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CUTS #8

Artists' Union England – A New Trade Union

Angela Kennedy

CAMEo Cuts

CAMEo Cuts is an occasional series that showcases reflections on cultural and media economies, written by CAMEo researchers, collaborators and affiliates. Contributions aim to be short, accessible and engage a wide audience. If you would like to propose an article for inclusion in CAMEo Cuts please email cameo@le.ac.uk

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Artists' Union England – A New Trade Union

Angela Kennedy

The story of the emergence of a new trade union for artists – Artists' Union England – is the subject of this edition of CAMEo Cuts. As a founder member of the Union, artist Angela Kennedy offers an insight into the thinking and organisation that led to the formation of the AUE and outlines the substance of its primary concerns and campaigns. In times of austerity, and with artists struggling to make a fair and decent living, the need for workers' representation and organising in the arts sector is argued to be ever more necessary and urgent.



About the author

Angela Jane Kennedy is an interdisciplinary artist with a multi-disciplinary practice: a degree in Performance Art, ten years working as a choreographer and contemporary dancer, another degree in Fine Art, plus an MA in Fine Art in 2017. Angela's inherently choreographic practice manifests through performance installation, drawing, poetry, spoken word, audio, movement and video. Her work is about embodied processes and the body, rooted in the experiential training of Body-Mind Centering and Improvisation. Work is made through a process of investigation and dwelling, arising from specific contexts or places, she then translates those responses into installations and performances often with a live audience. Angela's practice of thirty years continues to explore issues of equality, feminism, identity, class and social justice; her socially engaged practice reflects on issues concerning social justice, identity and gender. Angela is a founding member of Artists Union England – AUE and was an Executive Member from 2012 – June 2018.

For more details on her work visit
www.axisweb.org/p/angelakennedy

Artists' Union England – A New Trade Union

Tired of crumbs and endemic exploitative practice in the art world;
Or why everyone has the right to be represented collectively at work

Angela Kennedy

The European Convention of Human Rights gives a worker a right to be part of a Trade Union. For too long visual and applied artists in England have not had that opportunity. A trade union is formed when a group of workers feel they are being exploited and their interests are not being represented collectively. Unions balance the power employers have over individual workers. The union Equity, the actors' union, is 88 years old; BECTU – the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union is 27 years old¹; the Musicians' Union (MU) was founded in 1893. Artists' Union England began with three women artists in 2012, challenging long-held positions in some quarters of the art world, that visual artists could not form a trade union; as well as a direct response to the Austerity programme of the Coalition government of the time and their punitive economic measures which artists are still trying to navigate.

The Occupy movement in 2011 focussed on the growing excesses and inequalities within our society. In 2012 artists' livelihoods were already feeling the consequences of the policies of austerity. As usual the Arts were amongst the first to be cut, with much of our facilitation, teaching and lecturing work disappearing, alongside the wholesale demolition of local government support, meaning that much community/socially engaged practice – the unglamorous, undervalued and often very underfunded work in and with communities – has been eradicated.

The effect of austerity on artists and their working lives is no different from other professions, having a direct adverse effect on the precarious paid work of artists – through zero-hour contracts, less local government and public funding for the arts, cuts in visiting lecture work and huge cuts in schools' art budgets, as well as art subjects studied. This inevitably affects the funding available for art work in education contexts, communities, gallery work, art projects, residencies, commissions; all these avenues of funding have been decimated through the austerity programme. Often, after many years training in fine art, highly experienced and/or qualified with degrees, MAs and even doctorates, artists still find it incredibly difficult to survive, never mind thrive. Making a living as an artist has never been easy, however, the cuts have meant that some have had to give up their studios, which sometimes means giving up their art practice. The small amount of art-related paid work that most artists rely upon for any kind of regular income, is often precarious in nature. These austerity policies are disastrous for an artist, as well as arts communities; the very important by-product of affording a studio space is that artists are able to meet, keep in touch with one another, network, collaborate, share ideas, working practices and concerns. Through that they avoid becoming isolated members of their arts community or society; if you are on your own the harder it is to be heard, feel you have a voice, or included: artists can become disenfranchised.

Occupy helped to raise many of these important issues: of real injustice and inequality within our society, as well as how collectively we might openly explore and use inclusive forms of decision making, particularly through consensus and across single issue campaigns, alongside the trade union movement, LGBT community, homelessness, racism, the environmental movement and the Women's Movement – to name just a few. Occupy gave confidence to other groups of people, nationally, internationally, but also locally and regionally, to be demonstrative on the streets again, to register their voice, gain solidarity, to occupy common space. Many occupations and sit-ins happened, particularly with young people, some in Fine Art departments of Colleges and Universities. The Occupation of the University of Newcastle Fine Art department in 2010 lasted for 17 days and was concerned with challenging and engaging more radically in open public dialogue the notion of paying for education. Those in Occupation debated how education could be less elitist and more inclusive; one development was the setting up of a Free Education Network (Hopkins and Todd, 2015).

These Occupations were happening all over the UK, sometimes in Fine Art departments of Universities, often they had similar demands, a need to be heard, through open inclusive meetings, to discuss issues of inequality and social justice that were not being addressed by the government and /or society; young people were finding their own ways to campaign; a new generation were politicised because of the ruthless and cruel cuts of the Austerity programme. People got organised and artists, as so often, were at the forefront of radical action, perhaps because they have so little to lose... Young people, women, elders, the disabled, were inspired to raise their voices

and campaign for change, for a fairer society. Along with the resurgence of the feminist movement, the role of a trade union and its long-term values for social justice and a better society for all became again more relevant than ever.

During this time, however, the wider 'art world', instead of arguing the case for artists and their important role in society, took up the vocabulary of: 'resilience', 'making do' or volunteering – which usually means doing things for less or for free. The terminology of 'the market rules', was absorbed; reacting with fear and accepting that philosophy, rather than questioning or resisting it. It has also been reflected and indeed accepted into the vocabulary and substance of those who fund the arts, arts organisations and universities' teaching and research. We need to fundamentally question who is telling who to be even more resilient! Cultural industries academic Jack Newsinger, a CAMEo research affiliate, sees the wood for the trees:

Part of the problem with resilience thinking is its role in the de-politicisation of funding cuts, perhaps due to its origin in ecological science (...) [b]ut austerity is not a natural phenomenon; it is a political process that is consciously reshaping society in a myriad of ways to the detriment of those at the bottom, particularly the young and the disabled. So, while resilience might be a 'good thing' for individuals and organisations, it does not provide much of a platform from which to question the normative dimensions of austerity, or argue for a more inclusive, progressive arts agenda. Down with resilience!

(Newsinger, 2015, no pagination)

Much as some artists appreciate the possibility to perform or exhibit their art for free, the reality is that we cannot eat 'cultural capital'! Yes, there is room for a certain amount of pragmatism and adaptation; this is what artists do, have always done, to make their art and to make a living, or they would not survive. Most artists I know struggle to earn a living so that they can still practice and make art. Most artists are part of the working poor and earn only '£10,000 a year [or around] only 66% of the living wage', according to the a-n Artists Information company research published under the Paying Artists campaign (see Paying Artists, 2014; Jones, 2015).

What artists in the visual arts sector have never had is a democratically accountable organisation, there for when agreements are reneged upon; when contracts are promised then pulled. What recourse do you have? What can you do? Where art festivals think it is okay to apply for £30,000 of public money and all they offer artists to make a new piece of art work within that festival is £50; this is unprofessional and unacceptable, and this is where a trade union comes in. A trade union can help fight for you, support you to get that pay, that contract paid.

What happens when organisations do not offer any fee for a work 'opportunity'? Or offer a fee not of a national standard and do not stick to an agreement? A trade union can collectively negotiate for better pay and conditions with arts organisations on behalf of their members, as well as give advice – which for the first time takes the vulnerable artist out of the situation of having to negotiate every single contract on their own! Now, they can state that their trade union has democratically decided between their members what constitutes a national

fair rate of pay for a job, as well as get trade union representation at a meeting with an employer/commissioning group, residency or gallery if difficulties arise. Suddenly there is someone there with you, beside you, fighting for your rights and in your corner.

If your union is affiliated to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) or the Trades Union Congress (TUC) – therefore becoming part of the wider Trade Union movement – any member of the union can then access free training to become a Representative. This means that the Union can have a geographical network of artists who are informed, educated and share the same objective of fair rates of pay, who support one another in solidarity and can work to help one another to achieve these ends through campaigning. The Members are the Union.

Artists' Union England – AUE, came about because of a long-term issue of social justice and a belief that artists, as any other workers, are part of a community and an integral part of a healthy democratic society; free to express themselves, their ideas and opinions, and now able to take their place alongside other cultural workers and trade union members and have collective representation at their place of work.

In 2012, I and two other artists, Katriona Beales and Sally Sheinman, began seriously investigating how we could set up a trade union for artists. We spoke to the Scottish Artists Union, Northern TUC with Beth Farhat and Doug Nichols of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), who were very helpful and supportive. We also met and communicated with all the other cultural trade unions, including, the MU, BECTU, University and College Union (UCU) and Equity before we launched in 2014.

In 2016 we gained our Certificate of Independence from the Certification Office – a public body that, amongst other things, makes sure that trade unions have no connection or influence from employers. We raised the £4,500 needed for certification, from fundraising efforts of members, individual donations and other trade unions. As a trade union we can only be funded by our member subscriptions and individual donations, not from employers. We are now recognised members of the TUC and GFTU. This is very important for the development of the union, as mentioned earlier, but is also an alternative way for members to educate themselves. Historically this has been – and still is – a more accessible route for some working-class members to Further and Higher Education, particularly if they did/do not have access to the kind of privileged education which a grammar or private school can provide. Unfortunately, this is the case now more than ever, as the exorbitant and some would say extortionate fees of university means a mountain of debt

for students in higher education, making it inaccessible for many.

In September 2013 we pulled together an enthusiastic and committed team of other artists, who also believed by forming a trade union, for ourselves and for others, that this would be a significant new avenue which would help artists in their working lives. We wanted not just to have a more democratic voice – but a collective and independent one. Not an arts organisation but a Trade Union; a democratic organisation which is owned by and accountable to, its members. As a Union we can help regulate relations between ourselves and those that employ and engage us, on behalf of our members, and therefore improve artists' lives, pay and conditions of work. At last artists can independently and collectively challenge bad practice and call to account arts funding organisations and galleries not paying trade union recommended rates of pay. Artists doing this for themselves, together, through a trade union.





Within our sector of visual arts, a light has been shone on the unaccountability of institutions and organisations that sponsor or fund the arts. Artists' wages have continued to plummet – I have not had a real terms pay rise as a freelance artist for over 15 years; community/socially engaged artists have often found themselves at the whim of the latest ideas put forward by large publicly-funded research, not being able to have an appropriate trade union to join made it very difficult to collectively bargain a regulated fee or wage.

The mental health of the nation is becoming worse, paid art work is very competitive, artists know how vulnerable they are in the workplace, if they query a fee for work, will they not be asked again? This huge unregulated industry means artists are constantly running the tight rope of exploitation, workers are pushed to work longer for less, to volunteer where there was paid work and forced onto zero-hour contracts. A report by the Resolution Foundation (2016) found that: 'Typical earnings of the self-employed [are] lower than 20 years ago'. A shocking statistic.

The new Universal Credit proposals are going to make life incredibly difficult and punitive for artists too. AUE and SAU have published a joint statement about this and how this will affect artists:

We believe there is too little flexibility in a highly negative system which presumes artists will always be earning a regular amount and a lack of awareness of how versatile artists have to be to juggle finances and make ends meet regarding project, commission, residency work etc. thereby making 'monthly' reporting a practical nightmare. Indeed, their proposals are much more restrictive than HMRC guidelines on average hours devoted to business and trading at a loss!

(AUE/SAU, 2015).

I would argue that the value of art has never been so taken for granted. Most households will have functional objects created, designed and made by artists: chairs, sofas, kettles, clothes, books, music, mobile phone, toys, cups/ceramics, cushions, textiles, posters, pictures, magazines, games and images. All these products artists have spent their expertise, knowledge and training to design and make real. We need to argue for the role of artists within society. Yes, we need bread before we need roses; but we need both.

With the decision to withdraw the small Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in 2010 – which often enabled young people their first real taste of independence, with travel to and from college affordable for the first time, and the increase of university tuition fees threefold to £9000, the question of equality of opportunity, is still a huge issue for the arts community and society.

One which, as a trade union activist, I believe we should be campaigning to change. A whole section of society is being denied access to training in the fine arts as it is so unaffordable; it will inevitably become more exclusive and has already begun to affect who is training within the acting profession (see Thorpe, 2017); so that the long-standing belief and bias that art is only for the elite, is again becoming a fact.

Trade unions continue to raise the bar for their members, this includes: collectively campaigning against terrible or no pay, accountability and ethics of art funding, racism, sexism, homophobia, disability discrimination, ageism of any kind, either in the work place or in society, as well as long neglected health and safety issues in the workplace. Trade unions are at the forefront of developing safe working practices in artist led spaces, including awareness of good practice regarding physical and mental wellbeing. Health and safety in art work spaces is as vital now as ever, including working towards more transparent decision making within the art industry.

Here is a recent scenario of questionable health and safety practice (as well as the wider implications of local authorities' role in the gentrification /art washing dynamics of run down and neglected buildings, in our towns and cities being used as art spaces through peppercorn rents/lowering of business rates). Recently, an artist was offered a studio, in a typical artist-led studio space, where some of the 1960/70s tiles in the ceiling had been removed by the previous artist, which exposed what appeared to be asbestos tiles above. When queried, the response from the space was implausible and patronising, with a suggestion that it was not something for the artist to be concerned about. Unfortunately, this attitude

of complacency is not uncommon. What is also common is for artists to work in very dilapidated and run-down spaces, often with no heating and exposed to dangerous working conditions. Many artists do not know their rights, have little health and safety training and even where they do the precariousness of their position is often seen as a privileged opportunity! 'Opportunities' that could literally kill them – old buildings which are often rife with hazardous material and working conditions means the health and safety of those run-down spaces can become a real health issue for artists. The trade union movement historically has had to be at the forefront of campaigning, promoting and leading the way on challenging and changing the law, because of the fatalities involved regarding health and safety in work places. Do educational institutions, arts organisations and public bodies like the Arts Council sufficiently address the seriousness of health and safety issues, particularly when providing public funding to organisations? Where is the clarity and indeed transparency regarding responsibility for those issues, so artists know where they can go to raise concerns?

This industry thrives and relies on the vulnerability, isolation and lack of knowledge of their rights, of artists grabbing at any crumb offered to them: the often unpaid 'opportunities' of showing work in these (and other) kinds of gallery spaces, ultimately rely on the concept of 'the privilege of being an artist' – which can (often inadvertently) mask exploitative practices which do not consider the wellbeing, health and safety for the artists as workers.

This takes me onto the rich and competitive world of universities – institutions that are also failing to train artists for the reality of the precarious world of work and working



environments of the arts. If universities can have modules about professional practice, preparing students for the many situations artists' will face regarding the world of work, how to survive as an artist, business plans, life/work/art, networking etc., at the end of degree and MA fine art courses, why do they not all have the professional trade union for artists in for a talk, like other cultural courses do in acting and the music industry? Arts organisations, Arts Council England (ACE) and universities, AUE would argue, have a responsibility to make sure that the artists they train and support, have safe environments to work in; and that those bodies not collude in the questionable and growing corporatisation of arts, through art-washing and the creeping gentrification in cities and towns. AUE are determined to raise these issues on behalf of their members and to make these organisations and bodies accountable. As an example, see the AUE website for one of our current campaigns regarding corporatisation of the arts and Elisabeth Murdoch being elected to the board of ACE. (AUE, 2018)

The launch of our new trade union in 2014 was an incredibly proud moment for artists to work democratically together for change; we claim our place in the very proud history of Trade Unionism and look forward to a growing union of informed arts workers who can themselves have the tools and knowledge to support one another for a more just and fairer society, which includes being paid for their labour and paid fairly.

Visual artists in England are a brand-new demographic to be trade unionised and it will take time for artists to realise that the rhetoric of independent entrepreneurship can have a flipside, and that they may also be carrying on practices which have a direct detrimental effect on their wellbeing – which can include feelings of being isolated, vulnerable and exploited regarding how they trade their labour. Instead, artists can now choose a professional pathway of solidarity with others in the trade union movement and can make those who employ and engage us respond with equal professionalism.

Art organisations need to proactively play their part too, to treat artists with more respect and take responsibility for the opportunities that they post and make sure work advertised is fair, clear and transparent and has the rate expected for the job – the trade union national rates agreed by its members. This will help raise the bar for all artists, show that they are using best practice when employing artists and be a very positive example to other arts organisations that this can and should be done. Let's break the cycle – as the other cultural workers have done in acting, film, music, who expect to be paid for their labour – unions have fought hard for regulated Rates of Pay by negotiating a decent rate for the job, so that skilled and experienced artists do not work for free – or indeed insultingly be offered food instead of payment.

Also, just as in other working environments – there is a need to consider artists' mental and physical wellbeing through an awareness of equalities and adopting good policies and procedures when advertising work. We need the industry to become much more progressive regarding pay and conditions, thereby helping artists out of their precarious 'working poor' status and helping the trade union campaign to raise awareness of bad practice by implementing good practice and shouting about it alongside us!

For a recent example of a successful campaign by artists which AUE supported, see Art Not Arms, regarding BAE Systems, an arms manufacturer who decided to withdraw their funding from the Great Exhibition of the North (Art not Arms, 2018).

If artists want a better and more sustainable career, they will join their trade union and help us improve the life of all exploited and low paid artists in England and in the long term, like all trade unions, collectively help to fight for a more just and fair society.

Endnote

¹ For details of the previous unionisation of the sector of BECTU, please see: www.bectu.org.uk/about/bectu-history

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CAMEo Research Institute,
University of Leicester,
7 Salisbury Road,
Leicester LE1 7QR, UK
e: cameo@le.ac.uk
w: www.le.ac.uk/cameo

