Career paths of visual artists

Sheila Honey
Paul Heron
Charles Jackson
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June 1997

carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies
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Tim Eastop
Jane O’Brien

Arts Council of England
June 1997
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Executive Summary

Background

As part of the preparation of a Green Paper for the Visual Arts, the Arts Council of England (ACE) commissioned a piece of work looking at the career development and career paths of visual artists.

The aim of this project was to fill the gaps in current understanding about the career development and career paths of visual artists.

Methodology

The requirements of the data suggested an approach focused on in-depth interviews with a carefully selected, but small, sample of visual artists. In total, 20 visual artists were interviewed.

It was felt that the key media to cover included: painting, sculpture, photography, video/film, performance, installation, mixed and new media. The sample was designed to ensure that an appropriate range of activities is covered. The sample also covered artists who reflected as broad a range of characteristics as possible, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, stage in career, income etc.

The early years

Most artists had been good at drawing from an early age, but the idea of a career in art, or going to art college, started in their early to mid-teens for most. The most important factor at this stage was encouragement from art teachers. Many felt their art teacher had been very supportive and had recognised their ability fairly early on. However, with hindsight, some questioned the quality of art teaching at school.

Despite being good at art and having the support of art teachers, many said that attempts were made to put them off choosing art as a career. This lack of support came from other teachers and their parents. As a result, once the decision had been made to follow art as a career, its actual pursuit seemed to require a considerable amount of single-mindedness.

Formal vocational training

The next step for most artists was to go on to formal training. This is not to say that going to art college after school was a prerequisite for a
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successful career. We interviewed a number of successful artists who had not taken this route. It is, however, the next step for the majority.

Foundation courses

Most artists were very positive about their foundation course because it provided the opportunity to work in a wide range of media. Courses were seen as less restrictive and more challenging than art at school. This part of the training was felt to be important in helping the artist make decisions about which media to follow in the next stage of their training.

Degree courses

Views about degree courses were varied. The main complaint was the failure of courses to achieve a balance between teaching the technical aspects of the work and exploring the thinking or philosophy behind what they were doing.

Those taking degree prior to the mid '80s complained of a lack of crossover between disciplines. It was felt to be difficult to explore different media or mixing media.

On the positive side, this was seen as a special time - one in which the artists could take risks, make mistakes and be challenged. It was felt that the artist does not get this opportunity often because once out of college, there are many other pressures to cope with.

One clear message about degree courses was that careers teaching and advice on economic survival was universally negligible. Partly as a result of this, aspirations at this time tended to be unrealistic.

The first 12 months

Because of unrealistic aspirations and the difficulties of finding their feet, the first 12 months were not an easy time. This period was characterised by a reliance on work outside the arts, perhaps a little teaching and/or state benefits. In all, however, incomes were very low. Money from grants was rare and income from making work non-existent. Exhibitions were sporadic and generally unplanned, unless set up and organised by the artists. A number had tried to take up further study overseas, but had not been able to get grants. Many had a sense of isolation, and some artists suffered a lack of direction. Others found they were unable to follow the direction they felt they wanted to.
What is success?

Success for most artists, both their own and that of others, related most strongly to the quality of work. Although earning money from their work was something they aspired to, this was not a prerequisite of a successful career. Success was more about consistently producing good work over a long enough period of time to develop a reputation.

The ‘career path’

Most artists faced real difficulties in the first 12 months of their careers. In many cases, this situation improved little over the longer term. A very small minority experienced some considerable success in their first few years, characterised by prestigious awards, offers from galleries and sales work to collectors. The majority, however, continued struggling to establish their careers. This involved numerous applications for funding; the use of government schemes, such as enterprise allowance; a succession of residencies; projects and public art commissions; interspersed or supported by periods of teaching, either full time or part time, or other work unrelated to the visual arts.

Residencies

Overall, residencies were seen as a great opportunity for artists to explore their work, but also to take it into communities not used to any involvement with visual art. The more successful residencies, however, relied on supportive management teams and were based on well prepared contracts with practical aims and objectives.

Awards and commissions

The process of applying for awards and commissions, is one which is very time consuming, with a relatively low chance of a return. However, those who are successful are likely to get a great deal of publicity, which helps the process of building a reputation and developing a body of work.

Going their own way

A lot of artists interviewed had achieved a great deal from developing their own ideas into projects. This was particularly the case in the early stages of their careers when it was harder to win funding from the
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traditional sources. Although this afforded them the opportunity of having more control over their work and more security, the process could be very frustrating and extremely difficult. It could also take up so much of the artist’s time, that their own work suffered because of it. Embarking on this sort of project could be a risky process.

Teaching

The experience artists have of teaching can be very varied. Some find it very challenging and rewarding. For others, it can be a depressing process which eventually stifles their own creativity. Most, however, have taught at some time and many without any special training in teaching. Posts are offered by virtue of the artist’s reputation. Irrespective of its shortfalls, teaching is an important income source for visual artists.

Exhibiting

Exhibiting was seen as an important process for artists, simply because it allowed the work to be seen. Exhibiting was important in developing a successful career because it helped raise the artist’s profile. The most successful exhibitions seemed to be those which were carefully planned and chosen for a specific reason. Some artists found exhibiting abroad more successful because the overseas market was more receptive to their work. Exhibiting to sell work was not a prime concern and certainly not seen as a means of earning income. Very few had been paid for exhibiting and this was mainly in the form of EPR.

Galleries and commercial dealers

Only a few of the artists interviewed had been taken up by galleries and sold work this way. In some cases, this was because the artist felt that their work was not commercial. There was also the desire to ensure work remained in the public domain and not to go to private collections. This was linked to the concern about the barriers between art and the public, and the view that the gallery system tended to perpetuate a reputation of elitism. There were those, however, who had reached a stage in their careers where they felt that a move to a gallery system or commercial dealer was probably the next step. For these people, the gallery systems was seen as a valuable means to reach a particular client group, for example buyers overseas, which they could not reach without their support.
Facilitators and barriers

There were a number of factors which artists saw as important in developing a successful career. These included:

Building a reputation, getting connected. This was about being known to the whole range of people involved in setting up exhibitions, funding residencies etc. As more contacts are made, more opportunities arise based on the merit of the work.

Professionalism. This was not about making the artistic process into a business, but about being organised in terms of having CVs well presented, slides carefully and clearly labelled, written pieces about their work to hand etc., responding to requests promptly, and learning the most appropriate and effective ways of completing application forms.

Proactive approach. Being able to develop their own opportunities was seen as important to success. Artists needed to be active in looking and applying for work, chasing contacts and generating their own opportunities.

Persistence. It was argued that to be successful you needed a great deal of determination to carry on regardless, particularly because of the insecurity, the short-term nature of available funding, and the low incomes earned.

There were also a number of barriers to a successful career. The main issues raised included:

Funding. Although some felt there was more public funding available in the form of residencies etc., the amounts were still pitifully small and insecure. Poor funding leads to a downward spiral in the quality of work.

Studio space. The difficulty here was finding space which was affordable and with some degree of permanence. What was affordable was often on a short-term tenancy. This meant the artist would waste a lot of time constantly looking for somewhere else or moving. Having space where the artists can concentrate on making work was very important. Some felt it was important for selling work and attracting work, others disagreed.

Location. Some artists felt that the art market was still centred on London and that it was difficult to get commercial dealers to visit exhibitions or studios outside London. Some felt their work would not be taken seriously unless they moved there.
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Black artists

There were a number of issues which related specifically to artists of ethnic minorities. Although there was agreement that more Black artists have achieved prominence and critical success, there was a general concern that it was still harder for Black artists to make a lasting impression. It was believed that to have a successful career as a Black artist, their work had to be seen to celebrate their cultural difference, rather than deal with it critically, as this made the work harder to attract galleries and commercial dealers, and harder to secure commissions. However, the downside of creating celebratory work was seen to be the ease with which it could be marginalised in historical terms.

Income

Overall, artists were still earning very little from their work. Most got by with a combination of teaching or other work. Those who were surviving from their art work were earning probably far less than other professionals.

The future

In the future, artists were looking to earn more money and have a bigger profile, not because they wanted the fame or the money per se, but because it would allow them more freedom to make the work they want to, without the distractions or worry of making ends meet and taking any opportunity which comes their way. Thus, they were hoping for more control over their work and its development.

Conclusions

There are two key features of visual artists' careers which stand out as being different from traditional careers or other careers in the arts. These are:

The relationship between making work and earning money from that work.

Artists state that money is not the driving force behind making work. What is most important is making work which they are personally happy with. This clearly suggests that artists experience non-pecuniary benefits
or psychic income\(^1\) from continuing to practice. This is not to say that artists would not like to earn more. Money is important because of the freedom it gives to spend more time concentrating on their practice.

The apparently haphazard career paths most visual artists have followed.

These are careers in which one minor event can unexpectedly result in a number of opportunities. It would seem, therefore, more appropriate to refer to artists as following a ‘career matrix’, as opposed to a career path.

It has been observed elsewhere that people working in fragmented labour markets such as this, need to develop entrepreneurial skills. These are particularly significant to artists who have to work in a number of different fields and organise their own events. In addition, to participate in a specialised labour market, such as the visual arts, individuals need detailed knowledge of how work is obtained. Lack of understanding can act as a barrier to successful participation.

Although never a substitute for talent, good entrepreneurial skills and labour market knowledge can contribute significantly to developing a successful career. Unfortunately, neither of these skill sets seem to come very naturally to artists, and are certainly not fostered during their training. They may even be seen to stifle an individual’s creativity.

What is clear, however, is that artists seem personally compelled to continue to make work - no matter how difficult it seems and how insurmountable the problems, in most cases they are determined to carry on.

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\(^1\) Psychic income refers to the non-pecuniary benefits of continuing to practice. In visual artists, this could refer to the personal satisfaction of the work they make and the satisfaction of gaining recognition and reaching their audience (see Towe R. [1993]. *Singers in the Marketplace*. Oxford: Clarendon Press).
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1 Introduction

Background

Numbers working in visual arts

Visual artists form the largest and the fastest growing group among the cultural occupations. Analysis of the 1991 Census of Population by ACE\(^1\) found that of all those working in cultural occupations, 36 per cent (153,000) were working in art and design related occupations. Broken down further, ‘artists, commercial artists and graphic designers’ accounted for just over one-fifth (93,000) of all those working in the arts, and ‘photographers, camera, sound and video equipment operators’ accounted for a further ten per cent (41,000)\(^2\). Work by IES on the Labour Force Survey (LFS)\(^3\) found that these two occupational groups accounted for nearly 47 per cent of those working in the arts.

A male dominated sector

The work by the Arts Council on the Census found that for those working in the cultural occupations, 64 per cent were male and 36 per cent were female. Proportions were much the same for ‘artists, commercial artists and graphic designers’, but for ‘photographers, camera, sound and video equipment operators’ women only accounted for 18 per cent. Women, therefore, are under represented in the cultural occupations.

Young participants

The Census data show that the majority of individuals with cultural occupations (59 per cent) are aged between 25 and 34. Only 11 per cent are aged over 55 years, and 13 per cent are 25 or under. This age spread was found for both occupational groups which represent the visual arts. The Arts Council point out that this small proportion in the lower age group is likely to reflect the periods of training or higher education which are a prerequisite to a career in these occupations. It may also reflect the time taken for younger artists to develop their work to a point whereby it represents their sole occupation.

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2 For the purpose of this research, ACE wish to exclude graphic designers. It is not possible, however, from national data sources to break these occupational groupings down further to exclude graphic designers.

High proportion of self employed

The cultural occupations are also characterised by different patterns of employment status from the GB workforce as a whole. Overall, those with cultural occupations are nearly three time more likely to be self employed. Just over 42 per cent of ‘artists, commercial artists and graphic designers’, and 37 per cent of ‘photographers, camera, sound and video equipment operators’ are self employed (compared with 12 per cent for the workforce as a whole). On the other hand, for these two groups, just 50 per cent and 54 per cent respectively are full or part-time employees, compared with 81 per cent of the workforce as a whole. Unemployment rates for both groups are similar to the national average. Thus, it is clear from the Census that the visual arts are characterised by high levels of self employment and average levels of unemployment.

Ethnicity

The 1991 Census found that nearly five per cent of the GB economically active population have a non-White ethnic background. In the cultural occupations as a whole, just under 15,000, or four per cent, are defined as having an ethnic background other than White. In the visual arts, however, the proportion from non-White backgrounds is considerable higher than this. For those working as ‘photographers, camera, sound and video equipment operators’ the proportion was eight per cent, and for ‘artists, commercial artists and graphic designers’, this proportion was 17 per cent.

Period of change

The arts is also a sector which has seen quite considerable growth between 1981 and 1991. The second largest area of growth was for those working as ‘artists and commercial artists’, having increased by 71 per cent over this period. The growth in numbers working as ‘photographers and camera operators’ was much more modest, only increasing by 15 per cent. It can be seen, therefore, that visual artists make up a sizeable and growing occupational group amongst artists as a whole.

This pattern of change has by no means been even. The rate of increase in women within visual arts has far outstripped the increase in men, between 1981 and 1991. For ‘artists and commercial artists’, the number of females increased by 135 per cent, compared with only 44 per cent for males. Women working as ‘photographers and camera operators’ increased by 35 per cent, compared with only 12 per cent for men.
The numbers who are self employed have also increased considerably. Between 1981 and 1991, the numbers of 'artists and commercial artists' who were employees rose by 30 per cent compared with an increase in self employment of 146 per cent. The numbers of photographers, cameramen etc. working as employees fell by 13 per cent between 1981 and 1991, but the numbers working in this sector as self employed rose by 73 per cent.

Careers of visual artists

Although quite detailed information is now available on the demographic characteristics of visual artists from the Census, there has been little research undertaken devoted to visual artists since the Gulbenkian Foundation's work on the Economic Situation of the Visual Artist (Brighton et al., 1985). In fact, as Towse points out in her recent report, The Economics of Artists' Labour Markets, very little has been done on the structure of careers for artists.

One recent piece of work looking at training and careers was that conducted by IES on the dance and drama sector. This suggested that characteristics of this labour market were common to other artistic occupations. The study found that these labour markets were very competitive, and that when work was available it tended to come in small pieces. Undertaking professional training was seen as essential for a career, with most professionals having completed an accredited course. The study also found that people working in dance and drama needed to do several different kinds of work, and that periods of unemployment were common. Careers were likely to involve occupational shifts over time and this necessitated further training.

As the study on dance and drama indicated, it is likely that many of these characteristics apply to all occupations in the arts. There will also be characteristics which are unique to visual artists. One of the major differences is that visual artists tend to be self employed, whereas performing artists are more likely to work as employees. Also, unlike performing artists, the majority of whom are members of Equity, the actors' union, the visual arts are a non-unionised group with seemingly little professional cohesion.

As part of the preparation of a Green Paper for the Visual Arts, The Arts Council of England (ACE) commissioned a piece of work looking at the career development and career paths of visual artists.

The aim of this project was to fill the gaps in current understanding about the career development and career paths of visual artists. The project will, therefore, explore a range of issues around training backgrounds, qualifications, types of work previously and currently undertaken, employment status, current training needs, income, location of work etc. There were a number of key issues that we felt it was essential to pursue. These included:

- effect of gender
- employment status
- second jobs
- other sources of income
- qualifications and training
- current training needs
- developing an artistic approach
- location and materials.

These will be pursued in the later sections of the report.

Methodology

In designing the research approach, we had taken into account a number of key factors. These include:

- The nature of the data to be collected; although some of these data will be factual, such as current employment status, much will focus on career histories and will be attitudinal, that is, in terms of the factors which have influenced career patterns.
- The need to collect data from individuals working in a range of media, and at different stages of their artistic careers.
- The limited timescale and budget for the project.

These first and third requirements suggested that the research would have to be of a qualitative nature. The information to be collected about an individual's training and experience in the labour market needed to be of considerable detail so that the influences and barriers could be fully understood. This level of detail could not be gathered in a postal or telephone survey. Also, individuals are far less likely to provide personal details about income and work histories on a postal questionnaire or telephone interview. Face-to-face interviews, however, allow the interviewer to build up a rapport with the interviewee, gain their trust, and emphasise confidentiality.

A third option, focus groups, was also ruled out because in our experience, inviting adults to attend a focus group in their own time can present major problems of non-response and non-attendance.
We therefore, settled on an approach focused on in-depth interviews with a carefully selected, but small, sample of visual artists.

**Set-up and literature review**

We conducted a limited review of the literature surrounding this area of the arts. The purpose of this exercise was to supplement the material collected in the interviews and also to inform the design of the research materials. It was not intended to write this up.

**Sample selection**

**Defining artists**

One of the issues raised by Towse (1996) when looking at any occupational group working in the arts, is actually defining what is meant by an artist. She lists the eight criteria set out by Frey and Pommerehne which can be used to determine whether an individual is an artist. These include:

- amount of time spent on artistic work
- amount of income derived from artistic activities
- reputation as an artist among the general public
- recognition among other artists
- quality of artistic work produced
- membership of a professional artists’ association
- self evaluation of being an artist.

All these criteria have their own inherent problems, either to do with the subjectivity of qualitative information or the reliability of the quantitative data available. Probably for this reason, the last criterion of self determination is that used by most surveys of artists and was relied on for this project.

**What is a visual artist?**

Visual artists work in a wide range of media. In terms of the activities to be included in the definition of visual artists, the tender specification set out those regarded as forming the visual arts. It was felt that the key media to cover included: painting, sculpture, photography, video/film, performance, installation, mixed and new media. The sample was designed to ensure that an appropriate range of activities is covered.

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Characteristics of the individual

It was also necessary to choose carefully those artists who reflected as broad a range of characteristics as possible. The main criteria were as follows:

- type of media
- gender
- ethnicity
- type of professional training (if any)
- stage in career.

In addition to these criteria, it was felt that there were a number of situations that the research should cover, in order to gain a broad spectrum of the circumstances in which artists may find themselves. These included:

- an artist earning exclusively from their work through sales or commissions
- an artist working in the field of art therapy, community or social work
- an artist who is teaching in a secondary school
- an artist who is teaching in an institution of FE or HE
- an artist who is working in one of the big institutions eg the Tate, British Museum etc.
- an artist of international renown
- an artist in residence
- an artist who collaborates with another profession, eg public artists who collaborate with architects, engineers, scientists etc.
- an artist who has not gone through art school
- an artist who is financially supported by their partner or has a partner who contributes to the household income
- an artist who was an artist, but is now in a completely different career.

The artists chosen for interview were selected to represent as wide a range of situations as possible. This included artists referred to as the ‘Young British Artists’. However, these artists are relatively few in number, and as we had a wide range of artists we wanted to cover, we only interviewed one representative of this group. While the ‘YBAs’ have had a significant impact on the international recognition of Contemporary British Art, they make up only a small proportion of visual artists in England. For this reason, the report does not give undue weight to the YBA experience.

The actual sample of individuals was selected from a number of sources in order to ensure as wide as possible representation. A number of lists and databases were provided from which the artists were identified. These included:
In-depth interviews

In total, 20 visual artists were interviewed. The characteristics of interviewees are given in Table 1:1.

All the in-depth interviews were conducted by IES researchers, who have considerable experience in conducting this type of interview with individuals, and have an understanding of the substantive issues involved.

The interviews used a semi-structured interview guide, to provide the opportunity for in-depth discussion between interviewer and interviewee. This required, in turn, a relatively high level of interviewing skill, and a clear understanding on the part of the interviewer of the substantive issues being researched.

The information that the interviews gathered was developed on the basis of the literature review and discussions with the Visual Arts Department and other ACE staff. It was agreed that they should cover:

- personal details, including educational background, etc.
- factors influencing the decision to become a visual artist
- professional training, including perceptions of course quality, suitability for chosen career, careers advice and guidance
- early career patterns and expectations
- career histories, including periods of unemployment, second jobs and current employment status
- barriers and facilitators to a successful career, including the need to develop an individual approach, the need for studio space, importance of networks, gender issues, race issues
- role of creative collaborations and teamwork
- continuing training needs, professional development and support
- the role of galleries and exhibitions
- the importance of studio space.


### Table 1.1 Characteristics of 20 visual artists interviewed

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<td>Making work and working for artist led agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Painting/Public Art</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes 1962</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Painting/Ceramics</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes 1973</td>
<td>Concentrating on painting, supported by ceramics sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>Mix Media/Installation/Art related consultancy</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>Stained glass</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Yes 1985</td>
<td>No longer practicing - working in arts administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Charcoal/Ciba chrome</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes 1990</td>
<td>Developing new work, just lost teaching work, studying for MA</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Yes 1960s</td>
<td>No longer practicing - director of gallery</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes 1969</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes 1978</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes 1978</td>
<td>Relies on commissions</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Performance/Digital/Video</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes 1983</td>
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<td>Sculpture/installation</td>
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<td>Yes 1990</td>
<td>Making work and working with people with disabilities</td>
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<td>Wood sculpture</td>
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<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No -</td>
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*Source: IES Research, 1996*

All the artists were contacted in the first instance by letter or telephone, to outline the purpose of the research, establish the bona fides of the researchers, provide some guidance as to the nature of the information sought, and to invite the individual to take part in the research. Each interview was recorded and transcribed fully. Participants were assured
of confidentiality at both the initial contact stage and at the beginning of the interview.

Report structure

The report follows through a career path from the very early years in Chapter 2, through to views about the future in Chapter 7. In Chapter 2 the report looks back to when artists first felt they would follow a career in art, and examines their motivations, support received and their perceptions of what a career would entail. Chapter 3 follows through the traditional vocational training routes of foundation and degree courses, and looks at the good and bad aspects of each.

The first 12 months out of college is an important time for any career and the difficulties of this period for the visual artists is examined in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 assesses what artists regard as success, both in their own careers and that of others. Chapter 6 deals with the main methods by which artists support their practice and the facilitators and barriers to a successful career, and Chapter 7 looks at where they see their careers going in the future and what advice they would give to those starting out today. Chapter 8 present some conclusions from the research.
2 The beginnings of an artist

The early days

Most of the artists interviewed, irrespective of the media they currently work in, had developed an interest in art at a fairly early age. They had become interested in art in their early teens, and by the age of 16 or 17 had decided to pursue art as a career.

'As a child I wanted to be an acrobat or a fireman. Then it was an architect until I was about 13 or 14, and then the teacher suggested that I should do art rather than technical drawing. Then I never got back into the architectural thing again, really.'

'I must have been about 13 or 14. I'd always drawn at home. I'd drawn pictures, and my father who worked (very ordinary working class family lived in a council house) in a printing works always used to bring home paper, so we used to draw and draw and draw. It didn't matter because there was tons of paper so we grew up with it, I suppose. Consequently, at school I was quite good at art. The art teacher took a great interest in me, and encouraged me. Suddenly, I can't remember exactly how it happened, one day, instead of wanting to be a fighter pilot or whatever, I decided I wanted to go to art college. I was about 14 and that's what I wanted to do.'

'I think it's one of those things that's been with me ever since I was a kid really, and the first time it was brought up I must have been six, getting on for seven, when one of my school mates said "are you going to be an artist when you grow up?". It's always been a career option ever since. I was good at it. It was the thing at school which stood out like a sore thumb, so everybody thought that's what I was going to do.'

A prior history of artistic talent, or even an interest in art, in their immediate family did not seem to be an influential factor. Some had come from a background where a parent or close adult relative had been involved in the arts in some form. Equally though, there were those who had no direct contact with art, other than from school.

'My father was a painter and my great-grandfather on my mother's side was an artisan, a Master Carver. It's always been there - it was a part of life.'

At this stage, most appeared to want to pursue a career in art because they were good at it and enjoyed it. Only one artist mentioned being attracted to a career in art because of the lifestyle it offered. He had met a successful artist through an uncle when he was ten years old and had been impressed by his lifestyle, particularly the fact that you could do
Career paths of visual artists

what you want. He admitted he had no idea how difficult this career would be and was now no longer practising as an artist.

There was little evidence of the inner drive which appears later on.

Art at school

It is in school that the first interest in art is usually developed. Most of the artists said they had been good at art at school and had really enjoyed the classes - some to the exclusion of all else.

"When I was doing 'A' levels, I used to skive off everything else really to do art. I used to break into the art room in the evening and things like that. I was kind of the art swot."

The encouragement from art teachers was also seen as important. Many indicated that their art teachers had been very supportive and had recognised some ability at an early stage.

"When I was 14 or 15, in my third year at school I think, my art teacher decided that I was her star pupil and she was going to send me to art college. She arranged for me to go one day a week in school time, which was unheard of, to do life drawing at East Ham College for two years."

The majority of the artists interviewed had studied art at school. They had taken a fairly traditional route of doing 'O' level or GCSE, and gone on to study art in the sixth form. A number said that because of their ability in art, they took the exams early or missed out the 'O' level stage altogether.

"I did the 'O' level a year early, and I did my 'A' level when I was in the fifth form."

"I didn't actually do 'O' level art. My art teacher decided it was a waste of time, so when I was supposed to be doing 'O' level art I did 'A' level art. I therefore had an 'A' level in art two years before anybody else was taking 'A' levels, and then I retook it to try and improve the grade but got a worse grade than I did the first time round."

A number expressed misgivings about the way art is taught in schools despite having enjoyed the work at the time. It was felt that art at this stage tended to be rather staid or traditional with little scope to explore new media or less mainstream ideas. It was accepted, however, that teaching at this level in the current environment was not an easy task.
'At school, nobody had any experience of working in three dimensions really, apart from the pottery teacher.'

'Yes, that's right - the nature of 'A' and 'O' level courses is that it is based on an exam structure which is very conservative; it might have changed now, I don't know, certainly at the time it was.'

None of the artists we interviewed mentioned the influence of having worked with computers at school or having had the chance to do photography. In fact, of those artists now working with computers, all indicated that they were totally self-taught. This may well reflect the fact that the artists we interviewed would have been at school before these opportunities were available.

Supported in their choice

Once the decision had been made to follow art as a career, its actual pursuit seemed to require a considerable amount of single mindedness. Over half of those interviewed indicated that someone had tried to put them off this career option at some point in their school years.

A number indicated that their parents had felt that this would not be a sensible choice. This was for two reasons: either they felt it would be a difficult career, or they did not think this was suitable work.

'My Dad said it wasn't a proper job so I didn't do it for 'O' level. I did all the heavy sciences and failed them all, and then he finally said "well, at 16 you'd better go and do what you want to do, my girl".'

'My parents came on my 16th birthday in the middle of November, cold and miserable, sitting in some up-right place having tea, and my father was still going on about reading law at Cambridge. I said "well Mr Vannos [someone I thought he would have respected] said I ought to go to art school." My father said "ART SCHOOL!" and he exploded. It was terrible, and I burst into tears.'

'My father said the art world was corrupt to the core, worthless and was a world populated by petty criminals, perverts and homosexuals.'

There were also pressures to avoid a career in art from within schools. In many cases, other teachers, including head teachers, had tried to persuade pupils to follow other subjects they were also good at. This was particularly the case where it was felt that the individual may have been able to get a place at university.
'I don't think I got much encouragement from school. It was to do with the recognition of how difficult it is to making a living at it, which is quite sensible - although I think you need more of a reason than just earning a living.'

'Yes they did, because I was actually quite good at science subjects as well, and the school I went to was a comprehensive school which had a sixth form and they'd never sent anybody to university. They saw the potential of me going to university and they wanted me to go to a proper university to do a proper subject like a science, not waste my time going to art college. But it was water off a duck's back. I wanted to go art college, so that was it - tough, because I'm that sort of person which is why I think I've managed to make a success of being an artist, being stubborn.'

In most cases at this stage, the artists did not have a perception of how difficult being an artist would be as a career. Many said that they just did not think about it. Some simply had no idea what such a career involved. It was what they enjoyed doing and that was enough.

'To be honest, I had no idea. Right at the very beginning, I thought I was going to be apprenticed to an artist because that's all I'd come across in our kind of Boys' Own history books. That's what happened to Michaelangelo, so I thought that's what still happened. And school careers were completely useless.'

After school

The route after secondary school or sixth form was, in most cases, the same. Due to advice from art teachers at school, most went straight to art college. This is not to say that following the traditional vocational route was a prerequisite to a successful career in the visual arts, because we interviewed two artists who had not been to art college at all or chose to go much later on.

The interviews showed that there were a number of different routes people had taken. These fell into four broad groups:

No training at all

Some artists develop a successful career in the visual arts with no formal training at all. This probably requires even greater conviction in their practice than those who had received the support from a college. Working collaboratively or very closely with another, perhaps more successful artists can prove to be very valuable in terms of their own career development.
One artist we interviewed had taken a degree and worked in an area totally unrelated to the visual arts. Throughout this time, however, he had made work because he had always had an interest in it. Eventually, he made the decision to devote all his time to his artistic practice and abandon the traditional career. He did not return to college because he felt he did not need specific training and was capable of picking it up on his own.

**Intended to train**

Other artist set out on the traditional training route and find they are not suited to it. One artist we interviewed had intended to take a foundation course but dropped out very soon after it started. He had not gone straight from school but had spent an extra year at a local FE college retaking ‘A’ levels. By this time, he had formed strong opinions about what he wanted to do and so found the course structure restrictive:

‘I had a very strong opinion early on. The other students had not been out for a year and had less of a view of how things should be. I was quite arrogant. I thought I knew where I should go and what I should do. It was all very traditional. It was a class-based thing. The majority of the students were middle class. I wanted to do painting with different materials. I also did stuff with music, small installations, film etc.’

After this, he maintained contact with the other students and got from them the bits of the course he wanted, whilst not having to work within its structures. He also later worked very closely with a very successful visual artist from whom he felt he learnt a great deal about developing his own career. This was the only example of this sort of ‘apprenticeships’ that we came across. One artist, however, who had taken a degree in the 1960s, felt that his course was almost like an apprenticeship because of the very low student to teacher ratio.

**Trained later**

A number of artists interviewed had returned to college after starting other careers or having a family. In these cases, again, making art had been something they had always been interested in, but experience of other careers or situations had led them to realise that working in the visual arts was what they really wanted to do.

A woman artist interviewed had left school at 15 very disillusioned with education and started a job in window dressing with a large department store. After a year, the job had developed to doing work other than
window dressing so she went freelance. She then went back to college to do ‘A’ levels and worked at window dressing in the evenings to finance it.

‘After that, I applied to do teacher training to become an art teacher and got into Roehampton. The reason I went to teacher training college was because I didn’t think I was good enough to go to art school. I lasted two terms there. I just could not fit in because the other girls on the course were very narrow minded and had no previous work experience. Also it was very regimented. They wouldn’t allow me into the art rooms after six o’clock so I couldn’t pursue that. This left me with no option but to go for a diploma in art and design. So I went to do a foundation course. That was in 1970.’

Conclusion

The commitment to a career in visual arts starts fairly early, in the early or mid-teens. For many, the artistic ability had been present much earlier than this, and this was often recognised and encouraged by art teachers at school. This choice of a career was not an easy one however, with parents and other teachers attempting to ensure a different choice. The individual’s determination to pursue this as a career starts at this early age and continues to support them throughout their careers.
3 Formal vocational training

Foundation courses

For all but two of the artists interviewed, a foundation course was the next stage in their training, even if there had been periods out of the education or training environment. The decision to follow this route seemed to be based on the fact that none felt they would get onto a degree course without another year’s training. Most knew from art teachers at school that the foundation course was a prerequisite to getting into art college to do a degree because most ‘A’ level students have not built up enough of a portfolio to be accepted.

The main reason given for the choice of foundation course was that it was near to the parental home. Foundation courses only attract discretionary grants, if any, and so there was no funding available outside the area where they lived. None of the artists interviewed who had been on a foundation year suggested any other reason for the choice.

Why the course was good

The general observation about the foundation course was that they were good. Most of those interviewed were very enthusiastic about this part of their training. The main benefit gained from the foundation course was the opportunity to work in a wide range of media. This was often related back to experiences of doing ‘A’ level art which was felt to be restrictive and unchallenging. The foundation course was seen to be the other extreme, with opportunities to experiment in anything that was of interest.

‘The college had a radical approach - they did not allow life drawing. For me, the ability to draw kind of became a handicap because then I was just doing things that I knew, things that I was happy with and comfortable with. I wasn’t really challenging myself, or the ideas. So really from the foundation course onwards, I was trying to get away from drawing.’

‘I thought it was pretty good actually. It did shake you up. I think that is what foundation courses should do. I’ve subsequently taught on a foundation course. I think it was good as it did make me rethink everything that I had decided. I think teenagers are very conservative people actually, in lots of ways: “this is right and this is what this is” and so to go through that whole process of being turned on your head is really good. You don’t know what’s what anymore. It takes a bit of time to get through it and I think you have to be the right sort of person to come through it.’
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Allowing this sort of experimentation at this early stage had, in most cases, helped the artists to make some decisions about which particular media they would like to follow in their degrees. As one artist pointed out:

'The foundation course radically changed my ideas. I no longer wanted to do graphics. I now kind of had some inkling of the other things that were possible. And I was looking at minimal sculptors, and artists using photography and performance.'

'Originally I wanted to be an illustrator or a graphic artist, but after a week on a foundation course, I realised I was crap at these.'

A number of interviewees felt that the foundation course was beneficial simply because it allowed them to concentrate on art all day with a lot of support from tutors.

'The good thing about the course that I did was that it was small - there were only 12 of us so we got a lot of attention from the tutors.'

More generally, a number of artists mentioned that their foundation courses had been so good because the level of teaching was very intense. There were always people around to help who were permanently there, and not just part-time visiting lecturers who were not really committed. Many mentioned the course having a family atmosphere, which was often a result of the fairly small numbers in any one year.

Overall, it seems that this time was one which was marked by an intensive workload, a great deal of experimentation, but also a great deal of personal tuition and support.

What was wrong with it?

There were a few artists who had some complaints about their foundation years. Some felt they had been encouraged to follow the wrong media because of financial concerns. As one artist explained:

'There again, I hiccuped because I've really always wanted to be a painter but I was good at ceramics. Everybody kept telling me "you're going to earn more money at ceramics", and I enjoyed it'.

Others complained that the teaching was not really adequate for what they wanted. One said that the art course was run by four graphic designers who had a very rigid view of what people could and could not do. One sculptor had found the teaching far too traditional:
'It's funny really because on the foundation course, the one bit that I thought was pretty bad was the sculpture department. I did one day of sculpture and hated it. I opted out, went and did something else, and thought I didn't want to be a sculptor, but low and behold, I ended up being a sculptor. I didn't get on with it, and I think because it was done in a very particular traditional way by someone who had very particular ideas about how sculpture should be, it was very prescriptive, and I didn't fit into that way of thinking.'

The criticisms were few and far between, and most felt that this was a very valuable stage to their training and development, and that it had greatly helped them move on to the next step in their careers - the degree course.

The degree course

Those artists who had gone on to college after the foundation year invariably did a three year degree course. These were undertaken in a range of institutions, some in central London and many outside London.

Choice of college

By this stage, the choice of college was no longer based on location as with the foundation course, but on the course content and style of teaching. Choice of course seemed to be based on a number of factors.

Media

A surprising number of the artists at this stage still did not know what media they wanted to specialise in. The foundation course had helped them decide on the broader level that they wanted to do fine art and not textile design for example, but not whether they would pursue painting or sculpture. Thus, many chose courses because they provided a breadth of options and were not pigeon-holed into specific media. A lot of the traditional courses at the end of the 1970s and 1980s were perceived to demarcate the different media too rigidly, not allowing crossover from one form to another. Several of the artists interviewed had wanted to avoid this because they were still not certain of the direction they wanted to follow.

'When I was looking for degree courses, I was looking for places that would not be limiting, but would allow me to do whatever I wanted, because I wanted to do stuff on video and performance, I
Career paths of visual artists

wanted to make sculptures, I wanted to do paintings. I wanted lots of different things. ' Others were more certain and chose colleges because they knew they had particularly good departments in their particular media.

'At that time, there weren’t very many glass courses around. There was probably Edinburgh, but the one’s I got recommended were Leicester, Stourbridge and Farnham. We went to look round them.'

Style of teaching

Some artists had deliberately chosen courses where the numbers were small, and so the teaching and support would be quite intense. Others said they chose the college because they knew the approach would be a departure from the traditional teaching.

'The course was starting the year I joined. The head of the course was into automatic drawing, psycho kinesis, computers, and things like that. It all seemed really exciting and because it was the start of the course, it seemed like it was going to be full of arguments and discussion, and stuff like that.'

Others took a more traditional approach and did not feel they wanted quite such an approach. As one artist explained:

'I applied to Leeds on my first choice which was a very open course, and my second choice was Newcastle. I went to Leeds for an interview; I was totally overwhelmed by it. Subsequently, I learnt that Leeds had a reputation as the wildest, wackiest art course that ever existed, it was still way back in the ‘60s. It was really zappy and I couldn’t cope with that. The interview was like that: 12 people interviewing in a circle, with you in the middle, really goading you. What they were looking for was if you could stand up to them. When I was there for the interview, one guy (who got in) got his mate to carry him in a cardboard coffin that he’d made and he conducted the whole interview from the coffin. No matter what he said he was going to get a place, because he was mad enough. So anyway I didn’t get in there, I don’t think I would have coped with it, I think it would have completely thrashed me.'
Location

Unlike the foundation course where students had little choice about location, there was now a choice of location. This had been an issue for some students. As one pointed out:

‘Well, as long as it was as far away from home as possible. I’ve got to be honest about this, that was one of the concerns.’

‘I went all over the country looking at courses and colleges. As soon as I got off the train in Brighton, I thought this is where I want to be. I already knew somebody who’d been on the foundation course the previous year and came to Brighton. It was highly recommended from him.’

Was it a good course?

Artists’ views on their degree courses varied enormously. Many had the usual minor criticisms about particular teaching staff, lack of materials, poor studio space and so on.

There was, however, one major theme which came out of the interviews. The common criticism of courses was the failure of the college to achieve a balance between teaching the technical aspects of the work, and exploring the thinking or philosophy behind what they were doing. In some cases, the courses were not technical enough and there was too much time spent going into the motivations behind each piece of work. In other cases, it was felt that the course was far too technical and the philosophical background was completely ignored.

This balance was seen as important because devoting time to exploring the thinking behind work encourages students to challenge what they are producing and to move in new directions. Without the technical skill, however, they could not produce this work and therefore not develop their thinking.

‘It’s the philosophical thing. They worked us very hard and I think that was valuable. But I also think it would have been nice to have done a bit more talking. It was purely all the techniques, which you get a lot of in ceramics.’

‘The course was quite rigorous in that we would go into people’s work in some depth and discuss it. That was very useful and good experience, but it lacked just straight educational teaching - teaching people how to look at things in a certain way, how to develop skills with different materials. That would have opened up possibilities. You only got to use different materials if you came across them. It was unstructured in that way.’
One artist summed this up:

'One of the things that was really important was that there were a lot of seminars. A lot of talking went on about making things as well as actually making things, and that's the crux of it - a lot of courses talk too much about what you should and shouldn't be doing and don't give you enough practical advice or tutoring, and some colleges work the other way round. I think at the time it was that balance of the two things that meant you were constantly reassessing, and the talking about it helped you move on in the making of it, and vice versa.'

Several artists complained that their course had suffered from a lack of crossover between disciplines. Thus, it was difficult to explore working in mixed media, experimenting with one media or another, or simply trying out other media. This seems particularly important now, with so much mixed media work taking place.

'Weaknesses, I would say, were that you weren't encouraged - in fact you were discouraged - from any sort of crossover from one area into another. For instance, if you decided that you wanted to do some ceramics, or maybe you wanted to print on something that was going to be fired as a ceramic, that was very difficult to do. So it was actually quite compartmentalised. If you were in fine art, you were in fine art.'

A number of artists indicated that although the teaching staff were there and would be supportive if asked, they did not push; they were not overbearing; and often left you to get on with it and find your own way. For some students, this was seen as a real advantage and they found the freedom very liberating. For others, the lack of structure left them with a complete lack of direction. This seemed to relate to having the confidence to go and ask for help, which some apparently lacked.

'The strengths were in fostering independent study - you were very much left to yourself. It didn't strike me as unusual to begin with because I had so much that I wanted to do anyway - things that I wanted to get on with. It was only afterwards when I was meeting people from my foundation course who'd gone to other places, and had found that they had to sign in every day and attend classes. Their first year was more structured, whereas at Goldsmiths you spent the first three days queuing up and signing forms, and then eventually you're given your studio space and just told "there it is get on with it, and run round when you want us". So that was a good side. It's also the down-side, because you can feel very much left on your own, isolated, and some people sink very quickly. It's a double edged thing, it encourages you to be independent and to take
responsibility right from the start for everything; nobody's going to be bothered if you're not doing it.'

Some, however, found the support from tutors particularly lacking. In one instance, the interviewee reported that there were one or two good visiting lecturers who gave good advice and that he had tutorials with them once or twice a year, the rest of the time the staff were less helpful:

'It was very much finding your own way. They weren't even there if you needed help and tried to find them. They were down the pub, I think.'

One artist felt that the part-time teachers who were still successful practising artists were the most interesting and useful tutors, simply because they were practising. The full-time tutors failed to provide a general education. They were far too concerned with trying to instil their ideas and their beliefs into their students, but could not successfully inspire them because of their own sense of failure. He summed this up by saying that teaching can be:

'a really sad pathetic last resort of failed artists.'

Why the course was good

Despite these problems, most felt that their experience on the degree had been helpful in developing their work and exploring different techniques. This was often seen as a special time because it was an opportunity to take risks, make mistakes and be challenged. It was felt that artists did not get this opportunity very often. Once college was finished there were other pressures to cope with. This was seen as the time to really explore and experiment. The chance to explore within their media was seen as vital to developing a direction and a style leading later on to the formulation of a body of work.

An essential part of this exploration was the support and tuition provided. As discussed above, although some felt that the support was not quite structured enough, many felt that they had had more than adequate support which had been invaluable to developing their work.

'I wouldn't particularly say I was happy there because you were struggling, trying to do your work. They were always there. If at 7pm you wanted to sit down and talk about an idea, or how somebody had worked something, they would always be there.'
One or two argued that the unstructured approach was the best preparation for life as an artist because once you graduated, there would be no one there to look after you and support you on a regular basis. As one interviewee explained:

‘Often there would be tutors that I’d never met before, and they would come round and be quite negative, but I think that’s the best preparation you could have for when you leave college. I think it’s good because what doesn’t happen is that people come in and say “this is wonderful”. No one is paid to look at what you do once you leave. When I was at college, there were a couple of people who were picked out as being stars, and they got a lot of support from certain members of staff who promoted them, even to the extent of mock interviews for MA courses. But most of them actually didn’t become successful artists at all. They’d given up two weeks after they left college because without that kind of massaging or moral support, they couldn’t do it.’

Finally, on the more practical side, most commented on the importance of having excellent facilities which their colleges offered. This was often seen as perhaps the only chance they would experience to work with such a wealth of resources. Those students who had been working in sculpture, ceramics or glass, for example, commented on how important the good facilities had been in this process.

‘I was making sculpture out of all sorts of materials, and some of the things that I think were most brilliant about the college were that it was very well funded, there was a lot of space, and there were a lot of tutors in the sculpture department. There was something like five tutors - three or four full-time tutors, and one or two part-time tutors. I can’t remember how many students there were. I suppose there was only about thirty or forty, in over three years, which is an excellent ratio. Added to which there was a huge woodworking shop, a huge metalworking facility, a casting shop and a stone carving shop; and a technician in the woodworking shop, a casting technician, two metalworking technicians and a studio demonstrator.’

‘Although I actually did a fine art degree, I specialised in print making and the college has got a very good print department. It had at that time an excellent technician, particularly in screen printing which was my area, who in actual fact was much better than the tutors and had the technical knowledge as well. The equipment was very good too. This really helps because if you’re struggling with the techniques, having the right equipment makes it much easier.’
'They taught things properly - almost too far in a way, because if you did textiles you had to go and catch your sheep and shear it, and so on...'

Overall, although colleges were criticised for being too technical or too philosophical, for being too unstructured or too ridged and demarcated, those who had taken a degree felt that it had been a very useful time in the development of their careers. As one woman commented:

'I think by the end of three years you're just getting going. You just begin to realise what your aims and interests are, and what your own skills are as well.'

Careers and survival teaching

None of the artists interviewed said that they had any comprehensive preparation about surviving as artists once their degrees were finished.

'No way! Absolutely no! They did attempt it in that we did a business course in our third year where we learnt about how to keep books. But really I couldn't imagine that I'd need to know all that stuff. And here I am now having to deal with bank managers, accountants and all that.'

In most cases, career preparation was in the form of one or two lectures, at the most a series of six, at worst it was nothing at all. Those who had been given lectures suggested that the content was fairly lacking. Some concentrated too much on how difficult it was all going to be, with little practical advice about being self-employed, getting accountants, and general aspects of managing a career. The advice others received was often very unimaginative, only exploring the easy options of further study or teaching. In one case, the artist was told that they were going to be all right with no explanation whatsoever. The following quotes are fairly typical:

'I can remember having one lecture and I think there was a guy from art law who came along to give us a talk, and rattled off a whole load of statistics about the number of artists in Britain. There was no practical information. There was nothing about being self-employed or the reality of working as an artist.'

'I can remember having a couple of tutorials with visiting lecturers when the end was getting really close. I'd gone through my work and told them what I was doing, what I was going to do. And he said "Oh, you're going to be fine". I didn't have any idea why. He hadn't kind of enlightened me or anything. I suppose that, in a
way, him saying that kind of gave me confidence, even though it irritated the hell out of me at the time."

"They told us that what you do is you go to London, do an MA and get a teaching job."

"I can’t remember that happening, there was less of concern about it. Most people went out of college and got part-time teaching which kept them going."

One artist indicated that at his college, there had been a hidden agenda in terms of career progression. Those who were thought to be particularly talented and had, in the opinion of the lecturers, the greatest chance of success, were nurtured differently from the rest of the students. Even before the end of year show, they had been privately introduced to galleries and commercial dealers by lecturers who had connections. For the other students, there was little or no preparation.

Some artists pointed out, however, that they were not sure they would have wanted any more, or any such guidance at all. Some argued that they would not have wanted to spend too much time on ‘business’ issues. It was felt that it would have reduced their art to more of a mechanical process.

"Nobody told you that you’d need an accountant, that you’d need to become self-employed, and that you’d need to do all these other things, and in a way I’m quite pleased they didn’t really because it would have turned it into too much of a business. I don’t know, I have mixed feelings about that because I think some information should be imparted and guidance given, but I think if you’re not careful it can take over and ruin the creativity."

Another felt that they probably would not have taken a lot of notice because they had always known they were going to be an artist and there was no question of their doing anything else.

"I don’t know if that’s good or bad really. I mean it’s difficult to say with retrospect, but I suppose it was just fine for me, because I felt as though I was going to do this regardless. This was what I’d always known I was going to do, and I was going to do it. And I’d come out the other end and I’d carry on doing whatever it was that you do."

However, one artist that graduated in the ‘80s felt strongly that instead of lectures on careers a resource pack containing helpful references, useful tips and templates for applications would be more valuable. Such a resource would enable young artists to refer to it when needed, providing basic practical guidance and assistance.
I think that the most important thing is artists knowing who to 'phone, where to go to when they need things, and where to write to. With a resource pack you can have basic things like examples of proposals that people have written for projects. . . . all the various details about the London Arts Board, the criteria for lottery funding and what is necessary for that. Important things to know if you're having a show is how do you do PR for that? and how to write a press release for a show.

Surviving at college

Most of the people interviewed seemed to have survived at college on the grants they had received, although a number pointed out that at that time, the support was more generous, particularly in terms of claiming housing benefit and signing on as unemployed during the summer holidays. Very few sold any work whilst at college and those who did admitted that it was only one or two pieces. It seemed to be a fairly rare occurrence. No one said they could have supported themselves through sales of work.

A number of artists said they had jobs whilst at college. These were generally low-skilled, part-time work. For example, one had been a dustman during the holidays. Another artist who had studied during the late 1970s said that their college would not let them take part-time work, even in teaching art, because it was felt that it would distract from their studies.

'It did not really get in the way of my art work, and to a certain extent you needed to do it, to be able to afford to buy materials, framing and things for shows at the end of the degree.'

End of year show

All of the artists interviewed who had taken a degree course had finished with an end of year show. The experience of this was somewhat varied. There were those who felt it was a useful exercise in understanding the process and effort needed to put on a show. Others found the whole process very stressful, bringing out the worst in people. Few sold any work or made any connections with commercial dealers, and few knew of any other students who sold work either. It was more of a learning exercise in terms of exhibition management than one of making connections and furthering a career.

This may well reflect the period in which the artists were graduating. Four of the artists interviewed did mention that things were rather
different now. It was thought that it was more common to commercially position the end of year show and so the work exhibited within it reflected that by being easier to sell. There was also felt to be a lot more energy put into self promotion by younger artists. Indeed, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, because of the shift in popularity of young British artists, there was more of a culture of visiting end of year shows with a view to buying work.

There were other reasons for this lack of success. A number indicated that because the college was a long way from London, there was little chance of making contacts with commercial dealers or galleries.

'Being in Wales, you hardly had anybody coming to see you, unfortunately.'

'It was very much locally based then. It was in the studios in the college. They were whitewashed and you set up your show. They go round and mark it and then there is the big preview. You invite all your friends, have a good time, drink a lot of beer and wine, and act the fool. It's good!'

'I've met lots of other students' families; I didn't meet anyone from galleries at all.'

There was also the problem that because the work at college was so experimental, it was unlikely that they would be able to sell it, even if commercial dealers were at the shows. A couple of the artists graduating in the 1980s said that the show was seen more in terms of a theatre piece, with most people trying to produce large scale pieces and installations which were not commercially orientated. It was felt that the culture of the schools did not encourage a commercial approach and that those artists which did were felt to be 'slick' in a derogatory sense.

'I think I sold a couple of small things, but mostly it was unsaleable. It was all so big. I did very large figures and plaster, and also some very fragile things. It wasn't a commercial show by any means.'

'I sold one drawing but it wasn't really saleable work. Because they were installations, a lot of them were quite big.'

'A few came and looked, but they found my work very hard to deal with because it was cast, heavy chunks which were sculptural. A lot of people said that it wasn't glass.'

Another artist explained that the only people who actually sold pieces whilst at college or at the shows, were those on the fine art course who deliberately produced work that was commercial.
One or two had successes more indirectly. One artist had got offers to exhibit in London at the end of her degree. Through this she had made contacts in Germany and then sold work through galleries in Germany, where they were more receptive to her style of work.

Another artist met a lecturer from a further education college who liked his work and asked him to do a show at the college. This turned out to be on several different sites, so it was the equivalent of doing two or three shows. As a result, he was offered a job teaching art at the college.

Similarly to sales during the course, for most of those graduating from the degree course, the end of year show was a disappointment in terms of sending them off with contacts on which to start their careers.

Good time to be leaving

Most artists felt that they were advantages and disadvantages about the particular time they left college, whether it was in the 1960s or the 1990s. Opinion also varied depending on how they expected their career to progress.

One artist felt that the 1960s was a better time to be graduating than today because it was easier to get by on one or two days teaching a week. This paid enough to survive on, leaving plenty of time to make work. Her view was that this was not possible now. She also explained that housing was cheaper then. With the help of parents she had been able to buy a house large enough to include a studio for both her and her husband.

On the other hand, it was argued that there were an enormous number of people graduating from art courses in the 1960s, all wanting to be artists. The competition was extremely tough and the chances of success very limited.

The 1970s had both advantages and disadvantages. At that time, there were not the pressures and fears about sorting out their careers that students seem to have today. Also, things were more optimistic because there was not the unemployment and economic recession that has been experienced subsequently.

It was admitted, however, that there were not the same opportunities in the 1970s as there are now. In the last ten years, there have been more residences, schools projects and public art works from which an artist can make a living. Prior to that, it was assumed that artists would teach part time.
Career paths of visual artists

Those graduating in the 1980s had conflicting views. It was felt that there was a lot of competition for the residencies or commissions that were available. It was also argued that the level of interest and understanding of the British public in art, let alone contemporary art, was very low and was described by one artist as 'very elusive'. This meant that to do anything which did not conform to the mainstream was extremely difficult to get funding for, and therefore to get off the ground.

Some felt it was a difficult time because there was so much unemployment. As one artist explained:

'I've got a feeling that perhaps it might have been easier ten years earlier because in 1983 everybody was unemployed. I mean, nobody left with a job to go to. As an artist, or as an arts graduate, you didn't expect to have a job anyway because most of the population seemed to be unemployed.'

Another artist, also beginning at this time, felt that the level of unemployment was a good thing. Artists were left alone to be unemployed and carry on with their work because so many other people were unemployed as well. There was no longer the stigma of not having a job or an income to support them.

A number of artists also mentioned that because of the unemployment difficulties at the time, there were more schemes available in terms of benefits that they could use. Several had made use of the Enterprise Allowance or Community Programmes. Others mentioned the ease with which they could sign on for benefits and claim housing benefit.

One artist who had graduated in London in 1982 had found the situation rather different. He had found that living in London at the beginning of the 1980s, there was plenty of work around, although not in visual arts. He had his own business painting and decorating. He also suggested there were lots of opportunities for exhibitions at the time.

Further study

One of the alternatives on completing the degree course was to go on to do further study. Several of those interviewed had taken Masters courses directly after graduating. Some were able to get grants and so carried on full time. Others were less fortunate, and so studied part time and worked to fund themselves. Even this was seen as an advantage because by paying for it, it was felt that you made sure you got something out of it. As one artist pointed out:
'I did not get a grant to do it so that was why I did it part time. I funded myself through that. I'm sometimes reluctant to say things like this, but because I was paying for it, I took it very seriously. Not that I'm saying that students shouldn't be paid to do courses. It focuses the mind and you prove to yourself and to other people that you are really committed to doing it. I survived by working part time as a waitress.'

Again, as with the undergraduate degree students, the artists on postgraduate courses had limited success in selling their work. Some sold one or two pieces but never enough to live off the proceeds. The reasons for this lack of sales were similar. They felt that their work was not particularly saleable, and in some cases this was not what they had set out to achieve from their further training.

One motivation to do a postgraduate course was that students had found they were finishing their degrees just when they felt they had found a style or direction. The chance to do further study allowed them to continue to build on this work. In one case, this was quite a sudden realisation:

'My last year at college was in some ways an awful year because I suddenly ended up about a month before the final shows not knowing what the hell to do. I was at a total blank. I turned it around within a week and made a piece of sculpture which I still think was a really good piece of sculpture. I knew that I'd only just started then and only just discovered somewhere where I wanted to be, and I knew that I needed more time to develop it, before I went outside.'

Again, as with the degree course, the experience was varied. Some basically wanted more time to continue with a theme or idea. Again the same artist explained:

'I had a grant for two years, and two years studio space and two years workshop access. I knew that's what I was getting and that's what I wanted, and I also knew that I wouldn't get much tutoring out of there which is also what I wanted; I just wanted time.'

Others had a less satisfactory experience.

'I think The Royal College is extremely restrictive. It's like a finishing school, I think. You go there to polish off what you've discovered on your BA, and I didn't want to do that. I wanted help because I knew my work was changing and I wanted the tutors there to give me that help. I went at the worst time; there were a lot of changes going on. They sacked the head on our course and also one of the visiting lecturers who was always somewhere else
instead of teaching there, so we had no people to steer us. If there were techniques you wanted to learn they didn’t have people there to teach you it. A few students knew how to do it but wouldn’t share that knowledge. That’s very much what the Royal College was like; it was the only place I’ve gone where people lock their sketch pads away, it’s an amazing place.’

Work or study abroad

Three of the artists interviewed said they had wanted to undertake further study abroad. The funding system, however, meant that in all three cases, they were unable to take up places they had been offered.

Grants were difficult to get, and in many cases the artists had to show they could afford to do the course before the overseas college would offer them a place. As one artist explained:

‘I was looking to do an MA, and I really wanted to go to America because I thought it would completely change me. I thought it was just what I needed to get me out of my shell. I applied to the Rhode Island School of Design and I got a place but I couldn’t afford to go. I couldn’t get any funding. They did offer me part of a scholarship, but I had to prove when I got off the aeroplane that I had the money in the bank, and it was something like between eight and ten grand for each year, and I didn’t have it. So I applied to the Royal College and went there. I always equated it as I’d been offered a trip to the moon which was America and I’d settled for a day trip to Scarborough - no disrespect to Scarborough but I always knew that it wasn’t the same. It was second best.’

In other cases, the artists found that they could not even apply to overseas colleges until they could prove they had the funding to go. One interviewee found that this made the process of studying abroad almost impossible unless you could fund it yourself:

‘The thing which I think is incredibly difficult to surmount is the chicken and egg situation you end up with. Some places you can only apply to if you can show that you can fund yourself to go there. They won’t give you a place unless you can afford it. You can’t apply for a grant unless you’ve got a place. So you are stuck in the middle somewhere.’

There were also problems of trying to study abroad if the artists had been out of college for any period of time. It is likely that their lecturers were no longer at the college. Getting references was more difficult and personal contacts with tutors overseas could be lost.
Some artists had managed to travel overseas in the early part of their careers without actually studying abroad. This experience was thought to have been important in the development of their work. One artist, after graduating, won a travel bursary to Italy, and this settled her mind on what and how she wanted to paint. Another had been given a scholarship by a large company:

'About two or three years after I left college, I got another scholarship. I went to America for three months on a Kodak scholarship. After I came back from that, and I had a lot more stuff in my portfolio, I started getting more interesting work.'

Another artist saved enough money to go abroad for six months so that he could set aside a period of time to concentrate on his work.

'At the end of the '80s I went to Spain for six months to work. We rented a cottage in the country in southern Spain. The idea really was to go somewhere with enough money and enough time just to concentrate on our work and not have to worry about paying the rent. That was a really good time for me and I was very pleased with the work that I'd produced. It was a kind of consolidation of what I'd been doing until then.'

Aspirations on leaving college

On leaving college it seemed that most artists had an unrealistic idea, or no idea at all, about what they were going to do practically about furthering their career. They all knew that they wanted to continue in art but were often unclear as to how to go about it. Some, as we saw in the previous section, had wanted to study or work abroad. Others had even less idea about what to do next. The following are typical:

'I suppose most artists have kind of a need to make things, want to do things. I mean that's the underlying motivation. I mean if I'm actually not making anything, or painting or creating something, it's almost like a mental illness and I get very frustrated, so I sort of wanted to carry that on.'

'You suddenly find, the day after you graduate, that you wake up and think "what do I do now?".'

'To be quite honest, I don't think I was quite that clued up about it. I knew that there were grants available from the local arts association, Northern Arts, and I knew that I wanted to make sculpture, and I just wanted to find a way of doing it.'
Career paths of visual artists

Some were realistic in that they did not think they would probably sell very much but were unrealistic about other avenues available. The following is typical:

‘Well I never really thought I would sell very much because of the nature of the work, and I wasn’t really interested in making work with that in mind. What I imagined was that I would have exhibitions in galleries where I would receive grants to produce the work. That’s the kind of picture I had. I think I made a few tentative approaches to South East Arts or to galleries towards that, but I soon realised that either the money wasn’t there, or it was tough on competition.’

One or two had fairly strong ideas about the best way to take their work forward but found that this avenue was almost impossible and ended up looking into other opportunities. One artist explained:

‘In the end I graduated with the intention of going into the film industry one way or another, and spent the first six months job hunting, without any success.’

Conclusion

Artists experience of formal training was a varied one. Foundation courses were almost unanimously felt to very good, providing the necessary preparation for a degree course. The training was said to be intensive and the atmosphere generally very supportive.

Degree courses were far less satisfactory. Although most felt that this period of training had been a valuable time in that it provided an opportunity to experiment and explore their work without the distractions of survival, many criticised the way the course was taught and what was taught.

There appeared to be a lack of balance between the practical and the philosophical aspects of being an artist and this was felt to be detrimental to the development of their work. The unstructured approach to the courses, although suiting some people, certainly left others feeling lost and unsupported. There was also a sense of tutors or colleges being out of touch with the real world, as demonstrated by the complete absence of careers guidance or training in the practicalities of surviving as a visual artist. There was a sense that they were left to get on with it and that artistic talent alone was enough to succeed.

Most of those who had taken a degree complained of one or more of these problems which led to some disappointment, with their course and early careers not living up to their expectations.
"There should be much more emphasis on the actual big bad world out there and the way it works, instead of this cosy atmosphere of education. It is just assumed that if you learn all the things you go to learn, you will be successful as a result."
The first twelve months

'What I will say about the first year was I remember the devastating loneliness of it, devastating!'

The first 12 months after having graduated from college, either from undergraduate or postgraduate courses, were generally seen as quite a difficult time. Some artists were still trying to settle on a direction for their work, whilst others were finding it impossible to follow the direction they had hoped to.

'When I finished, I went out with a portfolio which consisted of mounted 20 x16 prints and an idea that I was going to be the most wonderful photo journalist in the world, and I just started taking it round to everybody that I thought of. But I was totally unprepared...I still had to live at home, and I certainly wouldn't consider I was supporting myself at that stage. I did spend quite a lot of time typing out letters, and asking people if they had any work or if they were interested in me doing any work for them, all that sort of thing, and taking a portfolio round. But in that first year I didn't get anything.'

This period could also be a time of unexpected change in direction because of the need to make the most of any opportunities that presented themselves, as the following quote illustrates:

"There was a group of students, a kind of fluctuating group, that centred around someone I was at college with. So he was the initiator, and then when we graduated, that group dispersed but we worked on projects together, so we collaborated right from the graduation. As well as trying to find work in the film industry, I was trying to find funding for film projects. So we wrote films together and we wrote story boards. We also wrote performances and developed performances together. So we had two strands going to our collaboration, and the performance just kind of took off, and we left the others behind. It was really like I had been holding the camera pointing at a performance and then it was kind of "can you put that camera on a tripod and come and hold this?" So I just kind of slipped into it accidentally, so I didn't do my first public performance until about six months after I'd graduated."

Some of the graduates worked alone in this first period whilst others worked collaboratively with people they had met, either through joining a studio or through links they had made at college. A number of those interviewed indicated that they did not work at all immediately on leaving college because of the difficulties of finding a space to work and not having any money to buy the materials needed.
Career paths of visual artists

Income

Income from art at this time was pretty much non-existent. Those who
did earn any money were also working in jobs unrelated to art. One
artist had his own company doing painting and decorating. Quite a few
managed to get jobs teaching art part time. Very few were able to get
grants from any of the funding bodies in this early period. Many lacked
the experience to complete the forms effectively or put together a
professional bid. Those who did seemed to do so more by luck than by
planning and only for very small amounts. Having said that, it seemed
that anything at all at this time was extremely helpful.

'I also applied for grants. The first thing I did was apply for a
small materials and workshop grant from Northern Arts which was
about £350. They gave me £700 in the end because the guy who
came round to assess me said: "You're paying for the studio then?"
and I said "yes", and he said: "have you put that down on your
application form?". He really liked my work and so he did me a
great favour and I got £700 which at the time seemed great. So I
spent that first year basically making sculpture.'

The majority relied on state benefits in its various guises. Artists seemed
to have made full use of schemes such as the Enterprise Allowance or
Community Programmes, or simply existed off the standard social
security and housing benefits.

'After a period of signing on, there was a year or so when I did a
community programme, the government scheme where they paid a
reasonable amount part time, but you still get housing benefit. I
was doing a book-binding job - bookbinding of school books.'

'I received housing benefit. This was absolutely essential for a
number of years. You could claim housing benefit under a certain
level of income. And it's very difficult to earn enough to absolutely
do without it.'

Others survived by a complex mix of incomes from a number of sources,
usually combining state benefits, some teaching, and some work on the
black market economy. The following example is typical:

'I was signing on and I had a little off the record job which was in
a record shop watching Space Invader machines a couple of
evenings a week, and I did some part-time teaching as well at the
local FE college which kept me going. But most of my time was
spent in the studio making things, again using the cheapest of
materials because I had no finances for it.'

'Well, I was married so I sort of sponged off him. I also did the
odd job just to keep things topped up. But that was really menial -
carnation picking, and things like that. I was working on the ceramics but I was also teaching. I did an evening class.’

Having a partner who was working was also mentioned as a form of support by several artists. It was not always that the partner was supporting the artist. In several cases, they were managing to pay their way. It was more that by having someone there who was regularly earning, it added a degree of security to a fairly precarious existence.

‘No, not really, I might have done a couple of decorating jobs or something; I didn’t take a job. I have a long-term partner and we’ve been together for 19 years. She’s a school teacher and she was head of department, so I’ve always had that behind me; that makes a lot of difference. At that time we always tried to share everything out so that it wasn’t her supporting me. I did try and bring money into the place, pay my half of the rent, pay my half of the food - all that sort of stuff, but really all the time there was that backup.’

Exhibiting

In terms of exhibiting work, the opportunities fell into two groups. In terms of traditional mainstream exhibiting, the opportunities were fairly unplanned and sporadic. Many arose out of chance meetings or events as opposed to the artist proactively generating them themselves.

‘I’d applied to Northern Arts for this grant and I’d sent them slides. They had a selection committee and somebody who ran a gallery liked my work and offered me a one-person show. So for the first year, I just worked for that show.’

Even the artists interviewed with successful careers, had varied experiences in this first 12 months. One particularly successful sculptor indicated that he had no exhibitions at all during this time. Another two artists said that although they managed to have a number of exhibitions in the first year, some fairly high profile, neither were taken up by a commercial dealer and there then followed very quiet periods. They then faced similar problems to those artists who had very little success in the first year.

There were, however, a number of artists who through working collaboratively with other people, managed to generate their own opportunities for exhibiting work, usually away from the mainstream or traditional galleries. One group staged outside events in parks and nature reserves drawing together musicians, performers and artists working together. Another chose to exhibit work in areas not usually associated with art. The following explains:
'Well, as a group we were interested in taking art out of gallery spaces which are often sighted as being élitist and very, sort of, unapproachable, and putting on shows that encouraged “Joe Public” to come in. We did that a number of times by staging events. Quite often we did things like festivals, taking over empty shops and putting on our own exhibitions and our own publicity and so on. We were trying to make the art more accessible.'

Selling outside

Two of the artists interviewed found themselves drawn into more commercial work after leaving college and one was quite financially successful. However, neither could be said to be working in visual arts anymore at this stage and eventually both gave it up, either because of dissatisfaction with quality of the work even though it was financially viable, or because it simply did not work.

'I specialised in screen printing at college and the sort of work that I was doing was very sort of layered and textured, and I always knew that it would have an application elsewhere apart from just as a fine art. At the time I was sharing a house with sort of another exstudent who trained in textiles and she gave me the name and address of an agent up in London. I went up to see them with what were extensively fine art pieces to see whether they would be of use within textile areas. Luckily they were, because at the time there was a fair amount of money around in terms of buyers and so on, and the sort of work I was doing was very popular at the time with textiles. My work was used for dress fabrics, mostly sold in the United States. So that's how I survived. I moved into the area of designing textiles, without having any textile training.'

Others were far less successful in their attempts to enter the commercial market:

'I had been working on these sculptural ceramics and I was doing exhibitions. Then I started to do slip casting and raw glazing, which means you could repeat the things so that I could sell them cheaper. I did all the commercial things like getting boxes made etc., but that was all a total mistake. It was a terrific amount of work to make all the moulds. I did the Covent Garden fair and the normal type of craft fairs. We used to get up at six o'clock in the morning and go to these places. It was horrendous. You'd sit there day after day and everybody comes along and they say “Oh, isn't that unusual, isn't that nice”. They were too strange for the general public so they didn't sell. I ended up taking about six boxes down to Oxfam in the end.'
The pursuit of studio space

There were very few artists at this time who did not find studio space of one sort or another. Most seem to feel that it was an important move to make, particularly those working in sculpture or installation, where the size of their work made it impossible to do whilst living at home.

'Within three weeks I'd realised that I needed a studio to work in. That was a prime thing. If I didn't have a studio, then I couldn't make sculpture. I couldn't do it anywhere else, and I didn't want to. So I found a workshop in a building that was run by a local art gallery. They had taken over this building and were renting it out as studio space and it was quite cheap. So I managed to get a space there, then I signed on for two years.'

Success with studio space seemed to hinge on setting up space with a group of people or joining a studio which was already running. Those who attempted to find places on their own tended to be less successful. The following quote is typical:

'When I left college, I found a studio space three floors up above a shop in an attic which was freezing in the winter. And I was actually making paper mâché sculptures for showing in the further education college, which tended to go mouldy because they wouldn't dry because it was so cold. I moved from there; I think I was there about six months. There were several artists in Nottingham; we were talking about getting a studio space together because at the time there was an awful lot of empty warehouse space which used to be textile factories. I think about eight or so of us had kind of heard about each other and met, and we got it together to actually get one of these floors in an old textile factory and get a joint studio.'

Others who chose not to go down the group studio route found other ways to overcome the problem of needing a space in which to work which would not cost any money. One artist and her partner managed to get two flats in one house, lived in one and used the other as studio space. Another used the garage at home. Some were more inventive:

'I lived in a council flat in Brixton and there was an old washroom next door. I just asked the council and they said "yes, fine, use it" as it was completely empty and being vandalised. I mean there was no power or anything but it was rent free, and the council cleaned it all out for me, and put a secure door on it.'

Many found that being part of a studio at this time was quite important in terms of moral support. Some had found the experience of coming out of college and being alone very isolating. Having people around with whom they could discuss work and come up with ideas for exhibiting or
performances, for example, seemed to help the artist continue and develop.

'Well, I think the main influence was at the time I joined a studio, which I now have gone back to. That was really as influential and inspirational as being at college because I was working with people who were doing other things. There were ceramists as well as sculptors, and they were also very forthcoming about their skills, and let you use the kilns and things. It goes back to the point I made before about the college being quite segregated. It was the opposite of that in the studio.'

One artist, however, disagreed with this view. He also found the first year without the support of college tutors difficult in terms of measuring the quality of his work. Although being in a studio there were people there to discuss it with, in the early days he did not feel that enough of a relationship had developed for him to feel confident about their views:

'It sounds all very nice, but I felt like I didn't know what I was doing, that I didn't have any back up because here I was working on my own. You lose that sort of support you had in college. That's the hardest bit. I didn't know any people around me. You don't get it from the other people you are working with. You've got to trust them haven't you? You've only just met these people, how can you trust them? You don't know what their background is. I kept inviting friends up saying: 'What do you think of this? Am I doing the right thing?' '

The process of finding a studio in some areas was a slow and laborious one. It was more so at this stage because few of those who embarked on setting up a studio knew anything about leases, contracts, insurance or dealing with councils, and some found the responsibility of organising the rent an onerous task.

'I was looking for a studio. I was working with two or three other friends who'd just left college to set up a group studio. So we were just looking at properties all over, trying to find something we could afford. I guess that took about six months. And all that time when you're plodding about, you can't do anything much, because it's not the sort of work you can do on a table at home. You need a lot of space.'

Satisfaction

Despite all the difficulties of finding somewhere to work, earning enough money to live on, and continuing to develop their work in such an unstable environment, some artists felt that they had been quite happy at
this time. These were the artists who had managed to continue to work after leaving college and so they felt they were developing. They were also those who had found somewhere to work and had managed to get work exhibited or were working towards an exhibition:

'At that time, I was satisfied with the range of work. The earnings could have been better, but I felt that I was learning all the time still. And that's good. Developing and expanding my ideas, and becoming more sure of myself as an artist as well.'

'I think I'd say very happy, but probably because of critical success and public success rather than what I was earning. There were performance fees that were being paid obviously, but there were no labouring rates, so I wasn't doing any better.'

Others found the transition from college more difficult to cope with than others. This often related to a sense of isolation because of the lack of the support they had formerly enjoyed at college. It also related to the amount of work they were able to do, whether they had managed to get any work exhibited and whether they were part of a network of artists or not. One artist explained:

'It was a big shock actually. At college, art is all you do really. That's all you have to think about. But outside you've got to deal with all of life's problems as well as getting on with your work. I mean the work often takes a back seat. That was quite a shock actually, and it took a long time to get used to that. I wasn't being as productive as I had been at college. And it did seem like it was an impossible situation, and I didn't know that it was sustainable. I mean, I'm quite stubborn. If I hadn't been, maybe I just would have given up because it was very hard.'

One artist pointed out that it was difficult to measure satisfaction with their work because they were constantly striving to do better and so they were never satisfied. When asked how satisfied he was at the time, one artist replied:

'Same as I'm ever satisfied, it's always yes, I was satisfied to a certain extent but the thing that keeps me going is always wanting to do the next thing because it's going to be better, getting better all the time.'

**Conclusion**

This time is characterised by a struggle to find studio space, a reliance on work outside the arts, teaching or benefits but generally low incomes. Money from grants was rare and exhibitions sporadic and generally
unplanned. Some artists suffered a lack of direction whilst others were unable to follow the sort of direction they felt they wanted to. As a result, careers could take some unusual and unexpected turns, not necessarily proving to be unsuccessful in terms of their artistic development.
5 What is success?

We have discussed in the previous chapter the difficulties that most of the artists faced in the first 12 months of their careers. In many cases, this situation improved little over the longer term.

Before discussing the varied steps artists take to establish their careers, it is important to look at what artists themselves perceive as a successful career, both in terms of their own careers and in the careers of others.

When did I become an artist?

Interviewees were asked at what point they considered themselves to be a 'visual artist' irrespective of their success. For most, this occurred fairly early on in their career. In some cases, this was as early as deciding to go to college to study art, and relates to their determination to take up art in the first place. The following comments were typical:

'I've always thought I'm an artist, I think it's a state of mind rather than a material fact of what happens.'

'Since being at college, I've never doubted that I am an artist. I have doubted the quality of my work at times, whether I am good enough, but I have never doubted what I am.'

Having been to art college seemed to be an important step in reinforcing the artist's sense of their talent. College nurtured the sense that they were special and could succeed, partly because it was felt that you had to prove some ability to actually get a place. This does not mean that those who had not taken a degree did not have this inner drive. They developed it themselves.

Another artist explained that his sense of being an artist was more closely linked to what he had been doing on a day-to-day basis rather than a matter of the quantity of work or time devoted to making work. He admitted, however, that he really did not think about it in a traditional sort of way:

'I wouldn't honestly say that I'd ever really thought of myself as an artist in that way. However, I haven't considered myself not an artist, but at the same time, I always had a kind of philosophy that you are what you do. When I worked as a painter and decorator, I was a painter and decorator. I wasn't an artist who was doing some painting and decorating, I was a painter and decorator that day. And when I was making some art, or had made some art, then I was an artist.'
For some, being an artist related to the time when they were no longer supported in some way by the education system. This, therefore, coincided with leaving the college system or the point at which they were committed to a career in the visual arts, without the financial support of a grant and the critical support of tutors and students:

'I think it was when I moved to do the postgraduate course. As I funded myself through it, it was an important stage. But equally a key milestone was having moved out of that and having lost the support of a college system. That's when you are on your own two feet and have to manage to keep going. After a year, or a couple or years or so of that, you realise “Yes, I am doing this”. I may not be financially particularly successful, but I would describe myself, and I do describe myself, as an artist. '

For others, the process was a little slower, rather unconscious, and related to some sort of ‘time serving’. It was more to do with realising that this is what they had been doing for a period of time or that they had been able to continue to survive at it:

'No, not as soon as I left college, nor at college either. I think probably there are quite a lot of students who think that when they leave college they are artists. I saw myself for a long time as wanting to be an artist. I was out there trying to be an artist, and I suppose gradually (and I don’t know when as I can’t put a definite time on it) you think “all right, I’m being an artist now”.'

Most artists had a sense of when they first felt they were an artist but what actually makes someone an artist was more difficult to clearly identify. Many people paint or draw as a hobby but would not consider themselves as artists. Many artists spend a lot of time doing things other than making work, and yet they still consider themselves as artists. What sets them aside seemed to be the centrality of making work to their lives. Although artists spend time working in other areas, teaching etc., this is usually to support their practice. Making work is their main focus and this is what they are driven by. Those interviewed who said they were no longer practising did not consider themselves as visual artists even though one still did drawing and sketches on holidays and in her spare time.

Am I a successful artist?

Success was something which came later than the feeling of being an artist, although this was difficult for artists to define in terms of a particular point in time, often because it closely related to their satisfaction with their work. This could vary depending on the circumstances prevailing at the time:
‘I don’t know. I think success is in so many different ways, isn’t it? I think for me the only way I can think I’m a successful artist is if I get satisfaction from having done something. That’s a kind of personal success. Perhaps it doesn’t even matter what other people think about it. I really don’t look at success in terms of how famous you are, or if your paintings are in every fancy magazine.’

Others felt that recognition was important. This could be from their peers or the audience they were trying to reach. The former was measured, for example, in terms being asked to take part in what were thought to be prestigious exhibitions, as opposed to having to ask:

‘I think that’s really quite personal. For me it boiled down to recognition really. One of the reasons for wanting to work in film and video was to be able to reach a wider audience. When the performance work was obviously reaching an audience and requests were coming in to perform, to present work, I think that felt like success, even though it never brought in any money.’

A few saw success in terms of income but only in the sense that if they were able to earn enough from making art, they would not have to do other jobs and so could spend more time developing their work. Most felt that success and money simply did not relate to each other. As one artist explained:

‘We did a piece which ran for three weeks or a month. Part of what we did was press released it, so that we could get more media coverage. We got it on the nine o’clock news, which was quite good because potentially a lot of people in the country could have been watching the nine o’clock news that day. You know it was one of those pieces everybody talked about. In terms of intervention, as a public piece of work, it was an incredibly successful piece of work. But we didn’t get paid anything for it, so is that success? What do you have to do to be successful?’

One artist saw his success as having achieved a balance between both the quality of his work and his ability to earn money from the work:

‘I think it’s to do with a mixture of both earning enough and quality of work. It’s to do with when you make something, you think “yes, that’s good”, regardless whether you’ve been paid for it or not, it’s immaterial. But I know at other times you think “yes, I’m being paid to make this”. And I suppose what I eventually did was get them into pace with each other.’
How perceptions change

We asked artists whether their perceptions of success had changed since they graduated. A number felt that they had not but others believed there had been a shift to a more realistic outlook on their careers and their success. For example, one woman felt that her ideas had changed because she realised there were lots of ways to earn money in order to carry on with her art work and that success does not relate entirely to whether all her income came from her work.

There was a sense that they had much broader ideas about the options open to them. On leaving college, as we saw in the previous chapter, graduates tended to have rather traditional and narrow views about the direction their career would take. Similarly, their views on success were also narrow. With much more experience of working in the visual arts, they realised that success could be achieved through many different routes and could be measured in different ways. As one artist explained:

'I think that I probably see more varied opportunities now. When I first graduated, I was probably quite narrow and blinkered to a particular London arts scene and the peripheries of that. But arts in schools, artists residencies, low profile public commissions - that sort of thing - the kind of work that keeps artists going, I'd have been hardly aware of at that point.'

Who else is successful?

Success in terms of their peers was measured on a number of levels. Most important seemed to be recognition by other artists, irrespective of the general critical acclaim, amount of sales and so on. As two artists pointed out:

'Oh, when I see their work published, hung on gallery walls, when I hear people talk about them. There are several things you want from your career, and one of the most important is the recognition of your peers. That is incredibly important for a lot of us. Money is important obviously, but there are enough people out there who are obviously making a lot of money, but still feel they’ve got to do different things to draw attention to what they are able to do.'

'It’s about their work. Whenever you are thinking about things, there are always two elements to it. You could see somebody who is financially sound, but hate what they do. On the other hand, you can see somebody who is struggling or earning by a different means and their work is superb, or just a particular piece. You think “wouldn’t it have been glorious to make that piece”. That’s what success is about.'
Having said that, success in terms of income was not totally ignored. Being able to live solely off an income from art was an issue clearly important to the majority interviewed, probably because the majority were not or struggling to do so.

There was also the view that success could be measured by the amount of work an artist is offered, in other words whether the artist is able to choose the work they undertake rather than simply doing anything which provides some income. This has the obvious knock-on effect that the quality of work is also likely to improve.

Others felt that success needed to be measured in terms of consistency or sustainability over a period of time. Due to the rather uncertain nature of art environment, there is a tendency for people to have bursts of critical acclaim followed by periods of relative anonymity. Success was seen as maintaining a quality presence for a sustained period of time. As one interviewee stressed:

'I think there are different types of success. There are people who are very good at working the market, whose work I don't appreciate at all, so they have one kind of success. I see other people who have short bursts of market success, and then disappear completely. Then there are other people who have a kind of relatively low profile but have a longevity about them - 15 to 20 years later, they are still there, and still moving, and that's one of the things I always look towards.'

Conclusion

The essence of 'being an artist' was particularly difficult to define and was something that was very personal. A number of factors were mentioned such as having been to art college, the amount of time spent on making work, surviving without the support of the education system or surviving over a period of time. What underlined this was the centrality of making work to their lives. Other activities were done as a means to support or develop their practice in some way. This inner drive to make work sets them apart from other people who may paint or draw as a hobby.

Success for most artists, both in their own and that of others, related most strongly to the quality of work. Although earning money from their work was something they aspired to, this was not a prerequisite of a successful career. Success was more about consistently producing good work over a long enough period of time to develop a reputation. This perhaps reflects the fact that earning money from the visual arts is so difficult, success has to be measured in other ways.
6 The artists’ ‘career matrix’

We have discussed in Chapter 4 the difficulties most of the artists faced in the first 12 months of their careers. In many cases, this situation improved little over the longer term. A small minority experienced some considerable success in their first few years, characterised by prestigious awards, offers from galleries and sales work to collectors. The majority, however, continued struggling to establish their careers. This involved numerous applications for funding, the use of government schemes such as the Enterprise Allowance, a succession of residencies, projects and public art commissions, interspersed or supported by periods of teaching, either full time or part time, or other work unrelated to the visual arts.

The next section will go on to look at these forms of working and some of the facilitators and barriers to success. Firstly, we will look at some of the main methods of support: that is, the use of residencies, awards and commissions, and teaching.

Residencies

The Value of Residencies

Around half of the practising artists had undertaken a residency at some point in their careers. The type of residency, the length, purpose and quality varied enormously. What did seem clear was that the number available had increased over the last ten to 15 years and that they were seen as important means of support for many of those interviewed. They were felt to be important because they provide a secure income, albeit small in some cases, and so allow the artist to make work and possibly explore new areas of work or new environments.

'It was at the right time. It focused lots of thoughts that I’d had up to then, for example from the industrial residency. I had all these feelings of not wanting to show in galleries because of the elitism, of wanting to be a public artist, and here was an opportunity to pull all these things together. I used that residency to do what I wanted to do. I just remember thinking “this is a year out, I can spend a year making things in my studio and not worry about having to pay the rent”.'

Artists also felt residencies were important, not only for their own support but because they were a means to get art out of the galleries and make it more accessible to the general public. Many artists felt that art was not accessible enough. Residencies within communities made some headway in breaking this barrier down. One sculptor deliberately used the residency to do this:
'I had very particular views about trying to involve people in it. I spent a lot of my time talking to people and saying “look, this is what I do, it’s not very different from what you do, but it’s art”. I actually made a piece of sculpture during those three months which was a packing crate. I was based in a sawmill where they made packing crates to send stuff all over the place. I wanted to do something that they did, out of the same materials, but do something different with it. I made this packing crate and filled it full of all these strange objects. I drilled a hole in one side, and when you looked through the hole all these strange objects inside suddenly look like inside a room. They all loved it.'

Many of the residencies that artists undertook, particularly those working closely with communities or certain disadvantaged groups, were felt to be very rewarding in terms of the personal interaction with the individuals. The work often had a very positive effect on the lives of those involved, whether unemployed, young people or people with disabilities. The following is a good example of the value artist saw in their work on a residency:

'What happened was that I was working with a ward which was an acute admissions ward. This means that people might be there for anything from a couple of weeks to several months and then go back home or wherever. There was a handful of people who would get involved in the art studio, working with me. They wanted to carry on and use the studio once they’d been discharged because it had become quite important to their recovery. It had quite affected their lives, and it was in several cases one of the strongest reasons for them actually being able to go home and to actually change their lifestyle.'

How long is a residency?

The lengths of residencies varied from a few weeks to five years. Often the end date turned out to be flexible or renewable. In some cases, the residency provided the basis for developing a longer term project. The flexibility arose for a number of reasons. In one example, the residency was very successful with the group involved and the funding bodies felt that the support should be continued.

In another, the artist developed an idea for a second piece of work which was taken forward because of the success of the work already completed:

'Whilst on the residency I had this idea for a sculpture and the manager said he thought it sounded really wonderful. I had not got time to do it that year so he said “let’s see what we can work out”. What we eventually worked out with the funding bodies was to
extend the residency for four months to make it. It actually took me a year but that was my fault. I totally underestimated how long it would take.'

There were also occasions where the parties involved in funding the residency had never supported an artist before and wanted to see how it progressed before making further commitment:

'The residency was initially for six months but it was quite open ended. We had money for six months but no one quite knew what would happen, because it hadn't been done before in that particular department. '

For one artist, the residency continued because although there was no more money available, it had been relatively successful and he was gaining badly needed publicity from it:

'I got a residency in a sixth form college. It was meant to be six weeks I think, and to be honest I wasn't busy doing anything else, so I stretched it out to be two whole terms, but I wasn't being paid anymore. I just kept going and making the whole thing work for me. That proved to be very successful and got publicity in the local press.'

Difficulties of residencies

Despite all the very positive aspects of residencies, there were drawbacks and one or two artists interviewed had experienced difficulties. These related either to the way the residency was organised or the way it was managed, particularly where there was more than one funding body involved.

A difficulty which was mentioned more than once, particularly with community work, was that this could take up much more time than the days allotted to it in the agreement. In many cases, the artist's own work, which they were supposed to be developing, suffered. Agreements were made in which the artist was expected to work two full days with the community or group around which the residency was based, and have one day to make their own work. In practice, this would not happen. One artist resorted to taking on a studio away from the one provided for the residency work, in order to get his own work finished. In some residencies, however, this was not possible because they were expected to be on site five days a week.

The following examples were typical:

'The difficulty with the residency is that I can't get my own work done. I am supposed to do three days a week on the community
work and two days a week on my own work. The community work has never been three days, it's more like five. It's very difficult to separate out because I've always had an open policy here. People can come in any time. You can't tell people to come back tomorrow because you'll get a reputation for not being open. So it's hard to focus on your own work. I'm quite happy doing three or four pieces at a time, but when you're doing seven or eight in workshops, it's very hard to focus.'

'I remember this time last year. I was desperate to find my own studio because it's sometimes very difficult to work with other people around when you've got people making demands on you all of the time. People come and go as they like, but you might get two or three people who talk all the time or who are very demanding of your attention and it makes life very difficult to work.'

Others found that the work was so badly organised and it was difficult to achieve anything at all, let alone develop their own work. In some cases, they felt that they were being used as glorified babysitters or day centre workers.

'Some residencies are not so good. I know people who have had horrendous experiences. They have just been locked in a room with 50 kids and two blackboards.'

Other contractual problems occurred. One artist complained that she had been given money to do two days a week research on her own work by a local university as part of a residency. The wording was rather open ended, and subsequently she found she had to teach an MA student as well developing her own work. The university then complained that they did not get value for money in terms of the research side of the residency even though she had given up the time to undertake student supervision.

There were also difficulties if there was more than one funding body involved in the residency. One artist interviewed was very frustrated by the bickering between the funding agencies over who should get credit for the work. This often held up publicising the work in terms of arranging events and exhibitions, and developing publicity materials.

The earnings could also be a bone of contention, mainly if the residency was for a longer period. Some found that at the end of a three year residency, their actual earnings had fallen because they had not got their agreements linked to inflation.

'My wage wasn't inflation linked, so I've just asked for an increase. I was very cheeky, I said to them "I've got a brother-in-law who's a tile salesman. He has targets to reach like me. When
he hits his targets he gets a bonus. He's professional, I'm professional. What's the difference?"

Successful residencies

The success of the residency seemed to rely quite heavily on how well it had been organised and how supportive the management team were:

'I think I was just quite fortunate that I had a lot of very supportive people. Some of the managers at the hospital were actually people involved on my management committee.'

Those that went well could lead to a wide range of opportunities. Some, as we have seen above, are successful in that the artists are able to extend the work and continue for much longer than originally expected. Others found that the work they produced was good enough to lead to work elsewhere:

'I took it as a chance to build more opportunities of what I wanted to do, so I ended up making that piece of sculpture, and that was it. I stopped looking for work - they came looking for me! It didn't always pay that well, but it came looking for me. I haven't applied for anything since then.'

Overall, residencies were seen as a great opportunity for artists to explore the work, but also to bring it into communities not used to any involvement with visual art. The more successful residencies, however, relied on supportive management teams and were based on well prepared contracts with practical aims and objectives.

Applications for awards and commissions

An alternative source of funding was to apply for some of the awards or commissions that become available. Just over half of the practising artists had received awards or commissions of some sort. This was a different way of working than with residencies, mainly because the focus was not on a particular group, community or environment. One artist explained the difference between the way he worked on residencies and commissions:

'A commission is when somebody wants you to do a piece of work for a particular place, and then pays you to do it. You then negotiate what it's going to be, all that sort of stuff: drawings, prices and time scales. A residency is slightly different. I set this up saying "I don't know what I'm going make and I don't want to know yet". I want to be in the place for a time to absorb the place
Career paths of visual artists

in whatever ways are appropriate, which is why we had the involvement of local people.'

Public commissions

A common method of funding was through commissions from public agencies. Commissions are usually fairly prescriptive and involve work either for a public space, an exhibition or an individual. The following example was typical:

'I was commissioned by the Arts Council to do some work for an exhibition. They had seen my work elsewhere and thought I'd be a good person to take part in this show.'

Commissions came from a whole range of bodies from the Arts Councils, Regional Arts Boards, through to local authority and health authorities. These were usually one-off commissions for a specific public building, park or exhibition. Sometimes they came about as part of a project or were for public collections. For example:

'I worked for the Libraries Department of the County Council. I worked in two or three schools alongside some art exhibitions, and then as part of that, they commissioned pieces of work from me. They had an art loan scheme so things went off to various schools and colleges, like a library.'

As with residencies, there were advantages and disadvantages of supporting work in this way. Some of these are discussed below.

Advantages

One of the main advantages of working for public commissions that the artist could be fairly certain that the work would be shown publicly. In many cases, the work would be shown far more extensively than work done for private collections. Many artists were concerned about their work disappearing into private collections and not being shown to the public at all. As we discussed earlier, a number of the artists interviewed were concerned about the barrier they perceived between art and the general public. Producing work which was not going to reach an audience did not appeal to many.

Some saw this way of working as quite challenging because they had to work within certain parameters. This could be, for example, working with certain materials or producing work which was vandal or fire proof. Making something which would suit those problems was difficult but
rewarding. However, this was only said to be the case if the artist was in the position to choose whether they wanted to do it or not.

Another artist indicated that he enjoyed working in that way because of the structure it provides. As he explained:

'It lets you know what you're dealing with. It gives you parameters and you know where your limitations are. Generally, the budget is there in the first place. It's very rare you get a loose opportunity, like "make a proposal for this space". The last time that happened, my proposal budget was £15,000 which turned out to be the budget for the entire festival, so that didn't happen. But usually you put proposals into a particular brief. You know where you will be working, what the target audience is and what your target budget is, and you work accordingly. So I found it useful to know that.'

Disadvantages

The main difficulty with public commissions is that completing the applications can be a very long and time consuming business, especially if it is for a large piece of public sculpture. A number of artists complained that they would be selected to make proposals for public pieces of work, which suggests an appreciation of their skills, but get nothing or very little in return for the effort. A proposal, particularly for a large piece of work, has to be financially viable and so requires a lot of research into expenses, materials, timescales and even technical statistics. This can take an artist a long time to put together. For most proposals, the artist is unlikely to be paid more than £300, and for some they get nothing. It was generally felt that there was a lack of appreciation of what was being done. As one sculptor complained:

'You've done all that training, you've done all that work and you've been practising for so long but none of it is appreciated. It's just not recognised. That can be really frustrating.'

It was also argued that the artists were providing all the ideas for no return. In other words, they were arguing for the payment of 'concept fees'. It was accepted that this did not happen everywhere. There were people who were more aware of the skills the artist has but this was not always the case. Again, a public artist complained:

'They are getting all those ideas - which are the most intangible thing and which are what you want to be paid the most for - they are getting all of those free. And all the work and effort, all the ideas just go into the cupboard and that's it.'
Artists found it difficult to reconcile the amount of work required for a proposal and the likelihood of receiving anything in return. If they did not put a lot of work in, they would end up producing a shoddy proposal and would jeopardise their chances of getting the commission. Even worse, they could make a mistake which would leave them with serious difficulties should they win the commission. The following example illustrates the frustrations with the process:

'There's one I'm doing now, which is a £75,000 budget, so it's quite a substantial amount. They will be expecting something quite substantial in the proposal, which will have things like electronics. I think six people have been short listed. They have been paid £250 each for something which you will potentially be tied into for two years. So maybe you say 'well okay, I'll just do £250 worth of work, which may be, I don't know, two or three days work'. But then, can you risk that? You do work for two or three days for something that you could get absolutely hammered for later on if you make a balls out of it, or make a mistake in your proposal. You could go bust as a result.'

A number of artists also expressed difficulties with winning commissions. Some artists found it difficult to work within very specified boundaries. This was particularly the case with commissions, which in some cases had very strictly defined parameters. One performance artist was asked by a local authority to develop a piece celebrating the sewers for a local festival. Since the subject matter was not inspiring to the artist, he felt he could not accept the work. Some artists more generally could not approach their work in that way. They felt that the work itself should take precedence over the location or event. As one explained:

'I have on occasions submitted slides or proposals to various places for exhibition or for a commission, but not wholeheartedly. This is partly because it takes a lot of time and effort, but also I'm not sure where I want to be showing my work or in what context I want to be showing it. So it's difficult to send out applications or proposals just on the off chance that somebody will come back. You might end up having to make some work for an area that you perhaps don't actually want to do, or within a context that you don't want to be in. So I think what I prefer would be to make the work and then for me to decide what's appropriate for the work, rather than the other way around.'
Public awards

Awards differ from commissions in that they are less prescriptive. The artist is given a certain amount of money to develop a new body of work. As one artist put it:

'I've had a couple of awards where I've been given a certain amount of money to develop a new body of work. Usually those are done on the basis of you say what you want to do, and they decide whether or not to give you the money.'

As with public commissions, awards are given by a range of bodies such as the Arts Councils, Regional Arts Boards, local and health authorities. Artists can also benefit indirectly from awards to galleries, artists’ studios, publications etc.

The advantages of awards were in many ways similar to public commissions. The artists could be sure that the work would be seen publicly and not disappear into a private collection. For example:

'I was given an amount of money by South East Arts to develop some work in conjunction with the museum and their non-western art collection, and because of that I was then offered an exhibition by the museum to show the work that I was making.'

The advantage of awards over commissions was that the artists had more freedom. They were being given money to develop a new body of work which they already wanted to pursue. They were not being tied down by the more tightly defined parameters of a commission.

The disadvantages of awards is that the competition is very fierce and the amounts of money available relatively small:

'The award is a great opportunity and I am really pleased to be doing it. It is absolutely what I wanted to do. It is almost tailor made for me after my recent work. But the fee for it is £500, and you know £500 does not go a long way. I'm doing it for the kudos of doing it. It's worth a lot more than £500. I know I've shot over that in the first month.'

As with commissions, there were also concerns about the amount of time it took to complete application forms when the chances of a successful outcome were very small. This could often be very frustrating:

'It does seem that now there's a lot of money around for things coming from the lottery, but for somebody like me as an individual, the amount of energy and work you have to put in to making an application is just a complete nightmare. I mean, we've spent a year negotiating with Rowntrees to do something. We've written reports, we've sent them stuff, we've had meetings with them.
They're just about to reach the stage where they're going to say "yes", but it's actually too late for us to start on the project we are proposing. We've put so much energy into it and we've had to jump through so many hoops. I think that's what puts us off trying for lottery money. There doesn't seem to be any sort of fast track.'

Private commissions

Only a few of the artists we interviewed had been approached by private individuals to make work for them. This experience was relatively rare because few private individuals chose to spend the sort of money necessary. It was also more difficult for some of those who made installation or sculpture because their work was generally not suitable for this kind of work. As one artist explained:

'My work tends to be very large - I mean much to big for anyone's house. I would appreciate it if there was more local authority commissioned work to go in buildings, or architects were commissioning work more often.'

With private commissions, there were not the difficulties of competition and making proposals that artists experienced with public awards but there were the advantages of knowing the budget and the limitations of the work. Those who had worked on private commissions enjoyed this way of working.

Going your own way

Just over half of the practising artists interviewed had achieved a great deal from developing their own ideas into projects. This was particularly the case in the early stages of their careers when it was harder to win funding from the traditional sources. Generating these opportunities usually took a number of forms, for example, organising exhibitions or performances in galleries, in their own studios, or in less traditional venues for regular festivals or one-off events. Artists, as we saw earlier, were also adept at organising community projects either as a continuation of a residency or as a new venture altogether.

There were numerous examples of where both individuals and groups of artists had set up their own exhibitions and events. These ranged from fairly traditional one-artist shows in galleries to collaborative projects involving a variety of activities and locations. Most of the less traditional events and exhibitions were born out of a desire to get away from the traditional gallery system, which was seen as elitist, and introduce art into more accessible places. The difficulty with doing this
was the amount of time it would take up and the lack of financial reward. In most cases, the artist would get a lot of publicity but be paid nothing. Some of the following are typical:

'We formed a group that was not attached to a studio in order to do something for the festival coming up. We wanted to do an exhibition that would be on billboards. We got a letter of support from the festival and then we took that to the companies managing the advertising on billboards and they let us use the signs.'

'We took over a hardware store and so there was enough room for 12 people to make big, room size installations. So everybody was able to do quite big shows, in enough space that we could control.'

These projects had generally been fairly short-term exercises with a particular exhibition or event as an outcome. A number of artists had some success at setting up their own much longer-term projects, or had arranged the funding to continue a residency which has come to an end. Although this afforded them the opportunity of having more control over their work and more security, the process could be very frustrating and extremely difficult. It could also take up so much of the artist's time, that their own work suffered because of it. The following example typifies the difficulties people face when embarking on this sort of thing. Although rather long, we felt it was worth including in its entirety:

'Because of the success of the residency, we thought of the idea of people coming back into the hospital to use a studio after the residency finished, but then decided there should be somewhere else which is available.

'Luckily, I knew a few people were able to cut through all the masses of red tape, and were able to find funding for things which proved quite critical. For example, the arts officer for the local council at the time came to visit me and he thought that this was a wonderful project. He said "I'll give you £2,000 and then I'll bully the health authority into feeling obliged to match it.". That was his particular way of working. He only lasted a year in the job, but he was an artist himself and knew how things would actually happen.

'We put together a programme and funding application which took many months and had to pass through many different departments. I did very little of my art work at that time. It was very stressful getting the money together, filling in endless forms. It was very dodgy. I didn't know almost from week to week, for possibly eight months, whether I was going to have any money at the end of the week, and a couple of times I said "well, I'm not coming in on Monday unless someone can sign a piece of paper". It's very hard to make people sign things.
'When we actually got the agreement to have the funding for the studio, it was so delayed that the building we wanted had been taken by somebody else. We then had to find another building and we had to write all the contracts. I had to organise everything. There was a lot of pressure on time and it ended up that we had three weeks to find a building or they wouldn't give us the money. You are hanging on for months and they say you can't have the money, and then you have got three weeks to start spending it.

'This is why I said my shared studio space proved to be very good experience. I'd done it before and I'd seen some of the pitfalls, and I felt quite able to take that on. Whereas imagine if I hadn't been through all of that, and had never started a studio space before? I wouldn't have really known where to have started, especially with the time pressures involved.'

This experience was typical of efforts made to get projects off the ground and keep things going. There were examples of less successful attempts which ended up wasting a lot of time and effort on behalf of the artists involved. Thus, embarking on this sort of project could be a risky process, especially if the artist's work suffers in the process.

**Teaching**

Fifteen of the 18 practising artists interviewed were either currently teaching or had been involved with teaching at some point in their careers. The type of teaching work they did varied enormously, from very basic art classes at the local adult education centre through to lecturing at one of the major art colleges in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Some saw teaching as a necessary evil in order to survive whilst others regarded it more favourably.

The fact that practising artists were involved in the education system was seen as important because of the experience they were able to bring to a course. They were seen as being able to add a practical insight into the work, and intellectual and aesthetic content. From foundation courses upwards there has always been a strong level of employment on a part-time basis of practising artists. They are employed because they have got a reputation and peers know they can be realistic.

Teaching was not seen as an easy option by any means. It was felt to be very draining and exhausting, although very rewarding as well. This was mainly because it required the artists to be continually creative and to draw out creativity in others.

'I enjoy teaching on the General Art and Design course, which is mainly now eighteen year olds. They're brilliant to work with, but
it's really hard work. It's about being creative as well. You are teaching people, or you are enabling people to be creative, which hardly anybody does these days. There's lots of creativity in making your house, or the cooking - all the things that people do - but it's quite limited. We try and invigorate people into the possibilities of their own creativity and stimulate that creativity, so you are having to be very creative with them all day long as well.'

It was also felt to be difficult because it was not something that could be lectured from a textbook or demonstrated by practical experiments. Teaching art was more intangible and so rather unpredictable.

It's not like teaching. It's different to where you are teaching a subject like physics and there are a set of notes. There is information you work through which divides up into areas, and you tell people about it and you show an experiment. When you are talking about very intangible stuff, you really don't know what you are going to come across from one day to the next. That's completely different and so it is incredibly exhausting.'

Some artists, however, had less satisfactory experiences with teaching either in terms of the bureaucracy or in terms of the students themselves. The artists found the whole process very frustrating and un.rewarding. In some cases, they were extremely glad to be out of it and did not look forward to the prospect of having to return if money became short.

'I was invited by the local art college to come along and contribute for one day a week on the HND in art and design. This was a baptism by fire into higher education teaching. I didn't know at that time that the students didn't want to do performance. It was added on to their timetable because BTEC told the college that they could not just build visual studies into the programme. It had to be identified and timetabled. The college's answer was to do some performance as it was visual studies and they knew there was a performance artist down the road.'

Another artist found that the degree students she had to teach were not conscientious. They regularly came in late and had not reached the technical standard expected by the second year. When the end of the year was close, they all went home because they couldn't afford to stay any longer. Although some of the problems were due to outside forces, it still meant that, for many, the experience of teaching was very frustrating.

There were a number of examples where poor management of courses or departments had made continuing to teach impossible. Two of the respondents interviewed had been working in HE colleges where new department heads had been bought in with little knowledge or experience of art. As part of cost cutting exercises, staff numbers were reduced to
levels that were impossible to manage and courses pared down to point of being useless. This had led to morale problems and very low motivation.

'The new head sacked so many people in the first year and she didn't even know what they did on the course. She was sacking one guy and he said 'I do teach second year, I just need you to know who I am before you sack me'. He was a really famous artist, a local artist, and she had no idea. She couldn't be bothered who he was. From a base of maybe 12 visiting lecturers and full-time staff, it was down to a very few.'

'Finally, they were trying to cut drawing out of the course, and in a staff meeting I completely disagreed with it - only in the staff room - but that wasn't acceptable. I had to leave.'

One artist, with a great deal of teaching experience, felt that because of the difficulties of teaching, the artist's own creativity suffers. The amount of time and energy taken up by it leaves the individual with little left to develop their own work. As she explained:

'I think they have a very hard job, and I don't think they're helped at all by the system. The system of training colleges and the back-up system is not there. I taught for ten years and I was dried up by the end of it. And there was no way you were going to do any work - your own work or exploratory work. Eventually you can't be any help to the students either. You've got nothing left to give.'

Some older artists discussed how the abundance of teaching opportunities in the '60s and '70s diverted. Some gave examples of the dangers of doing too much teaching:

'I think that what I am trying to do is to suggest that there was probably an unhealthy relationship between thinking 'had you studied to teach, or had you studied to be an artist?'.'

'Teaching is very exhilarating but you had better not do too much year after year because after 15 years you find that you have been moved to the pipe smoking zone, and lost to the sheer humdrum of it.'

All of the older artists interviewed were able to see a definite shift from when a part-time teaching job provided enough money to survive on, enabling them to concentrate for the rest of their time on their art work.

'. . . we're talking about 1970, and what I perceived as being a good thing to do was to get a teaching job. That was still seen as an aspect of the nobility, but allowed you to be an artist, and it was the equation that you got a teaching job for two days a week and you could run quite a serviceable life.'
These artists were also able to see how the equation had shifted not only financially, but also how things had changed in terms of the teaching loads they were expected to fulfil, and the deterioration in quality of time they were able to give students.

‘The nature of teaching has changed so much that you can no longer survive on two days a week, and the two days a week that you do have, you now have to see 80 people.’

‘... so the question of achieving any relationships are gone, and what are you doing with those relationships? Now people have to stand up and say something useful to a 100 people instead of being there for them on a more interactional level.’

The experience artists have of teaching can be very varied. Some find it very challenging and rewarding. For others, it can be a depressing process which eventually stifles their own creativity. Most, however, have taught at some time, and many without any special training in teaching. Posts are offered by virtue of the artist’s reputation. Irrespective of its short falls, teaching was an extremely important means of survival.

Facilitators of success

We have discussed above some of the means by which artists support their work and are able to develop it. However, success with these relies on artists developing certain attributes and skills in order to establish themselves as having a quality body of work.

Building a reputation, getting connected

One of the most striking things to come out of the career histories of the artists interviewed was the importance of building up a presence in the art world in terms of connections. This was about being known to Regional Arts Boards, local authority arts officers and whole range of people involved in setting up exhibitions, funding residencies etc.

Many of those interviewed had been asked to submit proposals for work because someone who liked their work had suggested they be involved. Others had simply been given commissions on the basis of something someone had seen elsewhere. The networks of contacts in some cases were very convoluted and complicated, and often informal. For example:

‘One contact who had seen my work was giving a talk and she showed a slide of a piece of work I had done. The woman from the
Career paths of visual artists

Public Arts Commissions Agency saw the slide, and as somebody had just dropped out of a shortlist of three for a commission and they needed somebody else, I made a proposal for that and got the work. As I was working at the Public Arts Commissions Agency, they then had my slides. They were shown to clients and I got a small piece of work from that. Then somehow or other, somebody from another regional Arts Board came to know of my work and I was proposed for a couple of things and got a piece of work at a hospital. Through doing that, the arts officer for the hospital heard about something that was going on at a hospital in London so I contacted them and showed them my slides, and now I'm part of a proposal that they made.'

This was all seen as part of building up a reputation. As more contacts were made and opportunities arose, based on the merit of the work, artists continued to make work and exhibit it. Through this process, their experience was also seen to be growing, as was their reliability in terms of being able to deliver quality work.

'I was also doing all my own work as well during that time, and through that I began to build up a reputation. You begin to get known by certain people, for example by your regional Art Board. They see you as somebody who is continuing to work, who it's worth their while investing in, in terms of grants and so on. I think that is another milestone, when you begin to get recognised. I did this through continuing to exhibit which also means you are accumulating experience and knowledge, and you're broadening your horizons. You are more aware of how to do things practically as well as aesthetically. That in itself becomes something which is recognised by people.'

Another artist had a similar experience through a commercial dealer that he had met by chance and provided an introduction into the art world:

'My first contact with the art world was through a commercial dealer. I just met him by chance. I wasn't chasing anybody, I didn't want to show my work again but he was curious about what I was doing. I told him I was doing some kind of work which I couldn't describe. I couldn't define myself as a sculptor and I couldn't define myself as a painter. I was doing something very different. Anyway, he came to see my work and was very interested in showing it. Through him I came to London as an artist. He began to invite me to openings because he wanted me to know other artists.'
Professionalism

Part of being successful in obtaining funding to make work and building up a reputation, was reliant on what some artists described as a ‘professional approach’. This was not about making their artistic practice into a business but about being organised in terms of having their CVs well presented, slides carefully and clearly labelled, pieces about their work to hand etc. This also involved learning the most appropriate and effective ways of completing application forms. These were seen as critical to success in securing funding over a sustained period of time.

‘I think it’s a complete misapprehension that artists are not professionals, and are not aware of the importance of how they’re perceived. A lot of my time, and that of all the artists I know, goes into the administration of being an artist, making applications, keeping CVs up to date, knowing how to budget, and things like that.’

Quite often, if you are invited into an exhibition, a group exhibition or even if it’s a one person show, all of a sudden the administrators of the space that you’re in, will turn round to you and say “Can I have your CV? I need it by tonight because it’s got to be at the printers tomorrow”, or “Can I have a statement about your work?”. So you need to be prepared and have all that ready. Otherwise it goes against you and you may lose an opportunity in the future.’

A proactive approach

We have already discussed the tendency for artists to develop their own exhibitions and projects. In addition to this, it also seemed important for artists to always be actively looking and applying for work or chasing contacts. This relates very closely to the process of building a reputation discussed earlier. Artists were unanimous that offers were rarely delivered to them; what had been important to their success was developing opportunities themselves:

‘I wrote around and the person in charge of education saw my CV and wanted someone to go and do some artwork so they contacted me. I think it is quite important to be proactive about it.’

‘Most of the exhibitions I’ve had have been ones that I’ve organised myself, or with others. The exhibition I had in London was because I knew the person who organised them there.’

‘But I then decided I needed to make sculpture, so I got the local art gallery to give me a one-man exhibition, and I decided I’d make all new work for it. I decided I needed some external thing to make
me make sculpture. I made half a dozen pieces and one of them was good, the rest were so so. I did it, but I didn’t earn any money during that time and I borrowed money off the bank, off my parents, off my partner’s parents, anybody who happened to have any money. I knew that it was disastrous if nothing came out of it, but something did.’

Developing opportunities also meant applying for residencies or funding which might not immediately seem an obvious choice. Some had success from applications where they expected none. Others had been unsuccessful only to find the application had led to opportunities elsewhere:

‘I applied for the residency at the Cathedral which was a year-long residency. It had been running for three years and they had had three similar painters. I think everyone had assumed it was a painter’s residency, as had I. When I saw it advertised I thought “I could do that, why can’t I make sculpture there?”

‘I got it and I think it was because I was a sculptor. I had a good interview because I had loads of new work and I was really enthusiastic about it. I think they suddenly thought “yeah, we can have a sculptor here, we have never thought of that”. Here was someone who was a bit different and they were looking for something a bit different. I just happened to fit that bill.’

Some artists were stoical about difficult periods where work was slack and tried to make those into opportunities as well. The emphasis was on using the time positively in order to develop something new which could lead to a new avenue of work.

‘So I went back to the studio and started drawing which I hadn’t done for years, and that started throwing up other possibilities and other ideas. Again, there’s a combination of applying for opportunities, and having opportunities brought to you. So since then it’s been a combination of in the fallow years, you are just keeping up some kind of practice in the studio, which will throw up possibilities.’

Thus, artists saw themselves as very much having to keep things going themselves. They expected very little to come to them simply because they made work. They felt very much that it was down to them to make it happen.
Flexibility

In some cases, flexibility was seen as important, particularly in building up certain skills that could be used in conjunction with making work. These may not be immediately related to art, but were skills which could be combined with art to open up other career directions. This again comes back to the realisation by artists, once they have been out of college for some time, that there are other ways to be successful as an artist, other than the traditional routes which most graduates assume they will take.

'I think I then decided you had to get a lot of experience of different things so that you could have as many forms of income as possible which would fit in with your artwork. And so I developed the working with people side because I thought there was always a need for it, especially if you've got some special skills. At one point I was teaching in retail and distribution. I was teaching self awareness to Marks & Spencer trainees. Then I was teaching kids who had never learnt a thing at school and schools couldn't cope with them but councils felt an obligation to do something with them. Through that I thought I would get a hold of those of personal skills and then kind of marry the two. Eventually I applied for the residency working here in the hospital. I'd done a lot of work with people who have lots of difficulties and so that experience enabled me to then work as an artist in a psychiatric department. I think it was quite important that I did all those other things.'

Persistence

Finally, one of the key facilitators to a successful career was persistence. Many of the artist interviewed felt that their careers were now only just taking off and this had been ten years after graduating. It was argued that to be successful you needed a great deal of determination to carry on regardless, particularly because of the insecurity, the short-term nature of available funding and the low incomes earned. Most related their survival to being incredibly stubborn. This was what they wanted to do and they felt they could not be happy doing anything else.

Barriers to success

The artists interviewed were also asked what they felt were the main barriers to success. For most of the artists, there was one main issue - that of funding. The difficulty of finding good affordable studio space was mentioned, as was location. These are discussed below.
Funding

The lack of funding from whatever source was seen as a barrier. It was admitted that funding was better than it had been and that it was, in some cases, better directed. Having said that, the amounts of money available were felt to be pitifully small and often insecure. The following example shows how fragile the funding system can be and how susceptible it is to outside influences:

'In about 1991, I got back into a situation where I actually had a lot of projects lined up for the coming year. Everything fell through because of the stockmarket crash. The knock-on effect was kind of astonishing. Suddenly, all the people who were funding the projects, didn’t have any money anymore. I lost a whole year’s work, a whole year’s projects just kind of disappeared. For example, there was a huge festival planned which had a budget of about five million. Obviously, I was looking at only a small percentage of that, but even a small percentage was a lot of money. That five million got reduced to one.'

A number of artists found that the lack of money available to allow them to continue making work led them into the downward spiral of having to take on more and more unrelated paid work. As a result, they would be spending less and less time developing their work and so were less likely to earn any money from it. Several of those interviewed had reached a crisis point like this at some time in their career. The following experiences are typical:

'During those first six years, before 1986-87, I did my fair share of fixing people’s cars, digging foundations for houses, decorating people’s houses, emptying gullies and anything else that would pay for my art work. I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to make a living out of what I do, which is making sculpture. I suppose the turning point really was 1986/87. I had a really bad 18 months, after which I realised I was making lots of money doing all these odd jobs, but I wasn’t making sculpture anymore.'

'Now, I haven’t got any jobs on at the moment. I’ve got things in the pipeline, but I haven’t got any jobs on, so I’ll probably have to go and start teaching again next term, which is very frustrating. I thought I’d managed to get away from it. But then you could get caught in this trap where once you go back to teaching you run out of time for art work. The teaching will be three days a week. I look after my daughter one day a week, and then my partner and myself have got to spend time with each other. And then I’ve got to make proposals in order to do the other stuff in order to stop teaching. So it gets a bit difficult. You can easily see why people end up becoming teachers all the time, because it’s so difficult.'
This lack of funding was also thought to result in the final quality of the work suffering. Without other sources of income, especially if the work was particularly complex or used expensive materials, artists are unable to buy the materials needed to complete the work to their satisfaction. If they have to work outside art in order to earn enough to buy the materials, they then find they don't have the time to actually use the materials. As a result:

'You end up with this attitude. Things have to be completed not up to standard because artists can't afford the materials or they can't afford the time. People then get the impression that art or what art is about is doing things shoddily or something, or not investing enough in it. In fact, it is that the artist just can't do it. So the whole perception of what art is ends up being skewed by the lack of resources and support.'

'My work was going down hill because I couldn't finish the work off properly. The gallery in Germany was still interested but what I sent wasn't good enough quality, and you can very quickly damage your reputation. It's embarrassing for them, it's embarrassing for me. So I kind of stopped. But I never got anything sent back.'

Part of the problem of funding was felt to be the lack of awareness and understanding of art among the general British public. One artists felt that this was for two reasons:

'Since the '50s, artists have had a tendency to put themselves in an ivory tower and have been hidden away. The other problem is that there is very little teaching in schools about art. So often it is a quick 20 minutes to do something, with no understanding about what they are doing or why.'

Some artists in the end do not cope with the pressure and the insecurity. One of the main barriers to developing a career in visual arts was seen as the individual's inability to cope with the lifestyle that this sort of career requires. As one interviewee explained:

'Several people struggled for several years working as artists but then couldn't stand it anymore and became quite mentally ill from it because it is a kind of poverty really. They can't stand the poverty anymore and the insecurity.'

Location - London or not?

The perception continues that the location to be based, if you are to be really successful, is London. Not living in London in some cases was seen as a barrier to success. However, many of those artists interviewed
who lived outside London and were experiencing some success had no
desire to move there, despite the perceived advantages:

'I don’t know, I’d still rather be here. Here or London I suppose,
although I’ve never wanted to live in London. Well, you’re
supposed to be in London really aren’t you? That’s what everybody
says. You should be in London if you are serious.’

There were criticisms about the fact that in terms of galleries and
commercial dealers, things seemed to be concentrated in London. As one
artist complained:

'It is very difficult to get anybody from London to come and see a
show anywhere else. There is so much going on in London, they
don’t think they need to bother. It’s very frustrating.’

Some artists had found that setting up outside London was difficult
because there was not the artistic community elsewhere that you could
find there. This often meant that studio space was not likely to be
readily available and took much longer to organise:

'It was very much not the done thing. If you were going to be
serious about being an artist then you went to London. So it was
quite a struggle initially to set up a studio outside London and for
people to take that seriously.’

Many found the networking and contacts that had to be made to succeed
in London a very unattractive process, and felt no desire to be part of it.

'It’s true you do sometimes look and you see work and you think “I
am better than that” and you are better than that but they are doing
well. You ask “why are they doing well?” and you know it’s
because they are in London. And I suppose I decided then that I
don’t want anything to do with that - I didn’t want to be part of that
art world. It’s so insular and everybody knows everybody else and
all that, and I thought “well either you become part of that or you
just stay outside it”. I don’t like going to previews and things.
Loads of people go to previews and think “oh, we can do a lot of
business there, and we’ll meet these people, we’ll meet those
people” and I thought “if that’s how you’re going to get on, you’re
a crap artist really. I want to be successful because I’m good at
making what I make, and I suppose I never really wanted to be the
world’s greatest sculptor, I just want to keep getting better at
making art.’

Another artist pointed out the risk of moving to London. If the artist
does not actually make it there, it’s much more expensive to live and it’s
much more difficult to find studios space. It is really seen as a gamble in
which you either win everything or you lose everything. In other areas it is possible to just get by.

Finding studio space

The problem with studio space did not seem to be actually finding it, but finding reasonable space which was affordable. We have already discussed the time and energy artists spent in their early careers trying to establish affordable studio space. Even in their later career, good space was often felt to be expensive relative to an artist’s earnings.

‘It can be expensive. You can pay what you want for it, by that I mean up to what you want. Generally it’s quite a big cost. If you compare it as a percentage of what your income is, it’s a big cost. It might not seem a big cost to someone with a normal job.’

‘It’s quite easy to hire photographic studios in London, but some of them are quite expensive. It’s a slightly different situation than a studio for an artist. I suppose the equivalent for most photographers would be a darkroom, and there is definitely a shortage of darkrooms that people can go to when they are just starting. I think there’s a real shortage of those - the sort of places that Camerawork and Photofusion run. So photographers are compelled to build their own darkrooms in the beginning because the facilities you can use at those places are difficult to book or they are unsatisfactory once you get there.’

‘No. It is not a problem finding space. Affordable studio space is a problem.’

‘I mean the biggest barrier with the last place was the expense of it. I was paying the same for my studio space as I did for my half of the mortgage, which is a lot of money. And then you find yourself getting caught in a trap of having to do other work to be able to afford the space, in my case teaching, but then you’re not in it to use it.’

The other difficulty with getting studios was that they were often on short-term leases which would mean a lot of moving around. Due to the need to keep the cost down, studios tended to be set up in condemned houses, empty industrial spaces and in buildings where the lease was due to expire within the next two or three years. Although this meant the rents would be relatively cheap, it also meant that a great deal of effort would be put into setting up the studio for a relatively short tenancy. Constantly having to move was felt to be unsettling and very time consuming, taking up valuable time which should have been spent on making work. The following examples are typical:
Career paths of visual artists

'The way that the studios I've been involved in worked, is that artists will take on buildings which are usually at the end of their lease. Therefore the rent is cheaper, but it also means that you have to keep on moving around. I had a longer lease, a seven years lease, for the last studio I was in, but for that luxury we had to pay a lot for it. But then the stability was good, and at the time I was able to afford that.'

'With the other group studio it dropped to a point where we were having to move more of less every 18 months. You're talking about 20 to 25 people with all of their stuff, having to find a building each time and set up all the legality of it.'

There was the suggestion that studio space has become easier to find over the last ten to 15 years. This was because there were more artists setting up group studios and so there were more affordable places available. It was also thought that space may be easier to find in the North because there were more empty industrial buildings than in the South:

'I don't think it has really. I think I've always managed to find somewhere, and I think that's improved over the last ten years. There seems to be far more studios, like shared studio spaces, where artists are getting together and setting up places.'

Space to work

Finding a good space to work was very important to the majority of artists interviewed. We have seen in the previous section that affordable studio space was not easy to find. However, all but two of the practising artists had a studio space of some sort away from home. The main reason for needing a studio was simply to have a space to make work.

'I think that eventually even in my principal areas of practice it does become important to have a studio. Obviously, if you are a conventional painter or sculptor, somewhere to be able to make the work is important to you. You can't make large sculptures in your back room.'

The studio, however, needs to be a space where the artist can concentrate on the work. There were also issues around the need to store all the materials that artists accumulate, support from peers they can provide and the opportunities for exhibiting and selling work. These issues are discussed more fully below.
Away from home

Most artists preferred to have their studio space away from home. It was felt that this instilled better discipline in their approach to work. A number suggested that if you worked at home it was very easy to become distracted and find other things to do. It also allowed you to put things down at the end of the day and leave them. Without having a specific space to work, it was thought to be difficult to separate out home and working life.

'There are too many distractions at home as well. You get up and you think "I should paint that ceiling really", or "I ought to do the washing" etc. I didn't want that. I wanted no distractions, so I had to go away from home. Now I'm probably strong enough to have a studio at home, but I haven't got the space, and I quite like going out.'

'I've never been able to work at home. I think perhaps when you are not being paid to do anything, the fact of getting up and going somewhere is quite important. It's almost like going to work. There is also the fact that you can leave it there, and go away from it. I've always found that important too, whereas if it was in my own house, and I was surrounded by paint and stuff, and you notice the kitchen needs cleaning, there are perhaps too many things that can put you off as well.'

'I could probably work at home now, but then I thought that I needed that discipline of getting up and going to work. When you are on the dole, nothing matters, you don't have to get up except when you need to go and collect your money. So, why get up? And that's what I didn't want. I knew that I wanted to be an artist, but it's still easy not to do it, and I've seen it happen. People ask "when were you last in the studio?" and I'd say "well, today I got up at 12 o'clock so I couldn't be bothered you know". I didn't want that, so I knew I needed a routine: nine o'clock in the studio and go home at five. I was like that at college even; I was the only person who was like it.'

It was also pointed out, however, that the studio could not be too far away from home, otherwise the travelling backwards and forwards could become too time consuming. For one artist the time and expense of renting and travelling to a studio, combined with the regimented feel of having to force yourself to work once you got there, outweighed any objections he may have had regarding working from home. He said:

'... so what I decided to do was put an extension on my home, and I actually worked out that over a five year period of paying back a loan I would be better off on a monthly basis than renting a studio. The lighting is brilliant because it's a conservatory and it's
increased the value of my property, and after five years no more studio rent ever!'"

Support from peers

Those artists working in group studios found the company of other artists very supportive. Many artists talked about the isolation they felt at various times in their careers but particularly after leaving college. Group studios allowed artists to get support from other people about the direction and quality of their work, even though they may not always be right.

'But it's incredibly helpful. I mean such basic things like carrying a bag of plaster upstairs. Sometimes you just need another pair of hands. And then if you're not feeling too good or you're not happy, you've got that kind of moral support.'

'You see it's through that kind of communication that you get your peer group criticism. That was quite important. Although it's not always what you want to hear. I mean it's not always right. '

This support obviously depended on the people sharing the space. There were examples given of where the studios were not a supportive environment at all. If the support of the other artists was to be relied upon, artists felt they had to build up a relationship with them. In this way they would come to trust them and value their opinion. If this did not happen, the studio could be just as isolating as being on your own. This could particularly be the case where the turnover of people within the group was quite high:

'In other groups they are actually very competitive, and can be very bitchy. I know that some of the groups in London are like that, but I think that also depends on the organisation. The letting and the sub-letting here is quite tight, so we always know who's in the studios. Whereas in London studios, there are people who have let studios unofficially, so you don't actually know who's in the building with you. A lot of people here are long-term residents.'

One artist interviewed was of the opposite view. He had deliberately avoided the group studio because he felt it would be too distracting. A lot of his work was focused and undertaken in landscapes and so as a space to work, the studio was not so necessary. He also did not want the interruptions of other people being around:

'Also I have become very much a loner. I did not want to be part of a group studio. I did not want distraction. A lot of being in a
Studio can be social. With three children and a partner working, I can not afford to waste time. I needed to work on my own.

Storage

If nothing else, the studio space was seen as important because it provided a space to keep everything. Those working in sculpture and installation admitted that they tended to accumulate all sorts of materials, tools and old bits of work. This all had to be kept somewhere and home was not a suitable place to do that. As one artist explained:

'Eventually you just get to a point where you actually accumulate things. I generally scrap bits of installation after a few years when they haven't been reinstalled somewhere. They get cannibalised into something else. But there is also the equipment, tools and all those sort of things. I mean my studio downstairs is almost like a tool shed; there's not much room for making anything anymore.'

Studios, sales and commercial dealers

Feelings were rather mixed as to whether having studio space was important for attracting commercial dealers and selling work. Quite a few of the artists interviewed had found that the shared studio had been important for setting up exhibitions and so on, contributing to their reputation, but few actually sold a lot of work through their studios and none had managed to get commercial dealers to visit them there.

'I don't think it is important for selling work or attracting commercial dealers. I think they are just going to want to see the work. They don't really care where you do it.'

'I'm not sure that it's important for attracting commercial dealers and selling work. It can be useful. We have open studios at least once, sometimes twice a year, and that is when most selling from the studio happens. I think that you probably have to be in London to get commercial dealers into your studio. It does occasionally happen. There's only one person I can think of from the large group of artists here, that has actually been picked up by a London commercial dealer, and was actually from an exhibition. It wasn't through the studio, he was seen working at an exhibition and then had a studio visit. Prior to that there was one other I can think of. He's subsequently moved up to London.'

Having said that, a number mentioned that it was important to have a studio because it was part of the professional image they needed to
Career paths of visual artists

portray. This had been important for attracting funding. One artist gave the following example:

'I've never worked like that really, so I've never wanted to invite people round to my studio. Although having said that, in order to get the grants that I got from the Regional Arts Board, it was very important for me to be in the studio working. Without that, you had less credibility because they want to come round to see what you are making. They want to give it to people who are actually doing it, not to people who were saying they were going to do it. So having a studio proved that you were serious.'

One of the artists interviewed felt that having a studio was important for selling his work. In the past he had not bothered, but now interest was increasing in his work and he was trying to move into the gallery system, he saw a studio as more of a necessity now.

'I have got studio space now. Now that I want my work in galleries, increasingly people see my work and say they would like to come to the studio to see my work. You can not invite them to your friends' back gardens. All work has been in response to landscapes. Now I have a strong space to focus on the work.'

Exhibiting

Why exhibit?

The most important thing to artists, about being an artist, is actually making the work and personally being satisfied with it. All the other activities were secondary but exhibiting came the closest second. It was agreed that exhibiting was important so that the work can be seen. A point which repeatedly arose about being an artist, was to do with reaching a wider audience. Exhibiting work was obviously seen as an important part of this process. However, it was not the main motivation for making work:

'I think exhibiting is important because it's the one way you will get seen. I mean it's a fine line. I would say that I do my work for myself. I do it because I want to do it. So if I don't exhibit I wouldn't stop working completely. But it is important that that work is seen. It's secondary, but only just.'

'I do think it is important. In a way, I think that unless your work is out there, who the hell knows about you.'

Some also felt that it helped to view the work critically because the artist was able to see it in another context and so assess it in a different light. There were other motivations for exhibiting, not least that it may allow
the artist to sell work and make some money. One artist described an exhibition she had as a big disappointment because although it was well received and got good reviews, she did not sell any work. Another succinctly summed this up:

'In a way, one recognises you have to exhibit to be able to sell.'

A couple of the artists interviewed found that exhibiting abroad had been particularly successful. In some cases, they had found it easier to exhibit overseas because the audience there was more receptive to their work. One artist at the time of interview was not exhibiting at all at home:

'I've got three or four shows going on: two in Australia; one in Austria that has been discussed for ever, which I'm sure will never happen; a big show in Germany; a show in Italy; and come to think of it, nothing here!'

One of the spin-offs from an exhibition is the catalogues or publicity materials produced to support it. Two of the artists interviewed, both from ethnic minorities, said that publications were essential because they showed that Black artists existed, exhibited and contributed. Another mentioned that as a result of a recent residency, his work had been included in a book and this had enhanced his reputation.

There were concerns, however, that perhaps too much weight could be put on exhibiting when assessing the success of a career. Some people are able to exhibit a lot but this does not necessarily reflect the quality of the work. This was sometimes thought to interfere with the awarding of commissions and awards.

'I don't think exhibiting is necessarily important or crucial to a successful career. Sometimes if you apply for a commission, people want to know where you've exhibited. I think that's not so important really, because it doesn't say what the quality of your work is. It could be that it's good, but it could be that you are very pushy and like exhibiting, or organise lots of shows. It could be you're just a name and people think because they've heard of you in another gallery, they should have you in their gallery. It doesn't necessarily say too much about the quality of your work.'

**Successful exhibiting**

There were a number of provisos about successful exhibiting. Some felt that it was more rewarding to organise their own exhibitions rather than submitting pieces for a larger event. This was because the artist is able to do what he or she wants rather than working to tighter restrictions.
Partly because of this, and the desire to avoid traditional galleries, many artist do organise their own exhibitions.

It was also suggested that it was better to avoid the temptation to take up every offer received but be more selective about where their work is shown. Some artists had not exhibited for some time because they were building up a new body of work which they wanted to develop fully before putting on view. They also pointed out that this would then involve finding the most appropriate place to show that work:

'I made myself the aim that I had got to make 50 good pieces of work before I did any sort of major exploration into London galleries and exhibiting. Then I've got to find the place that I feel they would fit into.'

Some found doing too much exhibiting could lead to a deterioration of their work. One artist said that he was not able to maintain the quality, having taken on too much:

'I did a lot of things for exhibitions which were on too short a time period. You end up rushing to finish something, and not really doing it justice. So I thought "well, what's the point of that?". If that means the work doesn't develop then just do the work and then think about the exhibition.'

It was also put forward that artists need to be clear about why they are having an exhibition, because this will influence when, where and what work they exhibit:

'I think it's quite important to decide why you are having an exhibition, what it's for, and what you are going to get out of it. It might mean you just want to show your work to everybody or it might be the other way. You might want to sell everything, or you want to become famous or get commercial dealers. Or is it just an ego trip? I think you have to be quite specific about what it's for.'

Getting paid

The motivation to exhibit certainly could not be put down to the income earned. Income from exhibiting was the exception rather than the norm. The payments for exhibitions which had been made were usually as a part of Exhibition Payment Rights (EPR). Although EPR was felt to be a really good thing, the amount of money received was felt to be small.

'I've only been paid a couple of times. This is where we're getting into Exhibition Payment Rights. It's a scheme that the National Artists Association and some Regional Arts Boards have taken on where the artists are paid a fee to exhibit, in the same way as a
musician would be. For example, musicians would get a certain amount of money every time a record is played or something. It's working on that principle really. You've done the work, invested time and money, there should be some financial reward. But usually the amount of money bears no relation to the effort and time that's put in.'

It was also recognised by some that although galleries can make a lot of money out of commission from sales, overall there was not a lot of money in the system, particularly for exhibitions where no work is sold. One artist summed it up:

'I think most other artists hope that EPR will be successful but it's very difficult because you come back to the question of who pays? Is it the regional Arts Board or is the museum, or is it the gallery? They are all as strapped for cash as anybody. They only have a finite amount to deal with. It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul if EPR comes in. The argument from that side is that something else will have to go.'

Exhibiting was seen as an important process for artists simply because it allowed the work to be seen. It was not seen as a prerequisite for a successful career but could certainly help in raising the artist's profile. The most successful exhibitions seemed to be those which were carefully planned and chosen for a specific reason. Exhibiting to sell work was not a prime concern.

'... people don't get paid for exhibiting. The gallery might have a very small fund to get the things framed or something like that. But compared to the amount a photographer would have to put in, especially if they're not going to sell, they're not the sort of images that sell. Then it's an enormous investment, I mean it really is a big investment in the development of your career.'

**Galleries and commercial dealers**

Working with specific galleries or commercial dealers was not as common as perhaps would have been expected. Only three of the artists interviewed were represented by commercial dealers and few had sold work through galleries.

Some explained that this was because of the work they produced. Some felt that their work was simply not the sort of work you could sell through galleries. Others concentrated in very large sculptures or installations which were not really appropriate for this market. As one artist explained:
'Most of them are looking for very commercial work that they know they can sell. I mean it's understandable in a way. It's just that there is very little room for more experimental work. I suppose that's where the grants and things that come into play - to support the more experimental work.'

For others, it was more to do with the way they worked. The following two examples show how the way the artist operates sometimes does not allow them to easily build a relationship with a gallery or commercial dealer:

'I've never made a move in that direction at all. I have not made a conscious decision not to, it's just that I tend to get diverted. The way my work develops, it shifts before I feel I've got a body of work that I could actually go to a commercial dealer with. I would imagine it's quite difficult for a commercial dealer to deal with that.'

'I find it very difficult if I have to come into the studio and think about making money. I have tried to think in those terms, that is making objects that perhaps are of commercial value but it just doesn't work for me. Fair enough if I was making things which had a commercial value and that was what I was interested in, or it just happened that way. Then maybe that would be okay. But if I had to think about it then it just doesn't work. I'd rather be doing something else.'

Some had made a deliberate decision to avoid the use of galleries or commercial dealers because they wanted to ensure their work would remain in the public domain and not in a private collection. For many, the purpose of their work was to reach an audience. Selling work to private individuals through galleries and commercial dealers was not thought to be rewarding or helpful in terms of their careers. Some found it a very unrewarding experience:

'I sold some work through a gallery in London. I remember going down to see it. On the Friday it was in, and on the Saturday it wasn't. I assumed it was broken but the women said to me "Of course you can sell work, you know". They wouldn't tell me where my work went. I heard it went to a business man in Jermyn Street. It's funny, we make all this work and it just disappears to the collectors. You never get to meet who you sell your work to. It's very odd.'

As we have already discussed, many of the artists interviewed were concerned about the barriers between art and the public. Some artists felt that the gallery system tended to perpetuate this because it had a tendency to be élitist. Most of the artists interviewed did not particularly want to be part of that system.
'Well, as a group we were interested in taking art out of gallery spaces, which are often sighted as being elitist and very unapproachable. Instead we were putting on shows that encouraged 'Joe Public' to come in. It was trying to make the art more accessible.'

'My reason for wanting to make public sculpture or sculpture in public places was because I was fed up with showing in galleries. There's a sort of elitism to galleries. It's about the people who go into galleries - art students, artists, art administrators and some of the general public. It led me to realise there are a lot of people who would never go into an art gallery but who actually really enjoyed looking at art. They were also frightened by it as soon as they walked in. They think "I don't know how to look at this stuff, I don't understand it". Whereas, when they just happen across things in public places they look at it and they think "hum, don't like that" or "that's nice". They are much more relaxed about it. That was why I wanted to make public art. The idea was to try to involve people in the making of that art as well.'

A few artists complained about the commission galleries make out of the selling work. Some felt that this was complete exploitation, whilst others admitted that there was a function there of providing a link between the artist and the buyer. The difficulty was that unless the artist was selling regularly and for a reasonable amount of money, it was very difficult for them to make anything out of it.

A couple of the artists interviewed had successful relationships with galleries because they had enabled them to reach a market they could not otherwise have done, particularly overseas markets.

There were also those who had reached a stage in their careers where they felt that a move to a gallery system or commercial dealer was probably the next step. This was driven by the desire either to sell more work or move to producing different work with a different market. This involved researching galleries to find the most suitable for their work. As one artists suggested:

'I haven't tackled it yet, but my plan was to select some of the things out of there and go along and see some of the venues, to see what they're like. Because there's no doubt about it, your work either fits or it doesn't.'

'I had wanted to be a community artist, to make work in public arena. Now I am feeling interested in moving into the gallery system. Also, now I feel good enough about the work and am getting positive feedback, I want to broaden the base that I work out of. Galleries will help broaden it. There is a particular client group out there that looks for my sort of work. The galleries
understand that and know who might be interested in that particular work. What I need to do now and what I should be doing is researching galleries in London and finding which might be sympathetic to my work. I am looking for introductions. Again it is contacts.'

Working in collaboration

Of the artists we interviewed, collaborative work had mainly been with other artists, such as writers, actors and dancers, architects and landscape designers.

Working with other visual artists

Some artists had found working in collaboration a very worthwhile and enlightening experience. It enabled them to come up with ideas that no one person could think of and forced them to explore their work more through the process of having to express their thoughts to other people. One artist summed this up:

'I really enjoy that way of working. You have to externalise things a lot. You have to talk through something. Nothing is hidden. Your thought processes can't be hidden, you have to share them with someone else. That's really good. Other people absolutely don't want to tell anybody else what it is that they are thinking about. So it can be quite claustrophobic when you're making something on a joint authorship, where you share all your ideas, but it is ultimately rewarding.'

Several artists interviewed had collaborated with artists overseas. This had been particularly rewarding because it exposed the artist to a different approach to working and allowed them to work in a completely new environment:

'I went to Brazil and I met lots of artists. I was looking to organise a project working with street children and hoped to bring a Brazilian artist here to work in the studio. I think it's important because you can get very stuck in one way.'

One artist suggested that collaborations had worked better with certain pieces of work:

'It's a different way of working. It's only appropriate for certain things really. For one piece we did, because it was a political issue, the work came out of discussion and argument so it seemed appropriate that we were working as a group.'
Another felt that the most successful collaborations were where the parties involved knew each other well and had a respect for their work. If this was not the case it was difficult to trust the other person and take on board their suggestions.

'I think one of the things I’ve found with collaboration is that you do have to have full respect and be respected by the people you’re working with. If you don’t have that then the collaboration won’t go anywhere. Certainly if it’s a true collaboration on an equal basis.'

Some found that because of the way the worked, they did not enjoy the process, whilst others were not sure that they actually learnt anything new from collaborations in terms of expressing themselves.

'Only the old theatre outdoor work. I usually work solo. I find it a lot easier that way. I am not a great negotiator. I have a vision and find it difficult to mix with others.'

'When a collaborative team works, it works because everyone brings their own skills to bear. In a way you find your niche in that group and you do what you do best. So I don’t know actually if you do learn a lot that is new. You experience other people working and the way they work, and I guess that could informative to a greater or lesser extent, but I don’t know whether it has helped me express myself.'

**Working with people outside visual arts**

The examples of this sort of collaborations were few and far between. For those instances where this had happened, the artists felt they had learnt something different about the way they work. The following example illustrate this:

'As part of the residency, we worked with a writer. We have involved bits of text from his stories into bits of the sculpture, and he’s taken things from the sculpture and written them into his stories. So it’s quite an odd sort of thing that’s happened. My work’s always been quite narrative, and I’ve never realised that really, stupidly, until I had a writer working alongside me, and I thought “yeah, I’m telling stories here”. And actually, for the last piece of sculpture that I did outside of the project, I wrote a story to go with it. It’s a way of explaining it, because I had to talk to some local school children about it.'

Another artist took great pleasure in working collaboratively, particularly with people who were not artists. He felt that the relationship was
Career paths of visual artists

mutually beneficial in that it brought a different style of expertise to the work and gave the non-artist a valuable chance to experiment with it.

'... after two days they were stuck with a problem with the work and I wasn't there, and they tried to sort it out. It was a discovery for them. They were ordinary workers who all their lives had done scaffolding for buildings, and suddenly they were doing something different. The next day I went there and I was amazed. They wanted to talk to me. They had become aware they were doing something artistic, and they'd look at the work. They became conscious they were involved in an artistic act.'

A number of artists indicated that they had worked with architects and landscape designers, but most felt that this was not really a collaboration. It was more of a consultative process rather than being physically involved in the design.

Black artists

'We are still stuck with a colonial world view in terms of art history. No non-White artists have broken that genealogy, whether it's Anish Kapoor or any Black artist, not even White Latin American artists. Unless our perception of art history changes there will be no fundamental change.'

This section details those issues that can be seen as specifically related to Black artists, and should be considered as in addition to their contribution to other sections of the report. For Black artists, the most pressing issue in terms of a successful career was having their work discussed in the public forum and historically recorded:

'You need the public, you need audiences, you need institutions, you need to develop a dialogue with your contemporaries, you need to be positioned in historical terms... in terms of development of ideas.'

Whilst there was agreement that more Black artists have achieved prominence and critical success, there was a general concern that it was still harder for Black artists to make a lasting impression, and that their contributions were often marginalised in the long term. It was felt harder, for example, to create a following for Black artists, and that even if you achieve success you remain an isolated artist with little influence stemming from your work.

The Black artists interviewed who went to art school felt that their presence was a token gesture, and they were the only non-Whites in their respective years, although this was felt to be a trend that was changing in
the '90s. Of concern to one artist was the number of students that had come to see him about their experiences of lecturers isolating Black students and encouraging them to explore their cultural identities. Whilst he believed that the colleges were acting in what they perceived as the students' best interests, he argued that the experience would negatively impact on their future careers.

'The history of Islamic art or African art should be taught at colleges, but they should be taught to everyone. The students should not be isolated from each other. If there's an Indian person they should not be taken out of the class and told "you should look at the history of Indian art". The teachers probably thought they were doing some favours, but they were actually destroying their potential.'

'White artists are free to do what they want to do, they don't have to deal with their identities, they don't have to underpin their work saying that this expresses their Englishness.'

It was believed that to have a successful career as a Black artist, their work had to be seen to celebrate their cultural difference rather than deal with it critically, as this made the work harder to attract galleries and commercial dealers, and harder to secure commissions. However, the downside of creating celebratory work was seen to be the ease with which it could be marginalised in historical terms. Another artist felt that you could deal with the question of identity without having to explicitly take either line:

'It depends on how clever a particular artist is. If you just churn out a stereotype of what it's meant to be like, then obviously you become marginalised. But if you start to deal with confusing versions then, for example, it can become neither African nor European.'

What this does seem to highlight is the additional resourcefulness needed to succeed as a Black artist, particularly when colleges are being seen to 'add to the extra baggage' carried by Black students when they are encouraged to explore their cultural differences, even if they have been born here. It was felt that the effect of being Black seems to entail having to deal with an extra set of hurdles, or career pressures, on top of those shared by all other artists. For example, getting a commercial dealer and exhibiting work have already been discussed as two of the key factors for the successful career of an artist, and these were felt to be even harder to attain for Black artists who wanted to break into the mainstream and have their work recorded.

Tokenism arose again as an issue later in their careers, where there was suspicion that even when some of their work was sold, the intention
Career paths of visual artists

behind the sale was less to do with the artist or their work and more to do with politics.

'In the mid '80s, one public body bought some of my work from me at a time when they were under pressure. There was a political objective: they should purchase Black artists’ work. So they bought every Tom, Dick and Harry’s, and they also bought mine. There was nothing special about my work. That was all.'

In general, the career potential for Black artists was considered to have improved, particularly since the '60s, when some galleries, for example, would not even show Black artists’ work, especially that of non-White foreign artists.

'I knew that some commercial dealers were very fond of my work, yet they didn’t want to show my work. One commercial dealer said “sorry, I can’t show your work, because we only show English or American artists”. I wasn’t English or American so my work wasn’t shown.'

A point raised by most of the Black artists was a need for an open debate about racism in the art establishment, particularly with respect to the role of the Black artist in the British history of art. One artist argued:

'. . . it is now recognised widely that racism does exist in this society. It has been pinpointed in various areas of employment and a debate has taken place. It has even taken place in cultural spheres such as Equity . . . it has been discussed in almost every profession. If there is no such thing as institutional racism with respect to art, it can only be dismissed within a debate, through an open debate.'

Such a debate was felt to be a way forward in confronting those extra pressures that were believed to impede the careers of Black visual artists.

Income and second jobs

The incomes of visual artists did not seem to improve very rapidly from that of their early careers. We saw earlier that income in the first 12 months was pretty non-existent and many relied on second jobs. For most visual artists, even those experiencing some success, their incomes were still pretty low and supplemented by teaching. Some of the following quotes illustrate this:

'For years I was working on £6,000 a year, up until quite recently. That would be what I earned from my work and the part-time teaching. Now I just get quite bad money.'
"I got £3,750 for making that piece of sculpture. I did do a few other things in between that (for four months work)."

"The year residency was £12,000 for the year (three days a week). £2,000 of that ended up getting spent on travelling backwards and forwards on the train, but that was the first time I'd been paid enough to live on."

"I get £16,300 a year, that's actually gone up a lot over the last year."

One artist argued that it was not possible for her to live off her painting. At most, she could only produce five or six good paintings a year. Even if she was lucky enough to sell three at £10,000 each, the gallery would take half so the income would not really be enough to live on in London. Thus, she continued to teach, which provided a stable basic income. She also did public art commissions, which although unstable spread over long periods and reliant on the complexity of the building industry, allowed the further development of her work.

There were numerous examples of second jobs either relating to the arts, such as running galleries part-time and teaching on a range of courses. Some still worked outside the arts although this sort of work was less common than in the early days because as the artist's reputation grew, other opportunities came about. The following quotes are typical:

"At one point I was reduced to working part-time in Pizza Hut. I was ten years older than most of the people working there. I just had to do something to earn money."

"For quite a few years I've worked as a set builder for offices, trade fairs and a bit in the theatre as well. Although it was quite dreadful work, it was very useful because it was fairly well paid - relatively anyway. So that kept me going for quite a few years really. But what it meant was that I was always on call, so if I'd been working in my studio and really getting into my work I would get dragged out on a job. So it wasn't ideal, but there was nothing casual that paid as well."

This again illustrates the problem we touched on earlier of other work cutting into the time artists have available for making art. The need to work in second jobs was seen as a barrier to the artist’s development and success.

There were cases where artists agreed that they had been helped by the support of a partner, for similar reasons to those discussed earlier. The fact that there were two people contributing meant that there would be a combination of different sorts of income.
Career paths of visual artists

'I have got my albeit fairly small income, but it is regular and then my partner's work is well paid when he is commissioned to do a piece of work because it is large scale. Then there is the occasional money that I get in from grants or selling some work, and that sort of tops it up.'

There were others, however, where living with a partner did not work in the artist's favour because of the limitations this placed on the amount of benefits they could claim. One artist faced very difficult problems when he and his partner split up:

'Because we were living together and my partner was working, I could not sign on. She had to support me. I was trying to develop my work and find a space to work in. Even if you do get work exhibited, you only get a performance fee for each performance and you are lucky if that covers your expenses. It's not a very great career move.'

'The following year, I had a year as a half-time technician at the local Technical College. I also split up with my partner at that point. We were actually married so she was still supposed to support me in the eyes of the benefits people. I also had the two days a week teaching so I did that until I got financially on my feet again.'

Some people were lucky, but again their circumstances helped and they had enough experience to cope with the uncertainty. This was certainly the exception and not the norm.

'Yes, I do earn enough to live on and I'm turning down work as well. You see I've got no commitments. There's just me and my partner and that's it. We've got no kids. Also, I've done it long enough now to realise that things will be all right, I think. I'm not complacent about that, but I've got a couple of things lined up for when this project finishes already, and I'm sure they'll be other things. In fact, I know there is: I'm turning people down all the time, not just one off. I'm constantly saying "no, I haven't got time".'

Overall, most artists were still earning very little from their work. Most got by with a combination of teaching or other work. Those who were surviving from their art work were earning probably far less than other professionals.

'I have for most of my career earned enough to survive, but compared to my contemporaries I earn less. People I was at school with, or knew in my 20s, who are social workers, teachers etc., and who are in salaried jobs, are on higher incomes, almost without exception, and they're also much more secure. But for
people who are self employed I think there is the whole problem of insecurity throughout their careers. Some people just can't live with it, so they give it up and they take another job. Some of us live with it - that's the way it is. I've never regretted it, but I feel that maybe if I'd decided not to leave teaching, or I'd become more of an academic, or I'd done something else, I'd have been better paid and more secure. On the other hand, I wouldn't have been down the sewers, I wouldn't have met fire fighters, I wouldn't have travelled, if you balance those things up.'

The only regular income seemed to come from residencies or teaching. Money from commissions and awards was very irregular and difficult to survive on, except for the few particularly successful artists. It also has to be recognised that those who were earning more had been struggling to get to this position for at least ten years or more.

Satisfaction

Despite all the difficulties of a career in the visual arts, those artists we interviewed were clear that they really could not do anything else. Their satisfaction with their careers had not changed radically from how it was after the first 12 months. They had the same complaints about the level of income and not being able to concentrate enough on making work, but were generally satisfied with the quality of the art they were making.

'I don't think you can be in a better state really. The amount of painting I do is always frustrating. It would be nice to be able to put the ceramics aside, and to create painting full time. I'd like to earn something from it. I don't require a lot, but just enough, and as I say, I think I'm excited by it. What are you going to do next? It's always very exciting.'

'I'm pretty satisfied with the quality of work, which I think is good. I mean the physical quality of it and the quality of the ideas as well. The artistic quality as well as the craft quality are both very good. I'm making a living out of it, and because I'm making a living out of it there are two other people working here who are also making a living out of it, so I can't help but be satisfied really. But I am not complacent.'

'I don't have any pressure to produce certain sorts of things. There are some disadvantages, I'd love to work five days a week on my artwork, perhaps to have my own space all the time. Sometimes I get frustrated that I'm not producing enough because so much of my energy is going into working with people in the studio, or trying to secure funding of the studio. But then on the plus side, I do
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have so much more security than most artists do, and I have a much higher income than most artists.'

However, the drive to always develop the work and explore new areas, made complete satisfaction almost an impossibility. Most were perfectionists, and even if happy with a particular piece already had something else they wanted to achieve.

'I don't think you are ever satisfied.'

Conclusion

As we saw in the previous chapter, the first 12 months were characterised by a lack of funding and sporadic, unplanned exhibiting. The later careers, although still unstructured in the traditional sense of a career, were characterised by more success in terms of gaining short-term residencies, projects and commissions. These tended to be interspersed or supported by periods of full-time or part-time teaching of art in the FE or HE sector.
7 The future

The next ten years

We asked the artists we interviewed where they saw their careers going in the next five to ten years. Most were unsure about what they would be doing, but had views as to some of the things they would like to try to do.

Overall, the most common response was that they hoped to be still making their work over the next ten years and making the work they want to. Some artists felt that they were taking on projects which perhaps they were not that interested in or were not that suited to, but because of the lack of opportunities did not have much choice. This goes back to what was said about success - that a mark of success was having so many offers of work that you are able to pick and choose.

Related to this was earnings. A lot of the artist interviewed said they would like to be able to earn enough from their work to live on, so that they were not distracted by having to work in other things or on projects they did not particularly enjoy. This did not mean concentrating on just one thing, but was again about having a choice over the projects undertaken.

'I think perhaps you are always working towards that hope and position where you can spend most of the time doing what you want to be doing - producing your own work, hassle free. That means when you are doing work for other people, it’s got to be things that you are interested in and you like doing. I would be more involved in artwork, but getting paid a lot more for doing less. When I work here, I think it’s quite important that this isn’t all that I do which is why I always try and do a few other projects as well. Otherwise it could be very limiting, coming here every day and doing the same thing.'

There were also those who wanted more opportunities to show their work. Once again, this was not about showing anywhere, but having more control over when, where and what was exhibited.

'Well I hope to be still making my work. I also hope that I would have more opportunities to show it, in the places where I want to show it. Perhaps have more authority, and I guess a bigger profile.'

Another artist also mentioned raising his profile and felt that this could be achieved by more criticism of his work. This way he felt he might make more progress in his career because he would be better known.
Career paths of visual artists

'I think I need a critical discussion about my work. Once that happens there is going to be more interest. The art market is a very small world, and I am not in it yet. That's where the galleries come in.'

A number of artists mentioned a desire to work overseas because they felt a different environment would allow them to further develop the work they were currently making.

'In the next five to ten years I would like to do more international work. I love travelling. I would like to work in other landscapes.'

'Where do you see your career going in the future? To Trinidad, I think!'

In the future, artists were looking to earn more money and have a bigger profile, not because they wanted the fame or the money per se, but because it would allow them more freedom to make the work they want to, without the distractions or worry of making ends meet and taking any opportunity which comes their way. Thus, they were hoping for more control over their work and its development.

Advice to others

When asked for a single piece of advice they would give to someone starting on a career in visual arts, a whole range of responses were given. However, there were some key themes which emerged from this:

Persistence. Most highlighted the importance to stick with it, if that is what you have decided to do. Being successful is all about determination and persistence. This also involved having a belief in your work.

'It's important to stick with it. I think, that's the first thing.'

Autonomy. A number said it was important to do the work you want to do, as far as possible. If you are making work that you do not believe in, it will never be as successful and you will never be satisfied.

'You've got to keep saying "this is what I want to do, this is what I want to make" otherwise you are just a fabricator for other people. If that's what you want to do, that's fine. I haven't got anything against that, but if you want to be an artist, and you want to work out there, you've got to stick to what it is you want to do. You might adapt that as you go, but you've got to be satisfied with it.'

Self motivation. This was about not relying on other people to help you in your career. It is all down to you. This relates back to the
importance of looking for opportunities and taking them, or making your own opportunities.

'The only person you can rely is you. Don’t expect anything from anybody else. It is all down to you.'

'Look for opportunities, take them, use them, move on.'

Flexibility. In some ways, linked to making your own opportunities. Part of being able to do this is about being flexible and making the most of the skills the individual has in different situations. It’s about being willing to diversify to open up new avenues of work.

'Be as flexible as possible. Be initiating things as well because there are so few opportunities. That means you can generate opportunities which you can use as well.'

Accepting rejection. This is a career where people will not constantly pat you on the back and say ‘well done’. There will be many occasions where work will not be accepted for an exhibition, won’t sell, or an application won’t win. Rejection happens all the time and does not necessarily reflect the quality of the work. The aspiring artist needs to learn not to be put off by rejection.

'You have got to try not to being upset by rejection. When something is so important to you it is much, much harder. You have got to recognise that not everybody is going to like your work.'

Collaboration and networking. Some suggested that working with other people was important because of the support they can give and because it helps to make connections.

'I'd advise them to work with other people as much as possible. Don’t just sit in your studio, you have to be talking to different agencies, getting things organised and knowing what’s going on or when something is coming up - just knowing what’s happening.'

One artist summed this up:

'As a Fine Artist I think you have to keep at it. You have to keep going at it. You have to be prepared to put up with being rejected from exhibitions, the difficulties of finding space, the difficulties of making ends meet. But if you really want to do it, you will find a way to carry on, and it’s only if you do that, that people will then realise you are serious about it.'
8 Conclusion

'I'm still working as an artist: I'm still writing, I'm still thinking, I'm still producing, I'm still dealing with new ideas. Of course I get depressed by the way I've been treated, but it's all part of the game. To be an artist is not an easy job.'

The previous chapters have looked in some detail at the lives of visual artists from their early days at school through to how they survive today. From this detailed analysis there are two key features of visual artists' careers which stand out as being different from traditional careers or other careers in the arts. These are:

- the relationship between making work and earning money from that work, and

- the apparently haphazard career paths most visual artists have followed.

These will be looked at below.

Artists and income

One of the key features to come out of this research was the apparent lack of commercial drive demonstrated by most of the artists interviewed. Artists state that money is not the driving force behind making work. What is most important is making work which they are personally happy with. A close second is exhibiting the work in order to achieve recognition from their peers and to reach the intended audience. Selling or earning money from the work comes some way after these priorities.

This is not to say that artists would not like to earn more. Money is important because of the freedom it gives them to spend more time concentrating on their practice rather than other income earning activities. Making money from work can be seen as an empowering process, and in the long run some financial return is essential if their practice is not to suffer. What is clear, however, is that if a higher income is not forthcoming, they will continue to make work, even if this results in economic hardship.

Many do suffer economic hardship. Recent research on artists' incomes\(^1\) has confirmed that most earn very little. More than one-third of the

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Career paths of visual artists

artists surveyed earned less than £5,000 gross from all sources of income in 1994/95, and 80 per cent earned under the average industrial wage of £15,000.

This clearly suggests that artists experience non-pecuniary benefits from continuing to practice. Ruth Towse\(^1\) refers to this in relation to opera singers, as psychic income, and gives the example of the satisfaction of performing. In visual artists, this psychic income could refer to the personal satisfaction of the work they make and the satisfaction of gaining recognition and reaching their audience. Indeed, some artists argue that they are incapable of doing anything else, so strong is their desire to express their view of the world to other people.

Thus, psychic income apparently prevails over financial considerations when choosing to continue with a career in visual arts. As we have seen, it is the overriding need to express themselves through their work rather than the possibility of earning large sums of money, which pushes them to continue. This lack of commercial drive must have consequences for how artists manage their careers.

The ‘career matrix’

Over recent years, our ideas of what consist traditional careers has been changing. The pattern of employment opportunities is being transformed by economic and technological changes. Jackson\(^2\) points out that the net effect is a widening diversity of career patterns and experiences, with many groups having more fragmented and mobile careers. Some writers have put forward the concept of the ‘boundaryless career’ in which individuals have no allegiance to a particular employer, or their work is dominated by short-term employment contracts. These careers are particularly characterised by an independence from traditional principals of job security, promotion, loyalty and so on.

In the previous chapters we have discussed the key characteristic of the visual artist’s career. These career patterns seem to epitomise what have been referred to as the ‘boundaryless career’. There are a number of ways in which this is the case.

Working to find support

One of the issues which came out of the study was the amount of time artists have to devote to finding a means of support for their practice, whether it be through exhibitions to sell work, funding from Arts Boards, public art commissions, residencies or developing their own projects.

We have seen that a key part of this process was to build a reputation and develop connections amongst the numerous agents who fund artists to make work, irrespective of the method of doing so. As more contacts are made, more opportunities arise. The artist develops a body of work and is seen to grow in terms of their experience and reliability.

Managing a variety of work

Another aspect of artists' careers which has emerged from the research is the need to be flexible and versatile. This could be in terms of developing their work to take in opportunities with new media or finding new ways to combine their artistic practice with other forms of work.

We have also seen that because of the very short-term nature of much of the funding, residencies etc, artists have to be able to work on a number of different projects at once and be able to move with ease from one form of working to another.

Working inside and outside

The need to work in other jobs unrelated to their artistic practice also appears to be a common feature of visual artists' careers. This could be in art administration or teaching, or something totally unrelated. Combining work both inside and outside their profession clearly creates tensions. Many artists complained that the time and energy devoted to other work meant that their artistic practice suffered.

Having said that, some of those who were teaching found the work very rewarding and challenging. The crux of the problem is whether the two activities compliment each other or conflict.
Career paths of visual artists

Perseverance

Jackson points out that in some circumstances, perseverance where success seems unlikely might be seen as a mistake. However, Towsel has suggested that unless individuals overestimated their chances of having a successful career, many potential participants in these labour markets are likely to be deterred from entering them.

Perseverance was a key trait in those artists who had achieved some success. Most felt that their careers did not start to take off until they had been working to establish it for some considerable time - in many cases as long as ten years.

Resilience

Closely related to perseverance is a degree of resilience. A number of the artists interviewed discussed the need to be able to cope with rejection and not assume it is a indicator of poor quality. To be rejected for an award or from an exhibition may simply mean that the work does not fit the particular event or area, not that it is not any good.

Those who were no longer working in the visual arts had left because of the difficulties of making work and working in other things, the constant struggle 'to make ends meet' and an eventual loss of motivation.

Entrepreneurial skills

The visual arts, as with other art forms, is often seen as an overcrowded labour market with too many people chasing too few commissions, awards etc. We have seen, however, that artists have some considerable success in creating their own opportunities. Some may be small scale exhibitions which generate very little income. Some have led to much longer-term projects providing the artists with enough to live on. These are often begun by artists who have recently left college, and who have less success with the traditional forms of funding and support because they have not yet developed a body of work with a strong enough reputation.

What makes careers in the visual arts different from other boundaryless careers is perhaps the fact that they are probably even more chaotic, disjointed and erratic than most. This is heightened due to the lack of

continuity, the predominance of short-term projects and the radical changes in direction which often take place.

These are careers in which one minor event can unexpectedly result in a number of opportunities, and careers in which artists not only have to grab such opportunities but often have to generate themselves. It would seem, therefore, more appropriate to refer to artists as following a career matrix as opposed to a career path.

Implications

There are a number of implications from these characteristics about the way artists manage and develop their careers in the future.

The need for entrepreneurial skills

It has been observed elsewhere that people working in fragmented labour markets often have to spend a lot of time working to get work. The importance of networking has already been mentioned. This requires not only time but certain associated skills:

- networking skills are important in terms of getting their work known to all the different agents involved in funding artists, for example the Regional Arts Boards, local authority arts officers, gallery managers etc.

- business management skills, in terms of coping with being self-employed, accounting, writing proposals, undertaking costings, setting up leasing contracts for studios etc.

- presentation skills, in terms of appearing professional and organised with slides, CVs, resumes about their work etc.

- time management skills, in order to juggle the variety of work.

These entrepreneurial skills are particularly significant to artists who have to work in a number of different fields and organise their own events if they are to achieve any success. The difficulty is, however, the lack of commercial drive demonstrated by so many artists. Indeed, the suggestion that entrepreneurial and commercial skills should be central to a successful career seem counter to the overall philosophy of artistic practice. It could be argued that it is this lack of commercialism which allows the visual arts to be so experimental.
Career paths of visual artists

The need for labour market knowledge

Jackson points out that careers are pursued in labour markets that are specialised to a greater or lesser extent. To participate in a specialised labour market, individuals need detailed knowledge of how work is obtained. Much of this knowledge is picked up causally over time, and lack of understanding can act as a barrier to successful participation. This is also the case for visual artists. There is, for example, a need to understand the most appropriate ways to complete applications for funding; a need to find the most successful ways to draw up proposals for commissions; and a need for knowledge about the most suitable galleries to approach for particular work. Success in the traditional sense relies on ability to understand how this works and market themselves within it.

The fact that colleges provide little or no support in this respect appears to be a serious shortfall in preparing graduates for a career in visual arts. Once having left college, research in other areas suggests the need for people to take responsibility for their own skill development and the need to engage in periodic reviews of their careers. In a labour market where it is so difficult to make ends meet, this seems an unlikely prospect.

Conclusion

What is clear is that artists are personally compelled to continue to make work. No matter how difficult it seems and how insurmountable the problems, in most cases they are determined to carry on.

The careers of visual artists are characterised by a lack of structure in the traditional sense, a lack of commercial drive, and a high psychic income. Although never a substitute for talent, good entrepreneurial skills and labour market knowledge can contribute significantly to developing a successful career. These skills do not seem to come very naturally to many artists and are certainly not fostered during their training. We should not, however, underestimate the achievements of the 'Young British Artists' who are well travelled, well networked and internationally successful.

'Lots of people think that I'm mad. Sometimes I think I'm mad. But I think the basic reason why I do it is because it's me. When I make my work, it is just me doing it and I get a lot of satisfaction out of that.'
9 Bibliography


