ARTTABLE

ArtTable is the foremost professional organization dedicated to advancing the leadership of women and nonbinary professionals in the visual arts.

www.arttable.org

Since the fall of 2022, ArtTable has been on a mission to uncover and address compensation inequities in the arts, with a particular focus on gender-related disparities. This collaborative effort, in partnership with Dr. Gillian Gualtieri, has culminated in the release of our first of three white paper reports, "Costs of Working in the Arts". These insights are now ready to be shared and mark the beginning of a series of evidence-based reports and workshops that will continue to inform our research. This project serves as the initial step designed to guide and advance our ongoing research, emphasizing the shared responsibility in creating a more equitable arts industry. Your feedback is welcome and we encourage your input as it will be included in our final report after all three workshops are complete.

This project is made possible through the generosity of individuals in our community who support our Impact Initiatives Fund.

Since 1980, ArtTable has been working to advance the leadership of women-identifying and nonbinary professionals in the visual arts. Through a variety of programs, we educate and inform members and the public about significant developments and issues in the visual arts, as well as support dialogue and promote the evolving leadership role of women-identifying and nonbinary arts leaders. Our initiatives provide ongoing educational and public programming, mentorship, and professional development opportunities that are central to our mission as a nonprofit organization. For a full description of ArtTable's Impact Initiatives, click here.

In 2022, ArtTable established the Impact Initiatives Fund in Honor of Meg Perlman. This fund directly impacts our fellowship, pay equity, and career roundtable initiatives, provides funding to our diversity, equity, inclusivity, and accessibility efforts, as well as provides opportunities for early-career women-identifying and nonbinary professionals in our Affiliate Membership Program by providing education and mentoring opportunities.

Please help us to make a difference by contributing to this fund.

The Cost of Working in the Arts
A Whitepaper Report from ArtTable's Study of Gendered Pay Inequity in the Arts
Gillian Gualtieri, PhD

The Puzzle

On average, women earn 84 cents for every $1 men earn in the United States, and the gender pay gap affects workers and work in nearly all industries (Ridgeway 2011). The gender pay gap is just one of many ways in which gender shapes inequity at work, and the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted several of these inequities in a variety of fields (Fuller and Qian 2021; Skaggs 2023). Indeed, the pandemic enhanced popular knowledge of these inequities and had long-term consequences for the changing meaning of work.

While gender inequity shapes work in a variety of contexts, the gender pay gap in the art world is especially puzzling, because women are more likely to be employed in the arts than in other fields, such as medicine, law, and business (Lindemann et al. 2016). Several studies from the early 2010s documented gendered discrepancies in pay, power, and prestige in artistic work. Yet, these studies do not account for the changes precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the world of work, the world of the arts, and social life at large. Inspired by these earlier studies and a desire to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which gender shapes arts workers' experiences at work and pay, ArtTable conducted a survey of artists and arts workers in the United States to better understand the current state of the artistic labor market, forms of compensation, workplace satisfaction, and the ways in which multiple identity categories, including gender, race, age, etc., may affect those outcomes.

Methodology

We used GoogleForms to administer the survey in which we asked questions about participants' demographics, work histories, current jobs, worst jobs, first jobs, best jobs, freelancing experiences, labor union activities, and other employment and work information. We recruited participation using the ArtTable newsletter, ArtTable website, word of mouth sharing, and through an editorial published in Hyperallergic. Ultimately, 1,234 distinct individuals completed some or all components of the survey. Most (**83.7%) of the respondents identify as women**; 11.7% of respondents identify as men; 2.6% of respondents identify as nonbinary; and 0.6% of respondents identify as transgender. The final population of respondents is remarkably diverse with regard to age, marital status, and parental status. While the majority of respondents are white (80.9%), we were able to recruit participants from a diverse array of ethnoracial backgrounds, ultimately resulting in a sample population that identifies as indigenous (1%), Asian (4.1%), Latinx/Hispanic (7.6%), Black/African American (4.1%), and multiracial (3.7%), among other identities. These proportions roughly match those of other large scale surveys of arts workers, such as the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) data. We collected data primarily in a quantitative format, but throughout the survey, we offered participants the opportunity to respond to some qualitative questions. We incorporate systematic analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in this report (we used STATA for quantitative analyses and MaxQDA for qualitative coding).

The Cost of Training in the Arts

There are many ways to mark the "start" of a career; some consider the first paid job to represent the beginning of a career, while others denote the value of unpaid internships and volunteer work in establishing career pathways (Frenette et al. 2021). Indeed, because educational credentials, such as college degrees, represent one barrier to entry or criterion necessary to be eligible for certain jobs in the arts, including teaching and arts administration, among others, postsecondary training can be considered a significant step in an individual's career ladder (Martin et al. 2023). Where someone chooses to study, what they choose to major in, and the kinds of professional development and networking opportunities, including internships, externships, and volunteer opportunities, facilitated by colleges and universities all can impact graduates' career opportunities and outcomes (Stevens et al. 2008; Hout 2012). Yet, college is not universally or equally available to all, especially with rising tuition costs at both private colleges and universities and public institutions (Jack 2019). According to *US News and World Report,* the average cost of a single year of college for an in-state student at a public university was $10,423 in 2022 (for out of state students, the average cost of a year at a public university was $22,293), and the average cost for a single year of private college was $39,723.

Rising costs lead to rising rates of student loan debt; student loan debt has continued to increase in the last few years (Akers and Chingos 2016; Baum 2016; Chan et al. 2019). Student loan debt shapes graduates' career choices and pathways, and arts graduates specifically report that student loans influence whether they pursue a career in the arts or stay in the arts after graduation (Lena and Lindemann 2014; Lindemann and Tepper 2012). Student loan debt often compounds existing inequalities based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status; students from racially minoritized groups and who are first generation college students are more likely to have student loan debt upon graduation (Addo et al. 2016; Hillman 2015). Additionally, student loan debt shapes accessibility to artistic careers, and graduates with student loan debt are less likely to pursue careers in the arts, especially if they are members of groups already underrepresented in the arts, such as racial minority groups (Oakley et al. 2017).

In fact, a 2021 report using SNAAP data finds that compared to bachelor's graduates with no loans, graduates who borrowed $10,000 or more have a lower likelihood of entering the artistic labor market upon graduation, and as the total amount borrowed increases, the likelihood of those graduates pursuing employment in the artistic labor market decreases (Smith and Albana 2021). This suggests that not only are graduates entering the artistic labor market at a financial deficit, but many, especially those for whom college poses a financial burden that is unattainable without loans, are unlikely to pursue careers in the arts in the first place, exacerbating existing inequalities based in racial hierarchy, socioeconomic disparity, and gender inequity.

The results from our survey indicate that 26% of respondents currently have student loan debt. Of those who currently have student loan debt, 58% owed more than $10,000 at the time of graduation, so their continued participation in the artistic labor market is quite remarkable. At the time they took the survey, 7% of respondents report currently owing more than $100,000 in student loan debt, and 1/3 (33.3%) of those who currently report having student loan debt owe more than $10,000. Our results also indicate that there is a slight gender disparity in student loan debt. 25.6% of respondents who identify as women currently have student loan debt, and 21.7% of respondents who identify as men currently have student loan debt. This suggests that, while the majority of our survey respondents do not have student loan debt, those who did owe money at the time of graduation and/or currently owe money on their student loans are more likely to be women, and they owe a substantial enough sum that the literature might predict that these individuals are unlikely to remain in the artistic labor market when the financial pressures of student loan debt set in.

One respondent succinctly explains, “I had to leave the job for a bigger paycheck to be able to pay my student loans.” Another writes, “I graduated from college in 2020 and earned my master's degree in 2022. I know that I am very lucky to have a job so recently after graduation. Unfortunately, with the level of student loan debt I have incurred, my salary barely covers all of my expenses in a low cost of living city. I can't afford a car, and I still avoid going to the doctor because co-pays are so high. I don't know what the solution is.” Another respondent suggests that a higher salary might make student loan debt more feasible: “I feel very supported with my colleagues and feel very lucky to have this position and work on projects that I feel proud about. I really wish I was paid more, as it feels hard with inflation, loans, cost of living, etc.” Another exasperatedly states, “I just want to make rent and take care of myself. I've never made a student loan payment because I've never made enough money!” Another woman summarizes the challenge she navigates: “Working in the arts it is hard to balance pay and what you love. I left a career path I adored (research/curatorial) for more administrative work to make up for the loans my art history degrees incurred and for further stability.”

These respondents suggest that perhaps the pressures related to student loan debt can be alleviated by compensation packages and other earnings that allow for the repayment of these debts and cost of living, but, our survey results suggest this is not likely.

Compensation in the Arts

The "starving artist" trope has defined the artistic labor market for decades; artists and arts workers are motivated by "passion" and soldier through the difficult conditions of underpayment because their work is meaningful and "noble" (Peters and Roose 2020). Artistic careers are also defined by certain institutionalized practices and norms that affect compensation, including flexible employment, project-based labor markets, unpaid internships, contract-based work, and self employment (Brook et al. 2020). These "non traditional" workplace practices make it difficult for artists and arts workers to secure consistent compensation, and the precarity that defines the artistic labor market makes it difficult to systematically study pay in the arts.

Additionally, there is a robust literature documenting wage differentials by gender and race across fields (Reskin 2000). Scholars have documented the ways in which men are paid more than women and people of color are paid less than their white colleagues in multiple labor markets (Browne and Misra 2003; Leicht 2008). However, given the precarity of the artistic labor market and the overrepresentation of women in artistic majors and the arts, we might expect that the gendered wage gap is lesser or even non-existent in the arts (Lindemann et al. 2016). Indeed, previous scholars who examine inequality in compensation in the arts find that the gendered and racialized trends of inequity that define other labor markets are replicated in the artistic labor market (Brook et al. 2020). The results of the ArtTable survey provide further evidence for the systematic devaluation of artistic labor and continued inequality with regard to race and gender.

We find that approximately 70% of respondents to our survey earned $30,000 or less as their base salary for their first job in the arts, and approximately 19% of respondents earned $31,000-40,000 as the base salary for their first job in the arts (indicating that 89% of respondents earned $40,000 or less as base salary for their first job in the arts). Notably, 69.2% of respondents who identify as men earned $30,000 or less in their first job, and 71.2% of respondents who identify as women earned $30,000 or less as their base salary for their first job, so a gendered pay differential, at least with regard to base salaries, is not observable at this first stage in respondents' careers. However, even though there is not an observably gendered pay inequity in this measure of first job salary compensation, it should be noted that $30,000 is a remarkably low base salary. Recent data published by Georgetown University suggests that the median yearly earnings of 25-34 year old college-educated workers in 2022 was $59,600 (CEW 2022). In New York state, a state where many arts workers find themselves living and working because of the concentration of job opportunities in the creative industries, individuals who earn $20,388 or less qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), colloquially called “food stamps.” While the “starving artist” trope is often presented as a kind of archetype for artistic work, the language is not too far from representing the truth, considering these numbers, especially when we consider rising costs of living, including rent, food, and utilities, in some of the most expensive cities, where artistic job opportunities are more prevalent, like New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami.

We also asked respondents about their current jobs, inquiring about their starting salaries and current salaries at their current position. 31.4% of respondents reported that their starting salary at their current job was $30,000 or less; 38.7% of men respondents report a starting salary at their current position of $30,000 or less, while 30.2% of respondents who identify as women report a starting salary of $30,000 or less. 23.4% of respondents report earning a starting salary of $70,000 or greater in their current position; 20.2% of those who earned $70,000 or greater as a starting salary identify as men. It does appear that respondents are rewarded during their tenure in their current positions. When we asked respondents about their current salary at their current jobs, we find that 20.5% of respondents currently earn $30,000 or less, and 41.5% of respondents currently earn $70,000 or more per year (in fact, 20.3% of respondents earn $100,000 or more in their current jobs!). 18.9% of those currently earning less than $30,000 per year in their current positions identify as men. This suggests that there is a disproportionate number of women or non-man identifying respondents still earning $30,000 or less in annual salary. Yet, 85.5% of respondents who report currently earning $100,000 or more identify as women. This suggests that gendered wage inequality may persist in the artistic labor market; yet, these results may also be a consequence of the gender demographics of all survey respondents (more women than men completed the survey) and the mechanisms of distribution (ArtTable is an organization dedicated to supporting women and non-binary individuals in the arts).

Despite inconclusive results with regard to gender-based inequality in artistic labor market compensation, it is evident that those working in the arts at large are woefully underpaid, on average, and these systems of low pay, especially among first job seekers and starting salaries, may contribute to systems of inequality that hinder those who cannot afford to work for so little compensation (people of color, parents, women, and first generation, low income college graduates). These low wages result in talent “melt,” or the loss of artistic workers from the artistic labor market as workers leave the arts to pursue better paid opportunities that match the cost of living for contemporary workers. These jobs may be, as one respondent explains, a “great opportunity, but [I] often worked 6-7 days a week, [and] did not make enough to live on in NYC.” Indeed, by the time artistic workers reach a point in their careers where they may make enough money to feel secure and valued for their work, they may have already accumulated years of experience—and debt—that hinder upward mobility and continued employment in the arts. One respondent articulates, “I did not get an "entry level" job in my field until I had obtained an undergraduate and master's degree, done several unpaid and underpaid internships over several years, and overall worked in the field for approximately ten years. Now, I am pursuing a PhD in order to hopefully climb the ladder; if I do get another job in my field that matches my interests, abilities, and experience, it will likely not be paid well enough to help me pay off my student loans entirely."

In addition to devoting substantial amount of money and time to acquiring hiring education and the valuable experience necessary to enter the artistic labor market and remain in that field, several respondents also described spending substantial amounts of their own money in order to simply do their jobs according to the expectations of their employers and/or the art world. After accumulating debt and working unpaid or low paid jobs, these respondents made significant personal investments to accommodate the "costs" of working in the arts.

Spend Money to Make Money: The Material Costs of Working in the Arts

Most of us think of work as a place where we *earn* money. However, sometimes we spend our own money to support the work of our careers. For example, teachers in under-resourced schools might purchase supplies for their students to use; academics may cover travel costs related to presenting their work at professional conferences. In our survey, 52.7% of respondents report incurring financial costs related to their current jobs, including unreimbursed expenses for materials, work-related travel, etc. 52.8% of women respondents report spending their own money to support their work in their current jobs, and 54.2% of respondents who identify as men report incurring unreimbursed work-related expenses. 49.7% of those who report incurring unreimbursed expenses report that those expenses total $1,000 or more; perhaps even more alarmingly, 6.7% of those incurring costs related to their current jobs report those costs totaling more than $10,000. 71% of respondents who report spending $10,000 or more in unreimbursed work expenses identify as women, and 80.5% of the respondents who report $1000 or more in unreimbursed work expenses identify as women. This suggests that, while most arts workers are incurring work-related expenses in order to do their jobs, women, who already earn less than men, are incurring greater expenses than their colleagues who identify as men.

These findings are particularly surprising and alarming to ArtTable, and they become even more obvious and concerning when we contextualize these results with some of the qualitative data we collected. In the words of one respondent, "though art has saved my life, it has been costly." Another artist explains how she compensates for unreimbursed expenses in her fees: "If I can't invoice for supplies, then that cost has to be added to my fee. In the past, it has cost me more to do the work than I ever got paid." Another respondent describes her experience in arts administration similarly, writing, "The pay did not meet my expenses so I had to take part time jobs and commission projects to survive." These respondents echo some of the sentiments embedded in the "starving artist" trope, which advocates that those who create art are lucky to do so, and passion, not financial compensation, should fuel one's drive to work. But many respondents expressed frustration that their compensation for their work does not reflect the cost of living in a variety of geographic areas, not just the expensive "creative cities," like New York City and Los Angeles, and many also explained that they lose money or spend all that they make in their pursuit of their careers and an artistic lifestyle.

Beyond the cultural expectations of low-paid labor in the art world, there may also be a gendered dynamic to the costs of working in the arts. Scholars have explored the "pink tax," or the fiscal mark up on goods and services marketed specifically to women consumers. It seems there might be a "pink cost" to working in the arts, in which women workers are both paid less than their male colleagues *and* invest more of their personal money in expenses related to their current jobs working in the arts. One respondent explains the fiscal costs associated with the aesthetic expectations of the art world: "I spend thousands to "look the part" because you can't show up in a Zara dress when meeting with major clients. I wish I had a budget for hair, nails, makeup, and outfits which is required as an aspect of this job. As a lawyer, a Macy's suit was just fine and your attire didn't matter." Others describe the costs of childcare, which can be greater than the amount that these women workers earn in the arts. One woman writes, "childcare providers were paid the same that I was!" The respondents who identify as men do not describe these concerns about aesthetic labor and/or the cost of childcare.

Concluding Thoughts

Indisputably, the artistic labor market reproduces systems of inequality. Workers take on student debt to gain the necessary credentials and training to enter the labor market, where they are underpaid and then feel forced to spend what little money they make on unreimbursed work-related and culturally expected expenditures, from transportation and professional development opportunities to hair and makeup expenses. As ArtTable continues to analyze our survey results, we hope to focus on the many complicated, intersecting, and interlocking policies, practices, and norms that reproduce systems of gender, racial, and class-based inequality in the arts. This whitepaper is the first in a series that will continue to explore these issues and contextualize our findings with social science theories as we work to provide both evidence of the problems in our field and proposed evidence-based solutions to these problems.

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