

Researching Artists' Working Lives*

The ways in which artists earn a living, the conditions in which they work and the laws and systems that support (and sometimes hinder) them have become increasingly popular subjects of research in the past fifteen years. Phyllida Shaw provides an introduction to the field and invites ARD readers to share their ideas about research that still needs to be done.

As the volume of research into the working lives of artists grows, certain lines of enquiry are being pursued again and again. Recurring themes include the types of work that artists do to earn a living; their income from artistic and other occupations; their qualifications and their access to training and professional development; their career paths; the market for artists' work; their working conditions (eg. hours, facilities, health and safety); and the legal and policy frameworks within which they operate (eg. tax and social security systems, intellectual property rights, public funding).

In the countries where much of this research is being undertaken, there are more people working as artists now than there were twenty years ago and more people are interested in why and how they do it. Studies have been instigated by funding bodies to inform their policies and grant-making programmes; they have been commissioned by trade unions and professional associations to support the development of services for their members, and campaigns for changes in laws, regulations and practices. Individual academics and university departments are involved in this field as contracted researchers but also in the pursuit of their own research interests.

This article provides a subjective overview of some of the significant pieces of research published, in English, in the past fifteen years. (An earlier study may be cited where it has informed a more recent piece of work.) Some of this research has a local focus; some is regional or national in scope. There are references to work from the UK, the Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands, Finland, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. There are reports in French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Finnish that have not been included only because they are not available in English.

This article looks at three aspects of artists' working lives that research is helping to illuminate. These are types and patterns of employment, earnings and working conditions, including the legal and policy environment. Much of the material reviewed contributes under more than one heading. The first time a report is mentioned, the title is given in full, followed by a reference number in brackets. Further references use the author's name or an abbreviated version of the report's title, followed by the reference number.

There are two aspects of artists' working lives which, for reasons of space, are not covered here. Both have stimulated enough research reports to sustain an article of this kind of their own. One is the education, training, professional development and career paths of artists; the other is the market for artists' work. Many sectoral studies (e.g. the music industry in Scotland; the subsidised dance sector in Australia; the craft sector in Victoria, Canada) include information on artists' working lives in a particular context, but unless the artist is their primary focus they have not been included here.

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Definitions

One of the first tasks of researchers investigating the working lives of artists is to define their research sample. In *Muses and Markets. Explorations in the Economics of the Arts* (1), published in 1989, Bruno Frey and Werner Pommerehne suggested eight criteria for identifying an artist. Their list found a wider readership, seven years later, when it was reproduced by Ruth Towse in *The Economics of Artists' Labour Markets* (2) and it was cited again, in 2003, by Rhys Davies and Robert Lindley in *Artists in Figures, A statistical portrait of cultural occupations* (3).

Of Frey and Pommerehne's eight criteria, there are three that researchers use more than others to define artists: the amount of time spent on artistic work, the amount of income derived from that work, and membership of a professional artists' group or association. More subjective criteria, such as an artist's reputation with the general public, recognition by other artists and the quality of his or her work are much harder to apply and are rarely used as primary criteria in the selection of a research sample.

In 2002, the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies published on its website a response to a question from one of its members about how other countries define their 'professional artists'. The questioner's interest was in the visual arts but the answers received from six countries closely mirror Frey and Pommerehne's criteria (4).

In his introduction to *Artists. An annotated directory* (5), Donnell Butler, of the Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies at Princeton University, provides a short critique of the different definitions used by researchers whose work features in his directory and observes that 'in many cases, the definition of the artist appears to be more a product of the identification method than the other way round.' In other words, the researcher who decides to survey composers who have received a grant from a funding body is accepting the funding body's definition of 'a composer'. Similarly, a decision to survey the members of a visual artists' association means accepting the association's definition of 'a visual artist'.

Data sources and methodologies

The data sources and methodologies used to research artists' working lives depend upon what is being researched. Most countries active in this field are now collecting and publishing information about people in cultural occupations (including artists) from their censuses of population and labour force surveys (or equivalent). Valuable though this data is, particularly when it comes to monitoring trends (6), it is a widely shared view that the broad occupational categories used by these surveys do not reflect, sufficiently, the complexity of artists' working lives.

In the UK the two main instruments of data collection on people's occupations, the Labour Force Survey and the New Earnings Survey, take no account of the earnings of people who are self-employed. The Australia Council estimates that its country's census captures just one third of practising artists in all disciplines. Randall Filer's attempt to use data from the 1980 US census (7) to examine the effect of age and education on artists' earnings was constrained by the fact that the census collects information on earnings from the main occupation of the respondent in the week of the census, and reports earnings

from all sources as a single sum. In 1992, Gregory Wassall and Neil Alper undertook their own survey of artists in which they looked at income earned from arts and non-arts sources and came up with results rather different to Filer's (8). In 1996, these two authors were among the contributors to *Artists in the Workforce: Employment and Earnings* which further highlighted the limitations of census data in identifying the scale and complexity of the economic lives of artists (9).

Creative New Zealand took a rather different approach to the research reported in its recently published *Portrait of the Artist* (10). The research process began in 1997 with the organisation of focus groups with artists in four cities to identify the issues the study might explore. The construction of a database of artists followed, using existing lists but also by advertising the research and inviting artists to register on the database. There was a separate scheme to register Maori artists. Criteria were then applied to determine which artists could be defined as 'professional'.

The Arts Council of Finland has been researching the economic situation of artists in different disciplines since the late 1980s. Between 1988 and 1996 it published reports on artists in eight different sectors (music, visual arts, cinematography, dance, etc), all of which drew on information supplied by the Finnish taxation register and the ACF's records of grants awarded. In 2003, the ACF published its first major cross-sectoral study, *The Status of the Artist in Finland. Report on employment and income formation in different fields of art* (11). Its author, Kaija Rensujeff, needed to be able to collect data from artists in different disciplines using the same methodological framework. His decision was to use the membership lists of Finland's 39 artists' trade unions and professional associations, as well as list of recipients of government grants.

For a survey of musicians' employment for the British Musicians' Union (12), researchers from the University of Westminster distributed a questionnaire through the Union's magazine. This membership list was used again by Rick Rogers for his survey of the work, education and training of professional musicians, for Youth Music (13) although he cast the net wider by contacting members of Sound Sense, the national development agency for community music and by placing the questionnaire on the Youth Music website. There are many other examples of studies where the researcher essentially issues an open invitation to artists to 'get in touch'.

Joan Jeffri's research into the working lives of jazz musicians in four American cities (14) used two methods to capture data from a famously informal group of musicians. The first was to contact members of the American Federation of Musicians. The second was to ask those who responded to the AFM survey to recommend other musicians they knew. This 'respondent-driven sampling' proved highly effective in reaching musicians who are not part of formal structures.

Types and patterns of employment

Studies of the types of work undertaken by artists and their patterns of employment fall into two main categories: those based on official data and independent studies designed to a brief. As noted above, the definitions of artists' occupations used by official data collection methods and their focus on 'employment' limit their ability to describe the detail of artists working lives.

The US census of population has recognised eleven artistic occupations since 1970 and the Current Population Survey (CPS) has been collecting information from artists since 1983. This enables the National Endowment for the Arts to publish regular bulletins on the number of artists in the workforce and to monitor trends over time but as with official statistics in the UK, Canada, Australia and elsewhere, they paint only part of the picture.

The UK's Standard Occupational Classification is modified to reflect changes in occupational categories but even so it is a crude instrument. The current version (SOC2000) identifies eleven 'unit groups' associated with the cultural sector, for example, 'actors and entertainers', 'authors and writers', 'dancers and choreographers'. The most detailed piece of work on UK artists, using official sources, is *Artists in Figures* (3) a quantitative analysis of artists' labour markets. This study highlights the fact that artists may be both employed and self employed, confirms that artists have many occupations and comments on the fluidity of employment in the cultural sector. But *Artists in Figures* can only tell part of the story because the Labour Force Survey only records information on employment. In a sector where the proportion of self employed people is three times that in the workforce as a whole means that for the time being, bespoke studies of artists working in specific art forms or geographic areas are more likely than official surveys to provide an accurate picture of the different dimensions of artists' working lives.

In his study of artists (all disciplines) in Finland, Rensujeff (11) started with the 11 fields of artistic practice used by the Arts Council of Finland and ended up with 35 different categories of artform and artistic occupation. David Throsby's recent survey of 1,062 artists in Australia, *Don't Give Up Your Day Job: An economic study of professional artists in Australia* (15) identified 120 different artistic occupations, which were condensed into eleven groups for purposes of analysis. Creative New Zealand's analysis (10) of the activities of 1,010 artists identifies 70 'examples' of artistic occupations and four artform headings and one 'other' category which includes teachers, arts managers and 'multiple genre artists'.

Two studies by Janet Summerton of artists in the southern region of England, undertaken four years apart, illustrate this point further. In *Artists at Work 1999* (16), Summerton reports on a postal survey of 232 artists in the region. The survey offered respondents a choice of 24 labels to describe their work. All 24 were used and 29 more were added. The follow-up report, *Dimensions of Practice* (17), includes information from 299 artists, 73 of whom took part in the earlier study. This time respondents were offered 27 occupational labels. Again all were used and 49 more were added. One of the recurring themes of Summerton's work is the multi-faceted nature of artists' working lives and her theory that for many artists, multiple job-holding is a choice rather than a compromise. Two findings that stand out from *Dimensions of Practice* are the extent to which artists are crossing artform boundaries in their work and the growing number of artists who are employing others. Regional (and local) studies like this one present researchers with the possibility of talking to the artists about the influence of local circumstances on the type of work they do and their pattern of work. Towse's *The Economic Characteristics of Artists in Devon* (18) and Ian Gasse's survey of artists and makers in North Yorkshire (19) both fall into this category.

Sectoral studies provide even greater opportunities to analyse the types of work artists do and their working patterns. Jeffri's work on jazz musicians (14) provides the first detailed analysis of employment and self employment in this sector of the American music business. York and Laing's survey of musicians' employment in the UK over twenty years (12) contains detailed information on trends in employment in live performance, broadcasting, recording, education, writing and arranging and uses quotes from musicians to explain the reasons behind those trends.

Crafts in the 1990s: an independent socio-economic study of craftspeople in England, Scotland, and Wales (20) commissioned by the Crafts Council from Cherry Ann Knott was designed to update a study conducted by Alex Bruce and Paul Filmer twelve years before (21) and to see what had changed. Both studies described the way in which individual makers earn a living. This was one of the first studies of its kind in the cultural sector in the UK and highlighted the fact that by 1993 many more craftspeople were moving towards full-time practice. Knott's study excluded craft workshops of more than ten employees. Three more recent studies of craft businesses in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland focus more on the dimensions of the sector in their respective countries than on individual makers, but also provide useful information on the types of work made (22, 23).

While theatre and dance artists feature in several of the studies mentioned above there appears to be less freestanding research into the types of work undertaken by these performing artists. *What Becomes of Undergraduate Dance Majors? A Study of the Five College Dance Department Graduates* by the Department of Economics at Mount Holyoke College (24). The Five Colleges Dance Programme is more than 30 years old and is the second largest dance programme in the US. This study reports on the types of work undertaken by 192 graduates and on income earned from dance and other sources.

Earnings

The earnings of artists features as a heading in many sectoral studies, reports on artists' working lives and on the arts (or cultural) economy. In *The Economics of Artists' Labour Markets* (2), written in 1995, Towse considers the findings of the key pieces of research into the economic characteristics of artists from 1980s and 1990s, and concludes that there has been a 'remarkable consistency' in the findings on earnings of artists. That said, and as she also points out, self-reported figures on earnings need to be treated with care. There are several reasons for this. Artists may understate their income; some may cite income from all sources when they have been asked for arts-related income only; artists' earnings cover a huge spectrum and reaching conclusions about the average income in any sector (music, visual arts, theatre etc) is problematic. 'The distribution of artists' earnings is so uneven that average figures are not representative,' writes Towse (p24). 'Even the median, which is a better representation of the "typical" survey respondent, is not necessarily a reliable statistic with a very skewed distribution.'

Most of the studies on earnings are either straightforward surveys of how much artists' are earning in a particular field (10, 12, 17, 20, 21, 25,26) or they are investigations, usually by economists, into the economics of the labour market (1, 2, 8, 9, 11). The recently published *A Handbook of Cultural Economics* (27) includes short essays by 50 writers on the subject and while some of these are tough going for non-economists, it

provides an unprecedented overview of the issues that cultural economists have to consider.

One of the most significant contributors to the subject of artists' earnings is David Throsby. Over the past 20 years, the Australia Council has been commissioning Throsby and his team at the Division of Economic and Financial Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney to undertake research into the economic circumstances of writers, visual artists and craftspeople, actors, directors, dancers, choreographers, and 'community cultural development workers' in Australia. Reports have been published in 1983, 1987, 1993 and 2003 and the last three have used the same methods to assess artists' income. In *Don't Give Up Your Day Job* (15) therefore, Throsby is able present figures on the mean (average) and median incomes of artists in different disciplines in 1986/87, 1992/93 and 2000/01 and to compare them with the earnings of managers, professionals and all occupational groups.

Artist and economist Hans Abbing's recent book *Why are artists poor? The exceptional economy of the artist* (28) identifies five reasons why as a group, artists' incomes are low and looks at the impact of a system of public funding on the incomes of artists, concluding that they are poorer as a result.

Alper and Wassall continue to offer new angles on the subject. *More Than Once in A Blue Moon: Multiple Jobholdings by American Artists* (29) looks at the practice of 'moonlighting' (doing more than one job) among American artists. Jeffri (30), Throsby (31) and others have looked at the connection between earnings and artists' decision about the work they choose to do. Filer, Wassall, Alper and Throsby have all written on the connection between earnings, education, training and age.

Working conditions

While there is research on earnings and types and patterns of work to be found in most countries, the material on the working conditions of artists seems to be much less evenly spread. Some of the most detailed work has come out of the Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University where Joan Jeffri and colleagues have twice looked at the live/work space, health care, health and life insurance, benefits and the financial needs of artists in the US. In 1989 Jeffri researched the working conditions of 10,000 artists in a variety of disciplines in ten locations US (32). This was followed, in 1998, by a study (written with Robert Greenblatt) of 7,700 artists in four of the same places - Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Minneapolis/St Paul (33). Jeffri's recent study of jazz musicians in four American cities (14) provides the first detailed analysis of the working conditions of jazz musicians in the US.

In the UK, the only significant recent cross-sectoral studies have been on artists' relationships with the tax and benefits systems, but these have also had an international dimension that makes them useful to readers outside the UK. *A balancing act: artists' labour markets and the tax and benefit systems* (34) is one of two reports commissioned by Arts Council England from the University of Warwick. (The other is *Artists in Figures* (3). *A balancing act* is a report of qualitative research with six groups of artists in different parts of England (performing artists; authors and writers; musicians; visual artists and craft makers; producers, directors and managers; and designers) looking at

impact of the UK's tax and social security systems on their working lives. One of the aims of this research was to develop recommendations for changes to the UK systems of tax and benefits in relation to artists. In preparation, Arts Council England commissioned Clare McAndrew to produce a comparative review of the tax and social security legislation and policies in seven countries – the UK, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands (35). This drew attention, once again to the idiosyncratic employment status and working patterns of artists. This report includes a particularly good list of references. Also in 2002, McAndrew produced, with Lorna Dallas-Conte, an international comparative study of artists' resale rights (36).

The health of artists is an area of growing research interest, particularly in relation to dancers and musicians. While some researchers have looked at the impact of poor working environments on the health of artists (37,38), others have focused on particular illnesses and conditions (39, 40). In some cases the lead has been taken by funding bodies (38, 39), some by trade unions and professional associations, or special interest groups (37,40).

What next?

This short and subjective survey has cited just 40 pieces of research. We would like to use this as the starting point of an exchange with ARD readers about current research into artists' working lives. Have you recently commissioned work on any of the subjects covered here? Are you working on a study now? What gaps in research would you like to see filled? Please email us at hc.ard@unn.ac.uk, giving Artists' Working Lives as the subject title, or else write to us at Arts Research Digest, Holy Jesus Hospital, City Road, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 2AS.

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On-line sources of publications

Americans for the Arts www.artsusa.org

Arts Council England www.artscouncil.org.uk

Arts Council Finland www.artscouncil.fi/

Australia Council for the Arts www.ozco.gov.au

Canada Council www.canadacouncil.ca/artsinfo/research/

CEDCO (Community Economic Development Corporation) Victoria, Canada
www.cedco.bc.ca

CPANDA: Cultural Policy & the Arts National Data Archive (at Princeton University)
www.cpanda.org/arts-culture-facts/artists

Crafts Council of Ireland www.ccoi.ie/publications

Creative New Zealand www.creativenz.govt.nz