

Engage

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and art together

Call for proposals — Engage 45: Class and Inequality

Edited by Professor Sarah Perks

The outline below, stimulated by a discussion with the Engage Journal Editorial Advisory Board (EAB), is followed by a series of questions that can be used as prompts in proposals for articles.



Proposals are invited for issue 45 of the Engage Journal: Class and Inequality. This issue will focus on issues of class, socio-economic disadvantage and inequality in relation to gallery education and engagement programmes and the related sector. Deadline for proposals: 18 January 2021

This Journal invites debate that is rarely addressed directly in museums and galleries despite being an instrumental part of current discourse around equality, diversity and inclusion, and featuring high on public and personal agendas alike. If social class is yet to fully emerge as a key topic for the art world, it has started to resurge in visibility due to attention including popular media on the 'red wall' (working class communities voting Tory in December 2019) and their focus on the north-south divide in terms of employment, health and housing inequalities. In popular culture, books from influential figures such as the musician Akala have received critical acclaim of their consideration of class, *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (2019) is particularly interesting in terms of its intersectionality with race and post-colonial issues. In 1990, John Major famously entered Downing Street with a declaration to create Britain as a 'classless society' and debate on the topic waned through the New Labour years. However, since the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, class has made a return to politics and public consciousness, and inequalities have been further emphasised by the horrific events at Grenfell in 2017 and this year by the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, as Owen Jones says in his new preface to his

classic Chavs: 'the book's impact has less to do with the provocative title and everything to do with fact that class is back with a vengeance.'¹

In the UK, over ten years of austerity policy, Brexit and now the Covid-19 pandemic have seen a new period of poverty and economic uncertainty, in contrast to a relatively affluent period prior to this which saw increased investment in the arts. In the US, Trump's single term as Republican President created new divisions and tensions across the country and introduced policies against immigration and the working classes generally, despite their perceived increasing support for him. Brexit and Boris Johnson's rise in the UK points to a similar paradox with widespread support for an ever-increasing elitist establishment and lack of social mobility. Across the world, populist and far-right politicians are emphasising difference, cutting social welfare programmes and changing societies in a way that privileges traditional class and hierarchical structures. The art world has responded critically to some forms of patronage, recently turning its back on several key figures known for bringing major wealth and privilege because of their connections to unethical concerns (i.e. Kanders and the Whitney Biennial, Sackler family and Serpentine Gallery) – will this bring about more structural change and actually affect perception of class and associated power structures?

In terms of gallery and visual art education, and wider community and participation projects, there are strong examples of organisations challenging social inequality head on, but not as many as you would expect. Art Gene in Barrow in Furness has launched projects such as its *Extreme Views* with artists residencies and think tanks tackling the town's post-industrial deprivation. North Edinburgh Arts has a strong focus on civic engagement and community connections, itself inspired by a 'useful' agenda embedded in institutions such as MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute Of Modern Art) and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's work on Civic Arts Organisations. Some arts organisations such as Blaze Arts in Lancashire and RECLAIM in Manchester are youth-led and pioneering approaches to widening participation and access for those from low social economic backgrounds specifically; also providing support to increase working class young peoples' participation at senior and board level. Venice in Wales artist Sean Edwards was rare amongst his contemporaries to address social class at the prestigious biennial in 2019, his installations informed by growing up in a single-parent family on a council estate in Cardiff. His thoughts emphasise the lack of consideration within visual art: "People talk about a working-class voice in terms of film or literature, and I was thinking, 'What does that mean for the visual arts?' I think the nature of my work has been to find a visual language for this."²

Museum as Muck is an award-winning network of working class museum and gallery people working to affect change in the socio-economic diversity of the sector. The museum sector has organisations dedicated to, or with significant programmes, charting the experiences of social class including People's History Museum

¹ Jones, Owen, Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class, London: Verso Books, 2012 (new preface edition)

² As quoted in Buck, Louisa, 'Made in Britain: what to expect from the British, Scottish and Welsh Pavilions,' The Art Newspaper, 06 May 2019, accessed at <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/preview/from-charlotte-prodger-s-still-landscapes-to-sean-edwards-s-monochrome-quilts-the-biennale-s-british-artists-are-united-in-contemplation>

(Manchester), Working Class Movement Library (Salford), Hackney Museum (London), Glasgow Women's Library, and the Museum of Homelessness (London). Following a trajectory paved by renown theatre companies such as Welfare State International, the theatre community has responded strongly this year to socio-economic disadvantage despite, and in spite of, its own forced closures. Pioneers Slung Low in inner city Leeds have been operating as a food bank, their Artistic Director Alan Lane explains:

"We've been really clear, we believe that everyone who lives in Holbeck and Beeston should have access to the most exciting cultural life they possibly can. And in this city with all the riches it has, that life should really be very, very good. And we know that that's not the case. So I'm doing my hardest along with my gang, to put the best cultural life we can into this community, and if that means giving them food so they can buy their own crayons or school shoes for their kids, then we'll do that. If it means giving them food so they don't have to worry about that and instead can do a painting for our LS11 lamppost gallery – which was unbelievably popular – then I'm not really giving them food am I? I'm giving them the time to express themselves."³

In 2018, *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries* was launched as the 'first sociological study on social mobility in the cultural industries' by Create London and Arts Emergency.⁴ Broadening out across the creative industries, the paper highlighted the significant exclusion of those from working class background, the unrepresentative creative class and issues of unpaid labour. The following year, Jerwood Arts and The Bridge Group launched the *Socio-Economic Diversity and Inclusion in the Arts: A Toolkit for Employers*, marking a focus rarely acknowledged before in terms of employment practices in the art world. This toolkit framed the issue as one of the most urgent in the sector as, "those from lower socio-economic backgrounds still vastly underrepresented amongst the artists and employees of UK theatres, festivals, galleries and arts organisations of all kinds."⁵ As well as a mission to support long term change by knowledge sharing and expertise, the toolkit also advocates for an intersectional approach. Whilst it is not a 'protected category' of Arts Council England, they do acknowledge class and have introduced 'improving access to creative and cultural activities to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds' into their temporary equality objectives for 2020.⁶ Last year's Runnymede and CLASS' report, *We Are Ghosts: Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice*, contains many observations and recommendations that feel all too easy for the arts sector to unwittingly reinforce: "We need a conception of the working class that doesn't pitch working-class people against each other along the lines of deserving/undeserving, white/BME, British/migrants: such divides have justified policies that make all groups worse off."⁷

³ Accessed at <http://www.aledsrevolution.co.uk/holbeck-wellbeing-is-in-the-right-hands-why-a-theatre-company-is-running-a-foodbank>

⁴ Panic! Report accessed at <https://createlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf>

⁵ Report accessed at <https://jerwoodarts.org/projects/weston-jerwood-creative-bursaries-2017-19/toolkit/>

⁶ Updated at <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/covid-19-response-reset/temporary-equality-objectives-2020>

⁷ Dhelia Snoussi and Laurie Mompelat, *We Are Ghosts: Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice*, Runnymede Trust and CLASS, London: July 2019, accessed at <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/We%20Are%20Ghosts.pdf>

Writing in The Guardian in 2018, Javaad Alipoor hit a nerve with his headline statement, “The arts world has turned working-class people into a problem to be solved rather than audience members or artists to be developed.”⁸ In my own recent report for *Art Monthly* (‘*Restorative Futures*,’ September 2020), I discuss the importance of work by artist-led organisations in building community engagement across the North of England and point to ‘social exclusion’ as a largely middle-class concept based on the notion of being excluded from certain types of cultural and artistic activities.⁹

Covid-19 has brought rapid changes in education and public engagement across the sector, with organisations and individual practitioners moving activity online as their physical spaces closed. As the Covid-19 crisis continues and organisations have limited physical capacity, the migration to digital activity is growing quickly, actively encouraged by the government and funding bodies. Physical arts education packages have also been produced by the sector for those not accessing online. However there is little evidence that the barrier to access is just devices and data, and nothing to back up the notion that online free access is any more than accessible than buildings. On the contrary, the government commissioned *Culture is Digital* report (2018) concludes that rather than helping increase the diversity of audiences, online access seems to reproduce, if not enlarge, existing inequalities.¹⁰ What is the significance of these changes for our sector and how can we understand access as being beyond an internet connection, and address the structural barriers whether physical or digital? How has this increased digital access intersected with existing inclusion work on class and, for example, those with restricted access through disabilities?

Many artist or education projects on social class have been influenced by significant academic texts from Marxism to cultural studies, for example those by Raymond Williams, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall. Whilst many of these approached through their lens of race and migration or white male sub-cultures, theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw developed ‘intersectionality’ to explain how these categories interconnect with each other. More recently books should as *Museum Activism* (Richard Sandell et al, 2019) and *Anonymous Was A Woman: A Museums and Feminism Reader* (Jenna C. Ashton, 2020) have paved new ground, repositioning practice in terms of equality, activism and social justice. Arts Council England’s ten year vision launched earlier this year, *Let’s Create*, reads like a participatory call to arms for geographical and socio-economic equality, albeit one without a detailed plan of action of the how this is achieved. *Class and inequality* can also chart the rise of the private gallery and museum – both in the UK and internationally from the Zabłudowicz Collection in London to MONA in Tasmania – with their structures, education spaces and programmes often rivalling the longstanding players that are largely public funded.

⁸ Alipoor, Javaad, ‘The arts world sees working-class people as a problem to be solved’, The Guardian, 5 Jun 2018, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jun/05/arts-working-class-people-britain-theatre>

⁹ Perks, Sarah, ‘Restorative Futures’, in *Art Monthly*, September 2020.

¹⁰ Report accessed at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital>

Questions

We are interested in contributions from colleagues in the UK and worldwide that concern the topic of class and inequality and specifically where this connects to gallery and visual art education. Proposals can address questions such as:

- How can we further understand where issues of class affect the practice of gallery and visual art education?
- What are the leading examples of inclusive and intersectional arts education practice that relate to class?
- How has academic theory influenced sector practices and engagement methods?
- What has been the explicit relationship between class, inequality and this year's Black Lives Movement?
- How have institutions and the sector responded reports such as Panic! and Jerwood/Bridge Group's Toolkit and what is the legacy work here? How does our sector deal with socio-economic diversity and inclusion in terms of recruitment and/or participants and how do we view the future of this?
- What have been key findings from recent educational projects addressing class and inequality?
- Discussion of the role of place, community and/or identity in regard to class and identity.
- Where does class appear in our formal and informal education strategies and pedagogical methodologies?
- What is the wider relevance of intersectional approaches to class?
- How do we view and learn from examples beyond the UK?
- What has been the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on class and inequality?
- How does class influence our approach to working online and through digital engagement?
- What is the impact of private money and institutions taking on more of the traditional role of public funding?
- Discussion of alternative structures for institutions and art schools, for example the rise of alternative and free art schools?
- What are educators and artists role in working with communities around social class?

Class and inequality should also provoke debate beyond addressing the working class and nor is this Journal restricted to the UK context, even if that context is the one that George Orwell declared in 1941: "the most class-ridden society under the sun".¹¹

Contribution information

The Engage Journal accepts a wide variety of writing and/or online content proposals including academic essays, interviews, collaborative pieces,

¹¹ Quoted at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_class_in_the_United_Kingdom

conversations, photo essays, debates, experimental work, and forms such as audio, video and other media will be considered. Final written contributions are expected to be between 2,000 and 3,000 words.

The Journal does not publish case studies, these are covered in Engage's sharing practice section.

We are also developing online event ideas for the Journal launch and invite proposals to consider how their contribution could be involved in this.

If you are interested in contributing to this issue, please send an informal proposal of around 200-300 words, your job/freelance title and contact details to editor@engage.org by Monday, 5pm, 18 January 2021.

The Engage Journal has a fixed number of bursaries for freelance writers for each edition, contributor's fees are not paid to full time employees, students or academics.

Journal timeline

- Proposals deadline: 18 January 2021
- Contribution submission deadline: 08 February 2021
- Engage 45: Class and Inequality will be published late March/early April

About the Engage Journal

First published in 1996, the Engage Journal is the international journal of visual art and gallery education. Now an online publication, the contents of each edition follow themes linked to the visual arts and education, chosen through an open-submission process. The Journal acts as a snapshot of current thinking on a subject, a repository of references, a source of practical ideas, and a forum for exchange between different parts of the art and museum and gallery community.

The Journal is edited by Professor Sarah Perks, curator, consultant and writer. The Journal is governed by a voluntary Editorial Advisory Board. The Engage Journal is accessible to Engage members and subscribers to the publication. To learn more please visit <https://engage.org/journals/>.

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