

20-21 has been a year of growth and adaptation for Axis.

It has welcomed the arrival of three new team members, the launch of three major projects and two new commissioning strands. It has seen us build closer ties with Social Art Network, partnered with HE institutions like Manchester Met University and Bournemouth Arts University and secured funding from Arts Council England and Art Fund. We have commissioned hundreds of artists and provided support to countless others.

Our organisation has risen to the challenges posed by Covid-19 and we have entered the new financial year in a strong position, secure in our role as 'the small arts charity that cares' and gaining recognition as thought leaders in the area of socially engaged practice.

Covid Response

Our 20-21 has, like all organisations, been underscored by Covid-19 response and recovery. As one of the UK's first digital arts charities, Axis was unusually well-prepared to make the shift to online programming and delivery, meaning that we were able to focus the majority of our energies on supporting our members, many of whom were badly impacted by the crisis and associated losses of income and opportunities.

Our 'no-strings' **Hardship Fund**—one of the first in the sector—ran for approximately 15 cycles beginning in March 2020, providing emergency payments to more than 150 artists. We also offered a **3-month Membership Holiday** to all those who would be otherwise unable to pay, enabling more than 300 artists to remain part of our Axis community during the crisis.

In addition to financial support, we also recognised the importance of offering in-kind support to artists who might be feeling disconnected from their work and communities. We worked hard to create new online content, resources and opportunities to help artists continue to be artists in spite of the lockdowns.

Our podcast, '**Live Out Loud**' ran for seven episodes, providing paid work for 17 artists commissioned to speak on their experiences and a 'talking point' on social media for our network. Episodes included 'Practice in Isolation', 'Social Art in a Time of Social Distancing', 'Care', 'Radical Wellbeing', 'Parenthood' and 'A New

World Order’.¹ We also ran 5 weeks of **Sunday Sounds**, a weekly collection of sound art, music, readings, performances and conversations submitted by members to help ease screen fatigue and promote wellbeing.

In April 2020 we successfully applied for an Arts Council England Emergency Grant and were awarded £35K to develop the **Social ARtery**—a project to build a new, ethical online space for artists and the communities they work with to meet, create and share their work (see ‘Projects’ for more detail). The funding helped us run the **Pioneers** programme with 18 artists and collectives who trialled the Beta ARtery platform and provided crucial feedback to inform the next stage of development.² We also received £10K funding from Art Fund to support the **Social Art Library Ambassadors** programme, documenting emergency Covid-19 response work by social artists in the UK and beyond.³

Finally, as a result of the success of ‘at home working’ for Axis staff members, in March 2021 we decided to give up our physical premises, representing a projected annual saving of approx. £2.5K: money which will help us build a stronger online infrastructure to support more artists in future.

¹ Commissioned artists were: Natasha Alexander, Sophie Bownes, Beth Davis-Hofbauer, Suzanne Dhaliwal, Rupi Dhillon, Amelia Hawk, Elsa James, Lady Kitt, Robyn LeRoy-Evans, Lauren McLaughlin, Radha Patel, Chantal Powell, David Robinson, R.M. Sanchez-Camus, Emily Speed, melissandre varin and Sian Williams.

² The Pioneers were: Sandra Bouguerch, Cath Carver, Niki Colclough, Sarah Dixon + Sharon Bennett, Bronia Evers, Rik Fisher, Anna Francis, James Harrington + Jennifer Booth, Pete Kinsington + Preston Street Union, Lady Kitt, Gil Mualem Doron, Kajal Nisha Patel, Shonagh Short, Anna Smith, Simon Tyszko and Jo Wheeler.

Commissions + programming



Work by Jaron Hill for Digital Residency (2021)

In addition to our continuing programme of **Five2Watch** and **Highlights** released weekly on Axis's social media platforms, 20-21 saw the launch of our new thematic **Digital Residency** series, replacing our previous 'Artist of the Month' feature. Led by Programme Producer, Harlan Whittingham, the first awardees Kim Coleman and Jenny Hogarth responded to the theme of 'collaboration', reflecting on a video work, *If You Can't See My Mirrors I Can't See You*, created by the duo 10 years prior. The second awardee, responding to the subject of 'World-Building', is Jaron Hill, who is currently producing work around the experience of being black and queer outdoors. At the same time, we also launched our **Micro-commissions** with two collaborative artist duos, Kiara Mohamed and Niloo Sharifi and Moa Johansson and an*dre neely commissioned in the first phase. In the second phase, Sam Williams and Ro Hardaker will work on 'world building'. Outcomes associated with the new residencies and commissions have included articles, blog posts and an online performance.

We also continue to offer platforms for the work of other exceptional artists, for example, *#Navigating_New_Normal*, by Quilla Constance and 'An Other A,B,C' by melissandre varin.

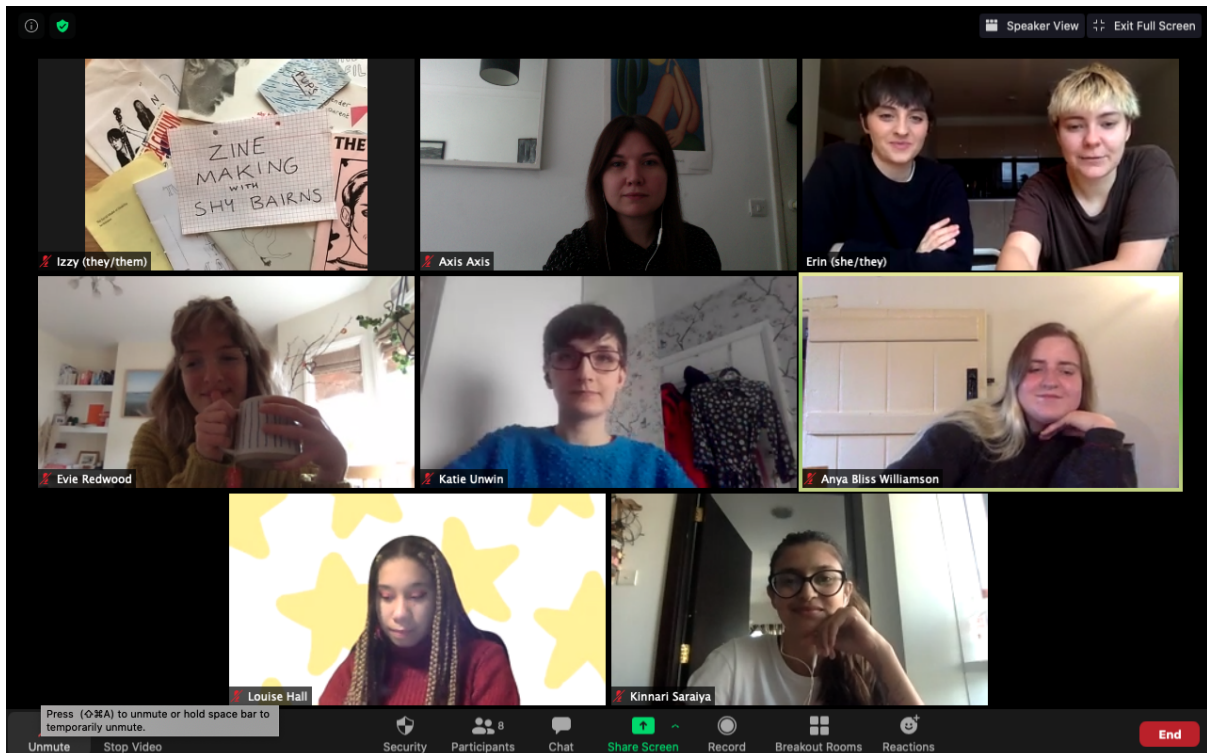


Caitlin Gilligan / Max Mallender for Vacant Spaces project, Bootle (2021)

Although our **Vacant Spaces** programme was initially stalled due to Covid-19, we quickly bounced back, supporting artists to develop Covid risk assessment plans informed by the most up-to-date guidelines provided by the government. This has allowed intermittent but safe activity to take place in between the various degrees of lockdown.

We also helped to facilitate contingency plans and provided replacement property for artists who have lost space in: Sunderland, North Shields, Middlesbrough, and Cardiff. In addition, we have begun to work with a number of new groups including in Bootle (with members of The Royal Standard, Art in Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University), Hull (with the Hull Artist Research Initiative) and Middlesbrough (with Community Connectors).

Education + outreach



Screenshot from Praxis online workshop with Shy Bairns (2021)

Led by Axis Engagement and Learning Producer, Kelly Culver, **Praxis** is now in its second year. The professional development programme was launched in September 2020 in response to the increased challenges facing new artists graduating into a sector hit hard by ongoing cuts and pandemic restrictions. Aimed at final year students, and originally trialled at Arts University Bournemouth, it offers a season of talks, practical advice and resources and networking opportunities to help smooth the transition from education to art career.

From September 2020 to February 2021, Praxis supported 20 artists and awarded 4 commissions (2x micro commissions, 2x workshops commissions). Guest speakers included Amahra Spence, Abbie Canning, Saelia Aparicio, Shy Bairns and Charmian Griffin.

Testimonies from participants were very positive:

It's been really helpful to have access to Axis's resources and constant support through their membership network. It couldn't have come at a better time, post-graduation and in the middle of the pandemic.

The Micro commission is an amazing opportunity for me to grow as an artist. Allowing me to buy new equipment and giving me extra confidence that my work and concepts are supported by others, thank you Axis!

In January 2021, the programme was adapted and developed for final year students from Arts University Bournemouth, Swansea College of Art, University of the Arts Norwich and York St John University. On July 1, a summer programme will provide 8 weeks of support, with the next full phase to follow in September 2021. Speakers lined up to contribute include Rupri Dhillon, Lindsey Mendick, Karanjit Panesar, Lydia Blakeley, Mary Cork, Lucy Wright and Taneesha Ahmed.

In May 2020 we also partnered with Artists Access to Art Colleges (AA2A) to help promote their services. Axis Media Producer, Jules Lister created a short film detailing employability support for students and residency placements for creatives.

Projects + research

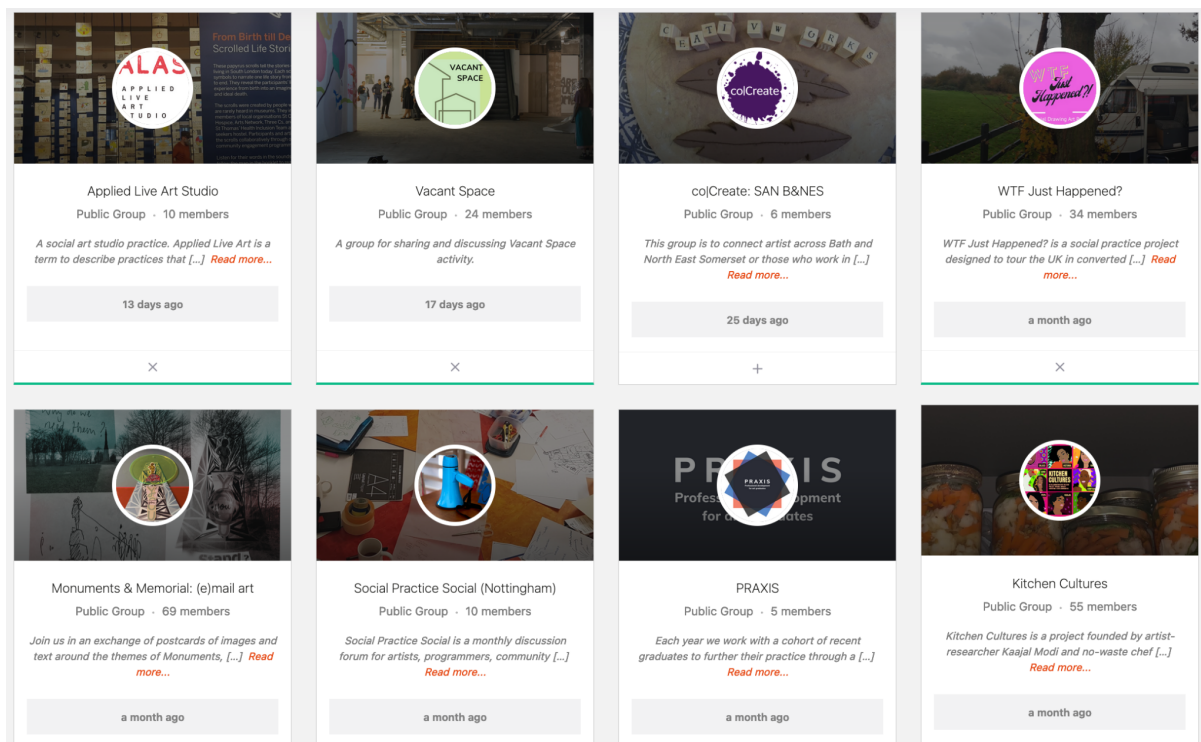


Taking Up Space walk by Social Art Library Ambassador, Gabriella Gay (2020)

Social Art Library, led by Social Producer, Dr Lucy Wright was launched in trial Beta format in June 2020 and in that time has become a growing archive of more than 200 projects and resources, submitted by artists. The project received seed funding from Art Fund to deliver the Social Art Library Ambassadors programme (10 artist micro-commissions), was featured by *Sluice* magazine and Open Eye Gallery and has grown a small but dedicated social media following (Twitter: c.1K, Instagram: c.1K). Full project evaluation by Lawrence Bradby in January 2021 underlined the need for an archive of this nature and demonstrated the success of the project to-date.

As part of SOAL's public programming, **Storytelling for Artists** was a series of sell-out events and workshops including 'Storytelling for Artists 101' with Debs Newbold (public lecture and masterclass for 10 artists selected via open call), 'Art + Gentrification' with Dr Tyler Denmead, University of Cambridge (virtual seminar and book launch) and the global film premiere of 'Shy Radicals' with Hamja Ahsan and Black Dog Films.

In addition, as part of SOAL's commitment to supporting critical writing on social practice, in January 2021, the second issue of **Social Works? Open journal** was announced with more than 25 writing commissions for parallel print and digital editions of the publication. Designed and edited by Lucy, it is due for launch in September 2020.



Screenshot of Groups in the Social ARtery

Social ARtery, led by R.M. Sánchez-Camus (Marcelo) is a bespoke and ethical online workspace for artists and the communities that they work with. ‘Soft launched’ in October 2020 with the **Social ARtery Pioneers** programme, the project grew exponentially by 300% in its first few months of existence.

Project groups on ARtery include: health & wellbeing, puppetry, food, visual art, dance, performance, music, gaming, LGBTQI+ and disabled artist-led projects. Artists come from different regions across England from rural communities to towns and cities, representing the cultural diversity of the country. An example is Kaajal Modi who ran a food waste & storytelling workshop with migrant women of colour in and around Bristol: the home for this project was built within The Social ARtery.

Social Art Network’s 11 regional hubs across the UK have already been onboarded to the ARtery and will form a new online network to deliver their peer forums. This sets the groundwork for the 2022 partnership delivering the **Social Art Summit**, a national review of social practice, and ARtery Digital Symposium, the digital home for the Summit.

Equality, diversity + access

20-21 served as a reminder of our crucial responsibility to embed equality, diversity and inclusion as driving principles across all of our organisational processes and delivery.

Although we have a strong track record of commissioning diverse artist projects, in a survey undertaken in June 2020, 100% of staff members identified as white and able-bodied, while of the 454 members who took part, 87.3% were white and 72.5% able-bodied—suggesting that we still have a long way to go for equality to be achieved at all levels of the organisation.

In summer 2020, in response to the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, we drew up an **Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity policy**, which set out Axis’s commitment to promoting equality and doing the work of educating to become a better and more proactive ally. Steps taken to date include sharing of pronouns in staff email signatures and offering artists from marginalised communities a fee to assist in the selection process for major commissions. We have scheduled 6-monthly updates to assess progress.



Quilla Constance in #Navigating_New_Normal for Axis (2021)

In addition, Axis is a partner in the new AHRC-funded project, 'Social Art for Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity', or **SAFEDI**, with Prof Amanda Ravetz, Manchester Metropolitan University (with whom we have previously partnered on the 'Beyond the Gallery' project and 'Models of Validation' Knowledge Transfer Partnership) and Marcelo, who brings his lived experience as a Latin-x UK settled migrant to the work . Alongside Social Art Network, Axis will support the delivery of six social art commissions to create a new model of creative collective policymaking, with artists, marginalised audiences, policymakers and institutions. Its aim is to deliver innovative policy change and position social practice as a leading champion of EDI in the visual arts. Policies developed for the cultural sector will be integrated into Axis policies to ensure the organisation is always leading on EDI issues.

Re-brand

This year we have taken important steps to update and rebrand our online platform to better reflect our growing confidence as an organisation and to clarify our message.



Excerpt of Brand Proposal by Let's Dance (2021)

We are currently working closely with **Let's Dance**, a creative agency based in Leeds who specialise in bespoke, ethical communication design for independents, social enterprises and charities. Together we have developed a new set of brand values to inform the kind of visual identity we will embody going forwards. These are (abridged):

1. A collaborative community

We're an organisation that is always in dialogue with our members: they shape everything we do... Collaboration isn't just something we value in theory; it's central to our way of working.

2. Bold + purposeful

A brand that is purposeful will provide us with the clear voice we need to tell our story more clearly and convey our impact, helping us to attract new members and be recognised more widely for the difference we make.

3. Flexible + evolving

Our brand needs to work for different audiences and provide a platform for the wide range of things that we do.

4. Supportive + empowering

We're here to support artists. We want them to see that we're on their side, working to make things better for them... The support we receive isn't

just reactive—we're often pushing forwards on the front foot to improve things for artists.

5. Innovative + creative

As an organisation we're never afraid to try new things. We don't experiment just for the sake of it though—our goal is to employ transformation so that we remain relevant in a sector that is always evolving.

Our journey continues

Axis's journey in pursuing clarity on the values that define us as an organisation and our vision for the world we want to see. It sharpens our focus around advocacy, infrastructure innovation and capacity building.

Over the past five years Axis has grown and changed, driven by two important factors: the first, without public subsidy we fundamentally changed our approach to enterprise in the quest for sustainability. This approach expanded the reach of our membership network and we started to draw interest and contributions from artists who were beyond the criteria, but found value in our offer.

What now

Getting the importance of a healthy artists-led sector is an urgent and long term priority. Our programme is driven by our purpose and membership, by doing this we operate in the best interests of artists.

1. **Our Story** - communicating our purpose to raise awareness and stimulate engagement.
2. **Membership programme** - stimulating activity with members to create a healthier ethical people centred mutual-aid network.
3. **Platforms** - with a digital first approach, refocusing our efforts to reflect changing expectations and opportunities.
4. **Building Capacity** - Creating a culture of nurturing, collaboration and growth.

