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Unequal entanglements: how arts practitioners reflect on the impact of intensifying economic inequality

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how arts practitioners reflect on their work amidst deepening economic inequality. Given the renewed interest in the social role of arts institutions under conditions of financialised neo-liberalism, the paper traces the complex ways in which economic imperatives figure in cultural practice. Drawing on interviews with UK-based gallery directors, museum curators, art consultants, and artists, I map out how austerity politics and intensifying privatisation processes have a profound impact on the workings of the sector, how they recalibrate dynamics between private and public artworlds, and how they shape processes of production and curation. My data specifically document how increasing economic precarity brings into relief structural inequalities of gender, race and (post)-colonial legacies already manifesting in the artworld. Rather than understanding austerity as a financial condition only, the paper thus presents an empirical exploration of the wider inequalities that it has exacerbated, from arts funding to institutions' programming practices.

KEYWORDS

Austerity; art institutions; inequality; cultural policy; museums; creative labour

Introduction

Austerity politics and privatisation processes have had a profound impact on the arts and museum sector, and the UK presents a prime site for investigating these dynamics. Foregrounding the voices of cultural practitioners themselves, this paper discusses the ways in which UK-based museum curators, gallery directors, artists and art consultants reflect on their work amidst contemporary conditions of deepening economic inequality. While the country saw a period of nationalisation in the years after the end of the second world war, the following Thatcher era drastically opened the path for privatisation and commercialisation, increasing the financial incentives for private and cooperate arts sponsorship via tax breaks or Public-Private Partnerships (e.g. Wu, 2002). This process continued during the New Labour years which not only incentivised corporate arts sponsorship further but also pushed for the adoption of economic rationales within the cultural sector more widely, turning the latter into an increasingly entrepreneurial (creative) industry: financialised logics, ranging from a "value for money" rhetoric to the implementation

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of commercial attitudes more broadly, pushed arts organisations and cultural workers "to be entrepreneurial, embrace risk, look after their own self-interest, perform their own brands, and be willing to self-exploit" (Bishop, 2012, pp. 15–16; also Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; McRobbie, 2015). Simultaneously, the Labour government adopted a rather populist discourse around arts and culture that stressed the latter as sites of social cohesion, regeneration and mobility, shifting "the prevailing rationale for cultural policy, away from culture, and towards economic and social goals" (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2015, p. 99).

These intertwined logics of economically driven private and state interests further sharpened after the financial crisis of 2008, when the UK's austerity measures led to severe cuts across all social and cultural infrastructures. With the covid-19 crisis hitting hard on public services, graver cuts are to be expected and might further deepen the cultural sector's dependence on private money, and connected therewith, private influence (e.g. Banks & O'Connor, 2021). Meanwhile, the Arts Council England (ACE, 2020) published its 2020–2030 strategy "Let's Create" which sets out the key deliverables and investment principles supposed to guide the arts sector through the next decade. While "Let's Create" is certainly ambitious, outlining an agenda for cultural organisations to become more "dynamic, highly collaborative, inclusive and relevant in the way they work and the culture they produce", the policy largely obscures the severe impact of austerity and instead asks institutions "to develop business models that help them maximise income, reduce costs and become more financially resilient" (ACE, 2020, pp. 27, 49). Bethany Rex (2020) therefore argues that the strategy's focus on "dynamism" and "resilience" would actually reinscribe austerity discourses by demanding cultural institutions to become even more entrepreneurial, while leaving "difficult questions of how to translate the strategy's ambitions into actual action unanswered" (2020, p. 129).

The non-commercial artworld is subsequently facing the challenge of re-envisioning their public purposes in line with the ACE's policy demands while simultaneously having to navigate an ever-shrinking availability of public funding. Simultaneously, the UK arts market has experienced a rampant monetarisation and a growing trend towards high-end commercial activity. In 2018, the sector went up by 8% to just under $14bn in transaction volume, leading to a 1% gain in the global market share to 21% (McAndrews, 2018). From gallery patronage and exhibition sponsorship to private collection loans and the increasing financialisation of the arts market, private co-operations and wealthy individuals have hence been staking out their role in the arts to an increasingly large extent. Some scholars and policymakers have highlighted this development as an opportunity to harness private wealth for public purposes (e.g. Anheier & Leat, 2006), "Let's Create" even defines as one of its core objectives "that public, private and commercial investment in culture creativity will all have increased by 2030" (ACE, 2020, p. 27). Others, however, empathically caution that the increasing reliance of cultural provision on private sponsorship only allows for economic power to be translated into more private revenue, and into cultural and social power which further questions the social role of arts institutions and the political effectiveness of artistic critique (e.g. Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006; Giridharadas, 2018; Upton-Hansen et al., 2021).

These concerns are certainly not new.[1] Yet, at a time when levels of economic inequality in many industrial countries grow steeper not least because of the accumulative prevalence of private wealth (e.g. Piketty, 2014; Savage, 2021), they step to the fore of contemporary cultural politics with new force. In the era of the super-rich and the so-called 1%, the question of how economic inequality figures in the arts and museum sector becomes particularly pressing. Despite its contemporary pertinence, however, the empirical basis for grasping the impact of intensifying economic inequality on the workings of arts institutions is still thin. Most notably, the voices of arts professionals coping with the pressures of austerity and privatisation are largely absent from both scholarship and policy. Current exceptions include Daniel Ashton's (2021) current work on UK cultural organisations which documents how the increasing orientation towards entrepreneurialism in cultural policy would crucially depend on, and exploit, the emotional labour of arts workers, especially when it comes to the management of sponsor and audience relationships. Building on Angela McRobbie's (2015) influential work on Europe's creative industries under neoliberalism, Michael Siciliano's (2021, p. 3) study of cultural workers in the US similarly emphasises the "tensions between capital and labor in the cultural industries" and asks how workers navigate the uneven distribution between creative work and creative control under today's market-oriented parameters.

Taking inspiration from such approaches, this paper centres the ways in which art professionals reflect on their work precisely in light of the recalibration of public and private artworlds proffered by austerity. My key concern is to get a more detailed understanding of how economic inequality figures in the workings of the arts sector, how it shapes the latter's organisational and curatorial practices, and how it further pronounces interconnected forms of inequality around race, gender and (post)colonial legacies. Exploring these concerns empirically, I draw on 25 qualitative interviews with directors, curators, artists and arts consultants in major institutions in the UK's gallery and museum scene to trace how increasing economic inequality and the accumulation of private capital have influenced working conditions, programming practices, and sponsor relationships in the sector. Overall, my analysis shows how austerity, rather than being a financial condition only, exacerbates wider structural inequalities already playing out in the arts.

Data and methods

This paper builds on 25 qualitative interviews carried out between November 2019 and February 2020 with both established and emerging artists, art consultants, museum curators and gallery directors. The sample represents 18 key public and private art institutions from across the UK, comprising both top-end museums and galleries located in urban centres as well as mid-sized and smaller regional institutions. This sample composition allows me to draw out comparisons between and across differently positioned organisations in terms of both location and size. While the study focuses on the ways in which public institutions are experiencing austerity and privatisation, the sample also includes private organisations to tease out how the relationship between the public and private art spheres are being renegotiated, precisely under conditions of increasing economic inequality and an expansion of private and corporate sponsorship in the arts. 18 of my respondents were contacted via interview invitations and seven participants were approached through snowballing. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min with the vast majority being conducted in person and the rest via phone or skype. Seeking to develop a more detailed understanding of how the lack of public funding and the rise in private art sponsorship impacts on the workings of the artworld, I conducted semi-structured interviews to let participants account for themselves in an open-ended manner while also collecting comparative data across the interviewees' different stakeholder positions. Beyond inquiring about the effects of austerity politics and the increasing financialisation of art, I also explored how such economic developments shape the workings of the arts sector more widely, paying particular attention to the ways in which they connect to inequalities around race, gender, regional disparities and the negotiation of colonial legacies. After transcription, the interviews were coded and analysed using NVivo and I removed all potentially identifying information.

How arts practitioners reflect on intensifying economic inequality

Austerity's impact on working conditions of artistic production

Austerity politics and public funding cuts were reported by all respondents to negatively affect the scope of their work to fulfil a social function, however defined, while being symptomatic of current economic conditions (i.e. decreasing public services, higher poverty and escalating inequality) in which the necessity for the arts to take on such a function is amplified. As one interviewee at a public museum in London summed up, "everybody is operating with less". The director of a London-based art institute spoke about how their institution's funding had declined from 70% to 80% funded by the public purse to 23%, severely limiting its ability to "target demographics that are difficult to access" and who may not be sufficiently large in numbers to satisfy their new financial requirements. Another respondent, working at a public gallery in Edinburgh, described a public contribution that has been flat, in nominal terms, since 2007 (equivalent to a 28.5% decline in purchasing power). Amongst the consequences of such funding cuts respondents listed the consolidation of artistic programming, the reduction of educational offers and, in some cases, the replacement of staff with volunteers or even the closure of institutions, such as regional museums in particular. A lack of public support was reported to have specifically influenced institutions' organisational and curatorial practices.

Indeed, my participants highlighted the inevitable effect that public institutions in particular would be pressured to balance out financial shortfalls. To do so, institutions would reorient either parts or the majority of their programming and extend their commercial infrastructure and services, such as running cafes, bookshops or event bookings. One respondent based at a London art institution noted, for instance, that "we are just about getting away with charging entrance, it's three pounds […] we also have a restaurant wing where you pay for a pheasant pie, £19, you know these are the conditions that you live with". For another public gallery director from Edinburgh, extending commercial activities was a necessary step "to keep our independence" from private funding bodies and their specific requirements. However, the director also added that despite increasing such commercial services, a decade of austerity still cut deep into the gallery's workings:

> we tried to maintain our commitments to staff, freelancers and artists. Pay throughout the sector is lower than it should be, but we try to track the public sector pay award for staff and published guidelines on fee payments to artists and freelancers. It's incredibly difficult and it's a very live issue.

Such responses, documenting the realities of the current funding climate in the UK arts, resonate with Rex's (2020, p. 133) analysis of "Let's Create" who suggests that the strategy's

> response to austerity is one where practitioners and organisations embrace these conditions as an opportunity – to attract private giving, to build fundraising capacity, to increase volunteer participation […] rather than a regrettable development to be resisted or adapted to, acknowledging that austerity has further destabilised the already precarious economic position of many and hampered the ability of funded organisations in myriad ways.

In keeping with Rex's argument, my respondents neither seemed to welcome the necessary expansion of commercial activities, nor did the latter actually appear to sustainably fund their respective organisational and artistic agendas. Rather, participants emphasised that the difficulty of maintaining commitments to work and staff would persist despite them trying to bring in more revenue from other sources. As a Scotland-based gallery director summed up: "the pressures to commercialise … it is a two-edged sword in a way. To get money, you need to invest in the commercial stuff, but this also costs resources, staff and time, which we need for our core work: doing exhibitions".

Another respondent working for a public gallery specifically complained about the little funds they had available to cover artists' fees when commissioning work: "We never would ask an artist to do anything without a fee. However, the fees we can offer are not a salary – they are rarely commensurate with the days an artist might spend on making a work". A London-based artist put it more frankly:

> Once, I was asking an assistant of mine how much he thinks I was getting paid for a commissioned project. … I said fee not budget … and his first thing was like 500.000 pounds and I laughed, it was very sweet, and then he brought it down to 70.000 and I said, I'm getting 1500 pounds. 1500. That's my fee. So, I often end up paying people working for me more than I get paid for a project. That happens all the time. I teach, that's how I sustain myself basically. And you never know if or how much of your art you will sell in a year either, it's not okay and it's not good and it's not sustainable.

These comments illustrate the increasing dogma of the creative, entrepreneurial self that has been entangled with austerity politics and that is reinscribed by current cultural policy. The position of "the Artist as Human Capital" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 70) here epitomises the uncertainties that come with freelance creative careers and illuminates the economic and emotional pressures of having to work multiple jobs just to sustain your own artistic practice (e.g. Ashton, 2021; Siciliano, 2021). As my interviewees' comments document, it is the shrinking availability of public funding that further aggravates these insecurities of cultural production and individualises economic burden which, in turn, might have an impact on who can even consider an artistic career at all.

Commercial pressures on programming and curation

According to a London-based gallery director, austerity politics would moreover have considerable effects on the programming of arts institutions with "more and more museums sort of behaving in similar ways" with respects to "choices around exhibition programming and displays, where museums are having to gravitate towards projects that are going to guarantee a return", what another respondent called "the big hitters". Such a reduction of artistic offers would go "at the cost of the variety and the diversity of programming" and would tend to cater to an already-established demographics of middle-class, mostly white museumgoers. This would result in "a loss of intellectual opportunity" challenging "the democratisation of cultural knowledge" as one of the arts sector's key social functions. These reflections indicate the kinds of values and aims that are currently competing – and perhaps clashing – in the cultural sector between neoliberal understandings of the arts and those oriented towards a critical and inclusive publicness (e.g. Rex, 2020). In this vein, a curator at a major London public museum cautioned that a consolidation of exhibition practices centring around the white middle-class consumer would lead to "already marginalised stories becoming even more marginalised" because "people tend to get very conservative" under conditions of financial risk. These tendencies would be especially detrimental for a sector which has itself been deeply implicated in raced and gendered inequalities and colonial exploitation and, as such, would actually have a pressing responsibility to "re-write historic wrongs", as one interviewee at a London art centre put it. As an Oxford-based curator described,

> stories that deviate from the established centre or challenge the notion of centre risk being pushed down on programming plans because you cannot always be sure that these exhibitions guarantee the same financial return.

In this way, financial pressure can lead institutions to proceed with "ready-made, nicely packaged exhibitions", not with the ones that might actually "challenge how things are done in the arts at a deeper level", such as rethinking exhibitions designs or curatorial production processes. This can be especially burdensome for "stories on the margins that need to be told and thought of differently", and the respondent specifically highlighted contexts of post- and decolonial knowledge production and exhibition designs inclusive of differently abled visitors.

These concerns mirror what Anamik Saha (2013, p. 823) elucidates as the "political economy of arts funding": sponsorship, public or private, would bring with it certain "arts funding governmentalities" which sediment into the practices of cultural producers and institutions, thus exercising a formative effect on the kinds of artistic work and cultural representations that are being created. Building on this, in times of austerity, the logics of commercialisation seem to have added yet another governing factor to institutions' programming and curatorial decision-making process.

Further, growing economic inequality and funding cuts seem to intersect and deepen already-existent inequalities of representation. Here, Abdullah et al. (2018, p. 183; see also Banks, 2019) observe that the scarcity of public funding would incentivise arts organisations to merely endorse inclusion and diversity discourses as commercial rationales and market solutions, rather than as a call for structural change, which "may be counterproductive to the government's own policy initiatives of, for example, widening citizens' participation". Following Saha (2013, 2018), this commercialisation of difference can lead to the reproduction of damaging, reductive epistemologies with regards to how notions of race, ethnicity, class, gender or regional identities become represented, and indeed produced, in the cultural industries. One artist specifically spoke to these points:

> look at artists of colour who are invoked to produce work about their identity, about their blackness, their southindianness and the invocation is to explain their blackness or brownness to a white audience mainly. […] why are artists of colour not more summoned to invoke their imaginary? Why is it often contingent on their identity in terms of what they make?

The ways in which growing economic inequality reinforces raced and classed inequalities in the arts are further summed up by the director of a London-based art institute: "The financial system of cultural institutions is broken because it often conditions you to literally either shut your mouth or constantly bite the hand that feeds you" which would bear significant consequences for questions of access and participation "from social inequality to gender inequality to racial inequality of different cultural roots, sexual orientation inequality […] so whom gets represented by whom, which voices get heard or not". As these reflections indicate, the financial imperatives of austerity – rather than setting out merely economic parameters within which the arts have to operate – intensify processes and inequalities already in train, with particularly problematic effects on practices of cultural production, curation and representation.

The increasing power of commercial galleries

The deep cuts in public sponsorships are somewhat ironically accompanied by the growing financialisation of the commercial arts market. One London-based art consultant said that increasing processes of monetarisation would have changed the sector "dramatically", elaborating that

> when our business started 20 years ago, the investment side of the artworld was seen as a bit of a dirty business whereas, if you look back in history, people have made money on art for hundreds of years, it's not anything new but now, 20 years on, its much more accepted as the norm […] there are millions of dollars flying around all over the place and you become very desensitised to it.

My respondents from public museum and galleries were highly aware of the impact of such commercial developments: seeking audience-generating, high-profile artists very often implies the representation by powerful, international galleries, whose dominance gets reinforced in turn. One gallery director explained that,

> commercial galleries – quite a number of them – are extremely powerful, and they seem to have almost endless possibilities, resources – financial resources – and could easily write a cheque. They have great spaces and publication departments, so It seems the role of museums and non-profit spaces has become somewhat limited. In addition, they can pay for the exhibitions of their artists in non-profit institutions and influence it too. So yes, their role has changed … oh it has been brutal, in the past 15–20 years.

Given their own monetary restrictions, some public institutions would therefore try to harness the huge financial potential of mega-galleries for covering parts of the exhibition costs, such as sponsoring the catalogue, supporting educational outreach or organising launch dinners. In this way, many institutions in the sample actually already had to implement what current cultural policies like "Let's Create" demand; that is, extended partnerships between public and private, between not-for-profit and commercial. However, according to one Oxford-based interviewee, such financial strategies would result in "the privatisation of programming" into the hands of a small number of powerful agents in the art ecosystem. These dynamics would tie in with the promotion of the notion of the "great artist" and would often also be extended into the provision of educational programmes to service the cultural capital for private galleries' stakeholders, as a Manchester-based gallery director explained. Aberrantly, such arrangements, in demonstrating institutions' ability to operate without public funding, would further decrease the incentives for governments to roll back the funding cuts, and so ultimately reinforce these new dependencies on the private sector. What we see here, then, is the increased blurring between public and private artworlds to the extent that the former can no longer independently operate, or operate at all, without the latter. However, in times of economic crisis, it is not only public spending that risks being cut back further but, as Tina Mermiri (2011) argues, private funds can be just as volatile. This backs the concern whether an overemphasis on the private stepping in for the public only reallocates financial risk and insecurity into a realm beyond democratic control, rather than presenting an actually sustainable funding model.

The increasingly important role of commercial mega-galleries brings with it acute ethical dilemmas among respondents operating within these funding parameters. One London-based interviewee cautioned that "the relationship with museums: that really needs to be thought about carefully. When these big powerful galleries interact with these public institutions, supposedly disinterested […] this can be quite fraught". Many respondents particularly attested to the fact that commercial galleries would indeed pursue their own interests when supporting public institutions and would hope to harness their "taste-making function" to increase the market value of their represented artists. As one interviewee resonated, in this way public institutions would support themselves an increasingly monetarised market: "you can't just have a commercial practice, you need the kind of institutional, critical framework underneath it to sustain the kind of prices of it". These quid pro quo exchanges between financial and symbolic power are unpacked by Victoria Alexander's (2014) work on the logics of gift-giving in arts funding decisions. As she explains,

> corporations expect to receive benefits from their gifts (advertising exposure, corporate functions in the arts venue, private tours of the exhibition or the back-stage), and many of the return benefits to corporations are specified before the gift is finalised. (p. 2)

Depending on the kinds of donors and their specific demands, such gifts can put arts institutions in highly contested positions. Indeed, the balance between the need to generate money "and to maintain sort of the integrity, independence, balance of the programming", as one London curator described it, clearly came across as one of the greatest challenges facing museums today.

Austerity's impact on donor relationships

Beyond the increasing involvement of commercial galleries in the structuring of public cultural life, private patronage via donors or corporate sponsorships was equally mentioned as a necessary but ill-suited solution to addressing the financial woes of institutions. For a public museum curator, the calculus is simple: "for the bigger shows, […] without sponsorship they don't happen". However, reliance on sponsorship makes it difficult to fund exhibitions with challenging subjects that "maybe open conversations that need to be had, but that may be quite difficult conversations or subjects the sponsor might not want to be associated with". As an Oxford-based gallery manager put it, "the basic expectation of anyone who sponsors an arts organisation is that they want to market themselves by association to a specific demographic", predominantly "white-collar professionals", and it is this historical association with exclusivity that enables institutions to access sponsorships. Art institutions are thereby instrumentalised in "courting all sorts of private and corporate agendas in relation to specific forms of marketing, rather than demographics", thus reinforcing the elitist nature of the artworld and structural inequalities more widely. Given finite staffing resources, the sizing of various pockets of potential funding thus ultimately end up determining where institutions have to orient their attention. Following one of my interviewees, this subsequently "affects the value and the culture of an organisation, because of the languages and the kinds of experiences that you're creating, the events and activities of the organisation", prejudicing or conflicting with simultaneous efforts to democratise participation. These comments show how the arts' increased dependency on corporate sponsorship, coupled with the inbuilt logics of gift-giving, further pronounces ideological conflicts between "the politics and discourses of austerity and the marginalisation of alternative values and practices which […] are alive and well within museums and the cultural sector" (Rex, 2020, p. 129). Moreover, given the indispensability of private sponsorship for public arts, the question poses itself whether we can still speak of proportionate gift-exchanges between donor and institution, or whether the latter is increasingly relegated to a position of precarity from which it has little choice but to accept the donations' conditions. As Alexander (2014, p. 9) puts it, "arts organisations are not obliged to accept […] corporate donations. However, failing to accept funding would come at the cost of reduced operations and programming, so in reality, only in the most unusual of circumstances would arts organisations actually refuse".

Yet, recognition of the power exerted by private donors within contemporary conditions of intensifying economic inequality has not remained unchallenged but prompted significant public backlash. Scandals around the Sackler family or BP funding exhibitions also made institutions themselves more scrupulous in screening the integrity of potential philanthropists and conducting ethical audits and risk assessments of existing relationships. However, as a curator in Edinburgh admitted, there would "of course always be grey areas". Several respondents therefore spoke at length about the need for greater integrity and independence: "that you not just bend over because someone is waving the next big check" as one participant coined it. Such reservations over acceptance of private funds stems very clearly from the perceived ability of museums to legitimise, even consecrate, wealth whose sources can be extraordinarily at odds with the supposed mission of such institutions and opens them to claims of hypocrisy. As another gallery director said: "the ethics of this public benefit driven through private support […] is open to forms of scrutiny that could be really exposing for institutions that have these values around public benefits; that are also at the moment articulating a really high value around democracy and environmental sustainability". The implication is that influential public cultural institutions can impart their perceived moral character and cultural standing by association; attributes that accumulate precisely because of the buy-in of the public. Put differently, it is by virtue of institutions' audiences that private, cooperate donors can trade for economic currency a potentially more vital and exclusive form of capital, namely social status. The attending public and the widely shared belief in the cultural legitimacy of institutions implicitly assume a stakeholder position in such exchanges.

My respondents also expressed concern about the shrinking possibility of resistance to private influence which one interviewee even described as "the in-built hypocrisy" of the artworld. A London-based artist particularly questioned "how the kind of financial viability of it and its comfort with people that are diametrically opposed to you ideologically can be sustained. […] where is the line between like acceptable wealth and unacceptable wealth?" These negotiations would put artists in a difficult, vulnerable position as they would often have to manage particularly unstable and precarious conditions. As the participant continued,

> it shines a light on the kind of hypocrisy of it. Emancipatory politics that have a kind of currency in the artworld also call upon a kind of communist, anarchical or socialist future and you are showing and presenting it to a room full of patrons who believe in the aggregation of wealth, for example. There has always been a kind of acceptance of such dichotomies of wealth, but I think this is changing. […] maybe, the kinds of future societies that we are entering will not allow for that.

Moreover, interviewees reported on the scope of influence private donors would be able to stake out for themselves even if their donations are relatively small. One artist working in a London-based studio collective recounted that "a lot of patrons will give a place like this 1000 pounds a year. And for that, they get invited to all the dinners, they get studio visits, you know, there is a lot that happens for that 1000 pounds. For them, this is no money, it's like literally no money. These people are millionaires". Whatever the moral evaluation of a particular donor, it seems clear that patronage is not only a means to fund art but equally a means to get access, control and power, further pronouncing the concern of power imbalances between funder and recipient in the current economic climate.

Yet, several respondents acknowledged that the moral complexity of the system could not simply be solved by demonising and turning away from private capital. A regional gallery director noted that, by enabling galleries to survive, "it's the private collector who's really subsidising that public benefit" of museums having access to and exhibiting new artists. One well-established artist described the easy "dehumanising of the money provider" by declaratively progressive left-wing arts discourses, pointing to the hypocrisy at the core of the artworld: "all the people that buy the art and finance the art and build the great big wings to the new art galleries: these are all capitalists". Another artist similarly observed that "you can't say public money is good and private money is bad. It's not. Because actually private money is what is paying the roof over my head and putting food on the plate for me and my children *and* my team". Moreover, public funding was justifiably also recognised to entail its own obligations, constraints and moral dilemmas as government grants often "explicitly come 'with strings attached'" (Alexander, 2014, p. 2). Accentuating the ambivalent relationship between cultural policy, revenue generation and the public cultural sector, the director of a contemporary arts institute elaborated that "the 23% you get from the Arts Council also govern the rest of the 77%", with the Arts Council expecting that "we implement our policies through those funds as well". Even worse, the ongoing requirements ascribed to the whole institution even with severely reduced funds could be used to justify further reductions. As the director continued, "once you are kind of starved to half death" then it's easy to "complain that you are not lively anymore". A private gallery curator moreover highlighted the political implications that inevitably come with state funding:

> I feel more comfortable with knowing exactly that I can trace what they [private funders] are doing. I know what their businesses are, I can see it, whereas the government, I don't believe in their policies. So, I'm actually more comfortable working for a private individual. […] but from the outside it's completely invisible, of course.

The majority of my respondents similarly spoke about the ways in which an over-simplified private-public dichotomy would just not depict the organisational realities of arts funding. May it be in the form of tax payments, tax breaks or public-private partnerships, the spheres of public and private money would be "anyhow very blurred", as a museum curator put it. Yet, most respondents ultimately acknowledged public sponsorship as having an overriding democratic benefit: "it maintains the public ownership of institutions", to put it with the words of an Oxford-based gallery director.

In fact, my interviewees widely embraced a "museums for the many" rhetoric. However, as Sara Selwood (2018, p. 291) cautions, in practice, this "[r]hetorical optimism endures alongside the failure of political will to create, and maintain" such goals, particularly with regards to visitors from minority or working-class backgrounds who would "remain unrepresentative of the population". The extent to which the public artworld has ever been truly democratically organised is therefore deeply questionable (e.g. O'Brien et al., 2016). In this vein, the above data indeed highlight the ambivalences of public funding, yet they also point to the risks and ideological tensions of private sponsorship. My participants thus trouble overly optimistic accounts of the UK's wider neoliberal project which positions the arts as a vector for wider economic and social development and which foregrounds a "neo-liberal notions of the citizen-subject as ideally entrepreneurial, self-reliant and self-creating" (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2015, p. 110). As such, they cast a critical light onto cultural policies which portray privatisation and marketisation as socially conscious, sustainable approaches to arts support.

The erosion of the arts ecosystem

One further crucial and arguably more fundamental impact that respondents ascribed to intensifying economic inequality proffered by austerity was the erosion of a sustainable arts ecosystem more widely – the erosion of "the fertile loop", as one artist explained:

> the relationship between the mainstream and an underground which has been a very fertile loop has been completely decimated. […] I think that, you know, in big cities, affordability of property, real estate, these things have also changed the ecology of art production and dissemination because there used to be a possibility for things existing as a means to an end in itself. So, a lot of artist-run spaces, and smaller, non-commercial, not-for-profit ventures that often revolve around particular groups of people, communities … These things are practically impossible in the current climate.

Beyond the general concern for the growing precarity due to a decade of austerity measures, my participants specifically criticised the state of arts education in schools, and the threat this would pose to the breadth of access and representation. It was specifically noted how the traditional connection between art history, social privilege and private education was aggravating because of severe cuts in arts curricula in state schools. According to an art gallery director,

> you have two thirds of society excluded, or at least hindered to a full education. That essentially makes creative thinking and evolvement of society poor. […] You segregate two thirds of society from being able to participate in culture, its production, reception, its making. Therefore, it becomes a very monotheistic and exclusive world.

Related problems were seen to affect art-focused higher education, notably due to university fee increases. Following a London-based artist, given "the kind of debt that they [students] are going to be left with at the end of it, and the art education doesn't necessarily mean that you will end up getting a job and pay this debt off", the arts as a vocation would effectively exclude large segments of society who can simply not entertain the financial risks involved, which would lead to a "skewed version of the world" in terms of the experiences and voices represented. Turning specifically towards the art colleges, another interviewee added that "if you go to art school now, they are a bit like finishing schools for the international elite", thus highlighting the (im)possibilities of social mobility in the cultural sector (e.g. Laurison & Friedman, 2019; McAndrew et al., 2020).

Such range of issues playing out in the artworld proffered scepticism about the social reach of art institutions. One artist, for instance, critically reflected on the use of artworks as vessels for performative political messaging, arguing that the current trend to "sort of over-intellectualise your practice in order to be taken seriously" would benefit people from well-established backgrounds to take up an artistic career and would foreclose the arts as a bubble for liberal elites:

> I came from a working-class background, so it was very important to me that there was money in it for me. And I often think that activism is a middle-class luxury a lot of the time. […] And it's like "no, mate", people who are gonna see your progressive art installation about global warming, they are not gonna be poor people and they are not going to be conservatives. […] It's a hermetically sealed world.

The respondent suggested that this rather hollowed rehearsal of established progressive positions would merely fulfil a performative role and thereby act as a vector for capitalism to endogenise itself by incorporating critique into the product circuits that sustain its existence and widen its reach (e.g. Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006). The artworld would thereby present itself as open and critical, while unequal structures of artistic consumption and production would persist. These findings speak to a larger discussion in sociology concerned with the remaking of (white) elitism at a time when elites actually seem to adopt more cosmopolitan, omnivorous tastes and values (e.g. Lena, 2019). To put it with Shamus Khan's (2014, p. 146) words, although elites "have opened themselves to the world, the world has not opened to all. […] But what is crucial is that no one is explicitly excluded […] From this point of view, those who are not successful are not necessarily disadvantaged; they are simply those who have failed to seize the opportunities afforded by our new, open society". My participants' reflections indicate that the erosion of the arts ecosystem risks making the cultural sector yet another site where such neoliberal narratives reinscribe and reproduce.

Against this backdrop, representatives of other institutions reported the urgency to grapple with and rethink structural inequalities of mis- and underrepresentation. Specifically mentioned was need for a critical investigation into processes of canonisation shaped by white supremacy, colonial enterprises, slavery and misogyny. For a Manchester-based museum director, it is crucial to "address historical inequalities through changing narrative of display" by rediscovering works that have not been included in the mainstream canon. Here, a London-based curator further stressed the need for deeper self-reflection amongst cultural producers themselves, elaborating that

> for a long time the gender imbalance was really awful. And to be perfectly honest, none of us had actually paid much attention, even though we are a majority female curatorial team. […] And actually think now "how did we let that happen?" So, I would say that within the last three to five years with much more strategic thinking around it.

To gain critical distance from Eurocentric traditions, interviewees underlined the necessity to review the ways in which curatorial and exhibition practices would be organised. One curator gave the example of expanding on community collaborations, especially when dealing with indigenous knowledges, colonial and postcolonial histories. In this context, the respondent affirmed the social potency of arts and artistic communication: "I have studied that stuff and I believe and see evidence between people understanding their past and their current physical and mental health". However, the question of equal access, reflexive curation practices and meaningful collaboration would be "ever-present", as even in cases of successful community collaborations, colonialism would always play a role because "it has not only brought about historical injustices but is still a system of present, ongoing violence […] we still need to be doing more work". While there seemed to be a shared view amongst our participants that more self-reflexive curatorial practices are urgently needed, there was also concern whether institutions were ready to face up to such endemic inequalities. As one respondent at a public museum recalled, "I see people roll their eyes" when issues of decolonisation, equity and diversity would be discussed internally.

There was moreover a broad reservation whether a focus on revenue-oriented programming would struggle to accommodate such crucial, self-critical work. As a museum outreach officer stressed, in the current climate of chronic under-funding, "we respond from one crisis to the next, there is no space to sit down and write these ideas up which makes it often a question of individual labour which can be very tough". Other interviewees specifically raised the risk of tokenism, which would reproduce rather than challenge raced and gendered inequalities in the artworld. A London curator of a public art centre specifically problematised the dynamics of the arts market which would continuously seek newness while market hierarchies would remain firmly in place: "There are new markets, and everybody is reassessing figures that have been marginalised and excluded from the 20st century art history. I mean that's what we all are doing and rightly so – commercial galleries are doing it too. They are presenting artists of colour who have been marginalised. Of course the art market is predominantly white". Yet, the curator also stated that

> I don't think it's just a trend, we have all become much more aware of the kinds of critiques and that we need to be paying attention to these things … but this can be quite a slow process because a lot of these things go back to education in art and how many of those communities actually study art, study art history, get involved in the arts in a difficult economic moment.

It is precisely this last point which again demonstrates how austerity has not only led to the intensification of economic inequality but connected therewith, has intensified the ways in which raced, classed, gendered and regional inequalities extend into the workings of the art sector with profound effects on issues of representation, access and production.

Conclusion

This article mapped the ways in which arts practitioners in the UK's museum and gallery sector reflect on the impact of austerity and privatisation processes and the challenges these impose on their work. Given the renewed interest in the arts' social role under current conditions of financialised neo-liberalism, I discussed the ways in which economic imperatives figure in the working conditions, curatorial practices and donor relationships of institutions, and showed how austerity has contributed to the erosion of the arts ecosystem more broadly. Overall, my analysis showed how the lines between private and public artworlds become increasingly fluid, and how austerity has further accelerated this development. Foregrounding the accounts of cultural practitioners, who navigate the impact of intensifying economic inequality in their day-to-day work, I especially teased out how the latter profoundly intersects with structural inequalities of gender, race and (post)-colonial legacies manifesting in the arts. I therefore argued for an understanding of austerity that acknowledges it not only as a financial condition but as an exacerbation of wider structural inequalities already at work.

Most notably, my data illuminated a gap between the aims and strategies put forward by current UK cultural policy – as exemplified by "Let's Create" (ACE, 2020) – and the everyday experiences of art workers "on the ground". Specifically, my analysis challenged idealising entrepreneurial discourses in the arts which present the financial possibilities of commercial activities and private sponsoring as fitting solutions to fill the economic vacuum created by austerity, rather than acknowledging the need for more systemic economic redistribution (Rex, 2020). The widening of commercial services was not seen as a sustainable solution for institutions to maintain their commitment to both staff and work, especially in light of the overall pressures to re-envision the wider social role of museums today. Rather, respondents expressed concern that a focus on commercialisation might even serve as a justification for public funding to be rolled back further. Interviewees moreover noted how such commercial logics go together with neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurialism which would sharpen already precarious conditions of artistic labour (McRobbie, 2015; Siciliano, 2021). Here, participants stressed the challenge to keep institutional independence and ethical integrity, while also having to rely on increasingly powerful mega-galleries and private sponsors to make their work happen. As such, the pressure to commercialise seems to work itself as a form of governmentality (Saha, 2018) by decisively influencing institutions' programming and curational choices. Pushing institutions towards audience-generating "big hitters", this would bear particularly constraining effects for critical representational politics and for sustainable diversity, equality and inclusion work. Consequently, arts practitioners are forced to navigate the ethical challenges of the "gift" of arts funding (Alexander, 2014) and gallery support, while also having to negotiate between the conflicting values of neoliberal entrepreneurialism on one hand and the arts' public role on the other. Austerity was also reported to have eroded the artistic ecosystem more broadly, deepening the classed, gendered and raced inequalities that already manifest in practices of arts consumption, education and production.

Together, the accounts presented in this paper bear larger relevance for arts institutions, cultural policy and funding bodies. Instead of a policy that merely tries to treat austerity's symptoms, they emphasise the need for a policy that offers structural change. In times of a global pandemic, and the socioeconomic crisis that has ensued, rethinking the social potency of arts institutions is vital and critically confronting the ways in which working conditions and funding structures might help or hinder such an endeavour even more so.

Note

1. The role of arts institutions has long been disputed, the arts have never been independent from its wider economic parameters and elites have always used culture to sustain privilege (e.g. Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1985; Friedman & Reeves, 2020).

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