

Supporting Work (version 1)

A collection of strategies for doing the job of being a freelance artist*

*made with self-employed artist, curator, writer practices in mind.

'Supporting Work' is a set of collaboratively generated ideas and encouragements to help artists maintain and develop their careers. It compiles ideas for dealing with tasks that are outside the act of making the work, but nevertheless need to be thought about, such as finances, planning and wellbeing.

This collection was created through conversations between a group of freelance artists, curators, writers and organisers who have established practices and have each been working in the visual arts for more than ten years.

It's been made with an ethos of generosity and anti-competitiveness, and is to be shared, borrowed from and adapted, to support our community of individual artist workers. It's around the water cooler sharing for those who work alone.

If you want to contribute to the next version, add ideas in [Supporting Work \(version 2\)](#).

'Supporting Work' is made by Joanne Masding. It is one of a series of objects made as part of 'Being mobile and multi-limbed'; a self-initiated programme of experimental research and studio development activities, supported by Arts Council England. Made with Ania Bas, Amelia Hawk, Lucy Lopez and Sarah Taylor Silverwood, and supported by conversations with artist mentor Jennifer Tee.

Juggling work and life

The boundaries between the two, being responsive to change

What do you make public?

- **Have an expanded universe.** Think broadly about what you spend your time doing and how to communicate your practice in its most expansive sense, letting people in on what feeds your work. You might have labels for the different activities you do, or it could all come under the banner of 'practice'.
- Work out your social media boundaries. Set limits on when you use it and how. Decide whether it's important to you to keep your non-work life private or to share a wider picture of you as a person.
- Decide upon your working practices and let people know this information up front. For example, you might not do artist talks, or you might work irregular days and hours. Use your email signature to say for example that you have dyslexia or that you will reply within 7 days. Create an access needs document. (See [Rosalie Schweiker's Terms and Conditions](#) and [Access Docs for Artists](#) website)

What do you need? (you, not your practice)

- Assess honestly how your work and your life are balancing. Trying to squeeze one into the other is usually unsatisfying for both, so think about what's moveable.
- Decide how much work you need to do, and of what kind. Can you support your overall happiness by doing work that's more flexible? Or by doing less work?
- It's ok to take a day off as a self-employed person. Prioritise your health over the idea that you're letting people down.
- Manage yourself like you would manage someone else and look after your wellbeing. Employers (no matter how temporary) have a duty of care to you, and you have a duty of care to yourself as your own boss.
- Build in costs of accessing support to funding applications and project budgets where possible. This might be to enable extra childcare, to pay for an assistant, or for ongoing mentoring.
- Learn what your early warning signs are when you need to plan in rest or take a break.

Do you need to make a change?

- Life changes such as health issues and new caring responsibilities will have an impact on your practice. Make changes with lightness and kindness. Do you need to work different hours? Does your studio need to change shape? Do you need to work differently with others? **Different doesn't mean worse.**
- Burnout isn't a good strategy. If you're feeling burnout take some rest in the short-term and plan some changes long-term. What can give?

Running a business

How to do the money stuff, and ways of lightening the admin load

What's your bank account setup?

- Keep finances and accounts clean and easy to keep track of by having a separate bank account for all your work transactions and a personal account that you pay yourself into.
- Use a free personal bank account as your work bank account rather than pay for a business one.
- Or find a free business bank account offered by certain banks. (Monzo and Starling have been known to offer business banking with no monthly fees.)

How is your maths?

- If you find doing accounts stressful and time consuming, consider paying an accountant to do this for you. Ask peers for recommendations of accountants who understand the arts.
- Or pay for a digital accounting service such as Quickbooks. Some of these services can connect with your banking to make preparing your accounts less arduous.
- Make an invoice log; a simple spreadsheet to easily keep track of who's paid, who needs chasing and who's reliable.

How do you do admin?

- Bunch up finance jobs to do all at once on a monthly or quarterly basis, so that admin doesn't leak into your proper work time.
- Invent an 'assistant' to deal with finance correspondence on your behalf: a separate email address and persona that you use when dealing with finance tasks. To run a business you have to take on myriad roles, and using an alias that has a voice more suited to demanding overdue payments than your artist-self can help get results.

Can you be smarter with the money that's coming in?

- Put aside twenty percent of fees and earnings as they come in, so that the cost of your tax bill is spread across the year. This can also act as a reserve if you have to take time off for sickness or something unexpected.
- When a big chunk of work money comes in, keep some in reserve in your business bank account so that you can start the next thing immediately, to keep up momentum.
- Move some of the money you pay yourself as fees into a savings account so that earn you the most interest.
- If you're going to take parental leave, put some money aside in the run up to your leave to act as a cushion for the period where you won't be earning or won't be earning as much as usual.

Career development

Making plans, what's progress?

How do you do planning?

- Make short, medium and long-term lists of tasks to keep you on track: doing a weekly plan on a Monday, a monthly check to make sure medium-term projects are on track, and an annual career dream list for long-term goals.
- Use the New Year feeling to make a career wish list in January, outlining long-term future goals. Make multiple opportunities each year for New Year planning, such as the back to school feeling of September or when you get back from a holiday.
- It's easier to do planning tasks after a break. Book it in your calendar and stick to it. If sticking to it is hard, ask a friend to check in with you and be accountable to them.
- Keep a list of places and people you want to work with so that you can track backwards and understand how to get there.
- Look at artists you like who are the next career step ahead of you and be interested in what they're doing and how they did it.

Can you meet them now?

Where are you?

- As part of your future planning, book in time to reflect on the previous year. Understand what you want more of and what you want less of. **Prioritise work that gives you joy!**
- Work out how you know when it's going well. Don't compare your achievements against others, focus on your own values and aims.
- Know that it's fine to go sideways and upside-down. Artists career trajectories loop and meander, and one year's successes might not mean similar linear growth the following year. Look at what happened and concentrate on things achieved.
- Know that the work is a product of the moment. When reflecting on previous work and projects, know that they would have been different under different circumstances and that outside factors such as budget, life and pandemics have an impact. **Perfection is not attainable.**

What can you make happen right now?

- Identify things you can make happen immediately and simply. You might not have been selected for a residency, but you can invite an artist friend to the studio for conversations about new work?
- Give yourself permission to do the scary bits. Want to invite someone to do a studio visit with you? This document hereby gives you permission to send the email. Do it! ([Ceri Hand](#) has great advice on doing this thoughtfully.)
- **Build your own parameters for making new work.** If work exists, it's more likely to find a way out of the studio, so don't wait for someone to ask you to make something new, be pro-active.
- Make your own opportunities for work to meet an audience, such as by preparing an open studio event or streaming live work.

Keeping well

Dealing with self-critique, working alone

What support can you access?

- **Find your people.** These are other artists, curators and organisations that fit your vibe. You'll be more likely to work with people who share a similar ethos, and have a better time doing so. Seek them out and build your art world. (This is not suggesting you only work with people who look like you, but that you learn your contexts to make a space where you fit.)
- Make a support group like the one that made this document. This group formed as a **Solidarity Syndicate**, and continues to offer mutual support and friendship. This could also be a network of peers locally or related to a specific strand of practice.
- Join relevant professional bodies or memberships to keep up to date with industry news and be part of a larger network of artists. Organisations such as **A-N** and **Artists Union England** offer support to their artist members.
- Research what support is available in your specific circumstances and use it.

Are you being kind to yourself?

- Check in with a trusted friend when you're in critical mode. Verbalising your self-critique to someone you trust will help you feel the truth, or lies, of your criticism, and where to go next.
- Writing down self-critical thoughts can also allow you to get a different perspective on them.
- Use your critical voice for good not evil. Ask yourself if a thought is useful and constructive and what you really mean to get further into the detail of what you want to improve.
- Don't compare yourself with others, especially if you've noticed their age in a bio. Artist research is a joyful exercise of finding people whose work excites you, not a competition.

What terms of employment have you agreed with yourself?

- Agree your working hours and work boundaries. This means agreeing when you're at the desk and when you check emails on your phone.
- Book in holidays to plan time-off throughout the year. Plan in holiday early in the year to make sure that it's a priority, and to make sure that you take it and can plan your work around it.
- Make peace with saying no. No doesn't have to mean a closed door: if you're saying no because you haven't got time, then suggest ways to stay in touch (like your newsletter) or ask whether the project could happen later for example.
- Make sure any work exchange works for you. Being an artist purely out of love is a myth. No one's doing you a favour by contracting you, you're providing something important. It's a dynamic relationship and you should feel valued in it.

What can you build-in ways to support you in future and maintain good health?

- Add in counselling or support activities as budget items in funding applications, to look after you and others as whole people. This could be costs relating to making work accessible, specialist training such as bystander awareness training or domestic abuse training, and care for you and others particularly when working with socially engaged practices, where subject matter is triggering, and on projects that require emotional labour.
- Write peer support and self-care into project budgets. This could be time for group evaluation or critical reflection with a mental health angle. Ask whether an organisation you're working with can do this for you or allocate budget to this work.
- Work on a variety of activities in tandem to your individual practice to inject different conversations into your week. This could be working as part of an artist-run project, or setting up an initiative such as a reading group.
- **Know that it's ok to pause.**

Being able to make the work

Daily planning, working rhythms, setting up conditions to make your best work

What's your workload?

- Assess your workload and learn what feels good, how much space you need, how much you can take on and feel able to deliver. Keep practicing getting this right.
- Book in time to play and experiment. Doing things that are unknown and unpressured is a vital part of the working week.
- Remind yourself of scale; what's reasonable to give in relation to how much you're getting paid and what you're receiving.

What does your week look like?

- Notice your time and energy pitfalls. Starting the day with admin jobs can mean you've got nothing left for the work. Try setting making as the first task of the day, to maximise energy, or have set times for dealing with emails.
- Think about how you keep up momentum in the studio, and what you need to do to get new work to become a resolved, finished thing. Achieving a specific making job can be a boost for tackling the next, and doing a mix of things you know and things you don't can alleviate the drain.
- **Do hazard awareness!** Allocate your time and be strict with yourself. Help yourself concentrate and focus.
- Remove background brain noise by setting up calendars and notifications that mean you don't have to do the job of remembering deadlines or to do lists.
- Have a mix of short and long-term projects that require different energies and bring different pressures.
- Think about the pie chart of what your working week looks like. If you want it to look different, what can change?
- Set personal deadlines for amorphous projects to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed and to help you keep making progress, one task at a time. It's easy for self-led projects to fall to the bottom of the pile, so make sure you make time to keep it moving on.
- Set time management calendars. Having long, short and mid range calendars can help prioritise workload and work around fixed deadlines such as submitting your tax return. Helpful for those who don't want to work in a high stress, adrenaline-fuelled, last minute kind of way.

How can you keep going long-term?

- Being accountable to someone else can give you an extra incentive to make progress. You could setup a peer crit group or an accountability club, where members say what they will do and the group check-in on progress at the next meeting. Are we all doing what we said we would?
- **Emails are not the priority!**
- Find the value in what you're doing. Even when no one else is invested in it. Learn to feel comfortable articulating what's exciting about your work, why it's important and what drives you, rather than getting this reassurance from outside only when others want to work with you.
- Listen to your gut. Follow your instincts and feel out decisions in your body. Weigh things up against your values and needs rather than money and prestige. A small iffy feeling at the beginning usually means bigger headaches later on.
- Initiate a long-term project that operates on a different scale. This could be something that has a new version you make every winter, or something that occurs every five years. Give your practice a different rhythm on a different scale.
- **Give yourself permission.** Whatever it is that feels tentative, or scary, or unknown, give yourself the permission to do it and see what happens.
- Add deadlines to your decision making. To make changes and big decisions, set time limits to determine when you're going to make a decision, and when you're going to act on it, to keep them contained.

Daily prompts

Cut up and pick

Articulate your expanded universe.

Invite someone in.

Prioritise work that gives you joy!

Send something out.

Build your own parameters for making new work.

Give yourself permission.

Finish something.
Perfection is not attainable.

Emails are not the priority.
No more emails today.

Day off? Holiday?

Find your people.

Do hazard awareness.

Play!

Make it a reality.

What do you want more and less of?

Can you meet them now?

Start something new.

What's next?

Listen to your gut.