

# VASW Forums 2022

## Summary

Between May and July 2022, Visual Arts South West (VASW) hosted ten regional forums: nine online and one in person. Each forum was hosted by one or two local artist practitioners with each host encouraged to tailor questions and discussion topics around regional concerns and themes. This year, VASW were able to offer bursaries to artists and freelance art workers to attend the forums.

The objective of the forums was to create a dedicated space to discuss how visual arts communities are coping with universal contemporary issues, while at the same time carving out a place for artists and art workers to connect, thus strengthening local networks. Building on 2021's Forum report, it was hoped that these conversations would give VASW insights into each region so that detailed feedback about local experiences could be gathered from artists and art workers.

The cost of living crisis, imminent recession, emergence from a global pandemic and international conflicts have built an environment where most people, across all sectors, are struggling significantly. Although issues can be more strongly felt in particular areas, it was obvious that the commonalities across the forums were universal for both urban and rural areas.

On a more local level, some artists simply do not know who the other creative practitioners are in their region. This was particularly evident within the more sprawling rural areas. Many people were surprised to see the diversity of practices and were pleased to have the forums to connect on this level and make contacts.

This report highlights the concerns that face both individual artists and the arts sector in the south west as a whole. It is also evident that this is a key moment to bring the region together and work as a whole, avoiding the urge to 'compare and contrast'. Although the commonalities reflect structural and systemic issues which extend beyond the reach of the south west and, indeed, the arts sector in general, key needs were expressed that can be actioned.

## Opportunities

### Political climate: financial obstacles

- Financial concerns were raised at every forum, with the knock-on effect of COVID-19, Brexit, the invasion of Ukraine, energy bills and rent rises badly affecting both individuals and organisations
- The ability to rent studios and pay for travel expenses has been greatly affected
- Attendees from both rural and city areas cited financial difficulties arising before either Brexit or COVID-19. Issues around second homes and Airbnb driving up house prices, paired with a lack of development of social or affordable housing or support from government has created a steady decline into financial instability
- Difficulties arise around organisations struggling to secure long-term spaces, which in turn may affect the opportunities provided to individuals
- Some organisations face challenges navigating CIC and charity status with regards to accessing spaces
- Need for more streamlined approach to funding bids, with artists opting out of the process due to time constraints
- Funding can be outcome orientated, which fails to support process driven research
- Brexit having an impact on funding for organisations such as Cultivator in Cornwall, which is funded by European Structural and Investment Funds

### Access to spaces

- Need for affordable local spaces to show and exhibit work
- Need for affordable studio spaces to maintain creative practices
- Need for a directory of local council contacts to connect with artists and organisations with potential free spaces
- Need for relationships between councils and artists to encapsulate longer term, mutually beneficial partnerships that could include creative industries in regeneration projects

### Ways of working

- Some concerns that the arts sector is being positioned to pick up the slack for public services with regards to mental health and wellbeing
- Mid-career art practitioners are sometimes left out of practical career advice. Ideas around 10-year plans for artist and smaller businesses were required
- Need for greater critical discussion across conceptual visual arts groups in order to aid different conversations
- Many arts sector jobs that can support artistic practitioners in their early stages are low paid

## Connecting the region

### Working together

- Unifying all areas of the region will encourage collaboration and foster supportive environments for making and working
- Collaborating across organisations and areas could allow for more ambitious projects to be achieved
- Putting an emphasis on idea and resource sharing with local artists and art workers
- Artists need well-managed online networks and platforms to connect with other creatives within their own areas, and across the wider region
- Need for better connections with higher and further education to create stronger artistic communities and retain art students in local areas
- Focus efforts on making long-term, meaningful connections with local networks
- Connections between artists and organisations need to be nurtured and strengthened; support needs to be offered from both sides
- Networking could be more regular and informal, with a combination of in-person and online, to create lasting connections

### Utilising and acknowledging the importance and strength of digital platforms

- Need for connections, sharing platforms and digital networks
- Online meeting format beneficial for working parents, those living with disabilities and those with lower income background. Essential to nurture and keep this format alive post pandemic restrictions
- Utilise online platforms for skill sharing across industries. Momentum for this is dwindling and requires support to cover digital subscription costs
- Need to set up local groups, with noticeboards for exhibitions, events and artist profiles to create strong connections
- Desire to continue online forums from VASW, especially when used as a jumping off point to introduce new people to local creative networks
- Care and attention needs to be given to those who are still vulnerable to the ongoing spread of COVID-19

### Resource sharing

- Utilising VASW's website as a resource, with information about opportunities as well as a directory for arts organisations spanning the south west
- VASW wishes to commit to a region per month to be featured across all platforms. Regions will be able to submit artist profiles, exhibitions, events and use the opportunity to put themselves on the map. Aims to both encourage visits to the area, and signpost other local communities to become involved in visual arts

- Encouraging exchanges, VASW will seek to stay in touch with forum hosts and work towards encouraging exchanges between areas. An example of this could be a small gallery or space in Dorset swapping work with a similar place in Cornwall to exhibit. This would aim to connect the artists and show work outside of their immediate locality
- As well as connecting with further and higher education, pay more attention to student retention in the region, perhaps focussing on Masters students who are more likely to be settled and building a practice in the area

## Recommendations

- Focussed lobbying and advocating for more access to affordable spaces across all areas of the south west
- Utilising VASW's existing platforms to focus more on promoting regionally specific content with the aim of connecting artists to their own local region, while also highlighting connections to the wider region and the UK as a whole
- Tailoring next year's forums to reflect the evaluation of the 2022 outcomes
- Continue to offer an online programme providing practical advice for freelance art workers, in conjunction with West of England Visual Arts Alliance