

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From Network to Meshwork:
Validation for Social
Practice Art and Artists

A REPORT BY
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The full report *From Network to Meshwork: Validation for Social Practice Art and Artists*, with full citations, can be found here:

<https://art.mmu.ac.uk/profile/aravetz/projectdetails/1048>

“I don’t
feel very
validated...”

(ARTIST, 22A)

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

(ARTIST, 21A)

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.

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1 Jeffers and Moriarty, (2017: 18)

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.

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.



Beauty in Transition,
Jody Wood, 2014



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.



gobscore, 2019, Hyena in Petticoats,
at 'Social Works? Live', Manchester
School of Art. Photograph Julian Lister.



Alana Jelínek, 2019, the fringe, at 'Social Works? Live', Manchester School of Art.

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

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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.

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.



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



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

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 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.

JCKED



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



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

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.

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