

SPEAKERS

Katriona Beales, Kelly Lloyd

[00:00:37] **KL:** You're listening to *This Thing We Call Art*, a podcast about how, "I don't wanna give in to an ideology that I fundamentally disagree with that doesn't value artistic labour, because I can't think of anything more important... There [aren't] very many spaces like art where you can talk about anything and everything, and it actually sets up a kind of external to yourself conversation with others, you know? Just, like, the actual thing that art is, blows my mind and I love it. And when that really happens, it's just the most incredible thing ever. And I just, I can't think of a more worthwhile way to spend my time."

I'm your host, Kelly Lloyd, a visual artist, essayist, and educator currently based in the U.K. I've been interviewing people in the arts about their livelihoods since 2017, and today you're going to hear a conversation I had on the 14th of December 2022 with Katriona Beales.

Katriona Beales is an internationally exhibited artist whose work responds to the social implications of new technologies, mental health and digital culture. Katriona's interdisciplinary project 'Are We All Addicts Now?' supported by The Wellcome Trust and ACE, was shown at Furtherfield (2017). Recent work includes new commissions for: the V&A and Science Gallery London (both 2018); IMPAKT Netherlands and a participatory green-screen installation at Autograph (both 2020). Recent exhibitions include the group shows at Camberwell Space, London; Estacion Terrena, Bogota; ArsSpace, Seoul and the Ludwig Museum, Budapest; (all 2022). Katriona has an MA from Chelsea College of Arts supported by a Stanley Picker Bursary and an artist profile on Rhizome.org. In 2022 she undertook an experimental online residency with Anna

Bunting-Branch, at the NHS' only Centre treating Gaming Disorders, supported by an ACE project grant. She is one of the 3 founding members of Artists' Union England.

I met Katriona through the London Creative Network Programme, and I spoke with her over Zoom while we were both in our homes. The audio quality for this season is varied, so remember that the transcripts for all these conversations are available on the project's website thisthingwecallart.com.

Our conversation was an hour and 20 minutes-long, and while I wish I could share it with you in its entirety, today, you'll listen to excerpts from it. I'm going to drop you 11 minutes in...

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[00:03:02] **KL:** Starting to speak, like, publicly about your own work or with, um, Artist Union England (A.U.E.) stuff? Or when did that kind of really ramp up you needing to speak to people, you know?

[00:003:13] **KB:** Good question. So, um, a potted history, so I've finished my BA, like, I did my BA in Liverpool in 2005 and I did some work in... I worked for a disability arts organization and then I worked for like a cultural network and I was doing like arts admin type stuff. And then I did some training with a thing that doesn't exist anymore to do artists workshops in schools.

It was a program called Creative Partnerships when they were really trying to prioritize creativity in the curriculum. Do you remember that? [LAUGHS] Way back in the mist of time under a previous, uh, political ideology. Um, anyway, and actually that was when I started doing more stuff in front of people, um, rather than behind a desk type stuff.

I mean, I'd always sort of had a studio-based practice, but, um, it kind of, you know limped along, alongside the sort of arts administrator. And then, I went full-time self-employed, um, in 2009 off the back of doing a lot of artists educator type stuff. I don't actually like that

phrase really much, very much. But, um, yeah, so it was, uh, I was sort of, uh, in between my BA and my MA that I started doing more sort of. And then I, we moved to London, and I did an MA, well, postgrad diploma and an MA. And then, um, I was also doing like this, um, artist workshop leader project at Tate. So, I was doing, every week I was doing like three or four workshops in the gallery with people. So, it just sort of broke back the back of that a little bit. I think just being like, "Hi, you don't know me, we're gonna talk about art, make something maybe, I don't know." You know, just, I dunno. It just sort of, it broke the fear in me, I think, of being rejected by people publicly or, I don't know.

Yeah, and then the Artist Union stuff, sort of, well, it kicked off behind the scenes in 2012. Um, there was three of us, um, Angela Kennedy and Sally Steinman, and we were just sort of totally fed up [LAUGHS] on a long train journey. And then we did two years of kind of unpaid work behind the scenes, trying to kind of work out how you actually do that.

How do you actually start a trade union, what does that actually do? What does it look like? And then it launched, um, with like, we had an Exec[utive Committee] and that was it. We had like 10 people, um, in 2014, um, but we had a constitution and we'd made links with other artist union, um, groups like Scottish Artist Union and Precarious Workers Brigade.

And yeah, and then that, and then that also, I've sort of consistently spoken about that since we launched that, um, in different contexts. Um, and spoken about artist pay and labour and, and things like that. Um, yeah, that I'm no longer on the executive of the, um, A.U.E. Um, and it is still primarily run by volunteers. So, um, yeah.

[00:06:29] **KL:** Can you tell me more about what A.U.E. is and maybe some of the, um, stories that come along with trying to figure out how to set up a trade union and all of the different kinds of people you talk to and the research that you've done? Yeah. Just tell me more about it.

[00:06:47] **KB:** Yeah, so basically A.U.E. is Artists Union England, which is a trade union that represents artists in England. Um, and it's not like a Great Britain or anything because there is pre-existing a Scottish Artist Union. So obviously the point of a trade union is to represent a group of, uh, workers and, um, and be like a vehicle for like cre- collective bargaining and changing working conditions.

And, um, basically in order to represent people, you have to delineate who you are representing. So that can be- it's partly geography, but it's also like the sort of theoretical territory like, what is the labour that you are representing? So, um, yeah, so we, it's for a, a visual and applied artists, and artists with socially engaged practice.

Um, and, uh, we have over the years had a bit of interest at different points from artists in Wales, but we haven't kind of, that's not actually ever coalesced into something actually forming. I think when people realize the work that it can take, you know, that can be off-putting. And it's ongoing as well.

Um, so I mean, setting up the trade union was like very eye-opening experience. Uh, and also to be honest, at points, frankly odd. [LAUGHS] Cause it was like, the history of the trade union movement is in one level, incredible. So, a lot of the kind of working rights that we take for granted today, like basic health and safety and like a five-day working week and things like that are result of the trade union movement. And so, you can see like the incredible impact that collective negotiation, um, by workers has had on the way our society functions and how effective that can be. Also, equally it's been a movement that's been dominated by white men. It hasn't done a good job at representing minority groups *or* a global majority.

And um, yeah, we really wanted to sort of be a different type of trade union in a sense. Like, because there was a, there was an artist union in the '70s. Gustav Metzger and people like that were involved with that. And we made some relationships with them. I mean, he's passed away now, but he came to our, we had a launch at the House of Lords, or was it House of Commons? I can't remember. Um, there

was a launch event, I think it was 2016. We had like a launch event there. And he came to that, and it was just, we had some other members of the original artist union come, which is wonderful.

Um, but they- that, that attempt at organizing a union actually didn't, it didn't stand the test of time because they didn't do some - and this isn't a criticism there, it's just they decided not to kind of formally, um, constitute some of the elements that you need to actually really form a trade union.

So, there's all kinds of kind of, there's something called a certification that you need, which is from a, a made-up office called the Certification Office, which Margaret Thatcher basically set up to make it more difficult to form a trade union. So, you have to kind of buy essentially a certificate. It's like, I think it's like back in the- when we did it, it was £3000. But you have to raise that somehow.

So, it is like these hoops you have to jump through to, like, get off the ground, and um, we managed to do it. Um, which I still think is one of the most amazing achievements. I can't, I, just full credit to people who are still involved with the union, like Theresa Easton and you know, people who are like really doing nitty gritty organizing, um, through, through it.

Um, because it's a lot, it's a lot of work. But what we've been able to do as a result is really, I think amazing and, um, I have earned thousands more pounds on a personal level because I've repeatedly- every time I, I, um, get offered a contract, I renegotiate it using the artist union rates of pay. And every time I get offered more money.

So, I think it's a tool, it's a collective tool, and it's, you use it. If you are part of it and you use it, it has power. Um, but it invo- you need, it needs people to join for it to be powerful. And I think when we first set up, I'm talking a lot, so please interrupt me. Um, but when we first set out, we had a lot of criticism. We had criticism from the Arts Council. I had some, frankly, bizarre meetings. I met with like the Head of Arts/Visual Arts at Arts Council. He just flat out told me that artists didn't need that. And I was like- basically I had a bit of a, the bit between my teeth and I was like, "We're not asking for your

permission and we're not asking for your money. We're just telling you what we're doing." And like, left the room! [LAUGHS] Because I just got to the point where it's so fed up of people saying basically "Artists don't need this." When it had been birthed by mostly women who had caring responsibilities, who had had a succession of cuts to artist budgets because of austerity. And, and basically, we just all felt this kind of surge of like frustration which we were trying to channel into improving our lives and each other's.

And, um, you know, that I think those pressures have actually increased since we formed over the last - it's nearly 10 years now. You know, I thought things were difficult when austerity first kicked in, but things are getting more and more difficult than mountain feels like it's getting bigger. And that can feel so paralyzing and exhausting and overwhelming and just make you wanna just stop, make you wanna give up.

Why am I doing this? Why am I earning so little? And why is my expertise not valued? And you just feel like, this is not sustainable. I can't do this. And basically, I wanna... collective things make me feel powerful because it makes me feel agency. And I think if we can make things together, they act as tools to intervene.

And, um, I just, I'm really passionate about it. Really. That's, that's my speech. [LAUGHS] Join a trade union. I don't even care which one it is. Just join a trade union. Yeah, and I can I just say that our trade union, it, their co-chairs are a disabled person and a Black woman. So, you know, we're just like rewriting the rules here.

And I just feel also like, um... I just, you know, we've trying to be nimble with a lot of our growth initially came through social media and, you know, we are just trying to... but it needs people to participate in order for it to work. So, I don't really have that much time for people who are like, "I don't know what the trade union does." And I'm like, "Well what are you doing?" [LAUGHS] I dunno, it's like, you know, the things have to come from the members of the union in order for it to function. So, it's not, you know, a musician's

union has been established for 150 years and they have like a multimillion pound, uh, headquarters in like Oval, you know?

The reason that they've got a lot more power and a lot more weight in their industry is because they've been fighting collectively for 150 years. So, of course, something that a few of us set up in my living room, like that's still trying to get off the ground isn't as effective yet, but it needs people to participate in order to work and it is a really powerful tool.

So... also, I mean it's kind of interesting time as well because it was interesting cause the Art Review recently just said that unions at number three in their like art, "100 Most Powerful Things in the Art World". I don't, I don't really believe these things, these like end of year reviews, but they're like the top 100 this year of like movers and shakers in the art world. Anyway, in Art Review number three is union and it just makes me laugh actually, because when we first started out talking about this, which is 10 years ago, um, people were like, "The trading union movement is dead. It's no longer relevant. How can it function for like atomized workers? You know, people don't, um, have collective interests."

And I think it's, that's a fundamental- I mean, it's been shown to be a fundamental misnomer because, you know, actually as precarious workers, artists have got so much in common with other precarious workers who don't have contracts, who are on zero hours, who, you know, basically whose working rights have been eroded by neoliberalism and individualism, and all of these -isms.

And actually, people have realized that some of these old tools that have a legal territory have power to push back against those things and they can be really effective. So, when we first started, it was just at the same time as the Ritzy strikes were happening in the Brixton, Ritzy Cinema and the cinema workers were striking. And it was just interesting cause it was like this sort of... people were surprised. Um, yeah.

And I think, you know, I, I'm still interested to sort of think about what an art strike looks like. Um, but I think people would notice

pretty quickly if we covered up every single piece of public sculpture in London because it was an art strike, you know, your visual territory is totally populated by art all the time and you just don't acknowledge it's not acknowledged. So yeah.

[00:16:51] **KL:** Um, yeah. In my lecture that I was talking about, I kind of added to the previous iteration of the lecture was, you know, commentary on being present in, um, you know, Hito Steyerl's, um, Duty Free Art, and she kind of begins this one section which is "The Terror of Total Dasein" speaking about like, what would an art strike even look like? You know, like, some people have been striking the whole time. Some people have not been making something the whole time. You know, (KB: yeah) but, what does it mean to take that away and have people not necessarily notice. Which is something I've been talking with my friend Jesse Malmed, who I interviewed earlier, um, about kind of the book, Tell Them I Said No where it's, like, the only people that people notice when they've left are the people that have gotten to a certain point in their career. (KB: yeah)

Like there have been so many people who have left the art world. Um, yeah. You know, we've known so many of them, like through being artists for, for this long and in different kinds of, and, and that is a kind of, that's not a strike, but it's a kind of, um, action, you know? (KB: Yeah. Yeah. It is.)

I feel like we're threatening it so much all of the time. We're threatening to leave. I mean, I, maybe this is like a good time to- you know, okay. So, I went to your artist lecture at um, Oxford Brookes [University], and in it you spoke about a number of your projects. Um, and you had this one story of, is it psychotic constant...

[00:18:21] **KB:** Okay. Yeah. You're talking about *Organic Control*. That's a film, yeah, that uses some, that's part of a big kind of research project that I did, um, called *Are We All Addicts Now?* And I was trying to articulate my own sort of disordered engagement with social media and insomnia, uh, and the sort of negative feedback loop between the two.

And also, how compelling and kind of attractive and seductive I also find online environments, so I was trying to talk about love and hate at the same time in a way. Um, and, uh, as part of that project, I did a kind of a bit of a deep dive into the sort of mechanics of platforms and what's really happening in terms of behavioural psychology and how that's employed within those spaces.

And um, so I got a bit into B.F. Skinner, who was like the kind of father of behavioural psychology in a way. And he, uh, was very patriarchal. Um, but he was also incredibly influential and still is, um, in terms of the design of, uh, a lot of platforms. And he basically, um, there's a B.F. Skinner Foundation and they gave me access to their-very liberal. They were very liberal about it as well, which surprised me. But they were, they gave me access to their moving image archive, which, of his life and also their, their photographic archive as well. And, um, I used some of his, some films which show some of his research in some moving image work that I made for that project.

So, um, the film that you're talking about is called Organic Control and it, um, comes that the, the title comes from some of his research, cause that's essentially what he was looking at is how to control populations in organic, by "organic" he meant like people and animals. Um, but ultimately, he was really talking about people like how to kind of channel society's behaviour to be better.

Um, it's all, you know, all of the kind of value judgments about it and what better constitutes are very, um, like it's easy to be highly critical of, of his research, but it's also important to acknowledge exactly how influential it's been and how it's still utilized. And basically, he was a person who discovered this sort of principle of variable reward. And what that means is, um, that we can't actually negotiate a variable reward schedule. It's a highly addictive in terms of our brain chemistry. And he proved that through a series of experiments with pigeons and monkeys and things like that, um, in which he basically, um, set up a, a, a kind of stable reward schedule. So, they had a little button and if the pigeon or the monkey pressed the button ten times, every tenth time, there would be some food.

And basically, animals responded to that by only pressing the button when they were hungry. Uh, and then he, this is quite, some of this is quite, um, disturbing. I find it quite disturbing.

Um, but he set up a whole suite of experiments, which basically, uh, varied the, this reward schedule. So, he made it unstable, the relationship to the, so you could click three times and get food, or you could click 500 times and get food. And you never knew. It wasn't consistent. And the fact that it was inconsistent meant that you have these very disturbing videos of these pigeons just constantly clicking. And even when the food comes, they're still clicking cause they don't know when the next food will come.

And that's sort of like scarcity model basically. Um, and basically, they die. They click so much, like 15,000 clicks in a few hours or something. They would, it, it was, they, and there's this video as well of this Macau monkey doing the same thing. It's just probably one of the most disturbing things ever. Um, and I use that in that film. And basically, that is the principle that is used to kind of engineer, uh, addictive behaviour in online spaces. It's also used within casinos. So, like a slot machine, you don't know when you're gonna get the three cherries and win 10,000 pounds, it could be your next go. And so that unpredictability is what is directly linked to a causation effect in terms of addictive behaviour.

And, um, it's, but it's also used in, in Instagram or like any other social media platform where basically if you post something on Instagram, you'll notice this, it, they held, the algorithm holds back when your likes are released. So, people might be liking your thing, but it won't always release - you won't see people's responses in real time, so it'll stagger it. Sometimes it'll be- and then you keep checking back, "Has anyone like my post yet? No one's like my post. Why have they not liked my post?" And, um, it's a way of keeping users on, on your platform. And uh, it's really, really effective.

Um, and then obviously there's this dopamine cycle attached to that. So, I just find it very dystopian. And also, very kind of, I find it fascinating as well. Um, and also even though I know all this stuff, I

still fall for it every time as well. So that's, yeah, that's kind of like an ongoing interest in my work in terms of like, design, environ- sort of behavioural design.

And in a way that's kind of what we are doing as artists anyway, cause we are trying to engage an audience and attract attention. And I also find that kind of crossover quite uncomfortable, and interesting as well. You know, I wanna make compelling installation. And we're, we're, we're even more so now in kind of within this attention economy as well. So, fighting for space, for a prominence, for position. Um, [SIGH] except I just can't be bothered to do that anymore. [LAUGHS]

And I'm interested in like, I suppose I'm interested in sort of, um, you know, strategies of resistance to these things and, and that is another reason why I'm interested in collective sort of forms. Um, although I make my own work under my own name. Um, but I am interested in the kind of collective endeavours and not just in the art world. Like I'm part of the resident's association on my estate. And you know, for me it's like how I want to live my life is about creating collective structures that we, where we can help each other out and form community. So yeah.

[00:25:22] **KL:** When, um, you know, cause at a certain point, right, you were, um, one of the founding members and then you were on the board of directors of the Artist Union England, and you decided to step away. (KB: Um, yeah) Um, can you just talk to me about that process of deciding to step away and what that was like and how you had to negotiate that among a variety of other ways that, um, you were involved in other things and obviously your your own life and, and your own work.

[00:25:56] **KB:** Yeah, sure. So, my hand was kind of forced in way because I got pregnant, and I wanted to have a kid. And, um, I kind of, um, had had a model of art sustaining my art practice, um, by, you know, delivering projects in gallery and education settings and then having

time to have a studio practice alongside that. And, you know, lots of people still use that model and I think it's a very valid model, but it's one that only functions if you haven't got caring responsibilities. Because the moment you kind of throw in caring responsibilities in the mix, you don't really have free time.

So, the idea that I would be able to be apart from a child who, I would have to pay someone else to look after, you know, and I, you know, my partner and I, at that point, he was also self-employed, and, um, you know, we did juggle childcare between us. But whenever we weren't doing childcare, we needed to be earning money.

And it just, the space in my life for voluntary work collapsed. And so, then it just, it, you know, in a way, I, I kind of didn't wanna leave the A.U.E. Exec when I did because we were just beginning. Um, but I had to step down. And, um, and it forced my hand in lots of ways. In some ways it was incredibly healthy and in other ways it was really, really hard.

Um, but basically, I just suddenly was like, right, I've gotta go after grant funding. because if I'm gonna have any kind of practice and be a mom, I have to have income to make my work. And so, um, or I just (and I don't mean this in a diminutive way) but, or I focus on being like an educator. Um, and, uh, I really wanted to go after continuing to have an art practice. So, um, and I realize those things aren't always distinct. So, um, forgive me a, a studio-based practice, I should say.

Um, but I, yeah, so I just, because I'd done, um, I'd just had my kind of big first, big major, um, institutional commission for FACT in Liverpool and I was pregnant and I was running into my self-employed mat leave, which is like, not really mat leave. Um, and I was like, "Holy moly, what am I gonna do? I'm gonna apply to Wellcome Trust." Um, because they, they, at that point, they don't do this anymore and I think it's, it's such a, it's such a loss to like arts funding, but they, um, used to have a, an arts funding stream and, um, it was significant amount of money compared to like, what you can get off Arts Council, whatever.

So, at that point, the small arts award was £50,000 and the large arts award was a £100,000. And because I just had this commission from FACT, which was in collaboration with a neuroscientist, I had the kind of biomedical connection there. So, I just, off the back of that commission, I just, and it was all fresh, the research was there, it wasn't difficult to write that application and I just slammed it together and, um, yeah. And then three months into my mat leave, I found out that I've been awarded £50,000. Yes, thank you God! [LAUGHS]

And then that was a game changer for me because the only reason I'm still an artist today is because of that investment from Wellcome. I can say that hand on heart. Cause that enabled that whole project, that whole *Are We All Addicts Now?* Project. And then so many things came off the back of that for me. Um, because surprise, surprise, if you invest in artist's practice, they're able to make some good work and then that builds sustainability. And then I also leveraged some of that money to get some more money from Arts Council and you just work it, baby. Um, so that taught me a lot, that whole experience. Then it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't have got pregnant because it forced me to, to not just kind of subsidize myself, but to take my practice kind of seriously for its own sake.

But it's that... Uh, you know, I've had a second child and holy moly, that is, that has been difficult, just in terms of continuing an art practice, and then obviously that also coinciding with the pandemic. Um, you know, and this Autumn is the first time that both my kids are in full-time education which I don't have to pay for. Um, so, you know, we, we limped along. And, you know, and frankly we only survived the pandemic because my partner got employed as a lecturer. So, we weren't both self-employed when the pandemic started, cause it wouldn't- you know, we would've ended up needing to leave London like a lot of other people and had to live with our family, I think. Because it's too precarious. [SIGH]

And yeah, and I feel, I do feel a fatigue as I get older that the precarity is increasing rather than decreasing. And I, although I want

to kind of do everything I can to change that, I also feel increasingly like I need a job, um, that is paid. Um, yeah. Cause I'm 40, 41 now. [LAUGHS] So, like, you know, it's just, um, a really difficult time I think to have an art practice in the U.K. if you're not independently wealthy, and I feel deeply disappointed by that. Um, yeah, it's dispiriting really. So, I think, you know, we'll see what happens. I'm, as you know, trying to get some funding to do a PhD. We'll see if that happens. And if I don't get funding, I won't be able to do it, you know, so I feel in a way that pragmatism about needing to earn money is very helpful. In that I don't feel embarrassed about having these conversations with anyone. I'm just like, "Can't pay me? Can't do it! Bye!" [LAUGHS]

Um, whereas I know that for some people that I know who maybe, have got some external money from somewhere, um, that they find those conversations trickier. But I wish they didn't. Please, if you, if you do have, um, you know, if you do have some external resources that mean that theoretically you don't need to charge for your work, please do charge for your work because it helps change the landscape for everyone. Whereas if you can, if you can do it as an act of solidarity for people who need to earn money from art practice, then please, please charge. Like, it frustrates me that, um, the unpaid labour thing is kind of propped up by people who are wealthy.

Um, and relatively we are wealthy. You know, I'm not, you know, like it's all relative, isn't it? Um, but I think I, I never break 20k in terms of earnings, which ridiculous. But statistically, in terms of how much artists earn in the U.K., I'm in like the top 5% of earners or something.

There may be like not 0.5% of people who are doing million-pound sales at auction, or A) none of that money is going to them anyway. Um, you know, even with the Artist's Resale Right. That is so small, the percentage of money that's going to the artist is all going to to, you know, blue chip galleries or auction houses.

But, you know, then there's like, you know, the three people and their dog who've, you know, have got [a] suite of studio space and

Anish Kapoor or whatever has got a hundred people working for him, making public sculptures for Chicago. Um, you know, those people are just, they're in a different, they're in a way I don't really think about them as artists cause it's so... it's such a different experience.

So yeah, I dunno, brands. They're brands, and then the rest of us are artists. And uh, the reality is I don't, the last research... I think was that artist on average earned under £10,000 a year. But I think that's gone down since then. I would be surprised if it hadn't. So... stupid. [LAUGHS] Stupid system. Unsustainable!

Yeah. And if you think about the creative industries being one of the main drivers of G.D.P (Gross Domestic Product), and you think about the role that artists have within that, and you think about, you know, institutional budgets, and then once you trickle down what the artist fee is, even within a major institution, you know... it's criminal really. We need to be a lot more militant about how wrong it is, um, because talented people can't do it. Loads of interesting artists are not making artwork and we are poorer for it. [SIGH]

[00:35:19] **KL:** I wanna ask, like, why it's important for you to carve out the, this kind of time in your life and in your art practice to devote to, um, creating an opportunity for, for other people. And, and I guess an opportunity for other people maybe shifted in terms of collective action, like an opportunity for collective action.

[00:35:47] **KB:** Mmmm. I can speak to that a bit. I mean, I think for me it's a difference between "I" and "we" and when I was trying to negotiate better pay for myself as "I", I found it really difficult. I felt awkward. There were a lot of assumptions that people had about me because I had a scholarship to private schools, so I had got quite a posh voice. [LAUGHS] You know, so then there's like certain- so then when you start having conversations about money, people are like, "Well, you don't... you know, that's what we have", you know, anyway. And I just wanted to like, I wanted to, I, when I was, when I, I, when I rethought this and with others, we started talking about a "we", and then

suddenly it's not about a, any judgment, you're not making, you're not allowing people to make judgment on you as an individual. You're saying that this is, um, a position of, is an automatic imposition of power. "We" is like, you know, many. And I think harnessing the idea of many, when you are trying to intervene in terms of like negotiating pay is absolutely essential because, um, yeah.

Even now, like if there's a, if I see opportunity that isn't, um (this is one- a secret little bit activism I do) I just email them and say, um, "I've seen your opportunity advertised. It sounds fantastic. Love, love the idea", do a little bit of fluffing. And then I'm like, "But I noticed that it doesn't adhere to the recommended rate of pay that is published by Arts Council, uh, or the trade union rate of pay which is our statutory one. And, uh, you need to be aware that these are published rates of pay that artists should be earning."

And recently, you know, I had this sort of quite a lengthy email conversation with someone advertising a role within a hospital working with terminally ill children. An artist, right? And, um, they wanted an artist to do a morning, a two-hour workshop in the morning at one site and then a two-hour workshop in the afternoon at another site. And they wanted to pay one flat day rate. And I was like, "Where is the allocation of, of money for, um, prep time?" And they were like, "Well, that's four hours of delivery so that you are left with three and a half hours for prep."

I was like, right. When you go to a workshop, you have to set it up beforehand, and you have to like, have conversations with key staff, and you have to, like, make sure the room is like warm and welcoming and be there when people arrive. So, that's normally about 45 minutes beforehand. And then at the end, people quite often wanna kind of stay beyond their length of the session. You can't just sort of close the doors and chuck them out, particularly if they're ill. And you often need to maybe flag up causes for concern with staff or like have a debrief moment, pack everything down, make sure that it's put away, you know, make sure space is tidy. And that's, so that's 45 minutes at the end. So that's an hour and a half aside every

workshop, so then by your reckoning, you're leaving half an hour of prep per two workshops a week.

I was like, that's, that doesn't, that is impossible. The amount of unpaid work you're asking someone to deliver, and they're also not trained. You know, no artist has got training to deal with terminally ill children. So, you're also asking for a major amount of emotional labour to be done, which none of the - and then, then they were saying, "Oh, well, we give, um, psychological support, you'd have free access to our counselling service." But you wouldn't pay the person to attend that, so...

So, you know, the whole thing, I just try, and I just try and come at people all the time with this stuff and be like, "No." Um, and I don't apply for things that I don't think are paid for properly, but I also kind of call people out because I'm just like this, these, these budgets are set by people who are on a regular income and they don't understand what they're asking people to do. How difficult it is to run a two-hour workshop, full stop, um, that's engaging and different each week. That's actually quite a big ask. And then to do that in a context where you're dealing with people who are critically ill, and not providing any kind of pastoral support for the artists you're working with. I mean [LAUGHS] ... Aaagh! Anyway, so I'm like, "I will not be replying for this opportunity cause because of this. But I thought you should know."

[00:40:33] **KL:** So, what are you working on now?

[00:40:36] **KB:** Well, I am just, I've just finished almost 99.9% finished, um, a kind of new moving image work. Um, and that used some new sort of things for me. So, it was like with 3D scanning and animating. Um, and actually I had to work with some technicians to help me realize it because my skills aren't adequate enough. But thanks to this Arts Council funding, I was able to do that. Um, but so the project that I've come to an end, which is this, I had a- some Arts Council funding for this residency at this gaming disorder clinic, which is an NHS clinic.

And that was for me, and an artist called Anna Bunting-Branch, who's absolutely amazing, to do a kind of residency experimental sort of online residency, um, in the clinic, working with the, uh, service users in this stuff. Um, and then also developing our own work and research. Uh, so I've just finished the Arts Council sort of final report for that.

Um, and now I'm in this weird kind of impasse moment where I have a couple of ongoing projects, but other things I've just finished. So, I just had some work showing in Budapest that exhibition has just closed and now I'm kind of in this weird place, which I'm sure some of us recognize, which is like, oh, uh, the next, the next things look a little bit... the next few months are bit empty. Um, I'm not, not sure exactly what's coming! Um, but actually I am trying to sort of get some funding for a practice-based PhD.

So, I've been focusing on that. And I also have started making some new work in the studio. So, I'm kind of thinking about starting the new year with a bit of a studio focus. Um, yeah, I'm starting a series called *Worry Beads*, so using some, uh, hot glass, um, and yeah, some sculptures. So, um, yeah, I'm excited about those. We'll see, we'll see what they, what they turn out like. [LAUGHS] But um, yeah, uh, in terms of like more concrete things, there's very little in my diary coming up, which just feels really uncomfortable.

Um, then there's lots of like, possible things that may or may not come off that I can't really talk about. And then it becomes like if they all come off, that's gonna be bad. If one of them comes off, that'll be okay. If two of them come off, that'd be great. You know, like this weird sort of, how do you, how do you plan a life when you dunno what's gonna happen in it? I dunno. [LAUGHS] That's not just an artist problem though.

What about you Kelly? [LAUGHS] Am I allowed to turn the tables?

[00:43:25] **KL:** Yes, you are, of course. Like, I think, I think I'm trying to figure out a way to redirect my life towards focusing on, like, making work,

reviving my exhibition career. Cause I don't really have, you know, things ahead of me, which freaks me out. Um, and obviously like focusing on my PhD, whatever that means. [SIGH] [KB: LAUGHS] Um, you know, just like trying to push forward this project, trying to, you know, understand its effect and, and work with that. And, um, yeah. So, I mean, I guess that's...

Okay, so, one question I wanted to ask was, um, in terms of like, [SIGH] I don't know, I mean, this is just like a very simple question. I'm probably gonna edit this out. But like, what do you think the answer is in terms of like... you know, I've heard this from people and you're talking about kind of how you know, um, austerity measures within the past ten years, have, have gotten worse. Like how, you know, um, you know, especially as your life expands and you're no longer this one particular kind of artist, you're no longer able to, or willing to, um, um, kind of accept un- unreasonable or like impossible demands.

Right, like, why do we stay? Why do we stay in this world? And then it's like on top of staying, like how do we get the energy to like work collectively? Uh, energy and also time, especially if we also have a studio practice that mostly revolves around us kind of needing to like, push it forward alone, you know? Um, like even if we work with other people, at the end of the day, no one's gonna go into the studio and like, make our work for us.

So, like, yeah, like everyone seems burnt out. Everybody seems quite tired. Everybody's been moving around between different jobs. Like things have gotten, um, better in some ways, worse in some ways, you know, as we're getting older, things get more complicated or, I don't know, depending on, I guess, how much money you have. Like, um, just kind of like what still motivates you to continue to be an artist and, um, continue to be an artist and, like, be an activist and, um, and how do you... yeah, like... yeah. How do you kind of move past that exhaustion or something?

[00:45:52] **KB:** Yeah. Ahhhh huh... Well, if you know the answer to any of those questions, please tell me. I think (what do I think) I've genuinely thought within the last couple of years, I can't do this. And that is the first time that I've really thought, "I can't be an artist anymore." Because I, it wasn't gifted to me, so, I've fought for it. And I've fought for it in a lot of different ways, and it's been hard won. And the idea even of like considering not functioning as an artist is, like, so alien to me. So, it kind of freaked me out that I got to the point where I was like, "I can't do this anymore."

But also, it kind of energized me as well cause I was like, I needed a kind of recall of like what I was focusing on and what I was trying to, how I was trying to function. And that's out of that reassessment has come this desire to do a practice-based PhD because I think the things that I find satisfying about art are having a real rigorous kind of research-based practice that things are built on and out of.

And that kind of depth of like engagement with something is just what interests me about my own work. You know, there's like a tactility and there's like a kind of sensuality and then there's the kind of nitty gritty of making things, but which also have to be affective in some way. But they need to have some sort of intellectual rigor underneath them as well as part of them. And, and in order to kind of be able to make things that interest me, I think I need to focus on functioning in a more academic context because at the moment that's one of the spaces in the U.K. that feels it's still like not very nice and there's loads of shitty things happening in academia, but it does feel a space where I could sustain my practice, um, as well.

And that's not just to say -I know there's loads of difficult things happening, academia. But um, yeah, so, I think it's just that that kind of whole sort of set of questioning has sort of allowed me to kind of attempt to start to refocus again. Um, and also, uh, think through why I want to persevere, again. And um, some of that is just like, just stubbornness because I'm not, I don't wanna give in to an ideology

that I fundamentally disagree with that doesn't value artistic labour, um, because I can't think of anything more important. [LAUGHS]

Like, there isn't very many spaces like art where you can talk about anything and everything and, and it actually set up a kind of external to yourself conversation with others. You know, that just... like the actual thing that art is, blows my mind and I love it. And when that really happens, it's just the most incredible thing ever. And I just, I can't think of a more worthwhile way to spend my time. So, yeah.

In terms of what can sustain me, like doing small scale kind of organizing helps me on every level because, um, I don't wanna just be someone... and this, this is how I feel sometimes, but I don't wanna just allow myself to be paralyzed by the kind of overwhelming odds that it sometimes feels like, you know, this kind of herculean effort of pushing these boulders up this hill.

And... also, sometimes when you get to the top of the hill, like you think things will get easier, but they're not. It's just another hill. You know, like there's certain career moments that I've had where it's like, "Oh, I've been commissioned by the V&A (Victoria & Albert Museum). Fantastic... Oh, things are still difficult. Okay, great." [LAUGHS] You know, like, I think the thing is, is that the way that art world functions currently is you're only as good as what you've got next. And that I kind of don't buy that logic cause I don't think that's actually healthy. I don't think that's a healthy way of living.

So, I'm just trying to do things on my own terms. Um, and trying to kind of have conversations like this with people like you, that helps me to keep going because there's a sort of commonality there of endeavour and an understanding there and we're developing a kind of shared, a sort of set of understandings about: A) This is really bloody difficult. B) It's really important. So, you know, these kinds of conversations help me a hugely, um, cause I think, you know, sharing, it's just sharing, isn't it. Sharing, like, the ... (oh sounds so cliché) but sharing the journey of like trying to continue to sustain a creative process. Is it, you know, I could have a much easier life and that maybe- actually, maybe I don't, maybe that's just a kind of made-

up idea in my head because everywhere I turn at the moment, people are, I know in different sectors are having a shit time. So maybe it's just everyone's having a shit time and there isn't a greener, there isn't a greener environment. But I certainly could be working in a better paid job.

I might be having a shit time, but I'd certainly be in a better, have a better income. So, you know, I think, yeah, that, you know, there, there is some something there that it needs to change for me because of age, you know, mortality, like um, I'm not probably gonna be able to work forever. What happens if I have a period of ill health, you know, things like that. So, I need to be a little bit pragmatic as well. Um, yeah. Is that... I dunno that that answers your question.

[00:52:09] **KL:** 100% answers my question. It got really hopeful there in the middle, and then it just went down again. [LAUGHS]

[00:52:17] **KB:** Sorry, sorry.

[00:52:18] **KL:** Oh, no, no, you don't - you're not here to inspire anybody. Other than maybe, we're here to, to be with each other in this conversation so that afterwards we're like, maybe things feel slightly less shitty. Um, which I hope, I hope is possible... But also let me ask you the final question that I always ask everybody, um, which is, um, uh, did we talk about what you thought we would talk about, or do you have any questions for me? Or do you have anything else that you'd just like to say on the record?

[00:52:55] **KB:** Love you, Kelly. I really respect what you're doing and trying to do with this project as well. And I think it's sort of like drilling down into actually what's happening in individual artists' lives does show certain things quite starkly really.

Yeah, I suppose I just... I feel like the last sort of final thought, or really is, is just that as an artist, it's easy to undervalue what it is that you do. And I just feel like, actually taking on the fact that we need to

affirm to ourselves and to others that what we do is important. Because I think it's really easy to come under this kind of like general kind of like malaise or like meta... sort of bigger picture political environment that actually kind of actively is trying to dissuade us from doing these things.

And it, it sort of like infiltrates, it becomes like a kind of fog. You can, it feels like a kind of oppression or like a weight. And actually, what we, we're doing is, is really important and creativity is important, and imagination is important and rethinking systems and structures is important. And art does that.

So, if you're... I don't know, without being too like emotive, but if you are thinking about giving up, I understand. And I've been there and so many of us are there. And I think, you know, let's try and do what we can support each other so that, you know, we can minimize that because yeah. Art's important. And artists are too [LAUGHS]. That's all I wanna say!

[00:54:39] **KL:** That was great! Thanks for talking to me.

[00:54:41] **KB:** Oh, thanks for having me, Kelly.

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[00:54:48] **KL:** You can find more information about Katriona Beales and her work at katrionabeales.com. Links to what we spoke about today, as well as other interviews with people in the arts, are on the project's website thisthingwecallart.com

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Kelly Lloyd.

Thanks so much for listening, and that's it! For Season 2 of
This Thing We Call Art.