweb), a KTP associate to project manage the knowledge exchange (in this case Rebecca Senior 2017–18; and Lucy Wright 2019–20).

The team employed action research, guided by the stages 'Look, Think, Act,' (adapted from Stringer, 2007). Within this we conducted 40 semi-structured interviews, supporting surveys and devised a programme of artist-led commissions in light of the results, which stakeholder group members were invited to apply for.

PARTICIPANTS AND GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE

An advisory steering group of artists, participants and members from organisations committed to social practice was convened by invitation at the beginning of the project, with positive action taken to support equality, diversity and inclusion. The group met face to face and was invited to contribute to the ongoing development of the research (see Appendix 4, Advisory Group).

A separate stakeholder group was also established through a combination of open call and targeted invitation. The 'snowball method' was used to broaden the group, with members asked to nominate other individuals they thought would benefit from being involved with the project. The group was crucial in supporting the values of social artists as outlined in the pilot research, which had stressed the importance of a bottom-up

rather than top-down system of validation for social practice. Stakeholders were able to determine their level of engagement over the course of the research, with a choice towards the second half of the project of paid and voluntary opportunities and commissions to bid for.

The aim of the interviews and follow up survey was threefold: to ascertain current gaps and issues in the field of social practice, to uncover current methods of validation and to determine whether an online platform developed by Axisweb could address some of these gaps and provide a necessary service for the stakeholders involved.

Initially, interviewees were approached from the project's stakeholder group. Alongside this, individual targeted emails were sent to stakeholders outside the group to broaden the interviewee pool in terms of geographic distribution of interviewees, diversity of participants and variety of roles in the field. Those interviewed represented a broad geographical distribution of social practice both in England, including Yorkshire, Lancashire, Merseyside, Bristol, Kent, Berkshire, Greater London; the UK including Scotland and Wales, and further afield including Toronto, Chicago and New York City.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview questions were designed to identify common themes across the different stakeholders and to determine whether an online platform developed by Axisweb could address some of these gaps and provide a necessary service for the stakeholders involved. Broader questions around the definition of social practice and issues and gaps facing the field were kept consistent between all interviewees; however, additional questions were also asked to ascertain the different validation models and evaluation methods utilized by stakeholders according to their main role in the field — whether as artist, commissioner, funder or researcher. Consent forms were signed by all interviewees ahead of the interview date and, for those interviewed via skype or telephone call, the interview questions were sent a week ahead of the scheduled interview date. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes.

In addition to the interviews, respondents were asked to voluntarily complete a short questionnaire after the interview had finished. This was designed to identify which components of a new digital platform provided by Axisweb would appeal to different stakeholders and to determine commonalities between the groups. The questionnaire was met with an 88% completion rate.

ANALYSIS

Analysis of the transcripts began with open coding of a selection of interviews for each of the three groups. Key phrases and words were extracted from the transcripts and after identifying the global themes, interviews were analysed according to the outcome harvesting method. In addition to gathering global themes from the transcripts, particular attention was paid to the respondent's emotional response, their values/opinions and the frequency of certain answers.

3
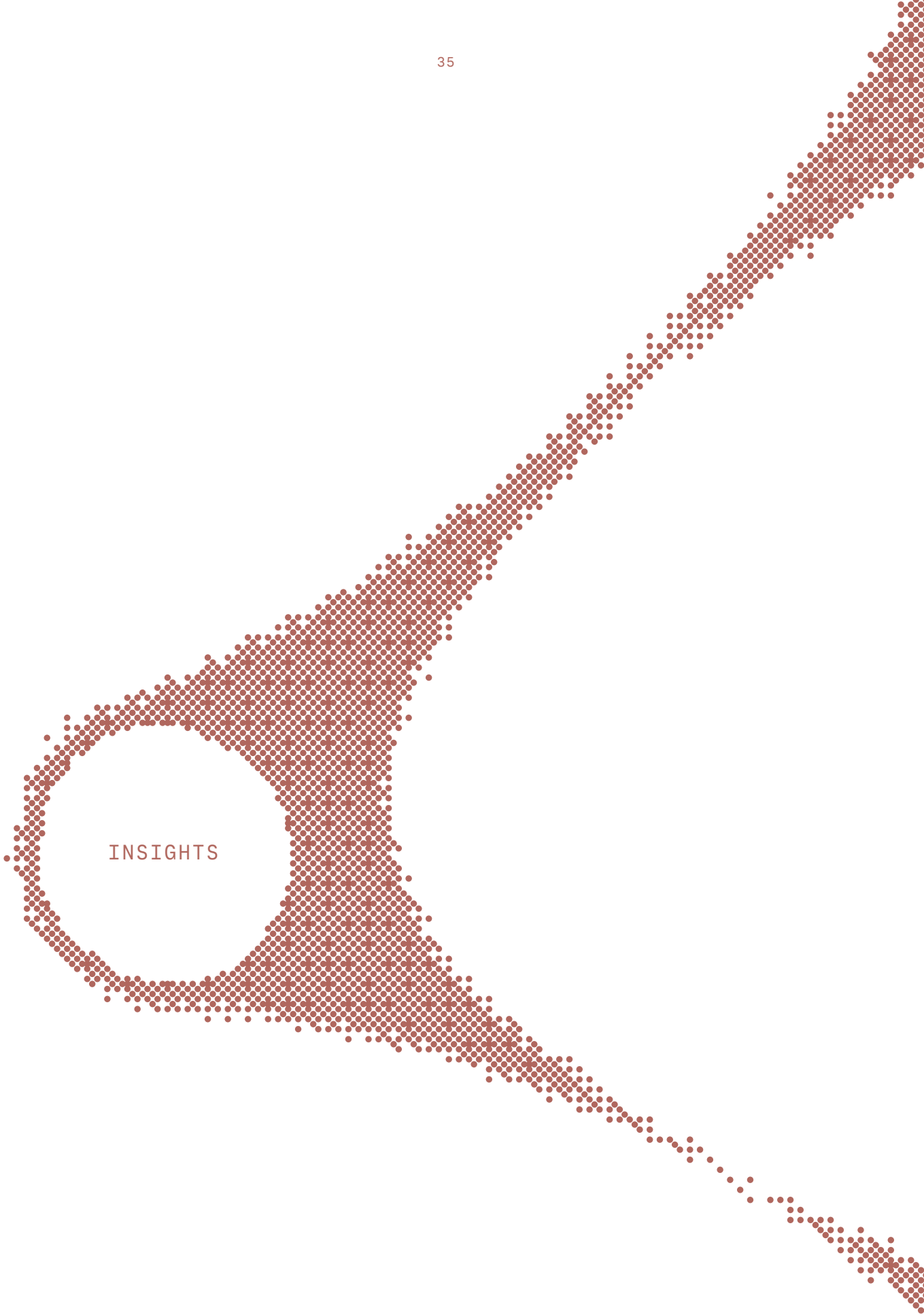
INSIGHTS

After coding and analysing the interview and follow-on survey materials, several interlocking issues for those involved in delivering social practice emerged:

- difficulty articulating social practice, including creating definitions and negotiating roles and values;

- unrealistic / unreasonable expectations from project partners (e.g. commissioners, participants, members of the public);

- lack of support and infrastructure for social projects;

- perceived second class status of social practice in the art world;

- validation gap.

FRAMING SOCIAL PRACTICE

While the invitation to participate divided respondents into artists, commissioners and researchers, the subsequent interviews revealed many respondents routinely moved between roles, identifying simultaneously as artists and researchers, commissioners and researchers, artists and commissioners, depending on the context. Many were able to offer insights from multiple perspectives, suggesting that social practice involves a significant degree of 'code switching' or alternation between two or more languages of practice.

Defining social practice was a key challenge identified by both artists and commissioners:

> I think there's a lot of fuzziness around the terminology and a lot of confusion (Commissioner, 4B)

For some, this reflected the 'slipperiness' of social practice understood as a necessary quality of art which actively seeks to interrogate and reframe its key questions and assumptions on a continued basis:

> Social practice is always the one I find most difficult actually to define… it's constantly evolving and shifting for me (Commissioner, 3B)

For others, it was important to acknowledge that a single definition may not be enough to embrace the diversity of practices that involve working socially.

> I think it's really important to drill down on and maybe come out with more than one definition, because I think there's more than one type of practice happening here (Commissioner, 4B)

> We would diminish what we do… [if we had] an identikit package of "this is socially engaged practice (Researcher, 1C)

This multiplicity of definitions reflects the wide range of values and approaches employed by those who identify with the broad category of social practice. This sometimes leads to misunderstandings about the nature and aims of projects labelled as 'social' and can make it challenging to advocate for social practice outside of the field:

> There is a huge disparity in art that is labelled socially engaged (Artist, 13A)

> People don't know how to define it. I feel like that's a struggle for me because…if people can't categorise it, they sometimes don't know what to feel about it (Artist, 6A)

> Developing a language around defining these differences would help me be better able to articulate my work to the public as well as other artists (Artist, 13A)

The diversity of contexts and settings in which social projects take place could partly explain the complexity of the field of social practice. Artists receive commissions from a range of organisations, including within the contemporary arts (e.g. arts organisations, galleries) and non-arts bodies (e.g. local authorities, health organisations, education institutions). These disparate organisations have different agendas and understandings of how social practice should function and what it might achieve. Commissioners are often driven by the transactional,[1] seeking artists to deliver a particular measurable 'output' — an 'experience' quantified by numbers attending festival days, etc. There are often formulaic budget scales (£2K, £5K, £10K) to contract artists with certain skills to animate and achieve that, while sometimes the artists hope to achieve something more subtle and more in tune with their needs. They may thus hope to subvert a commission brief.

....

1   Personal communication, Susan Jones

Broadly, a dichotomising tension between two agendas was described by the interviewees:

1.   Social art as primarily critically
     engaged and art-world-facing:

Social practice is when the audience
completes the work in some way… some-
thing where the audience is partici-
pating in some manner and it's actually
having some kind of progressive effect
on the artwork (Artist, 6A)

2.   Social art as primarily community-
     facing and concerned with addressing
     specific local needs:

       Really, we're looking at the arts as
       a kind of instrument for transforma-
       tional change, rather than arts in and
       of itself (Commissioner, 9B)

Although the interviewees reported that institutions tended to prioritise one agenda over another, many artists talked about working hard to balance both aims over the course of their social projects.

As a result of these competing agendas, artists can experience disparities between commissioning opportunities and their own values, leading to mismatched expectations between the organisation commissioning a project and the values of an individual artist's practice. For example, time allowance was identified as an area of potential conflict, as funders put pressure on artists to achieve results quickly:

I think even when commissioners say
they want a socially engaged artist,
it is debatable, because they don't
give enough time for that process. They
want a commission that is already tied
down and that to me doesn't match with
socially engaged practice. (Artist, 4A)

The wide applicability of the term social practice in a range of contexts meant that some felt that the term and more importantly what it stood for, risked becoming diluted and harder to advocate for:

       It's a throwaway word that people are
       starting to use quite a lot and then it
       becomes a capsule term for everything
       (Commissioner, 7B)

Of particular concern to artists was the perceived misappropriation of the terminologies around social practice to describe work that was not coherent with the broad values of particular social practitioners:

You'll have artists talking about
being socially engaged and they're not!
(Artist, 3A)

It can get made to kind of bolster up
the reputations of institutions or to
make them seem more like they're being
inclusive, so I think that's a massive
problem (Artist 10A)

For commissioners, the difficulty in articulating social practice also meant that on occasion, projects were less successful than hoped for, or failed to meet certain expectations:

       I think [artists] didn't really under-
       stand what it is that we wanted… or
       maybe we didn't understand what we
       wanted actually (Commissioner, 2B)

This can have a negative impact on artists going for commissions, where those offering a commission sometimes use artists coming for interview to test out their ideas, as if they were consultants, only to then decide they want something/someone else.

Artists, commissioners and researchers identified a lack of critical writing as a significant factor in the lack of visibility and frequent misunderstandings identified around social art practice:

There is little formal assessment or
criticism on any of its qualities other
than ethical or use value, leading to
moralistic and trite characterisations
of the field… Because of this lack of
critical dialogue, much contemporary
art criticism throws the baby out
with the bathwater, dismissing social
practice as non-art, exploitative or
non-critical (Artist, 13A)

Several respondents stated that critical discourse should be led by artists with lived expertise of social practice, rather than critics and academics:

> We need to find ways to allow the artist to write about it. We need the artist's voice to come out because they're the ones that are in the communities… not the commissioners because they don't go into the communities in the same way and certainly not the critics or the academics (Commissioner, 4B)

At the same time, some felt that there was a lack of traction for existing writing about social practice, arguing that more should be done to ensure that the debates and findings of social practice research reached the right people and were taken seriously:

> We produce all these wonderful reports about arts and health and the data about why it's effective… and academia and the intellectual basis behind it I think has been slow to catch up (Commissioner, 9B)

Researchers felt too that there needed to be more opportunities to link up between research and practice and to share writings with the wider community around social art:

> We don't want to go to all the trouble to start producing content that nobody reads. It's always helpful to hear more from people who will be your reader and your contributor (Researcher, 2C)

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

As the societal benefits of social practice have made it an increasingly valuable commodity in the public funding landscape, interviewees reported that projects are often subject to very high expectations from partners, including commissioners and participants, which can be difficult or even impossible to fulfil. In particular, the expectation that art projects effect measurable social change, a value central to the work of some social artists but not to others, was felt as a source of potential tension.

Some artists reported that organisations are unrealistic about the extent of change that is possible in a project's time-frame and budget:

> I was once asked by a council that had given me £500, how did I sort out poverty?… If you could solve poverty with £500, there wouldn't be poverty! (Artist, 22A)

For others, an emphasis on solutions overlooked the important role played by artists in raising questions and highlighting problems, sometimes referred to as 'agonism' (Schrag, 2016):

> I think the increasing want or need for this practice to solve so many problems and so many gaps is a huge problem and I think it's a huge demand on artists and on producers and on participants as well. [There is an] idea that this form of practice is there to make up for or to solve a lot of problems. It's maybe not understood that art isn't always there to solve problems. Art can be disruptive and uncomfortable and can sometimes illuminate more problems than were highlighted before (Commissioner, 3B)

Others resisted the view that social change was a viable — or desirable — aim of their work. Instead, they viewed collaboration as an artistic choice, a privilege that often benefits the artist more than is generally acknowledged, doubting the

sincerity of claims that individual art projects might effect significant transformations:

With focusing too much on the benefits to participants, you forget how basically this is just a more interesting way of making art and that as an artist, I gain massively from any of these interactions (Artist, 1A)

I think it's a lot of responsibility to put on socially engage artists, when actually you might be interested in a social practice because you're interested in people, rather than interested in marketing essentially (Artist, 22A)

Where projects were planned with a strong emphasis on problem-solving, commissioners felt that artists were not always well-supported enough to deliver the requested results and sometimes became the 'scapegoats' for a failing system:

It's managing people's expectations of what's going to come out of it and also [assessing] whether it's even appropriate to have an artist going into a place that might have a lot of problems (Commissioner, 7B).

I've had artists contact me…they're on the verge of a breakdown because they're in a really tough situation… and they've been asked to do something that's really unachievable and they're getting flak from the commissioners and the community (Commissioner, 9B)

In addition, some respondents emphasised that setting out with a rigid set of expectations was incompatible with the collaborative nature of social practice, in which all stakeholders should be able to inform and influence the process:

From the artist's perspective, there is a reticence to run a project that delivers very specific outcomes and that artists don't want to be tied down to specific outcomes because that's actually not what their work is about (Commissioner, 5B)

Artists also highlighted the need for more support to protect their personal safety or professional integrity. A lack of training for both artists and commissioners was emphasised as an issue when working in sensitive contexts and addressing complex social problems:

The gap is we're undertrained… it's very arrogant of us to think we can [make significant social changes] (Commissioner, 4B)

I've been commissioned by people who should be incredibly sensitive to [ethical issues] because they work with communities…but they still have gaps in their understanding of this (Artist, 16A)

My biggest worry about socially engaged practice is the ethics…I think there needs to be a lot more discussion and research around this thing called "socially engaged practice" (Commissioner, 4B)

Particularly concerning is the reasonable inference that lack of training and support could cause deficiencies in relation to the ethical treatment and wellbeing of participants/collaborators.

INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SOCIAL PROJECTS

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the high levels of responsibility placed on artists working in social settings, practitioners often felt unsupported in the work they did, receiving little training or mentorship. Sometimes based in communities for long periods of time, social artists reported feeling isolated, both from other social practitioners and from the wider art world:

You don't have any support. You're just kind of launched off into this thing and unless you put those supports in for yourself, they don't really exist (Artist, 21A)

This was inevitably felt to negatively impact on projects, as artists lacked formal support systems and resources to conduct their practice in the manner that they wished.

Artists routinely commented that they experienced isolation in their work, stressing the importance of face-to-face support systems and opportunities to share experiences and challenges with others in the field. Some commissioners also recognised the importance of helping artists counteract the negative effects of loneliness and imposed self-reliance:

As an individual artist working in a socially engaged way, there are moments where actually you are very much on your own (Artist, 12A)

It can be a really lonely job…the more you can connect people up the better (Commissioner, 9B)

Social practice was also described as lacking visibility as a contemporary art form, often taking place below the radar of mainstream arts networks. Artists felt invisible to each other, as well as in the context of the wider art world:

You can do a great project and no one will see it (Researcher, 1C)

The projects that you work on don't
get the profile or the critical
reviews. They remain quite invisible
(Artist, 21A)

Socially engaged artists aren't very
visible to each other because they're
working in contained ways. They don't
tend to have studios where they're all
together (Artist, 8A)

For most, this was linked to a lack of opportunities to reflect on social practice as an aspect of contemporary art, including a paucity of critical writing, long-term funding and opportunities to showcase social projects in art world settings:

I don't think it gets enough critical
writing… in journals or magazines or
newsletters that we all tend to read. I
think it's really important that it's
not just those artists that are more
fine art, more gallery-based that are
securing all that important coverage
(Commissioner, 6B)

There's not large-scale funding for
projects… they tend to be smaller pots
of money that are side lined for other
things (Artist, 3A)

Others referred to a lack of dedicated training opportunities or university courses and the absence of formal awards or recognition for excellence in social practice:

It would be nice if we were invited to
teach in mainstream art schools on an
equal footing, to share the successes
of our project with the wider art
community (Artist, 9A)

There's no equivalent of the National
Portrait Gallery competition, or Taylor
Wessing Prize for portrait photogra-
phers (Artist, 3A)

In addition, funding systems which demanded a continual process of grant capture were felt to work against the creation of a lasting and visible legacy for social projects:

I think organisations and staff are
under a lot of pressure. Many of them
are under-resourced and therefore

they're time-poor and stressed and
understandably they're more focused
on delivery and the next project…
than supporting the current artist
(Artist 21A)

Overall, many respondents emphasised that social artists faced similar issues to many others working in the arts, often advocating wholesale system change to assure a living wage for artists and to address current levels of inequity in the wider arts sector:

Universal basic income
would be fantastic (Artist, 2A)

We're basically just fighting over a
very small pool [of money] and there's
a much bigger pool of the population
that should be touched by something
other than money (Artist, 16A)

STATUS IN THE ART WORLD

The lack of support, infrastructure and visibility led some artists to feel like second-class citizens in the art world:

I guess some people wouldn't realise
this is art, they wouldn't see me as an
artist (Artist, 22A)

For some, this was a direct result of their conducting social projects outside of the conventional spaces of the art world. In particular, working in ways that overlapped with other forms of (undervalued) labour such as social work and social care. Doing so put pressure on artists to be able to move easily between different sectors and to effectively communicate the role and value of their work to disparate stakeholders:

The practice intersects with so many
other things, whether it's youth work
or community engagement or activism…
You have to be able to speak the right
language and because you're working
in lots of different sectors, you're
using lots of different languages and
you can't ever be fluent in all those
languages… I sometimes worry that means
we aren't taken seriously in any of
those sectors (Artist, 3A)

Commissioners too felt that social projects commanded less high status than other, more conventional forms of gallery-based art:

> I always call it "the proper arts world" which is really awful. In the white cube arts world, we don't really make a dent, but every now and then we'll do a project that does get that kind of press (Commissioner, 3B)

Many felt that the conventional spaces of the art world did not do enough to support social practice and treated practitioners differently to artists working in other ways:

Socially engaged art is still seen as low brow, I think, in a lot of the art worlds (Artist, 7A)

The work is sometimes dismissed and not recognised as an art practice in itself…people and organisations can be quite dismissive (Artist, 10A)

For some, this was reflected in a lack of financial support for social practice, as well as a lack of promotion for those social projects that did receive funding from an institution:

I don't feel that a lot of galleries take it seriously in terms of money, but also in terms of platform — based on their online presence but also on their space (Artist, 3A)

Others suggested that the art world seemed reluctant to engage critically with the outcomes of social practice, tending to limit its impact to the education or audience development wings of an institution:

It shouldn't be just, oh this is our outreach programme and that's just to do outreach, or, these artists are just to engage local people. It should be really embedded (Artist, 7A)

In addition, both artists and commissioners felt that social practice was more contested than studio-based practices, particularly within the mainstream art world. At a basic level, this meant that practitioners and funders had to work harder to justify social practice in ways that were rarely expected of more established art forms, like painting and sculpture:

That space [of validation] is secured for them. People come in, they respect the work. For us, we're constantly having to battle with people just to get our project somewhere (Artist, 6A)

For commissioners, this sometimes meant that it was more difficult to get support for social projects:

> I think it would be easier to commission stuff if the status of socially engaged art in the arts world was higher…It's starting to happen, but it's still a bit of a poor relation (Commissioner, 9B)

Researchers too felt that social practice — and the research concerned with it — lacks visibility in the art world, calling for more channels to share work being done:

> You can do a great project and no one will see it (Researcher, 1C)

VALIDATION GAP

The challenges identified above help to create a picture of a 'validation gap' for social practice. Although certain approaches and outcomes of social projects are highly valued, including in contexts outside of the arts, the practice is also often misunderstood and lacks suitable infrastructure to support its critical contribution, particularly within the art world. We asked interviewees to reflect on their experiences of validation and to explore possible solutions.

'Validation' was not a commonly used term by those in the arts community and some found it initially uncomfortable, associating it with an empirical approach and top-down decision-making not compatible with the human interaction of social practice:

I've got a problem with that term "validation" which is like rubber stamping, where some institution or person goes, "tick, you're doing that socially engaged work right"… I'm just thinking, who decides? (Artist, 10A)

WAAS, Bureau for the Validation of
Art at 'Social Works? Live', 2019.
Photograph Julian Lister.

Several reported that they did not currently experience a sense of validation in relation to their practice, suggesting that for some, validation was most easily understood in terms of its absence or contestation:

I don't feel very validated
(Artist, 22A)

I decided that I would apply for
more things and I found that quite
soul destroying because most of the
time it was nothing or "you've been
shortlisted" but then nothing and
that just left me unvalidated — that
the work wasn't worth bothering with
(Artist, 4A)

Similarly, and in line with the wide range of definitions offered for social practice, responses did not show clear consensus around a set of agreed principles or values for how the validation of social art might function:

I've known some social practice artists
who want gallery representation and a
studio and others who couldn't care
less (Researcher, 2C)

Individual values around the purpose of art, whether it should be socially useful or provocative, whose and which interests it should serve and how varied, depend upon the particular aspect of social practice an artist most strongly identifies with as well as their political ideology and career stage. This suggests that attempts to address the validation gap for social practitioners needs to be aware of and responsive to the often-divergent value systems at play amongst those who identify as social artists. Crucially, artists felt that any and all routes to validation should be recognised as valid in themselves:

I think maybe there isn't just one
way of validating socially engaged
art… There are lots of different ways
and they have to have credibility…
We need to give it that credibility
(Artist 22A)

This scenario is comparable to the interconnecting domains through which traction and visibility can be gained by studio practitioners (e.g. exhibiting in artist-led spaces, commercial galleries and/or publicly-funded galleries). The routes through these domains involve different expectations, entry points and levels of perceived prestige, but offer artists opportunities to develop their career paths in alignment with their circumstances and individual value systems.

For social artists, the options are relatively fewer and more difficult to access. For some, validation represented gaining (greater) acceptance from existing structures and institutions in contemporary art, such as galleries and funding bodies:

When you get funding from organisa-
tions… it's a validation of the trust
that they have for you… it's validation
of their faith in you (Artist, 4A)

When we're approached to do work with
organisations that we would respect…
we would think, "oh that's really good,
we've got a reputation for quality,
meaningful work" (Artist, 10A)

These respondents generally acknowledged the value, power and influence of existing institutions — and the benefits to an artist's career of engaging with them. This was particularly meaningful when seeking to communicate the value of an artist's practice to others:

I think when you obtain funding that
demonstrates [the validity of your
practice] very easily to people
(Artist, 8A)

For many, gaining recognition from institutions also demonstrated a wider acceptance of social practice within the mainstream art world. Several suggested that rather than looking for a separate system of validation for social practitioners, social practice should be more widely understood and embraced by the art world as an equivalent practice of contemporary art. For these artists, the current gallery-based system was usually felt to be limited, or reliant upon outdated assumptions about how art might look and function:

It frustrates me that the art world is
seen as studio-based gallery practice
because that is just one tiny section
of the art world and I don't agree with
the fact that we should be reinvent-
ing something different [for social
practice]. I think that field should
be expanded to include this and other
forms of artistic practice as well
(Artist, 21A)
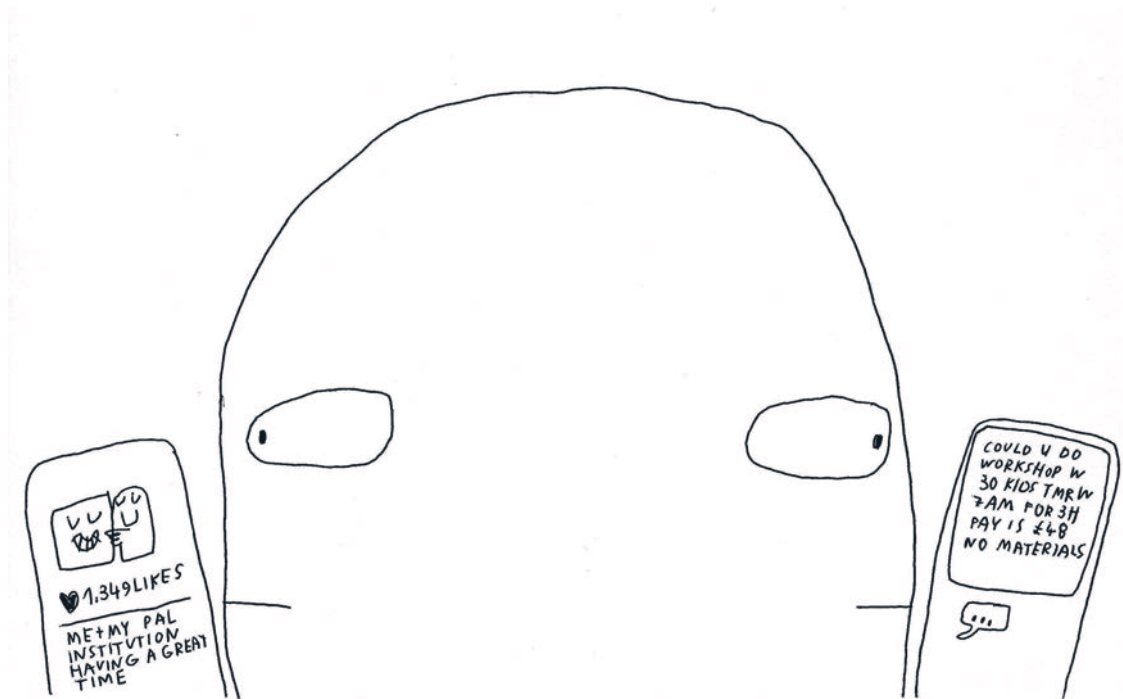
Rosalie Schweiker, London Art Economics,
commissioned by Company Drinks.

We're not lone artistic geniuses work-
ing in a studio… and therefore [people
think that our work] can't possibly
have the same quality. It can't make
people feel the same way as this male
creative genius making something in a
studio (Commissioner, 9B)

However, most agreed that institutions needed to change
their approach to social practice, and to engage with it on terms
equal with other forms of gallery-based art. They stressed that it
should not be the job of social practitioners to bend their work
to meet existing conventions, or to become more acceptable to
a mainstream gallery system, but rather that existing structures
should expand to embrace social practice on its own terms.
For many this required a major shift in the way social practice

is understood and promoted by institutions, moving it out of the education wing and into the main spaces of exhibition and promotion, or enabling it to move easily between these different contexts. In particular, this meant clarifying the relationship between social art, that was generally defined as critically engaged and art world-focused, and community art, which was felt by some to have become a diluted term, associated with instrumentalism and a lack of criticality, although this position is one strongly contested by many community arts practitioners and scholars.[2]

When social artists were commissioned by galleries, their role was often understood to be that of a pedagogue or community worker, to the exclusion of being an artist:

I'd like to see a separation between socially engaged practice and what you might call… community art… I don't just want to make work that keeps people entertained on a session or is a really nice creative output. Socially engaged for me is more than that (Artist, 3A)

For others, it is imperative for institutions to better understand the nature and role of social practice and ensure that a shared value system is discussed and negotiated in relation to a commission:

If an art institution does not have a fundamental understanding of social practice, it does not matter how much tangible support they provide, there are always difficulties and unmet expectations, because the philosophical understanding is mismatched (Artist, 13A)

However, others argued for more systemic change, rejecting the gallery system as something fundamentally at odds with their values as social practitioners:

I don't think I fit into…regular [validation] models, but I'd like there to be different validation models (Artist 21A)

We don't fit that model and we mustn't, otherwise we've failed… Let's not re-invent the wheel, let's invent something else (Artist, 22A)

For many of these artists, it was felt that networks of artist peers should play a greater role in shaping and determining the nature of validation within the social practice community, rather than relying on institutions and funders. The future role of organisations might then be to foster and support artist-led movements, without co-opting or appropriating such systems as their own.

Both the pilot research and the interviews for the current research highlighted an absence of connections congruent with the values of stakeholders and able to provide the kinds of validation relevant and necessary to their careers — critical feedback, solidarity, reputation, peer-learning, training, advice, profiling, and so on. This suggests that effective validation is not transactional (I work with you because you know how to behave) but transformational for both parties (shared values and authentication), something that is preferable in the long-term because mutuality is explicit.[3]

A number of commissioners interviewed for the current research suggested that validation by peers in the field of social art was important in their own judgement of how successful a commission had been:

We would look at things like the reception amongst peers in terms of the socially engaged arts world. What's the reception of a project in the arts world? (Commissioner, 9B)

However, commissioners also described a lack of diversity in artists known to their organisations and spoke about their wish to broaden the pool of potential commissions, as well as benefiting from associated expertise from and about the field of social practice:

Access to a wider range of artists and information about their previous work. Input from artists about what barriers they face to working in the public realm so we can get a better idea how to support a more diverse representation of artists working in this area (Commissioner, 1B)

Our pool of artists…is quite narrow and anecdotally does not seem to be very diverse in make-up (Commissioner, 2B)

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2   Matarasso, François. *A Restless Art: How Participation Won, and Why It Matters*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2019.

....

3   Personal communication, Susan Jones. Jones uses the term co-validation to describe this in her forthcoming Ph.D. thesis.

Several commissioners admitted that they often took their cues from other organisations when searching for new artists to commission:

> …we're looking at…who else has hired them, organisations that share the same ethos. And if they've worked for them successfully, they're likely to be able to work for us successfully as well (Commissioner, 9B)

For the majority of 'non-art world' commissioners, the benefits to participants were the driving force behind supporting social practice, linked to drivers delivering government initiatives around social impact and wellbeing, but there was less sense of imperative for participants to have more agency in the projects.

Regardless of this, a large majority of artists and commissioners emphasised the overlooked importance of 'participants' and collaborators as primary validators of social practice:

> I think everybody involved in the project [has a role in its validation]… It's participants, it's our collaborators and partners (Commissioner, 3B)

Many also acknowledged that there is currently a lack of satisfactory ways to capture participants' views — and pointed towards a hierarchy between participants and funders in relation to the respective weight of their various validating judgements.

In addition, artists considered legacy as essential, but found it an unsupported aspect of practice. They considered current evaluation methods to be insufficient, opaque or only measured in monetary terms. On the other hand, funders from local governments and commissioners connected to larger institutions (galleries) had confidence in their potential to develop evaluation frameworks of social practice, and emphasised how keen they were to develop new partnerships with other commissioners. They were also confident in their own ability as validators. Meanwhile none of the social practice artists we interviewed identified funders as part of the validation process, beyond providing more support in terms of money.

The Commissioning Programme

Informed by the thematic issues identified in the interviews, and to bring an experiential dimension to the question *how would a new model of validation better meet the needs of social practice artists?*, the research team established a four-stranded commissioning programme called 'Social Works?' responding as follows:

a. To provide a platform for social practice artists' critical writing and debate, the first issue of a new journal called 'Social Works? Open' was published.

b. To combat isolation, four artist-led network gatherings called 'Social Works? Get Togethers' were commissioned across the UK.

c. To explore specific issues (in this case paid commissions and arts and health), two artist-led 'Social Works? Workshops' were commissioned.

d. To create opportunities for informal conversations between the wider stakeholder group through a festival of social art, 'Social Works? Live' was held at Manchester School of Art in April 2019.

Launch of 'Social Works? Open',
Sheffield, 2018

Members of the stakeholder group were invited to apply for these paid commissions. The group was regularly updated about the progress of the programme and were invited to send ideas and feedback, either informally via email or through a tailored online survey. Each commission included a small budget for a blog post to be written profiling the event (see quotes from some of these blog posts below). The stakeholders commissioned in earlier iterations of the programme were invited to assist with selecting later commissions, trialling and reviewing outputs for follow on actions.

'SOCIAL WORKS? OPEN'

This was the first UK-based journal issue dedicated to social practice, with support from Arts Council England, Heart of Glass, Peckham Platform and Manchester School of Art. The publication included contributions from Jen Delos Reyes, Kerry Morrison, R.M. Sánchez-Camus, Claire Mead, They Are Here, Harvey Diamond, Lauren Velvick, Les Monaghan and Joe Cotgrave.

The writing demonstrated the value of artists providing accounts of what they do and know — taking the pulse of society — in their own voices:

If we are creating work with people and are putting our finger on the pulse of society, what is our blood pressure reading? How is this very act defining and redefining cultural output today? And what does this mean within the current UK context?'

R.M. Sanchéz-Camus ('Social Works? Open' 2018: 66)

To date the publication has sold more than 350 copies, is included in all major repositories, including the British Library and Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, and the online pdf receiving 1,423 online reads so far. Cognisant of the issues around paying both artists and writers for their labour, all contributions were paid at standard professional rates.

This was a series of commissioned artist-led network development initiatives held across the UK. The research had shown that a lack of studio space, gallery representation and exhibition culture along with the fragmented nature of socially engaged practice, meant that many socially engaged artists face isolation from their peers in the UK. The brief was to bring together like-minded practitioners and support the sharing of experiences and best practice. There were 28 separate applications for the available funding, giving a sense of the demand for peer to peer artist-led support. We were able to fund four of these proposals.[1]

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1   The blog posts commissioned for each event which
        the following quotes are taken from can be found
        under each event tab here https://www.axisweb.org/
        social-works/

Socially Engaged Art Fair — led by Sally Lemsford

Socially Engaged Art Fair was held in Bridport, Dorset and provided a space for artists to share ideas about the kind of support most needed by artists and how this might be achieved. Participants were given a stall and invited to present their ideas, questions and provocations.

It wasn't going to be a day that put 'art bollocks' on a pedestal, but dealt with tangible issues that you perhaps feel like you can't talk about to ACE or your peers.

Blog post, Megan Dunford

A Balancing Act: Precarity and socially engaged arts practices — led by Alex Wilde

A Balancing Act which took place at Kinning Park Complex in Cornwall was an opportunity for creative practitioners who define as socially engaged to meet and discuss the issue of precarity within their projects and careers. The event was recorded creatively by Josie Vallely who produced a 'zine of collected material, reflections on the event and contributions from people attending.

Precarity tied together all the topics. It related to the nature of our practice — in practical terms such as unpredictable income, lack of security, and ways in which we practice — balancing different interests, agenda, expectations. Precarity is an issue that affects many of the communities we work with and is sometimes the subject matter which we are tackling in our work.

Zine, Josie Vallely

Arts and Health, facilitated
by Daniel Regan, London, 2018

For the Labour of Love, facilitated
by Priya Mistry, Nottingham, 2018

Arts and Health — led by Daniel Regan

Arts and Health took place at Free Space Project, London and brought together artists who identify as having a socially engaged practice in arts and health with the aim of making new connections for peer support and knowledge exchange. A series of micro-workshops took place during the Get Together focusing on getting funding, troubleshooting projects, starting out and building connections.

What was perhaps even more useful was the act of sharing feelings and fears, validating discussions around managing insecurity, anxiety and self-doubt and the collectively acknowledged dread of 'networking events' […] A hive mind in action and one characterised by support and generosity.

Blog post, Katherine Lazenby

For The Love of Labour — led by Priya Mistry

For The Love of Labour took place at Primary in Nottingham and involved preparing and eating a meal while exploring the question, 'what does the culture of work in social practice say about how we value each other and the labour performed — paid, unpaid and emotional?'

When we are trusted and invested in, we are given the room to develop, take risks and experiment with our practice. When there is a lack of understanding about the nature of our work we are micromanaged, underpaid and overworked.

Blog post, Gina Mollett

'SOCIAL WORKS? WORKSHOPS'

Two workshops were commissioned as part of the 'Social Works?' Programme. The impetus for these was the need for more direct and clear communication between funders/ commissioners and artists in the field of socially engaged practice, and the brief was to find new ways to navigate the difficult relationship that often exists between these two parties. The commissioned events, led by artists, explored a specific topic or issue facing the field of social practice.

Drawing by Sadie Edgington
of *No Shortlists*,
facilitated by Joshua
Sofaer, London, 2018

'Of the City: Developers' Dinner' — led by Amahra Spence

The 'Developers' Dinner' addressed the historical relationships between artists, placemaking and the built environment, in the context of gentrification, displacement, social cleansing, cultural assets and community. Forming part of Spence's 'Artist-Friendly City' research, the workshop brought together invited artists, planners, architects, developers and others invested in 'regeneration' and the built environment, with the aim of collectively re-imagining possibilities and making new connections in a rapidly developing Birmingham.

For many artists spending an evening in conversation with a bunch of developers doesn't sound like much fun… what happens when you put seemingly opposite people in the same room and create space, over some good food, for them to philosophise over the future of their city? Turns out they all find out they share the same concerns and have ideas for solutions to the problems.

Blog post, Siana Bangura

'No Shortlists' — led by Joshua Sofaer

Concerned with the inevitable power imbalance between commissioners and artists, this workshop sought to flatten the hierarchy by randomly matching the four participating artists with commissioners for one-to-one discussions and facilitated exercises with the aim of encouraging more open discussion about organisational and artistic aims and greater transparency about the commissioning process. Commissioners were expected to commit £1500 for a potential project to be explored during the course of the workshop. Of the four artist-commissioner pairings, three led to commissions (Amy Pennington for Festival of Making, Elsa James for Cubitt, Sadie Edgington for Tate Exchange) and one led to continued discussions about future opportunities (Juan delGado for Heart of Glass).

This workshop wants to flatten the hierarchy', Joshua had written in the project introduction, but did the concept work in practice? Certainly, institutions hold the power in their relationship with artists; they are able to choose who they work with and how they work with them. Artists are often in a position of uncertainty; we generate creative material before the point of offering up a proposal and then it can be rejected after a series of communications back and forth.

Blog post, Sadie Edgington

'SOCIAL WORKS? LIVE'

In addition to the Workshops and Get Togethers, a festival of social art was held in April 2019 at Manchester School of Art. It attracted approximately 100 participants including artists, arts organisation representatives, academics and members of the public and involved 11 new commissions. Its aim was to facilitate open discussion amongst social practitioners and to share difficulties and ideas about best practice, while simultaneously showcasing some of the possibilities presented by working socially.

We commissioned 11 artists to be 'stallholders' at the event, each showcasing ideas and practice through performances and interactive sessions. Together we explored the ways in which — by working in the open — we can share and shape new possibilities previously unseen or imagined. The artists were Eva He, gobscure, Harald Smykla, Jaron Hill, Lady Kitt & Louise Brown, Leslie Thompson, Mark Prest, Rabab Ghazoul, Rosalie Schweiker, Sharon Bennett & Sarah Dixon (The Women's Art Activation System) and Social Art Network. Jody Wood (A Blade of Grass, U.S.) made a live contribution via the instant messaging platform, Slack.

I didn't know what to expect but I went with it and got lost in lots of interesting and varied actions and discussions. A great mix!

Participant: 'Social Works? Live'

Eva He

Eva presented the receipt printer chatroom analog, 'LOOO' — a computer keyboard of limited word-keys connected to a thermal printer that instantly prints out user-generated messages, offering commentary on the current chaos of the socio-political climate.

https://madeinartslondon.com/pages/eva-he

gobscure

gobscure came in the guise of Mary Wollstonecraft, the feminist, internationalist and pamphleteer who was written off 200 years ago as a hyena in petticoats for being mad, bad, rad and bi. Participants were invited to sketch a map depicting a personal journey onto Mary's petticoat.

https://www.nudgingmeteors.space

Harald Smykla

Harald presented the temporary bureau for C.R.E.H.A (Centre for Research into Emotional Hygiene through Art), a performative research project investigating the emotional impact of art. Participants were invited to recreate and process their memories of significant, emotionally charged art experiences in any kind in order to answer the question — can art move you?

http://www.creativebd.org.uk/artist-commissions/harald-smykla/

Jaron Hill

Jaron collected ideas and submissions for the second issue of HERM, the zine for a queer arts collective based between West Yorkshire and London. The aim of Jaron's stall was to interrogate and deconstruct the notion that London represents the creative epicentre for the UK, by providing space for creative and open discussion that validates and empowers people from diverse backgrounds, including those who do not identify as artists or designers.

https://www.jesson-hill.com

Lady Kitt & Louise Brown

Kitt and Lou provided a drop-in service, the Social Practice First Aid Kit, with 'prescriptions' and resources (physical, digital, imagined, emotional) for social arts practitioners.

https://www.lladykitt.com/social-practice-1st-aid-kitt

Mark Prest

Mark Prest — founder of Portraits of Recovery — presented 'PhotoLoo', asking how art might be useful to explore our feelings and our conflicted selves. Mark guided participants in making self-portraits using a set of instructions to explore feelings and internal conflicts — and the resulting polaroids formed a temporary gallery that visually articulates a better collective identity fit.

https://www.portraitsofrecovery.org.uk/about/

Rosalie Schweiker

Rosalie sold or traded copies of the book, *Teaching For People Who Prefer Not To Teach*, which she edited together with Mirjam Bayerdoerfer and co-designed with Margherita Huntley. Visitors to Rosalie's stall were invited to try out some of the exercises in the book.

http://www.rosalieschweiker.info

Sharon Bennett & Sarah Dixon / Women's Art Activation System

Sharon and Sarah presented the Bureau for the Validation of Art in which attendees at 'Social Works? Live' were given the opportunity to submit their work for validation. Using a series of pre-set questionnaires, the Bureau's officials came to a decision as to whether the art presented was valid as art, providing an official stamp and docket recording the outcome.

http://thewaas.org

Leslie Thompson

Leslie — a regular artist at Venture Arts studios — documented and depicted proceedings at 'Social Works? Live' through live observational drawings.

https://venturearts.org/artists/leslie-thompson/

Rabab Ghazoul

Rabab, an artist and director of the Cardiff-based grassroots organisation Gentle/Radical, documented reflections, critical musings and provocations from 'Social Works? Live' — in the form of a live publication. Her summation talk invited participants to think about how our readings of power might inform our social practice work; personally, politically and institutionally.

http://rababghazoul.com/artwork

Social Art Network

Fresh from their success at Tate Exchange the previous day, Social Art Network provided a space to discuss the development of resources for social arts practitioners.

The commissioners

The commissioners' hot seat included sessions with Scott Burrell (Head of Programme for Create London), Beth Emily Richards (Artist and Producer with Take a Part) and Paul Hartley (Founding Director of In-Situ). Attendees were invited to ask any questions about the commissioning process and to share their experiences of undertaking commissioned projects.

The fringe

Having received a very a high number of excellent proposals for the 'Social Works? Live' commissions, The Fringe was created to enable more artists to showcase their work, both as planned activities and informal interventions within the space. Bursaries were provided to facilitate travel and contributors included Katy & Rebecca Beinart, Amelia Baron, Sally Lemsford, Alana Jelinek, Zoe Toolan and others.

'Social Works? Live', Leslie Thompson

INSIGHTS FROM THE COMMISSIONING PHASE OF THE RESEARCH

The commissioning phase of the research attracted a large amount of interest amongst the stakeholder group. Stakeholder members represented a range of artist-led networks, both formal and informal, established and emergent, which have momentum but sometimes lack the infrastructure to realise their goals. This phase tested the feasibility of a relational model of validation in which artists develop communities of practice, have the means to discuss specific issues in focused ways, to develop a critical voice for the sector and to improve access by funders and producers to diversify the pool of possible candidates for social art commissions.

The outcomes, reported via commissioned blog posts,[2] provide an indication of how social practice groups might expand and connect with one another to share expertise and support, becoming communities of practice, while linking further to relevant organisations, funders and commissioners with the aim of developing understanding and diversifying commissions in social practice.

Making this connection process visible also helps other social artists access artist-led networks, who might otherwise be working in isolation. It suggests ways to advocate for social art in the art world and beyond; to support individuals and groups in accessing relevant resources and peer-to-peer exchanges, contributing to mutual validation processes, without imposing a top down system of validation upon them.

In all parts of the commissioned programme, there was a powerfully expressed desire and need to connect up with others doing the same kind of work and organise together for the conditions that will enable artists working with social practices to feel validated. As Gina Mollett writes on her blog post on the get together *For the Love of Labour*, ideas for validation include

transparency, codes of conduct for organisa-
tions, peer to peer appraisals, collective action,
celebration.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Whilst the study included some international stakeholders, and involved research associate Rebecca Senior travelling to the US for face to face meetings with social practice organisations and artists, the scope of the project and the lack of existing research on artist validation limited the scoping of the context for validation to the UK, rather than extending it to international attitudes towards validation; understanding this wider context is an important task for the future. Similarly, a future goal should be to understand the relation of devolved UK cultural policy, validation processes, and ongoing debates about how and why validation matters.[3]

A second limitation of the commissioning phase of the research was the creation of the stakeholder group only to inform the research. Although engagement with the commissioning process was high, the stakeholder group was not supported to become a fully-fledged structure during the research, which could be viewed as a missed opportunity. Nonetheless, Axisweb have continued to work with the stakeholder group beyond the original scope of the research as far as possible, for example via a prospective *Social Art Now!* publication, and in the formation of a Social Art Library.

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2   (see: https://www.axisweb.org/social-works/)

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3   We are grateful to Frances Williams for raising the question of devolution after reading a draft of the report.

CONCLUSIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

The research confirmed and extended the findings of the 2015 pilot study which had first provided evidence of a validation failure. The team interviewed a further 40 artists, commissioners and added researchers to this mix. The research engaged approximately 400 participants through the advisory and stakeholder groups, and through events run for members of these groups. It also developed secondary forms of engagement through online hits and social media communications.

THE PILOT STUDY

The pilot study [1] had targeted artists and commissioners who were considered to already have achieved success and a degree of validation, with first-hand experiences of having been validated.

Commissioners had been asked about their role in supporting artists working mainly outside the gallery system, deciding who the best artists to work with are, how these artists achieve visibility and reputation and the main advantages and disadvantages of the current system.

Artists had been asked about the main routes to visibility and a nationally successful career; different ways used to measure success, the comparative impact on an artist's professional status of a top tier gallery exhibition, or a significant project in a non-gallery context, incidence of institutional training to prepare for social practice, routes to finding out about the 'top players' in the field, degree of satisfaction with the way artists working outside the gallery system are validated and how to improve things.

The pilot concluded that the values of social practice artists and their requirements and desires for validation diverge significantly from the gallery (art world-as-network) model. Social practice artists consequently have less influence within these networks, in part because the commissioning practices, funding streams, artistic and ethical values, outputs and outcomes of social practice are not fully compatible with those of the contemporary art world and art markets.

The current research confirmed the validation gap, adding evidence to existing insights and accumulating new evidence for four further thematic interlocking issues

- Difficulty articulating social practice, including creating definitions and negotiating roles and values;

- Unrealistic / unreasonable expectations from project partners (e.g. commissioners, participants, members of the public);

- Lack of support and infrastructure for social projects;

- Perceived second class status of social practice in the art world.

It modelled how artist-led networks can connect with one another to share expertise and support, becoming communities of practice, while linking further to relevant organisations, funders and commissioners.

OVERVIEW OF ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

These insights can be formulated as four challenges:

a. **External roles & awareness:** these concern the place and profile of social practice in the artistic community and wider society. There are challenges in defining, its role and purpose, its community and workings. There is a perceived second-class status of social practice in the art world.

b. **External commissioning & participation:** artists, commissioners and funders report unrealistic and uninformed expectations from project partners (e.g. commissioners, participants, members of the public).

c. **Internal support and resources:** There is a lack of support and infrastructure for social projects; there are felt to be low levels of funding given the expectations and demands of the tasks required.

d. **Internal capacity building:** lack of skills and training, under-established communities of practice and network functions, lack of professional support systems for social art practitioners and stakeholders.

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1   *Beyond the Gallery*, 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Eight recommendations emerge from consideration of the interviews, survey work and pilot commissioning programme.

1. The production of a journal and forum specifically for social practice (the exemplar produced during the research is available in hard copy and as an online pdf here https://www.axisweb. org/models-of-validation/content/social-works/2018/social-works-open/

2. Social library/centre, offering resources and live project opportunities to social practice artists and other stakeholders

3. Directory of social practice artists for use by funders, commissioners, participants and artists

4. Training/skills and other kinds of artist development specifically relevant to social practice

5. Research programme looking at social practice systems & communities, with particular reference to the funding landscape

6. Identifying, mapping and strengthening communities of practice

7. Partnership building between communities of practice and gatekeeper organizations

8. A social practice meshwork able to support and promote social practice art, involving stakeholders in an accessible, horizontal exchange structure

Brief notes on each of these are provided below, followed by an overview of three strategic options for future action

9. **Journal that provides forum for critical debate and exchange:** this builds on the pilot journal (online/offline) 'Social Works? Open' which gave social practice artists from UK and beyond a voice for the first time through competitive funded writing commissions. To develop this, establish publishing 'home' for the journal as lively forum for wide-ranging views and ideas, develop business case and secure funding to become self-supporting, increase print run and sales accordingly. *(Challenges addressed as a result: external roles and awareness; internal support and resources).*

10. **Social Library / centre:** an online and offline library and living archive of social practice, offering resources and project opportunities to social practice artists and other stakeholders.

(Challenges addressed as a result: external roles and awareness; internal support and resources).

11. **Directory of artists and social art projects:** this builds on and extends existing Axisweb provision, with a more comprehensive national presence. Over a 3 year development period this would develop provision for a growing social artist membership, accommodating the specificity of social art practice, locations, commissioners and funders' requirements. *(Challenges addressed as a result: external commissioning & participation; internal capacity building).*

12. **Training, skills and bespoke artist's development for social practice:** artist-led education programmes for commissioners and funders, co-producing best practice guidelines; integrated, non-overlapping artists' development provision, underpinned by artist-led evaluation of existing and newly proposed opportunities *(Challenges addressed as a result: external commissioning & participation; internal capacity building).*

13. **Growing communities of practice and community building:** continuing to grow connections that emerged during the research via reciprocal exchanges between existing individuals and groups becoming a connected community of practice able to contribute to validating social practice artists. Linking regional to national to international communities of practice. Activities might include an annual festival(s), international meet-ups, online webinars to debate topical questions, bespoke events for partners members and associates. *(Challenges addressed as a result: internal support and resources; internal capacity building).*

14. **Partnership building with national organizations representing artworld and non-artworld stakeholders:** this recognizes that social practice is not an island, rather it has many links with existing programmes and organizations: not only in the cultural domain but including health, education, regeneration, community development, digital economy and so on. *(Challenges addressed as a result: external roles & awareness; internal capacity building).*

15. **Strategic research on social practice activities & communities:** this aims to take forward the current (modest

scale) research on a more strategic basis. Topical themes include the evaluation of social practice impacts, the involvement of audiences and participants in validation and social practice networks, the life-paths of artists, the funding landscape and commissioning system *(Challenges addressed as a result: external roles and awareness; external commissioning and participation).*

16. **National 'task force' to lead and promote social practice.** A new artist-led taskforce to promote the social practice community of practice to promote the field of social practice and provide democratic leadership. *(Challenges addressed as a result: external awareness & roles; external commissioning and participation).*

Launch of 'Social Works? Open' at
Social Art Network event, Sheffield.
Photographs by Julian Lister.

OPTIONS FOR FORWARD DEVELOPMENT:
FROM NETWORK TO MESHWORK

Given that respondents indicated a strong preference for a flat and emergent rather than hierarchical and fixed model of validation, we recommend that actions 1–7 are developed into an emergent system of influence through the guiding principles of a *meshwork* structure. A meshwork is an interweaving of growing, moving lifelines — lines laid down in a life (Ingold, 2010). Meshworks gain their strength through their knots of encounter where lifelines become interwoven and entangled. Thought of as a form of organisational structure, a meshwork is the co-respondence of lifelines, their resonances with one another requiring attention and care to their concurrent movements. The form of a meshwork can be distinguished from that of a network, the latter often visualised as a fixed array of more and less powerful nodes interconnected by geometrical lines which communicate point to point. A meshwork by contrast grows in relation to its capacity for mutual correspondence and entanglement. For example, Axisweb and Social Art Network show meshwork tendencies in their correspondences over social practice, nurturing a common purpose going beyond what each can get out of the encounter, adopting an ethos of care for the larger social environment of which they are a part.

Wheatley and Frieze (2006) explain that taking social innovations to scale involves a movement from network to communities of practice to 'systems of influence':

When separate, local efforts connect with each other as networks, then strengthen as *communities of practice*, suddenly and surprisingly a new system emerges at a greater level of scale. *This system of influence* possesses qualities and capacities that were unknown in the individuals. It isn't that they were hidden; they simply don't exist until the system emerges. They are properties of the system, not the individual, but once there, individuals possess them. And the system that emerges always possesses greater power and influence than is possible through planned, incremental change.

Voorhoeve (2006) calls a system of influence a *meshwork*. A network is made up of likeminded people who deploy reciprocity to realise individual goals; in a community of practice knowledge is shared, partially standardized and made available for broader use; in a meshwork, which can quickly develop out of a network and community of practice, individual interests are fulfilled, but commitment to a shared purpose brings interests into alignment beyond fulfilling individual and often competitive ends. Individuals "perceive what piece of the puzzle they are holding" and as a result deploy new capacities and skills (ibid, 11) This, Voorhoeve argues, scales up influence, without sacrificing autonomy.

If we were to identify conventional options for how to apply the recommendations strategically, we might suggest different organisational models as follows, with their various advantages and disadvantages

a. **Ad hoc development:** this continues in the current vein of decentralized activity, spread around a number of organizations and a host of other stakeholders. (Advantages — a relatively open creative space with no pre-determined structure in keeping with ethos of many social practice artists: disadvantages — lack of overview, visibility, critical mass and support systems.)

b. **Devolved agency model:** a single unit or office takes the lead in national coordination, as a devolved section under the wing of a larger organization, i.e. a national public or philanthropic body. (Advantages — a national presence with visibility and backup: disadvantages — possible reduced independence and creative scope for artists, smaller commissioners and participants).

c. **Free-standing organisation:** a new national level organization is set up, as a partnership with major sponsors and commissioning bodies, and including for wider stakeholder representation. (Advantages — focus and creative scope: disadvantages — possible extended start up time, insecurity of funding and similar risks for a small freestanding organization.)

However, the above options assume that the more influential a network structure becomes, the more it operates through centralising powerful nodes. We propose an alternative to this assumption in the form of a meshwork, which seeks to support the full involvement of multi stakeholder partnerships without relying on more powerful supernodes and *their* favoured interconnections. This requires deploying the types of imaginary, leadership, use of resources and principles developed in peer-to-peer, cooperative organisational structures.

'However, there was a feeling of frustration in the room that these same topics are being discussed at various gatherings across the UK. Lists of actions, toolkits and resources are being produced but what needs to happen in order for them to implement change?'

Gina Mollett, blog post,
For the Love of Labour

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

By way of conclusion the report suggests that in the short term, these recommendations be the subject of further consultation and 'community of practice' building. This could take the form of:

- smaller organizations such as Axisweb, Social Art Network and others being funded through national sponsorship to develop networks and communities of practice via capacity building measures outlined above (e.g. journal, artist development, research, networking, skills development etc.)

- funding bids from researchers to develop new programmes and research partnerships to better understand issues on which we currently have only anecdotal evidence — for example levels, types and extent of funding currently supporting social practice, models of best practice for social practice artist development.

- a partnership of artists, more established communities of practice and influencers (e.g. ACE, NHS, LAs, charitable foundations) to consult on the recommendations set out in the report, through artist-led and artist-enabling deliberative democratic enquiry events.

In the longer term, it is clear that social practice is a potentially valuable and significant strand in the UK cultural community. Like all professional practice in the arts, social practice requires validation. In the networked art world this amounts to a belief — or social imaginary —shared widely enough to offer assurance that the skills of the producer and the value of the product are fit for purpose. Artistic careers grow and flourish, or decline and diminish, due to externally generated acknowledgements. Social practice offers an opportunity to go beyond the network model which primarily benefits the individuals involved, by building communities of practice where greater benefits are shared, and towards the tensile flexibility of the meshwork, which brings us into correspondence not as static points in a grid, but through ever emerging 'thread-lines' out of which relationships might occur.

At its heart [a model of validation] needs to encourage artists to do this for themselves and [organisations should] partner with them to work strategically, critically. (Artist, 15A).

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LIST OF IMAGES

Frequently Asked Questions

What is social practice art?

The term social practice (art) used in this report originated in the U.S and is becoming more common in the UK. Finding one term to cover to everything that is labelled as social practice art, (a.k.a. socially engaged art) is not without its problems. There is no one way in which art and the social come together and so there is always a slipperiness about whichever moniker is chosen. Our use of social practice reflects learning over the course of the research informed by our stakeholders, including international members for whom social practice best describes a maturing field in which artists work closely with participants and/or audiences, where social elements are a medium of the work, not just a context for it of it. At its best, social practice art achieves high quality results. At worst the high expectations of those who commission work is matched by the inadequate support available to artists and the restricted resources, including time and budget.

What is validation?

Validation is the process by which the practice and skills of a social practice artist are acknowledged, critically engaged and promoted through commissioning, funding and training by relevant organisational bodies and professional networks.

Who are the artists?

Social practice artists are found across the arts, not only within the visual and performing arts, but also design, digital media and architecture. Artists come to social practice via a range of routes, including further and higher education in the arts and humanities, curatorial and educational practice, arts administration, activism, music and community work.

Who has a stake in social practice?

Those invested in social practice include: `artists`; `participants`; `participant-audiences`; `secondary audiences`; `commissioners`; `curators`; `producers`; `funders`; `educationalists` and `researchers`.

Who pays for social practice art?

Social practice art is supported by many different funders, including: `Arts and Heritage`; `Charitable trusts`; `Health and social care`; `Education`; `Local government`; `Private sector`.

What are the problems?

Despite achieving excellent results, and being increasingly in demand, social practice frequently goes `under-recognized`, `under-funded` and `disconnected.`
    This goes hand in hand with problems and challenges around the lack of adequate validation for social practice artists.

Interview Questions

Artists

1. What is your definition
    of social practice?

2. How would you describe your practice?

3. How do you evaluate the work you are
    doing in your Socially Engaged Art
    Practice (SEAP)?

4. How do you define a project
    as effective or successful?

5. How do others evaluate your work?

PROMPT

·   Commissioner
·   Producer
·   Participants
·   Other

6. What indicators within your practice
    validate it as socially engaged?

7. Do you receive validation of your
    practice from external sources?

PROMPT

·   Connecting with others
·   Gaining commissions

8. What gaps and issues affect
    this field in your experience?

9. What would help you to practice better?

10. Would you be willing to pay a
    membership fee or bespoke fee to
    use such a platform/services?

Commissioners

1. What is your definition
    of social practice?

2. What indicators do you look for when
    determining which artist to commission
    to undertake a project?

3. How do you evaluate the quality
    of the work you commission?

4. What validators do you look
    for in a successful project?

5. Who is providing these validators?

6. What gaps and issues affect the
    commissioning and funding of SEAP
    in your experience?

7. What would help you to commission
    and fund SEAP better?

8. What should be the indicators that
    validate socially engaged practice?

Researchers

1. What is your definition
    of social practice?

2. Could you speak a bit about your
    interest/role in Socially Engaged Art?

3. How do you evaluate a socially
    engaged art project/work?

4. What validators do you look
    for in a successful project?

5. Who is providing these validators?

6. What gaps and issues affect the
    field of Socially Engaged Art and
    the teaching of Socially Engaged
    Art in your opinion?

7. What would help you to
    critique this practice better?

8. What indicators should be used to
    validate this practice, beyond the
    academic/critic's role?

9. What would help you to support/
    create Socially Engaged Artistic
    Practice better?

10. Do the outcomes need to be validated/
    evaluated by someone/something beyond
    the institution?

Follow on Survey Questions

Thank you for agreeing to be part of the Stakeholder forum for the project Models of Validation. It would be fantastic if you could complete this quick questionnaire, which has been designed to gauge your level of involvement in the project.

(In some of the following Qs below we use the shorthand term SEA to describe forms of social practice beyond the gallery. We recognise the limitations of this.)

1. Which, if any, of these descriptions would you use about your practice/the work you do?

☐   socially engaged art (SEA)

☐   social practice

☐   community art

☐   participatory art

☐   agonism/ agonistic

☐   activist

☐   collaborative

☐   inclusive

☐   pedagogical

☐   therapeutic

☐   other — (please specify your own term)

Anything you want to add about this?

2. How long have you been working in the above way/genre/field, and how did you get started?

3. Do you belong to any groups, formal or informal, concerned with SEA? If so, can you tell us a bit about this group and your role in it?

4. What do you think you are able to bring to the validation model stakeholder forum and why — e.g. experience (say what kind), opinion (give us a taster of this!), networks, friendships and connections, new /unheard perspectives (please explain a little), specialist knowledge, leadership ...and so on.

5. Which of the following would you be able to help us with/ be interested in getting involved with:

☐   Opinion

☐   Questionnaire

☐   Focus group — in person and online

☐   Advising

☐   Representation of interest group

☐   Testing of the online validation model as it develops

☐   Conference and workshop attendance

☐   Being interviewed

☐   Interviewing others

☐   Conduit between researchers and participants

6. We would like to include representation from groups who have experienced SEA as collaborators, participants, audiences etc. Could you nominate a participant for the forum from a community group/ social group you have worked with outside of the arts to also take part in the forum?

Uptake for Commissions

As a result of this work, Axisweb's existing provision was further extended to an integrated digital/physical approach to address the issues raised by social practitioners. Social Art Library was developed during 2019 and launches in 2020. The library is fundamentally artist-led and was informed by a set of guiding principles developed from the interviews. Comprising articles, books, reports, projects etc. it represents an ongoing archive of social practice, also enabling artists, commissioners and researchers to discover each other's work etc. It is Axisweb's aim that the library helps to raise awareness about the diversity of approaches and issues in the social art field, by making publications of all kinds accessible and searchable.

OFFERS	TAKE UP
Stakeholder forum and advisory groups	161 Stakeholders 14 Advisors
Survey responses	Stakeholder forum (161) 50 % return rate Interviewees (40) 88% return rate
No of 'Social Works? Open' printed	400
No of 'Social Works? Open' sold	350
'Social Works? Open' read online	1,423
No. 'Social Works?' commission applications	Total = 155 Artist Commission = 44 Get Together = 28 Workshops = 17 Writing = 66

Advisory Group Members

NAME	ORGANISATION	LOCATION
Patrick Fox	Heart of Glass	St. Helens, N E England
Diane Hebb (Director Engagement, Participation)	Arts Council Wales	Cardiff, Wales
Jo Verrent (Senior Producer)	Unlimited	Yorkshire / London
Ailbhe Murphy	Create Ireland	Dublin
Esme Ward (Head Learning, Engagement)	The Whitworth	Manchester
Deirdre Figueirdo	CraftSpace	Birmingham
Alison Clark	Arts Council England / Factory	London
Tim Joss (Founder)	Arts Impact Fund, NVCO, Aesop	London
Anthony Schrag	Independent	Scotland
Rachel Anderson	Independent / Artist	Yorkshire
Phil Cave (Head of Engagement)	Arts Council England	London
Emily Druiff	Director Peckham Platform	London
Laura Sillars	AHRC / Site Gallery	Sheffield
Andrew Nicholas	Community Member Engaged in SEA Projects	Manchester
Alistair Hudson	MIMA	Middlesborough
Rachel Gadsden	Artist	London

AW
– AR