

# *CIRCUIT* QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

Two Year Report

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# INTRODUCTION

*In life you are always growing and changing and there is never a point that you stop. People can cut themselves off from it and not allow themselves to experience more and open up more but I think it's better never to allow that to happen. People put up barriers about talking about stuff. Everybody experiences life and everybody experiences it in different ways so I think it would be nicer for more people to talk.*

- Nel, Wave 5

We would like to thank everyone who participated in this research for talking with us.

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# KEY FINDINGS



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This is a report on research conducted over two years with twenty-one young people who were participants in *Circuit*. The young people we spoke with all wanted a career which involved the visual arts. Their lives echoed what existing studies of youth transitions have already shown: young people are experiencing prolonged transitions to secure employment, and have difficulty in finding stable housing. This situation sometimes has a negative impact on their wellbeing.

This report explores how differences in the young people's backgrounds - particularly their family financial resources and knowledge - led them to have different ideas about what work was desirable and possible to get and how it was best to get that work. The report explores the different ways young people made use of *Circuit* and their different trajectories in the world post-*Circuit*.

Some young people were orientated to being paid artists, curators and creative professionals. Among our participants, they came from the more privileged backgrounds. They could live with their parents and be financially supported; they had better knowledges about how to build experience and networks and how to develop a professional identity suited to roles in the arts and creative industries. They used *Circuit* to:

- develop practical knowledge of the arts and their potential place in it
- gain symbolic capital from their association with a gallery
- and to find contacts in the art world.

Other young people, feeling themselves far from this competitive professional world, accepted that they would not make money from art and subsidised their lives as artists with other work. Some chose to take work, for example as a teacher, which took them away from their art practice. Others chose time to practice their art over professional work and lived a very frugal life. Neither group could afford to rent studio space. For this group, *Circuit* was a way to remain in contact with arts organisations and with communities of artists.

A third group, those with least family resources, wanted to find less prestigious but stable work in the arts, in marketing or community programming. A few planned their career strategy at university and joined *Circuit* while still in formal education, as part of an attempt to gain experience and knowledge. However, others left university without a plan and joined *Circuit* as graduates to find out more about the arts jobs market and to find work. They worked in bars, shops and call centres while trying to find stable paid work in the arts and were not always successful in finding it. Eleven interviewees left full-time education before or during the research either because they had graduated or did not complete their course. Only six of these eleven were earning their living doing the kind of work they wanted.

The research raises questions for galleries about what role they ought, or might take to help emerging young artists build careers and lives.

# THE RESEARCH



# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research was commissioned by *Circuit* - an arts programme for 15-25 year olds, led by Tate and funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation. *Circuit* ran in ten art galleries in England and Wales between 2013 and 2017.

Art galleries in the *Circuit* programme were committed to extend their cultural offer. Funding was used to support partnerships between galleries and youth sector organisations. Each gallery was encouraged to engage young people in programming: this was to both inform gallery staff about young people's interests as well as produce more inclusive programmes. The 'core' group of young programmers and gallery staff would learn from and with each other.

This research was designed to explore the lives of some of the young people involved in *Circuit's* youth programming activities. The research had three initial aims:

1. to respond to calls, made in the context of austerity, for robust longitudinal work to articulate the 'value' of the arts for individuals and society.
2. to help galleries understand more about the current generation of young people. This project was informed by extant research which explored how young people achieve a sense of adulthood at a time when the traditional markers of this transition, such as leaving home and going into paid employment, are particularly fraught.
3. to explore the different value the arts and art gallery had for young people from different backgrounds. What difference did *Circuit* hold and make for its more, and less, privileged participants?

The research sought to answer the overarching question "What value does *Circuit* have in the lives of young people?"

# PARTICIPANTS

The research followed twenty-one young people who were part of *Circuit* in four different galleries - one in the capital, one in a midlands city, one in a northern city and one in a more rural Welsh town.

Our cohort were generally members of 'core' gallery groups. Only one had become involved with *Circuit* through 'partnership' work, in this case between a gallery and a Pupil Referral Unit. The young people were from relatively privileged backgrounds. Nineteen of the twenty-one had spent at least some time in Higher Education: eleven had studied or were studying Fine Art; five had or were studying design-based subjects including Architecture, Fashion, Graphic Design and Illustration; and two were taking post-graduate courses in Gallery and Museum Studies. Thirteen had at least one parent with a degree and four had a parent with an art degree.

Yet interviewees were not uniformly advantaged. For some, going to university and pursuing a professional career seemed inevitable, while for others it was the result of a key 'choice' moment that could easily have been different. While seven out of the twenty-one had a parent doing highly paid work, for example being a director of a large company, four came from families in which the person earning the most was doing low paid work, for example, in retail. Some had two supportive parents and a home they could live in free of charge, while others either had troubled relationships with their families or a family without enough money to offer them a room or contribute to their living costs.

The twenty-one had different levels of access to the arts: three lived in London, twelve lived in other large cities and six lived in more rural areas. Because of the personal nature of what is discussed in this report and the potential for harm arising from identification, great care has been taken to ensure participant anonymity. It is for this reason that we have anonymised both interviewees and galleries and in some instances reported events without names of the young people or the galleries. The ethical imperative of anonymity means we have largely excluded discussion about the importance of gallery difference, and place more generally, in influencing aspiration and opportunity.

Interviewees spanned the full age range of *Circuit* participants. The table below, which introduces the interviewee pseudonyms that will be used throughout the rest of the report, shows the passage of the cohort through education and work over the two years of the research.

| Pseudonym | Wave 1                               | Wave 6  |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Martin    | GCSE student                         | A-level student   |
| Henry     | Further education student            | In full time work                                       |
| Rob       | In part time work and voluntary work | Running a business                                      |
| Angela    | A-level student                      | Foundation course student                               |
| Shane     | A-level student                      | Undergraduate, in part time work                        |
| Justine   | Foundation course student            | Undergraduate   |
| Kate      | Foundation course student            | Undergraduate, in part time work                        |
| Jacob     | Undergraduate                        | Undergraduate   |
| Nel       | Undergraduate in part time work      | In part time work                                       |
| Vanessa   | Undergraduate in part time work      | New graduate  |
| Frankie   | Undergraduate                        | New graduate  |
| Molly     | Undergraduate                        | New graduate  |
| Alex      | Undergraduate in part time work      | New graduate  |
| Clara     | Undergraduate                        | In part time work                                       |
| Lyn       | In part time work                    | In freelance work, studying an MA part time             |
| Rachel    | Graduate in part time work           | Graduate in full time work                              |
| David     | Graduate in part time work           | Graduate claiming benefits, setting up as self employed |
| Jo        | Graduate in part time work           | Graduate in part time work                              |
| Charlie   | Graduate in part time work           | Graduate in part time work                              |
| Leo       | Graduate in part time work           | Graduate in full time work                              |
| John      | MA student                           | Graduate with MA in full time work                      |

Table 1. Participant pseudonyms and their passage through education and work

# RESEARCH DESIGN

The project drew on the methods developed by qualitative longitudinal research. Because it follows unfolding events, qualitative longitudinal research can track what happens to its participants over time. As participants speak about their thoughts and feelings, concerns and hopes, researchers can track the senses of self, ambitions and decision making processes tied to what happens.<sup>1</sup> Our method allowed us to explore the back and forth between young people's perspectives and intentions, the world they encountered and the pathways they followed. We could analyse the links between participants' family history, class and gender, their desires and 'dispositions', and the places they were finding for themselves in the worlds of work and art.

The research consisted of six waves of interviews conducted over two years. When possible, interviews took place in person but when necessary they also took place online and by telephone. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed.

Retention was very good. Of the twenty-one young people who, after their first interview, returned for wave two, none dropped out of the project completely, although some missed one interview along the way. Nineteen participated in Wave Six.

|            |                        |
|------------|------------------------|
| Wave One   | September 2015         |
| Wave Two   | January–February 2016  |
| Wave Three | June–July 2016         |
| Wave Four  | September–October 2016 |
| Wave Five  | January–February 2017  |
| Wave Six   | June–July 2017         |

Table 2. Dates of interview waves

At each interview, participants were asked about 'home', 'work', 'education', 'art practice' and 'the gallery'. 'How are things at/with...?' As interviewees became used to the questions, they would pick up the narrative and the analysis from the preceding interview, which sometimes made these prompts unnecessary. Interviewees were also asked about their past lives - their family history and early experiences of art - and about their hopes for the future.

Interview transcripts were analysed after each wave. Data was analysed synchronically so that themes common to the emerging data as a whole could be explored. It was also analysed diachronically in relation to the existing data generated by each participant, so that an account of their particular trajectory over time could be developed.

Qualitative longitudinal research is often carried out over periods of many years and even decades. This is not the end of this project and we hope to re-visit participants over two further years.

# PRECARIOUS LIVES AND CAREERS IN THE ARTS



# PRECARIOUS LIVES AND CAREERS IN THE ARTS

Most of our *Circuit* participants were born in the 1990s. Research shows that those who were born in the 90s, and later, experience a particular range of difficulties. They face high university tuition fees, high housing costs, low levels of unemployment benefit and falling levels of trade union membership. Their labour market experience has been dominated by the 'downturn' and by longer-term trends towards the 'gig economy', part-time working and precariousness and by the 'hollowing out' of mid-skilled jobs from occupational structures. They enter the work place at a lower wage than previous generations and are more likely to have trouble paying for essentials such as food. Outcomes from post-compulsory education are less straightforward and take longer to achieve. For them, a diverse range of part-time, non-permanent work, including unpaid volunteer work, is the norm. As well as being poorer, they are more likely to suffer from stress, anxiety and low levels of self-confidence than previous generations. They are often less optimistic about finding a stable job in the future. <sup>2</sup>

The situation for those entering the creative industries is particularly severe. The creative industries advertise relatively high ratios of internships relative to other vacancies. Graduates work for substantial periods in voluntary roles before securing work, despite the fact that much work in the creative industries is comparatively poorly paid. Work in the creative industries is characterised by short-term fixed-term contracts, project-based work and the absence of protection in case of unemployment or incapacity. <sup>3</sup>

This precarity is not a completely new situation in the arts. Artists have long adapted to undertaking and living from the proceeds of project after project. They have long accepted unpredictable earnings and have been prepared to lead a 'double life', doing one job to support another. Artists have long traded low, insecure wages for other 'psychic' benefits - low levels of routine, opportunities to use their own initiative, and high social status. It is no accident that the arts have been described as the 'laboratory' of precarious living. <sup>4</sup> It has been suggested <sup>5</sup> that young artists are perhaps better prepared for the insecurity and lack of social rights that so effects their generation because they knowingly sacrifice security for the sake of an aesthetic, ethical or political commitment. However, changes to welfare

and unemployment benefits implemented since 2010 have bought a period of particular difficulty for young people trying to make a life in the arts. It is no longer possible for young arts graduates to refuse employment of any kind while they wait to sell work, or for an arts job to appear.

Of course, precarity is not experienced by all young people in the same way. The ability to take up an unpaid internship often depends upon parental support. Those with family support may be able to maintain control over their work patterns while they take up a portfolio of temporary, part time and unpaid opportunities, oriented to building a career. Others, meanwhile, find themselves in paying jobs, with changing and unpredictable schedules over which they have little control, which do not lead to career advancement.

<sup>6</sup> Location is also a factor. It is easier to find internships and maintain a flow of art or creative industry work in London than elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

The informality of routes into work in the arts and creative industries means that negotiating them depends on both good career planning and on having networks to draw on for advice and though which be put forward for the right internship and first job. Graduates of arts courses are more likely than average to do unpaid work but, although the right placement can be a way into work, this is not always the case. Many of the internships and placements taken up by the less privileged will never turn into paid employment - due to funding limitations, they will always be unpaid.<sup>8</sup>

There are also more 'embodied' factors that mediate the effect of precarity. The workforce in the arts and creative industries mirrors that of other high status professional occupations which recruit largely from those with privileged class backgrounds, and less of those who are women and/or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic. Within the creative industries, those from more privileged backgrounds tend to hold positions in which they earn more.<sup>9</sup> Voluntary work and other early work experiences can operate as a 'filtering site' in which students are informally evaluated through 'classifying practices' - organisational norms, work assessments, meeting practices and the like - which privilege white middle-class ways of speaking, looking and acting.<sup>10</sup>

# COHORT EXPERIENCES



# COHORT EXPERIENCES

This section of the report begins to explore how the young people we spoke to negotiated precarious lives and the complex routes into work in the competitive and under-funded field of the arts. It gives real life examples of the importance of family support for career planning and family financial support post-higher education. These were, as will be seen, key to determining what pathways into work our young people were and were not able to follow. We show how formal education fitted into the young people's lives and the connections they experienced between art, precariousness and wellbeing.



# COMPLEX ROUTES INTO THE ARTS

We first of all discuss housing, employment, formal education, and art and precarious work in the arts. We then move on to canvass the place and benefits of *Circuit* participation.

## 1 Housing

Of the eleven interviewees who were not in full-time education, because they had graduated or left at an earlier stage, six went back home or continued to live with their families. None of the six hated living at home. Lyn liked living with her parents. She said it was ‘helpful, actually a good thing’ because they talked things through with her and gave her support. On finishing university Jo went back to live with her parents and brother, who had also moved back home. She was making, she said, ‘the most’ of the last chance they had to all live together. Others, however, would have had their own places if they could have afforded them. For Charlie and her partner, who both lived with their mothers and worked low paid jobs in supermarkets, having a house of their own was what they ‘both wanted’ and what they ‘both needed’.

Moving out of home was not only put on hold because it was unaffordable but also because of family responsibilities. Charlie’s financial contribution to the household ‘kept her mum afloat’ and she was only planning how it might be possible to move out because her mum had a new partner. This, as Charlie put it, ‘took the pressure off’ her. Alex’s situation was similar. Justine would have liked to rent a flat with her boyfriend but he could not move out of home because, after a break-up, his mother could not afford to pay the bills alone.

Having one’s own place, however, was not necessarily a benefit. Not being able to live at home increased the amount young people needed to earn and paradoxically sometimes decreased their stability. Compare Jo, Rachel and Vanessa. Jo, who lived with her well-off parents, felt that living at home and working part time in a library had ‘an expiry date’, she was ‘happy for now’ and busy doing hand embroidery, going to the theatre and poetry readings, being part of a creative writing group and engaging in online activism.

Rachel, however, could not live with either of her parents and, after leaving *Circuit*, moved between cities working long hours at different low paid jobs. She sub-let a living-room sofa from friends in one place and then found a room to rent in another. She didn't have the time or energy to go to galleries or even to see friends. Not being able to live with either parent was also an extra worry for Vanessa. On graduating she didn't know what she was going to do, but she did know it was going to have to involve getting a job and immediately finding a place to live as she would have to leave her student accommodation.

## 2 Employment

Getting a job was also related to young people's backgrounds, not just their education and qualifications.

Leo eventually got a job in arts marketing. It is worth looking at his story in detail to show the ways in which young people's positions in relation to family, unpaid and paid work mutually affect each other.

After leaving University, Leo moved back in with his Dad and his Dad's girlfriend. He took on bar work and became involved with *Circuit*. During busy volunteering periods, he worked days at the gallery and then nights at the bar. When we first interviewed him, Leo felt that he was caught in a 'catch-22' in which he could either earn enough money to live on or commit to volunteering his way into paid work in the gallery. "What do I go for" he asked, "financial security or what I enjoy and what I love and what I believe I can pursue as a career?" He eventually quit his bar job and threw himself into a variety of paid and unpaid work in the gallery. He produced one-off moving image backdrops for gallery events at good 'commission rates', did marketing work at an artist-led space for minimum wage as a 'favour' to a member of the gallery staff, and supported student-led projects completely unpaid. It was, he said, 'a leap of faith'. He could do this because his father didn't ask him for rent. His father was, however, 'a bit frustrated' and didn't totally believe that Leo didn't get paid for the work he did at the gallery. It was, Leo said, 'quite a bad situation' and eventually he had to leave home at short notice and spent two months couch-surfing. Luckily, he found a room to rent in a flat with a friend and, at around the same time, was offered his first permanent full-time role.

Not all the young people found similar success in their desired arts occupation. As our research ended, other young people in our cohort balanced casual arts jobs they did because, as Rachel put it, they ‘liked them’ and jobs in shops, cafes and call centres that ‘funded’ these activities. Neither Jo nor Rachel’s applications for jobs in the arts met with any response; Charlie subsidised her involvement with the gallery with work in a supermarket; Nel was not paid for his art making; and David did not find work in the field of film and photography. At this point in time, they are still hanging in, hoping that the right opportunity will come along.

### 3 Education

Primary, secondary and college education made important positive interventions in the lives of interviewees. Three of them described the importance of education in changing the direction of their lives. The first, Angela, a woman of colour, remembers a primary school teacher telling her parents ‘She is really smart. Make sure you send her to a private school or a really good school’. Her parents did and she believed she had her ‘school to thank’ for pushing her to develop her organisation and concentration and the possibility she is now pursuing of becoming an Architect. The second, Henry, is autistic and initially wasn’t given any ‘engaging work’ by his school. With the support of his mum, who worked as a teaching assistant, he engaged in ‘hissy fit foot stamping’ that resulted in a new specialist education hub being set up at his school. Through this hub he took up a work experience placement in a technology company, doing 3D modelling and, as he turned 18, he was offered a full-time paid job at the company. The third, Vanessa got bad A-level grades and, on leaving school went into retail work and periods of unemployment. She looked into studying Maths and Science, but at a college open day got talking to an Art teacher and in an ‘impulsive moment’, signed up to do a BTEC in Art. ‘You need to be on this course’ he told her. She felt she had found a way to ‘do something’ with her life. She worked three days a week while at college and got top marks. She went on to study Fine Art at university.

But if experiences in formal education had made some young people socially mobile, for others, their enjoyment of education rested on their already existing privilege. For some of our interviewees, education formed part of a clear plan orientated towards building a career.

Martin is still at school but already knows which university he would like to go to and that he wants to become a Fashion Designer. He goes to a grammar school and takes extra courses outside school, designs and makes clothes and corresponds with designers. His family take him on trips abroad to see art. 'I know where I want to be. And I know how to get there' he said.

Those who studied Fine Art, however, were often not preparing for any particular career. A Fine Art degree was more often pursued for its own sake - for the opportunity to become deeply absorbed in the experience of art making. While ten of the eleven people studying Fine Art loved their courses, those on more applied courses had more mixed experiences. Nel quit a course in Fashion which he felt 'stifled' his creativity and considered going back to study Fine Art instead. Jacob left a degree in Film, which he had taken in order to prepare for a career but didn't enjoy. The course, he said, was dominated by 'controlled group work'. The following year he began a degree in Fine Art, which he hoped would give him 'freedom to explore' and help 'develop' him 'as a person'. This decision, Jacob felt, was linked to his 'privilege', particularly regarding housing. Because his brothers lived at home 'until they were like 30', there was no 'pressure' on him to move out and this meant he could cultivate this 'open' attitude to the future.

Although the freedom to not plan might be linked to privilege, being able to use one's time at university to plan a career can equally result from privilege. Less advantaged young people in our cohort did not make a conscious choice to not plan, as Jacob did. Looking back, Rachel thought that, because she had not known anyone 'go away to university' and not understood what it was about, she had 'wasted' the opportunity. Rachel - and most of the other young people who did not get the jobs they wanted over the period of the research - had left university without a career plan but had not done so on purpose. Those with the least family knowledge and support struggled most to make use of university. Shane, who is the first in his family to have 'completed school', is struggling at university where he is left to 'fend for himself' financially by his family. Through *Circuit*, he worked with a Graphic Designer who recommended Graphic Design to him as a career and this is what Shane went on to study. Shane has a photography practice in which he expresses his feelings but he struggled to use this to help him with his course. He made self-portraits expressing 'determination' but worried that his marks were low and he didn't know how to improve them.

## 4 Art, precarity and wellbeing

Of the twenty-one young people in our study, five sought professional help from doctors and therapists for mental health issues during the research period. This includes one young person who made a suicide attempt and another who became too unwell to carry on with the gallery work she had been offered. A further six described, at some point in the interviews, experiencing intense anxiety, depression or fatigue. In all, just over half felt they suffered, in some way, from psychological distress.

The arts are linked to mental health in a stereotypical narrative in which illness gives them access to a kind of visionary truth which cannot be got at through talent or training alone. However, research into the wellbeing of art students also suggests that art making can be a therapeutic, beneficial activity that makes artists more able to cope with the difficulties of home life, relationships, earning a living and trying to find a place in the world<sup>12</sup>. The research participants spoke to us about the latter.

Our interviewees reported that wellbeing and art-making had both positive and negative connections. Kate said that some but not all aspects of her practice ‘came out of a way not to go crazy’. Henry had used drawing during difficult times while he was at school. It was, he thought ‘a sub-conscious effort to understand’ what was ‘going on in his head’. Art making allowed young people to address their feelings about their lives in a way they couldn’t in work environments. Alex had a tendency to feel anxious and this was exacerbated by some of the demands of *Circuit* and what she sometimes felt was a ‘competitive’ and ‘judgmental vibe’ at the gallery. She was able to make work for her Fine Art course that ‘expressed the sort of emotions I wanted to express but I couldn’t because I was trying to hold this professional persona around me constantly’. Justine, however, began to produce work during her Foundation year about obsession and compulsion. ‘It was good’ she said but also ‘horrible’. A ‘weird anxiety thing happened’ and she felt ‘worried about going out in the evenings’. Vanessa had suffered from ‘depression’, she said, for as long as she could remember and did not like to make work when she was feeling ‘poorly’. Making art, she said, can ‘solidify the good’ but it can also force one ‘to remember the bad’. For others, it was not the content or process of art making but a commitment to art itself that supported wellbeing.

Nel described the life he built around art as his way of finding his own path and finding purpose and self-confidence. Seeking 'freedom' from work and money, he said, was 'healing' the depression he had felt as a younger person.

Those seeking purpose and self-confidence from paid work in the arts, however, could not always find it. Not finding a stable job when one wanted one generated significant anxiety. Leo had first 'connected' with art in a way he found 'therapeutic'. He got in 'a lot of trouble' as a kid and wasn't expected to finish his GCSEs. 'I used to shut myself away and draw and paint' he said. But, after graduating, his tenuous link to the arts generated significant anxiety. It was 'quite hard to stay positive' he said:

*When you're doing all this work, you've got to have a positive mentality all the time... If anybody asks you to do a job 'Sure, I'm right on that'. But it just gets to the point where you think 'Is this realistic? Is it do-able?'*

Leo worried that his hair was falling out. Yet he persevered because, he said, *'the thought of just being a full-time bar tender just drains my soul'*.

There is little doubt that being in a kind of limbo between graduation and getting the job that you want produces anxiety and can adversely affect self-belief. While volunteering for *Circuit*, Rachel had been happy, she said, even if it meant 'really scraping by'. But her 'confidence went really down' when it failed to lead to paid work. Gallery work, she said, is 'good for people who have other things in their lives' - other sources of income and other sources of self-confidence. But she did not: 'I feel very floaty, just floating about' she said.

The longitudinal nature of the research revealed a connection between precarity and wellbeing. It also allowed us to see the ways in which *Circuit* itself functioned in relation to employment and wellbeing in particular. We now turn to *Circuit* to see the place it occupied in these young people's lives.

# CIRCUIT

Arts participation can be thought of as a leisure activity, or as a consumption practice. For our interviewees, all members of *Circuit* core programming teams, *Circuit* was about finding a place in the arts. But finding a place in the arts usually meant finding work in the arts. And in order to sustain their arts ‘participation’, they needed the money and time that came with being paid. Moreover, for many, visual art was their key source of agency, belonging and purpose in the world. Their commitment to it far exceeded what can be seen as a leisure time activity.

Interviewees found very different things to value in *Circuit*. The different uses they made of *Circuit* were inflected by their different experiences of housing, education, employment and art making. The arts programming work they engaged in as part of *Circuit* had value for them in four main ways.

Firstly, participants were part of a collective. For some this meant being part of activity in a safe space where people weren’t ‘judged’. Clara was, she said, ‘in a bad place’ when she joined *Circuit* and was helped by ‘group activity’. For others, it was more about being part of a community of people with whom they could talk about art, who really cared about art and who, as Frankie put it, ‘actually wanted to do stuff in the art world’.

Secondly, being given the power of a professional arts worker was a recreational ‘thrill’. As Jacob put it, it felt ‘really big’: it was ‘deciding what is shown in a really great venue, not just like in someone’s basement’. Or, as Molly put it, education can feel ‘insular’ because what you do there ‘doesn’t really go into anything’ but working with *Circuit* ‘feels like its straight away doing something’.

Thirdly, *Circuit* supported the pursuit of work in the arts. *Circuit* was used to develop a sense of artistic and curatorial identity, as evidence of prestigious work experience, and to make connections in the gallery and art world more generally.

Fourthly, *Circuit* was used as paid work. Most *Circuit* work was done 'voluntarily' but some aspects - writing blog posts and staffing events, for example - were paid. *Circuit* members were sometimes offered longer term paid positions - 'Internships' and temporary part time roles as *Circuit* Assistants, *Circuit* Marketing Assistants and *Circuit* Festival Coordinators. Sometimes, aware of *Circuit* participants' need for paid work, and their existence as a pool of skilled and knowledgeable but inexpensive casual labour, galleries also offered them bits of non-*Circuit* related work - staffing exhibition openings, conducting surveys and doing administrative tasks. *Circuit* members also found longer term part-time paid roles in the galleries as Gallery Assistants and as assistants in administering and delivering public programming.

*Circuit* did not set out to intervene in pathways into work in the arts. But it was seen in this way by our interviewees. It was understood as part of the arts internship and casualised work environment. *Circuit* was sometimes seen as an exchange of unpaid work for practical experience and the symbolic reward of being able to put a gallery's name on one's CV. This left its members the problem of individually negotiating a fair arrangement for themselves. Justine, for example, worked eight hours a day for four weeks, also 'staying behind' and working at weekends, on the installation of an exhibition in a gallery that had nothing to do with *Circuit*. It was only when the paid technicians asked the people 'high up in the gallery' that the volunteers be given something towards their travel and food that she got any financial compensation. Alex struggled with feeling 'grateful' to the gallery but also feeling that she had been 'taken advantage of'. She found it hard to say no to requests the gallery kept making for her to do unpaid evaluation work.

Despite the issue of payment, there were clear benefits for young people arising from *Circuit* participation. And these were not only influenced by the young people's social and economic positions, but by their various arts 'dispositions', as we now explain.

# DIVERSE EXPERIENCES



# DIVERSE EXPERIENCES

The next section of this report analyses in more detail the different ways interviewees were building lives for themselves in the arts and the different ways *Circuit* fitted in.

We refer here to different interviewee ‘dispositions’. A ‘disposition’, in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, is a ‘response’ to one’s situation and a ‘predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination’ that influences how one will act in the future.<sup>12</sup> Dispositions, as previous qualitative longitudinal research has described, are formed as young people ‘invest’ in fields of life in which they can achieve agency, competence, and a recognition of their competence.<sup>13</sup> Dispositions are made up of modes of reasoning, opinions and tastes and ‘self-image’. This self-image is sometimes called aspiration, or ambition. The sense of who I am and what I can do is not fixed, but changes over time. Experiences both reproduce and also produce and shift the sense of what is possible. Dispositions steer actions, experiences and understandings. At one time, for example, Vanessa had thought that she might like to be an exhibition curator but, on learning more about galleries she realised she was just ‘not that sort of person’. She didn’t ‘fit’ and she wanted something which matched with her sense of self – her embodied disposition(s).

In this section of the report we describe three ‘artist’ dispositions, two ‘curator’ dispositions and an ‘artist entrepreneur’ disposition. These are a heuristic. Most interviewees do not fit neatly into just one disposition category. Instead, the categories describe experiences, values and desires that tend to cluster together in the lives of our interviewees. These dispositions underpinned the ways in which participants experienced, valued and strategically used their *Circuit* participation.

# THE ARTIST

Three distinct artist dispositions existed for our interviewees: that of the 'paid' artist; that of the 'poor' artist; and that of the 'non' artist.

- The 'paid' artist sells work and undertakes commissions as part of a portfolio of paid activity in the arts. Their own practice sits easily alongside aspirations to hold other roles, in design, business or curation. They use *Circuit* and their time at university not only to develop their art practice but also to plan a career.
- The 'poor' artist has little expectation of making a living from their art practice. They make art for their own enjoyment, to explore something about themselves, to help people, and to contribute something important to the world. They do not see professional work as continuous with being an artist and choose to make a living from casual low paid work. Their time at university is dedicated to art making. For them, *Circuit* is a way to join the community of artists that exists around the gallery.
- The 'non' artist, although they may produce art work, does not see themselves as an 'artist'. Like the 'poor' artist, the 'non' artist makes art for themselves and out of a commitment to art making and does not expect pay or recognition. Yet 'non' artists want a secure income. They seek professional work that has a connection with the arts and some of the qualities of art making because it is creative - such as art marketing - or because it helps people - such as art therapy and art teaching.

Those young people in our study who succeeded as 'paid' artists had: a well-developed art practice; the most developed artist self-presentation; the most knowledge of how the art world works; the most contacts in key positions in the art world; and the most economic capital. 'Non' artists were from more mixed backgrounds. Although the work they looked for required them to have degrees and knowledge of professional fields and networks, they chose jobs they saw as not so competitive and that they were unlikely to fail at getting. They sometimes had responsibility for other family members. 'Poor' artists come from similar backgrounds as 'non' artists and, like them, had less cultural, social and economic capital than the 'paid' artists. They, however, were more often able to rely on some family support.

We now use these dispositions to further discuss the life stories of our interviewees.

# 'PAID' ARTISTS

On graduating, Frankie and Molly were offered paid commissions to make work for publications, exhibitions and public and private institutions. Molly's degree was in Illustration. While doing her degree, which often involved collaborative work, she also developed her own art practice and won a curatorial internship at the gallery. Her course taught her about being 'business ready' and 'branding yourself'; she learnt though *Circuit* how artists are selected for work and commission on the basis of how they present themselves online. She had worked to build and maintain a social media presence and was featured as an up-and-coming artist, illustrator and curator in several online publications. Soon after graduating, she was advised that she had enough 'interest around her' and enough commissions coming in, to 'go freelance'.

Like Molly, Frankie was interested in art making and also in curation and art selling. She studied abroad for a period where she worked intensely on her drawing and took business classes and began to develop art exhibition and selling projects. She was 'confused' about what kind of career to build and how. Her tutor abroad helped her make a plan which involved getting an internship in a gallery, writing - because 'that's a good way to get your name out there' - and perhaps doing a short course at an auction house. A gallery director suggested she look into the field of art law. *Circuit* was another source of advice. There were *Circuit* sessions where, she said, everyone sat round trying to come up with ideas for her. They warned her that being a curator involves having 'to eat pasta with tinned tomatoes for the rest of your life', a prospect which concerned her. Her first commission was passed to her by a tutor who she had approached, looking for opportunities. She debated whether to accept it because of the low fee that was offered for time-consuming work.

Frankie had always been encouraged to plan a career and was encouraged to explore career paths by, for example, doing a summer course at St Martins while at school. Despite her uncertainty about what she wanted to do, and the amount of work she put into trying to decide, she never doubted that she would have a role in the arts. This belief was always accepted and supported by acquaintances who already had such roles.

Neither Frankie nor Molly had immediate money problems. Both had financially comfortable parents. But even so, Molly found money a barrier to presenting herself as an artist. As well as getting commissions, people also wanted to buy existing pieces of her work as 'art' and when they were introduced to her 'as an artist', they wanted to come and see her in her studio. However, Molly was not immediately able to afford studio space and was working out of her family home.

# 'POOR' ARTISTS

Some interviewees did not expect to make money selling their work but still felt that being an artist was central to who they are.

Nel exhibits his work on Instagram, performs live at gallery events and enters drawings into exhibitions, mostly unpaid. 'I want my work to comment on issues that have been part of my life', he said, 'I would like my work to be available for people who are like me, addressing issues that people might face'; 'I would like to do work which is known because it helps people rather than because it brings me wealth or success'. Nel works in a low paid and precarious non-arts post and lives frugally. He is critical of the presumption that people should work full-time or that they need to be compulsive consumers. It is not money but self-understanding, he said, that gives you 'power over your happiness'.

Clara studied Fine Art at university, where she became deeply absorbed in her practice, but had 'never been inclined to be commercialised'. She wasn't able to continue her large-scale painting when she graduated because she had no space to do so in her parents' house where she returned to live. She began to work outside, and on a smaller scale and to work digitally. She felt 'at a loss' not having a studio to go to but she also appreciated the opportunity to work with complete independence. When she had worked in a shared studio space, she had been 'more cautious' about what she did and after she left she came to make work that was more 'personal'. 'Sometimes my art is just for me, isn't it?' she said 'and I think that's why I am enjoying it. I'm being honest, enjoying it for what it is'. Clara felt she became more confident in her identity as an artist after she left university. Since she hadn't had a studio, she said, art making had only occupied her thoughts more:

My university tutor said: 'You'll know within the next year if you did the right thing, studying art'. A lot of people get the qualification and they don't carry on with it and they realise 'No, that's not something that's in me'. I have realised it is in me and it was there before I went to University and it still is after. Poor artists, while they didn't have the knowledges and connections of 'paid' artists, did tend to have supportive parents who offered them some support and security. Before studying Fine Art, Kate had started a degree

in English Literature. She quit at the end of the first year and went back to live at home for a while. She had always done lots of drawing and painting but it was only when her mother asked her 'Do you want to do Art?' that she knew she did. 'I didn't think I was allowed' she said. But she was then given permission to pursue a path that was not going to ensure a high or stable income. Her parents supported her through a Foundation course before she went on to university. Kate wants to be an artist when she graduates, but is 'not so naive as to assume' she will have any success. She expects instead to get 'a part-time job somewhere shitty', 'doing mindless stuff' that will allow her to prioritise her art making. 'I want to be able to focus on my work' she said, 'If you just work in a shop, you can be thinking about your practice all through your shift'. Working in an office, even in the gallery office, she said would be 'miserable' - it would mean accepting 'you were never going to make art yourself'.

The problem for these 'poor artist' young people was maintaining their connection to the art world. After leaving his film course, Jacob hadn't known if he would go back to university but, he said:

*I realised the cliché of an artist who paints in the middle of nowhere and never talks to anyone is a lie because you need these people around you because you are part of a culture. You can't just be there on your own, or at least I can't. I want to go to uni so I can be in a studio with other people around.*

After graduating, Clara also found it difficult to stay in touch with other artists and not to become isolated. 'When you're on your own, you've got no grounding' she said, 'You bounce ideas off other creative people, don't you?'

Rather than helping these young people to pursue a career, *Circuit* helped them to become part of an artist community. For Nel, *Circuit* was a place to develop his art making - particularly a live practice which he was invited to perform at *Circuit* events. After joining *Circuit*, Nel and Kate both got jobs as Gallery Assistants. Most other Gallery Assistants were practicing artists with whom they could discuss and from whom they could ask advice. The Gallery Assistants also supported them in being critical of hierarchies of the gallery. Nel ran a parodic social media account for a mini gallery the Gallery Assistants had in their green room. 'The GAs would never get an exhibition in the galleries upstairs' he said 'so it's a bit of a...critique'.

# 'NON' ARTISTS

'Non' artists did not claim the identity of 'artist' because they thought it was not possible for them to be 'paid' artists. 'It's not realistic' Justine said, 'If I could be, I would be'. Vanessa, although she had an art degree and an ongoing practice, said something similar: 'I don't have a studio, a website. I don't feel like I'm set up to be an artist'.

However, these 'non' artists had the same commitment to art and art making as the 'poor' artists. They were totally absorbed in their art practice throughout their Foundation and university courses. Vanessa, on graduating, planned to continue making work that she thought had 'purpose'. 'I see art as self-expression' she said:

*If someone is suffering from something and expresses how it makes them feel, then that gives us insight. That has a purpose in the world, doing something that comes from your heart, from yourself. I've got an issue with the way art in galleries is done and I don't want to be associated with that.*

Justine said that after her degree she would only make art when there was something she wanted to 'make art about'. 'I'm not really interested in making money from my art' she said, 'If there is nothing that's motivating me then I don't want to make work for no reason'.

But 'non' artists didn't want to live on a low and precarious income. They didn't want to be 'poor' artists. Among our interviewees, the 'non artists' were women from mixed or working class backgrounds who wanted to secure a source of regular income. While studying, they made preparations for getting a secure and stable job in a field involving art.

Justine, already making art exploring experiences of mental distress and having experienced it in people close to her, thought art therapy would be a way to do something 'that helps people' and something that 'makes a difference'. During her first year at university Justine began working voluntarily in hospital rehabilitation wards. Justine's father doesn't work and her parents live in a house too small for her and her sister - who returned to live there after graduating - to all live in comfortably.

Her mother works for the NHS, which Justine believes, in the current political climate, is 'an important thing' to do. Justine hoped working in art therapy would be something that wasn't 'risky' and that there would be funding for art therapy in the future. She saw work as something very different from art making - it was not about being 'motivated' but about securing an income. 'There is not a job I think about and think: 'I really want to be that', 'I really want to do that' or 'I have to aim for that' she said. 'Non' artists often wanted to buy a house and to live with a partner and this was the case for Justine, although being able to do so seemed a long way off.

For 'non' artists, as for 'paid' artists, *Circuit* offered practical help in learning about professional conduct and the workings of the art world, and in making useful contacts. Alex had worked part time in a small marketing company while studying at university and on graduating took up an unpaid internship in an arts organisation which she 'calculated' would 'fill' the 'few holes' she had in her CV and allow her to get the kind of position she wanted. Alex's internship was recommended to her through the gallery, which she said taught her 'about the real world' - 'how to talk to people, how to not take shit off certain people, who to look up to, how to handle myself better.'

While Alex was at university, her father - a Quantity Surveyor and a landlord who believed, she said, in the importance of 'money and being successful' - split up with her mother. Her mother had a small income from work in retail and had to sell the family house and needed lots of emotional support from Alex. For Alex, looking for 'stability' in work meant rejecting both a career pursued simply for the sake of wealth and a risky career in the arts pursued for the sake of status. Alex enjoyed the work of 'manipulating', 'taking control of', the digital world and being around people with a 'passion' for art. Fundamentally, though, she wanted a job in arts marketing because it would earn her 'enough money'. Work became ever less and less of a priority. 'I just want to be happy and have a job will keep me stable' she said, 'I don't mind what job I end up with at the moment' - what's important is that 'you're with who you want to be with'.

'Non' artists did not always feel at home in the competitive professional world of gallery work. Alex was not totally convinced of the value of jobs in the arts and sometimes wanted to say to curators: 'You still go home and put your pants on one leg before the other'. Charlie was more enamoured of the gallery: 'How many people walk past Grayson Perry, to walk through Cindy Sherman, on the way to the office?' she asked. Alex had been involved at the gallery since before she went to university, and she was known, she said, as a 'veteran', as 'a product' of its work with young people. However, she didn't quite want to play its game either. Although she had been told that there would 'always be a bit of work' for her at the gallery, she continued to seek 'the security of a regular wage' in supermarket work. Charlie had experienced being blocked from pursuing one route towards being a 'paid' artist by a simple lack of money. She had won a place on a specialist degree course in Hand Embroidery but her student loan hadn't covered the costs of living where the course was located. Because her mother could not subsidise her, she transferred to a Fine Art course in a city where rent was cheaper and she could work part-time. After graduating, she was content to keep one foot in the working-class job her partner also had, with colleagues with whom she could 'have a laugh'. At the gallery, she said 'It's a bit more creative and bit more professional version of me', whereas at the supermarket 'we can have a bit more...not crude banter... jokes'. This last comment is particularly revealing of the classed nature of gallery professional cultures.

# THE CURATOR

Two distinct curator dispositions existed for our interviewees: that of the 'artist' curator and that of the 'worker' curator.

The 'artist' curator has a post-graduate qualification and, like the 'paid' artist, sees their work as part of, or akin to, an art practice. They have a well-developed curatorial identity and networks that include people in positions of power in the art world. They use *Circuit* to develop a sense of their curatorial identity, as evidence of prestigious work experience, and to make connections which they could then use to get their first job.

The 'worker' curator deals with some public programming and the more routine work that needs doing around the gallery. They see their work not as part of their own practice but as serving an institution or community. They have a degree but come from more working class backgrounds. Rather than planning a career and investing in activities with which to later enter the job market, they take the work they can get immediately. They attempt to work their way into stable roles in the arts through volunteer and short-term, part-time positions that they combine with work in bars, shops and call centres. They used *Circuit* as 'one foot in the door'.

# 'ARTIST' CURATORS

Some of our interviewees were well on the way to becoming professional curators.

John was the most successful. He studied Fine Art and Art History at university then volunteered in arts organisations to 'tap into' their 'networks'. He got a sense of 'what was being done' and became interested in 'collaborative co-production'. He collected experience he could use as evidence he had 'curated events' and 'managed people'. He made sure when volunteering to take on tasks like 'handling a budget'. He did an MA in Museum and Gallery Studies, realising 'you hit a lot of walls' without a postgraduate degree if you are 'trying to get a job higher up'; he presented papers at international academic conferences. At the end of the two years we had known him, John found a job as a Public Programmes Manager abroad where he had gone to live with his fiancée and found himself with 'an assistant and two interns'. The work was a way into opportunities to 'curate' experiences for the public, he said, 'like Jeremy Deller'.

John's success was in part possible because he was able to mobilise family resources as well as his own educational and social capital. John's parents don't work in the arts; his father runs a painting and decorating business. But he was sent to a Grammar school that was 'always really competitive'. He lived at home during his MA and didn't work. Nor did he work during the subsequent period he spent getting established abroad. His journey through education and the art world felt like a 'natural progression' he said. Although he thought he 'got lucky' with his first job, at the same time he had never been 'worried' he wouldn't get one. He knew how to build the right CV and had the ability to present himself as someone suitable for this 'higher up' work.

Lyn had more difficulty been perceived as an 'artist' curator. She had taken a year out of education after finishing her A-levels and *Circuit* became her main focus and where she did a 'huge part' of her 'growing'. She met a gallery director who taught her about 'useful art', about art that 'doesn't need to be about self-expression, it can be something that serves society' and this was a 'turning point' in her relationship with art. Through *Circuit*, she built networks and developed her own workshop practice. Lyn came to be paid for taking on 'coordination tasks' and as a 'maker' in another arts organisation. She was then later employed as a Project Manager at the gallery and paid 'professional rates' to deliver workshops for other institutions. She was given a studio as a bursary by a curator who liked the workshops she ran, unpaid, in her working class neighbourhood. The most 'meaningful engagement', Lyn said, happens not because of the 'big flashy stuff' galleries often do but in 'small', 'basic', 'intimate' work. Despite not having a degree, she was able to 'slowly move out of that 'young people' bubble'.

But as Lyn came to apply for more senior roles in the gallery, she felt she had been 'typecast' and this became a barrier. While it was no longer a problem to get into work 'to do with communities and outreach', she could not even get an internship in 'exhibitions'. Through *Circuit*, she said, she developed 'a strong association' with communities' work and that meant people didn't take her seriously 'as an art historian or critic'. When she began an MA in Gallery and Museum Studies - believing it was necessary to getting 'higher level work' - people found it hard to acknowledge this. At an interview, she said:

*I felt as though I couldn't make them see me as an art historian or someone who is studying curating. When I asked for my feedback, the feedback I got was 'Do you even want to curate? Like maybe you should do a curating course.' And it's like 'You saw my application, I'm studying it at Masters level'.*

Although she wanted to become an 'artist' curator, her path - working her way into more senior roles in institutions in which she was well known - had been more that of the worker curator, and this had its drawbacks.

# ‘WORKER’ CURATORS

On graduating, worker curators have an immediate need to earn an income they can live on. Their focus is not so much planning and preparing for a future role but maintaining a flow of temporary, part-time positions, combined with other kinds of low paid work. They accept low pay and insecurity as ‘normal’. Leo, for example, was simply concerned to find a job in the arts that would pay him enough to get by - to buy food, pay the bills and not to be ‘struggling at the end of the month’. Vanessa dreamed of owning her own house at some point in the future but her experience of low paid insecure work outside the arts - both her own and that of her mother who had worked ‘cash in hand’ when Vanessa was a child - meant that simply ‘doing a time sheet’ seemed like ‘a step up’ to her. Leo’s and Vanessa’s stories are illustrative of the ‘worker’ curator disposition.

‘Worker’ curators see their role as serving an institution. Leo liked working in a gallery because there was a constant turnover of themes, experiences and people to work with even though the work he did, such as designing promotional material for exhibitions, was not about developing his own practice: it was about ‘responding to other people’s ideas’. He didn’t mind being ‘stressed’ and feeling that he’d done a hard day’s work. He was, he said, ‘committed and dedicated’ and ready to ‘put the extra work in when it’s needed’.

‘Worker’ curators are concerned with proving their commitment to arts workplaces, in which they are already known, in order to continue to be offered bits and pieces of work. On completing his Fine Art degree and having done a short marketing internship, Leo started looking for work. He volunteered for *Circuit* and, as a result, did, over two years later - in a serendipitous internal re-shuffle - get a permanent role in the gallery. After volunteering for over a year, he got a part-time fixed-term paid position working for *Circuit*. He was then asked to be Interim Marketing Assistant for the gallery but didn’t get the job when it was formally advertised. The woman who got it, he said, was better at talking about ‘all the duties and responsibilities’ she had already accrued. ‘She’s got more confidence than me’, Leo said, ‘That’s the one thing she may have had above me, the confidence to be able to say this stuff’.

Leo combined gallery work with bar work. During busy volunteering periods, he worked days at the gallery and then nights at the bar, sometimes only getting 'four hours sleep'. He was able to ameliorate the lack of sleep problem somewhat by threatening to quit the bar who were insisting on him working late nights. 'I know when I'm being unappreciated' he said about the bar work. 'They really wanted me to come back because they know I'm good at my job. So I came back on really good terms'. He won a pay rise and the ability to choose his shifts. Yet his attitude to the gallery was the opposite. To progress there, he said, 'You've got to show that you're more committed and willing to get that experience than the next person'.

Like Leo, Vanessa had also always worked. While she studied Fine Art at university she volunteered at the gallery, took up an internship there, won a paid role working for *Circuit*, and then later worked in one-off project management roles and a one-day-a-week role as interim Community Project Assistant. Balancing university and the gallery was often 'a bit of a stretch' and the gallery often took priority but this was ok, she said, because it was going to help her career. More specifically, she was hoping to keep a 'foot in the door' at the gallery so she could get a permanent position when she graduated. 'I get stuff done and I'm reliable. I don't flake out', she said, 'It's about taking the initiative to make sure everything runs smoothly [...] It's about the eagerness to do it'. Yet Vanessa was not given an interview when the job she had been doing on an interim basis for a year was advertised and on graduating there was no immediate role for her. It was 'a bit heartbreaking'. As she graduated, she didn't know what she was going to do.

*Circuit* was important for 'worker' curators in two ways: it allowed them to achieve a social status denied to them in their low paid, low status work outside the arts; and it offered them the promise of a route into work in the gallery. Rachel and Kate's stories amplify the tension between status and pay.

Rachel was initially positive about the attempt *Circuit* was making to combat the situation where getting work depended on 'privilege' - 'on who you know not what you know'. Rachel hadn't wanted to carry on with her practice after her art degree and graduated, she said, with 'low self-esteem'. She found promoting and coming up with ideas for *Circuit* renewed her self-confidence. She was 'able to put on creative events and creative ventures'; she was able to talk to employed curators; she was 'in the loop'.

She was able to set 'briefs': 'We've always had it the other way around' she said 'and then you're the one giving the orders'. Rachel combined mostly unpaid *Circuit* work with paid work in a call centre and in cafes and bars. These jobs, she said, turned her 'brain to mush'. 'You're made to feel' she said, 'you're not worth investing in... you're quite disposable, and expendable'. Being part of *Circuit* allowed her to assert a higher status. When people asked her where she worked, she said, 'even when I was working at the call centre I was like 'I work in a gallery''. She was lots of people's gallery contact. Even after she moved away, she said, people continued to ask her to help them out: 'Can you link me to this person?' 'What's going on?' 'We need a DJ'.

The galleries protected these status-based rewards. Rachel described how people who were not regular members of *Circuit* and didn't want to 'dedicate two hours each week to go to meetings and a lot of extra stuff as well' were not allowed to be involved in putting on events. She was told by the gallery: 'It's not fair for them to put on an event here when they don't dedicate their time like the rest of the group'. But the status that could be offered by the gallery was limited. While the high status of *Circuit* members as gallery insiders could be kept distinct from that of other young people, their special status did not always stand up to that of gallery employees. In contexts where being a volunteer at the gallery didn't offer status rewards, Kate said, it seemed less worthwhile:

*Without being totally selfish, you are giving up a hell of a lot of your time and, if you don't get anything back, there is no point doing it. It is unpaid work and you are giving up a lot of hours. The collective feel that they give a lot of their time to the gallery are they are doing a good deed for the gallery but a lot of the paid gallery staff think 'Oh isn't it sweet we are letting them do this'.*

*Circuit* was also advertised to art students as something that would benefit their careers. Leo described a talk he was part of giving at a college:

*It was a realistic talk. You need to go above and beyond all the time. It's no use being a student anymore. You have to do internships. You have to do volunteer work. You basically have to do everything. You've got to have a part time job. You've got to be involved in the creative scene. You've got to*

*know what's relevant. What's hot. What's not.*

But those who did not have Leo's success often eventually felt that their participation had been, as Kate put it, 'a way of trying to get in somewhere that hadn't come off'. They didn't 'get a break' and it 'wore them down' she said.

There were particularly 'awkward' situations where some *Circuit* members were being paid and others were not. In this context, rewards of status and self-confidence were undermined. Being paid was itself an important signifier of status, which the rewards of participation and decision-making could not make up for indefinitely. The applications Rachel made to entry-level jobs in the arts, after two years volunteering for *Circuit*, met no response and eventually she stopped making them. 'It sucks', Rachel said, 'What's the point of doing *Circuit* if you can't progress, if the opportunities aren't here? I've got the knowledge and there is no way of progressing'. She came to feel that although she had given the gallery her 'all', she was unappreciated because she wasn't paid for her work while others were. 'People were getting opportunities above me' she said 'I was getting really embarrassed'. She imagined, that people were no longer thinking how lucky she was to work for a gallery, but were thinking: 'You've been here for two years. You do so much. Isn't it funny how they haven't made a role for you yet'?

# THE ARTS ENTREPRENEUR

Entrepreneurship is part of the dispositions of both 'paid' and 'poor' artists. Paid artists, working 'freelance', manage their career as a business. Others set up projects oriented to the promotion and selling of art work. 'Poor' artists sometimes sell bits of work. Kate for example sells embroidery through the online marketplace Etsy. Artists also saw entrepreneurship as part of making an aesthetic and social intervention in the world. Nel had plans for a fashion brand in which he wanted to combine business, art practice and activism. His shows, he imagined, would 'be art, tell a story, and challenge something that's wrong in society'. This is the distinct disposition of the artist-entrepreneur. Artist-entrepreneurs combine a commitment to visual art and social purpose with a business orientation and sensibility.

Rob is a good example of an arts entrepreneur. Although his parents are not wealthy, Rob went to a 'private' primary school where 'Porsche and BMWs' and 'crazy houses' were the norm before he went to a 'normal high school'. He got into sport, won sponsorship, and began his first money-making scheme, designing a logo he printed on clothes for sale. He was always on the look-out for a way to make money. After a year at secondary school, he started to 'have a hard time'. He found out he was autistic and went to a special education unit. That is where he encountered *Circuit*, engaged in partnership work with the unit. He became involved with an artist who, he said, 'changed his life' by teaching him 'money is an enabler not the goal'. With the artist, Rob developed an idea for a project to empower his local community through entrepreneurship - to create a place where young people could get support for ideas about how to make their communities better. After becoming involved with gallery, Rob also worked closely with the exhibition curator and, after meeting a clothes designer at the gallery, worked on a project with him. He also entered young entrepreneurship competitions and found several 'mentors' in the business world.

Rob started his own business, combining his commercial and artistic interests. He saw it as an opportunity to 'curate' products and perhaps even, in the future, design them, as well as a way to connect with the local community.

Entrepreneurs prefer learning through practical experiences to formal education. Rob dropped out of a college business course he talked his way onto, because it was not for people wanting to start a business, but for people 'who want to work as a manager'. He had no intention of pursuing further or higher education. People generally went to university, he said, to avoid work or 'reality' for a few years.

Nel felt similarly. He studied Fashion at university but dropped out after a year. He wanted to 'make stuff' and not have to justify the origin of his ideas. He wanted to learn 'technical stuff' about 'business' and 'manufacturing'. 'I prefer to learn by actually doing something, by making mistakes' he said. He had been building a presence posting drawings on Instagram and was enjoying 'the immediacy of it', how 'easily accessible for a lot of people' it was and the potential exhibiting art through social media had to 'build community'.

For artist-entrepreneurs, *Circuit* was a source of knowledge and connections, just as it was for artists and curators. Because they rejected formal education, *Circuit* also had a particularly important role for Nel and Rob in supporting their reflection on values and community. Their involvement with *Circuit* played a part in developing their aspiration to build ethically and aesthetically engaged businesses.

While all of these young people might look roughly similar if we think of them as 'emerging young artists', or 'talent', these dispositional differences are important. They arise within particular family and social/cultural/economic capitals which position them differently in relation to the possibilities that they see for themselves, and which others, including *Circuit* and programmes like it, make available to them.

● STUCK PLACES –  
THE ROLE OF THE GALLERY ●



# STUCK PLACES – THE ROLE OF THE GALLERY

This longitudinal research showed that different family experiences, financial situations and levels of knowledge about careers lead young people to want different things from the arts and to have different expectations about what positions in the arts it is possible for them to occupy. The aspirations of the young people we spoke to during this research were mostly grounded in what they thought would be possible for someone like them to achieve. But despite their often modest hopes for the future, the majority either were still experiencing, or had experienced, being stuck somewhere that they didn't want to be, unable to make their arts aspirations a reality.

Stuck places had their origins at the point of choosing a degree and developed during university. For some, doing an art degree was a time not to worry about work and to become absorbed in art making. Many, however, were anxious about precarity and wanted to prepare while at university to enter into a career on graduating. They worked and volunteered outside of formal education in order to prepare. Yet only a privileged few of our interviewees were adequately prepared during university to begin a career on leaving. Many remained ignorant about the arts and creative industries job market and did not know how to develop themselves as arts professionals. Creative industries bodies have recently expressed concern that not enough young people are being trained in the kinds of creative, entrepreneurial and technical skills to do the jobs that are needed, [14] but this research suggests that this is not all that is going on. Aspiration and training are necessary but hardly sufficient.

While it is the case that all the young people we spoke to experienced some period of employment uncertainty, those who came from less privileged backgrounds were having a harder time and making less progress. Some of our interviewees had neither the family nor independent financial resources to work for no wages in order to develop experience and networks in the professional arts world. Even those with some family support found it impossible to balance the tasks of making and sustaining networks, remaining part of a community of artists, renting studio space, and producing work and portfolios with the tasks of making enough money to live on and preparing to set up their own household.

This suggests that any intervention in creative industries pathways needs to take account of the differences in young people's economic circumstances. Some more than others are able to take advantage of internship, mentorship and work placement schemes. Differentiated policy interventions are needed.

*Circuit* held an interesting and somewhat ambiguous place in the lives of these emerging arts practitioners. This research shows that *Circuit* intervened in three ways for different groups of young people. For some - for those in further and higher education preparing themselves for careers as professional artists and curators it was a supplementary programme which supported them to develop practical knowledge of the arts and their potential place in it; gain symbolic capital from their association with galleries; and to build contacts in the art world. For those leaving university without a plan or not wanting a professional career, *Circuit* was a way to get a foot in the door at a gallery and be introduced to artist sub-culture. For those who rejected formal education, *Circuit* was an alternative place of learning that combined practical, real world learning experiences and with a commitment to political and aesthetic reflection.

But, it could be argued that while the galleries running *Circuit* benefited from the youthful cultural capital that core programming teams brought, and the expanded audience base they enjoyed as a result of the events the young people ran, the benefits for young people were much more mixed. This is in part because the young people, certainly those we interviewed, saw *Circuit* as having an individual instrumental purpose, as well as being a means of participating in the democratic production of a public arts offer. All the young people wanted *Circuit* to work as a 'positional good' serving their own self-interest – and these interests were diverse, as we have described. The young people did not blame *Circuit* for their stuck places, although some of them did wish that *Circuit* could and would do much more to help them progress. They were particularly discouraged when jobs that they had worked in and for, went, apparently arbitrarily, to others who had not put in so much voluntary effort and time.

We think that the notion of *Circuit* as a ‘positional good’, and of ‘stuck places’, is worthy of further discussion now that the programme has ended. How much should gallery youth programming take on in relation to career formation and employment? How might it address its own positioning in the internship and unpaid arts economy? How might it deal with what can be perceived as the in-equitable distribution of small pieces of paid work? How might it avoid producing further precarity? What strategic alliances might be made, and with who, to take action about the precarious situation of England’s emerging artists? What policy interventions might make a difference to the diverse cohort of young people who do want a life and livelihood in the arts – and what can galleries do to support this agenda?

● NOTES



# NOTES

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# CIRCUIT

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