



# AFRAID TO SPEAK FREELY

Survey of freedom of expression in the arts 2025

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*“I’ve seen behind the curtain. What I witnessed wasn’t equality—it was control, silencing, and bullying.”*

Respondent November 2024

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Introduction

Freedom of speech and artistic expression are widely considered cornerstone values of the arts and our democratic society. The ability to challenge orthodoxies, explore controversial ideas and perfect ground-breaking expertise has historically fuelled artistic innovation. In principle, the UK’s arts and cultural sector espouses these liberal ideals. Yet, in reality, a troubling set of double standards exists.

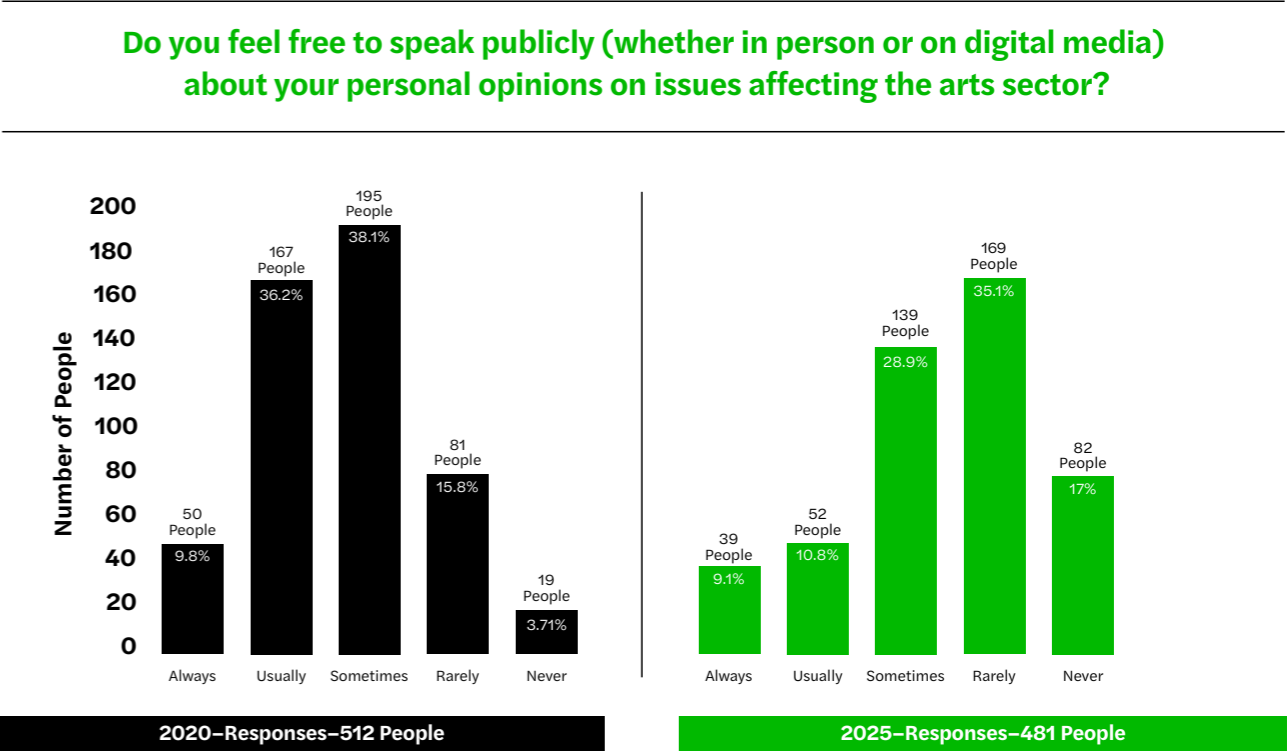
In 2020, less than a fifth of 512 respondents to an Arts Professional (AP) Pulse survey said that they did not feel free to speak publicly on heated social and political debates of the day. New research conducted by Freedom in the Arts (FITA) demonstrates that in the 5 years since the AP survey, freedom of expression in the arts sector is in an even more perilous state. Today the majority of 481 respondents asked whether they speak freely, claimed they never or rarely did.

Artists and art professionals talked about a pervasive culture of ideological conformity to a relatively small set of ‘hot’ political and social debates. Nuance and dissent about topics identified as ‘taboo’ is met with professional and social reprisals, cancellations and bullying and harassment, the fear of which generates widespread self-censorship.

This report presents that research and paints a damning picture of what life is like for artists and arts professionals working and practising in the UK in today’s arts sector.

A note on methodology

Afraid to Speak Freely presents the findings from FITA’s Freedom of Expression Survey. The survey was designed to capture a broad snapshot of arts practitioners’ views and experiences regarding free expression. 483 people, working across the arts and cultural sector, responded to the online survey in autumn 2024. They spanned the four jurisdictions and included artists, performers, writers, producers, administrators and others. For comparison reasons, FITA chose to adopt the AP (2020) Pulse survey open text and closed response questions. To enrich the survey data, a number of semi-structured interviews with arts professionals who had experienced or witnessed bullying and censorship in the arts were conducted. The two datasets were thematically analysed.



# Ideological Orthodoxy and Viewpoint Intolerance

Freedom of expression and viewpoint diversity is a fundamental tenet of democracy, enshrined in UK law (Human Rights Act Article 10 1998). Without it, notions of ‘free speech’, ‘artistic expression’, ‘political freedom’ or ‘academic freedom’ ring hollow. Yet, what happens when a professional culture permits only a limited range of viewpoints on urgent matters of social and political debate? Or when there is an assumption that some debates are ‘settled’ because ‘everyone knows’ that there is a right and wrong side to the debate? These are not esoteric questions. They cut to the heart of the processes that threaten freedom of expression in any professional culture or institution.

The finding of this research is that there is a widespread, deeply held perception that it is political closure and ideological orthodox that governs the arts and questioning it, adding nuance or rejecting it risks grave career and personal consequences. The starting point is the fact that so few artists and art professionals feel free to speak publicly about their opinions (see preceding page). A shocking 84% (n=390) respondents claimed that they never, rarely or only sometimes feel free to speak publicly about their opinions. Compare this to just over half of the respondents in the AP (2020) survey.

More tellingly, 78% of FITAs respondents agreed with the statement *“people working in the arts wouldn’t dare own up to right-of-centre political opinions”*. (See appendix 2). This indicates a widely perceived pressure to conform politically. This response requires interpretation in relation to open text comments and the interviews. There is a deeply held view that the arts are left-leaning. Many of the ‘dangerous topics’ (see next section) that the survey respondents identified are often presented as having a ‘left’, ‘woke’ (i.e. good) stance and a ‘right’, ‘anti-woke’ (i.e. bad) stance. This categorisation is egregiously incorrect<sup>1</sup>. It is often used to denigrate those who dissent, offer nuance or express any doubt about what are perceived to be, in the industry, the prevailing ‘progressive’ views on social, political and even geo-political issues of the day.

Hundreds of survey respondents referenced the dominance of a singular viewpoint in the sector. For instance, 169 respondents explicitly mentioned terms like “orthodoxy,” or “one-sided” to describe the climate, and dozens more alluded to “ideological” pressures or “identity politics” shaping what can be said.

Respondents described arts institutions as “oppressively politicised” with a “very one-sided view of social issues [that] stifles debate, humour and nuance in the arts,” as one survey respondent commented. Opinions that deviate from or even explore the prevailing consensus in the sector are met with hostility or silence rather than open discussion. Respondents described an arts culture that represented only a fraction of the wide variety of views held more generally within society. Respondents described this as a dogma or groupthink that discourages viewpoint diversity or pluralism.

*“The arts sector is intolerant of opinions and attitudes outside of the accepted consensus,”*

one survey respondent warned. This results in viewpoint diversity intolerance: that is, an implicit (sometimes explicit) gatekeeping of acceptable viewpoints. One respondent quipped that the sector

*“believes it is owed artistic freedom but doesn’t tolerate freedom of speech within its own ranks.”*

This irony was not lost on FITA’s research participants. Another survey respondent observed:

*“Artists are instantly isolated when they fail to speak the currently accepted line. Even completely run-of-the-mill opinions can find an artist blacklisted. It’s now the ‘right-on’ crowd (colleagues, institutions, even government) vs. the isolated heretic”.*

<sup>1</sup>See Ozkirimli, U. (2023) Cancelled: The Left Way Back From Woke Polity: London for the left-wing critique of contemporary identity politics (often called ‘woke’).

These perceptions were strongly reinforced by the interview respondents, who provided concrete anecdotes of how this orthodoxy manifests.

*“The arts world now wants everyone to have the correct political art – the correct opinion – that makes them feel comfortable,”* explained a visual artist who has faced backlash for her views.

She contrasted the present climate with a decade ago, noting that previously people didn’t care about an artist’s personal views as long as the art was good, whereas now *“if they find out you’ve got the wrong opinion, they don’t want to know about your art.”*

Interviewees pointed to institutional complicity in enforcing the orthodoxy. An arts curator described *“the growth of the politicisation of arts institutions”* such that programming now *“illustrates a particular political position.”* He recounted how, in one instance, dozens of arts organisations issued virtually identical public statements endorsing one side of a contentious geopolitical issue (after a Middle East conflict), suggesting that taking a balanced or neutral stance was no longer acceptable. In this interviewee’s view, these organisations have taken on activist roles rather than providing open platforms. Another interviewee – a novelist – noted that many of her fellow writers *“show very little spine”* in part because key literary festivals and media are themselves aligned with those stances and narrow range of viewpoints.

The consequences of this orthodoxy extend beyond mere disagreement – they shape careers and creative choices. An academic and poet observed that this *“has an impact on what people are producing”* as artists, arguably, increasingly *“write to the brief”*. He even remarked that in contemporary literary critique, *“good...translates as ‘I agree with you’ rather than actual quality”*. Such a dynamic, if widespread, would indeed create what he called a *“crushing influence on the creative process”* – a sentiment that echoes the findings of the survey.

In summary: despite the public facing account of itself as open-minded, the reality of the arts sector is now one of viewpoint intolerance, policing of ideological orthodoxy and increasingly politicised artistic programming. Most arts professionals and artists in our study feel there is one ‘correct’ line on major issues – a line one crosses at one’s peril. Whilst direct comparison with these results and the results of the AP survey (2020) is not easy, there is evidence to suggest that FITA’s respondents feel significantly less free and have identified a professional culture in which viewpoint diversity is less tolerated than 5 years ago.

# Dangerous Topics and Heterodox Viewpoints

What are the dangerous topics and the viewpoints that one is “*ill-advised to express*” in the arts sector? We posed this question and respondents provided a vivid catalogue of dangerous topics. The responses show a remarkable consensus and more so because it was made clear that being able to identify these dangerous topics and heterodox viewpoints was not reliant on the respondents holding them. It is perhaps unsurprising that most answers converged on a set of issues often referred to as part of the UK’s ongoing ‘culture wars’<sup>2</sup>. Virtually every respondent could name at least one such dangerous topic, and most listed several. Interestingly, there is a broader range of topics mentioned than noted in the AP (2020) survey report which highlighted: Brexit, criticising funders, trans/gender critical<sup>3</sup> viewpoints, expressing strong religious views, nuanced or critical views on EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) and challenging sector norms. 5 years later and expression of gender critical viewpoints looms large as the most dangerous topic, followed by Israel/Palestine. This is very telling given that both these issues are perhaps the top two most significant social and political issues of contemporary times.

At the top of the list is women’s rights, gender identity and transgender politics. Roughly half of all respondents (n=196) who answered this question mentioned that expressing anything akin to a gender critical viewpoint was dangerous. For example, disagreeing that ‘trans women are women’ or offering a nuanced analysis questioning transgender self-identification policies were repeatedly described as ‘career-ending’. One respondent wrote that “*the cult-like embrace of gender ideology*” means that “*stating biological facts or defending women-only spaces*” would get an arts professional labelled transphobic, shunned and subject to bullying. The sheer number of times this came up (over 60% of answers to this question) shows how central women’s rights has become as a flashpoint. Indeed, many of the public houndings, denunciations, bullying campaigns, cancellation and attempts to get an individual

sacked or otherwise threaten their livelihood in recent years, have revolved around this issue. As a result, even some who do personally hold gender critical views said that they “*would never say so publicly*” in the current climate.

Close behind are matters of race, identity politics, and critical race theory (CRT)<sup>4</sup>. Around 13% of the survey respondents mentioned that expressing a viewpoint that might be taken as criticism of certain anti-racism narratives or diversity policies is dangerous. For instance, suggesting that “*some diversity quotas might have gone too far,*” or expressing scepticism about training like unconscious bias workshops, would likely invite accusations of racism. One respondent listed “*critical talk about CRT and race theories*” as well as “*any suggestion that there may be over-representation of certain demographics*” as examples of views no one dared utter for fear of reprisals. The survey highlights another irony: in the arts – which prides itself on inclusion – any

<sup>2</sup>We dispute the all too easy categorisation of what is going on as a ‘culture war’. The idea that this is a culture war is part of the problem itself as ‘culture war’ infers that there are progressive, left wing, ‘good’ stances to take on ‘the culture war’ itself and right wing bad faith stoking of a ‘culture war’.

<sup>3</sup>The view that sex cannot be changed regardless of how individuals might identify

<sup>4</sup>The view that racial bias is inherent in many parts of western society, especially in its legal and social institutions, on the basis of their having been primarily designed for and implemented by white people.

critique of inclusion practices is itself dangerous and unwelcome. Similarly, viewpoints that openly dissent from movements like Black Lives Matter or question their tactics were seen as dangerous and likely to generate reprisals. The line between opposing racism (which all our participants support) and subscribing to a particular brand of anti-racist activism has, in their view, become non-negotiable – one must toe the latter’s line to avoid being called a racist and face censure.

Another dangerous topic is the Israel–Palestine conflict and Middle Eastern politics. This is not surprising given recent events (e.g., the Israel-Hamas war of 2023). Roughly a quarter of respondents brought it up. The perception that the majority of survey respondents conveyed was that in UK arts circles, the climate is staunchly pro-Palestinian – so voicing sympathy for Israel or condemning groups like Hamas (which is a proscribed terrorist organisation) is dangerous and sits outside the tolerated viewpoints. The reprisal for one survey respondent was to be bullied out of a collective for offering a heterodox viewpoint. Respondents noted a perceived double standard: “*Vehement pro-Palestine statements are acceptable or even encouraged, but anything pro-Israel is condemned.*” One person wrote that within their theatre community, “*expressing even mild support for Israel’s right to exist would make you a pariah.*” One respondent noted that “*being able to express pro Zionist or pro Jewish posts or hostages’ pictures*” whilst another noted “*support for Jewish friends*” were considered dangerous and would risk a backlash. That said, a lower number of respondents felt equally vehemently that ‘pro-Palestinian’ views were not tolerated in the sector.

Some pointed to immigration and nationalism – including Brexit. Advocating stricter border control, or expressing nationalist sentiments (e.g. pro-Brexit, pro-Union Jack) were commonly cited as “*career suicide in the arts.*” Roughly 15–20% of respondents mentioned Brexit or immigration. Even though Brexit was supported by 17.4 million Britons, within the arts it’s seen as anathema<sup>5</sup>. One respondent said,

“*Support for Brexit = instant leprosy in my field.*” Another noted that in arts jobs under local councils, “*if you’re not visibly upset about Brexit, people assume you’re one of them and you get excluded.*”

This suggests that even since 2016, a pro-Leave stance has been stigmatised – confirming ArtsProfessional’s finding that arts workers felt muzzled over Brexit. “*Admitting you’re a Tory*” was almost a laughable idea to some respondents – “*might as well wear a sign saying ‘kick me’*,” one joked.

Finally, a few other niches were noted: criticism of Islam, was flagged by some. While mocking Christianity might pass with little comment in liberal arts circles, “*any criticism of Islam will get you labelled Islamophobic,*” one respondent observed.

Tellingly, respondents often rattled off these dangerous topics in list form. One survey answer practically bullet-pointed them:

“*Discussion of the transgender phenomenon and ideology. Support of Israel or Jewish individuals in the Israel/Palestine conflict. Critical talk about CRT and race theories. Any criticism of religion, particularly Islam... And so on.*”

Another wrote: “*Gender critical views; opposition to critical race theory; support for Israel’s right to exist; in Scotland, support for the Union (criticising the SNP); discomfort with #MeToo; pro-Brexit; Conservative (even small ‘c’ conservatism)....*”

<sup>5</sup>Hill, L. (2016) “Creative Industry Leaders To Vote Remain” Arts Professional 20 May 2016. <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/creative-industry-leaders-vote-remain>

The interviews echoed the survey results. Graham (writer) remarked, “*I’m basically the most despised kind of person – a visible ‘TERF’ – second only to J.K. Rowling,*” noting that his gender critical stance put him in the crosshairs. Manick (curator), in his account of The Art Forum’s open letter ‘supporting Palestinian liberation’ (19 October 2023) and the response to it<sup>6</sup> illustrated how an expectation of political neutrality by cultural institutions had disappeared and, those who objected to the stance taken were seen as troublemakers.

Summing up: from gender ideology and racial politics to geopolitical conflicts, arts professionals perceive that only a narrow range of viewpoints on ‘dangerous’ topics can be voiced with impunity. Other viewpoints – even if held by large segments of the public or rooted in legitimate debate – are considered ‘unsayable’ in arts circles. An intolerance of viewpoint diversity reinforces political orthodoxy - a groupthink - which, as will be described below, fuels self-censorship, bullying and creates a chilling effect that spreads to all corners of the arts.

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<sup>6</sup>See <https://www.vulture.com/article/israel-palestine-gaza-artforum-letter-fallout.html>

## Reprisals, Professional Risks, and Institutional Caution

The survey data and interviews confirm that there is an array of personal, professional and institutional risks associated with speaking out. The respondents in the AP (2020) survey noted the following as the main reasons artists and art professionals do not speak out: fear of consequence (52% of that survey had themselves experienced intimidation or harassment for speaking out), fear of offending, the futility of doing so, employers explicitly discouraging respondents to engage in ‘controversial topics’ and paid silence (14% of the respondents had been offered settlement agreements to remain silent). Yet, 5 years later, 80% of FITA’s respondents claimed that they had experienced intimidation or harassment for speaking out.

In the arts, livelihoods are often precarious; add to that the threat of being “blacklisted”, cancelled, bullied and harassed and it’s easy to see why many err on the side of caution. The fear expressed by the survey respondents for what might happen if one does break with orthodoxy and express a heterodox viewpoint on a dangerous topic was not unsubstantiated. Respondents detailed how the stakes are high – careers get stalled, commissions withdrawn, projects quietly dropped, jobs are ended, threats of violence are not unheard of, and funding and careers endangered if one crosses certain lines

Many in the survey noted that dependence on public funding or grants makes organisations wary of controversy, leading them to implicitly or explicitly gag their employees. As one respondent observed, “funding is actively acting as lobbying” – suggesting that accessing funders’ resources imposes implicit viewpoints, which are often highly partisan on contemporary social debates.

Multiple respondents recounted incidents where criticism of a funder or sponsor was explicitly or implicitly off-limits. Take for instance, the following quote:

“I would not publicly criticise the actions of

funders for fear that it would jeopardise my future funding”;

“We all know which topics will upset [major funding bodies], so we just steer clear of them in our programming”;

“maintaining public funding was used as an excuse for unlawful action” and

“the sector is biting its tongue for fear of biting the hand that feeds.”

Interviewees and survey respondents pointed to a culture of institutional risk-aversion: boards and managers, worried about controversy, pre-emptively muzzle contentious speech, art work or productions. One arts administrator wrote,

“Our board pre-emptively vetoes anything that might offend someone – it’s like walking on eggshells”.

The net effect, as the respondent put it, is that

“job security and financial survival become tied to toeing the line, making speaking out not just a personal risk but a potential career-ending move.”

One survey respondent stated:

“We have to be careful. I’ve seen colleagues removed from projects, funding quietly withdrawn, and careers stalled because they ‘rocked the boat’. It sends a clear message: stay in line or be forced out.”

Far too many survey respondents and interviewees, however, talked about the reprisals meted out to them by colleagues. In the AP Survey in 2020, only 148 respondents answered the question that asked which constituencies of people respondents felt pressure from. Most of those (n=85) said colleagues. In 2024, however, the FITA survey shows that collegial relations are deteriorating.

Where less than 30% answered the question in 2020, 74% (n=258) answered it in 2024 and said that their colleagues were the source of pressure to conform. Likewise, whereas only 21 respondents in 2020 identified friends as a source of pressure, in 2024, 53% (n=186) identified their friends as the source of pressure. This is an alarming change. It indicates that artists and art professionals are experiencing intimidation, pressure, bullying, ostracism, harassment by those most closely connected with them and their practice. Cliques and whisper networks form to marginalize an “offending” individual. One survey respondent wrote, “Friends I’d known for years cut me off overnight because I questioned the accepted line on [a social issue].” Another recounted, “I was removed via bullying from an art collective for being critical of Hamas.” In that case, simply condemning Hamas, an internationally proscribed terrorist organisation, led to the artist’s expulsion from a group project. Likewise, women who voiced gender critical viewpoints reported being subject to “psychological torment, social ostracisation, [and] attempts at economic sabotage” by colleagues.

80% of the respondents have experienced intimidation or ostracism for speaking out with 61% of respondents stating that this had happened in reaction to their artistic and creative activities (up from 45% in the AP Survey in 2020). In open-ended responses, participants recounted frequent instances of trolling, shaming, boycotts and exclusion. Keywords like “bullying” (appearing ~44 times), “ostracised” (~52 times), and “harassed” (~47 times) peppered the survey comments. Approximately 125 responses explicitly mentioned “Twitter,” “Facebook,” or generic “social media” as hotbeds of hostile reaction. Clearly, many in the arts have either witnessed or personally endured the phenomenon colloquially known as ‘cancelling’ instead of its more formal name: bullying and harassment.

Respondents described a culture in which colleagues and peers can rapidly escalate conflicts

into public shamings with all the personal and professional effects that these generate. Social media serves as an accelerant: a single remark can trigger a “pile-on” of criticism and calls for boycotts. “One wrong tweet and the dogpile would begin... the rest of us are muted for fear of a hostile reception”.

Graham Linehan’s story illustrates how informal industry blacklisting operates. He stated:

“There came a point when I just stopped even trying to get work, because... you’d call up an old contact and there’d be this pause as they figure out how to get rid of you.”

Linehan expressed his gender critical beliefs around the need to protect single sex spaces and rights and found his former collaborators would not touch his projects. He also saw a major project (a musical in development) taken away from him by producers due to the reputational risk of associating with him. “It was so traumatic to lose something 75% done,” he said, “now I can’t work on anything unless I think it has a home... because there’ll always be someone who says ‘don’t work with him’.”

Another interviewee, a well-known poet, described how speaking out on women’s rights left her largely shut out of the poetry scene:

“I’ve got one poetry client left... I just don’t get opportunities anymore, and I was an award winning poet.”

She characterised the situation as “a celebration of mediocrity” – implying that those who keep their head down (even if less talented) get gigs, whereas outspoken talented people get harassed, bullied and hounded. She described when a specific poetry platform removed her work because the poems were being shared by people “whose values do not align with the [that] company”. For the interviewee, this episode was an informal means to censor not just her, but her audience (i.e. people

who also held her gender critical feminist viewpoint) under the guise of ‘organisational values’.

The fear and realities of public humiliation – of being labelled a bigot or bad actor – looms large in the survey’s open text comments. Indeed, 82% of FITA respondents (compared to 69% in AP survey of 2020) agreed that the *“potential for hostile social media reactions makes me hesitant to share my opinions online.”* This indicates a growing awareness of the problem of reprisals, at best, or an increasing level of actual reprisals, at worst. Several respondents mentioned specific cases (e.g. the vitriol J.K. Rowling faced in publishing) as cautionary examples that *“if it can happen to someone famous, it can certainly happen to me.”* As Jenny Lindsay put it:

*“Other women are really scared...they’re just not saying anything because we [who spoke up] are held up as cautionary tales.”*

In the survey, numerous respondents referenced colleagues or friends who were *“made an example of,”* which subsequently silenced entire groups.

The emotional toll of such aggression from colleagues and peers is high. Several interviewees became visibly distressed when recounting how they were treated. *“It was like a mob went after me – people I considered friends joined in,”* said one respondent when talking about a group of fellow artists that publicly branded her a transphobe and petitioned venues to drop her events. A visual artist shared that after she expressed her feminist views online, she and her partner received violent threats.

*“We were worried we’d be physically attacked... my partner stopped gigging for years out of fear”.*

There were numerous other such extreme examples that mirror the treatment that others outside the arts sector have also received – from

death threats to online petitions, from mobbing to violent and aggressive protests . Such incidents demonstrate that bullying in the arts and other sectors isn’t just abstract online ‘flak’ or hostility – it can and does spill over into real-world violence, intimidation and an individual’s loss of bodily safety and security.

Institutions have abetted this peer-driven bullying by capitulating to disproportionately low levels of relatively weak complaints. Interviewees and respondents cited examples like that of Jess de Wahls’, when in 2021 the Royal Academy (RA) precipitously dropped her work from its shop having received only eight accusations of her supposed transphobia, only to later apologise and reinstate her when she challenged the leadership. Most respondents felt that arts leadership<sup>7</sup> often *“quietly side with the loudest complainers”* rather than defending staff and artists from bullying and harassment, or standing up for artistic freedom. As one respondent put it,

*“Institutions fold at the slightest sign of controversy – they’d rather sacrifice one person than face collective anger.”*

The survey data and interviews underscore one of the most important findings of this report: in a professional context in which reputation is effectively an artist’s CV, reprisals, bullying and social sanction is a common reality for many arts professionals. People are not just imagining worst-case scenarios – many have already lived them. The reprisals, when they come, are hugely disproportionate. Given the ‘long tail’ of the online world and artists’ need to maintain a public profile, harassment can morph into an ongoing aspect of an artist’s career. The mere whiff or hint of deviation is enough to end careers or saddle someone with seemingly never-ending bullying campaigns or smears.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jun/23/royal-academy-of-arts-apologises-to-jess-de-wahls-in-transphobia-row>

## Fear, Self-Censorship and the Chilling Effect

There is widespread self-censorship among artists and arts professionals. The FITA survey reveals that many arts professionals “*keep their head down*” to avoid potential repercussions. Artists and arts professionals described how they “*weigh up the risk*” before speaking or creating, often opting to stay silent on contentious matters. Self-censorship manifests as artists avoiding certain topics, using guarded language, or entirely refraining from public discourse about anything that might provoke potential controversy. One respondent confessed that “*people are scared to say what they really think*”. Another said they “*often feel pressured to self-censor for fear of being ‘cancelled’ or bullied for not conforming to the orthodoxy.*” The fear and reality of backlash and bullying (from colleagues, audiences, or internet trolls) leads individuals to pre-emptively silence themselves – a classic chilling effect where the anticipation of negative repercussions is enough to deter open expression. Fear and self-censorship is both a consequence of the hostile environment in the arts sector and a reinforcing factor that keeps contentious issues from surfacing.

Fear and self-censorship makes sense given the severity and widespread nature of the potential reprisals that artists and art professionals may encounter. Many respondents anticipate bullying, harassment and backlashes. It is striking how often respondents refer to “fear”. For example one respondent confessed, “*People are scared to say what they really think.*” In other words, the expectation of hostility is enough to silence people.

Multiple survey measures reinforce how common this fear is. In practical terms, our survey indicates hundreds of arts professionals routinely withhold their true opinions. Artists and arts professionals learn that speaking out has costs, so they avoid it. Many respondents used words like “*hesitant,*” “*cautious,*” “*anxious,*” or “*afraid*” in describing their approach to potentially controversial discussions. When facing an environment where four in five have experienced or witnessed retaliation for speaking, it is logical that many

decide it’s safer to say nothing.

*“I feel the gap between personal life and work has totally disappeared. Now, if someone dislikes your opinions, they won’t just disagree – they will isolate you from the whole institution. Knowing this, I keep my head down.”*

The interviewed artists spoke of constantly second-guessing themselves. “*This stress creates self-isolation and self-censorship.*” One interviewee described how even outside of work, a casual remark can haunt one’s career, so they feel compelled to stay quiet everywhere. It shows how a single tweet or comment made anywhere that could be read as dissenting the political orthodoxy can reverberate back to one’s employer or network and threaten an individual’s livelihood. One interviewee (a theatre director) recounted how a private conversation in his own home led to grievances from colleagues and his eventual resignation – an example of how even personal spaces are not truly “*safe*” for free discussion. The result is what the respondent above called “*self-isolation*”: people withdraw and avoid colleagues for fear that any real talk could become fodder for a campaign of bullying.

Another interviewee, a poet and educator, reflected on how the artistic process has changed over 15+ years in the field. He described a time, early in his career, where he wrote a provocative poem from the perspective of a problematic character. He then said that

*“I’m aware I might struggle to write that now... there is this nagging voice that tells me I wouldn’t access that stuff [in my unconscious] now.”*

The interviewee mused on the possibility that in his early career his “*unconscious had the freedom to go there*” but now he probably censors such ideas before they even become a poem. This subtle internal inhibition might be one of the more

insidious aspects of self-censorship. It’s not just about what people say publicly; self-censorship can shape what an individual even allows him or herself to imagine and create.

There is also a psychological toll to this self-censorship. Responses spoke of “stress,” “anxiety,” even “paranoia” about saying the wrong thing. One interviewee described it as “*living in a mad world*” where you feel you must constantly filter yourself. Another said, “*It’s really unhealthy to be this stressed [about speaking].*” This mental strain can lead to burnout or people leaving the sector. In fact, a few respondents mentioned that they had considered changing careers or had quit arts jobs because they felt they “*couldn’t be [themselves]*” in the current climate. This is a damning indictment on the culture that artists and arts professionals have to navigate in the course of the work.

# Resistance, Resilience and Calls for Change

As in 2020, the FITA survey found that most respondents (89%, n= 422) strongly believe the sector has a unique responsibility to speak out about things that matter, regardless of the potential consequences.

Alongside descriptions of endemic bullying, fear of reprisals, institutional and organisational pressures, respondents offered ideas for change and accounts of pushback already underway. There is an emergent resilience: individuals and groups finding the courage to speak up about what had happened to them, forming support networks, and advocating reforms to restore openness in the arts. While perhaps a smaller thread than the others (since fear and conformity were the dominant stories), this resistance movement is clearly growing. About 364 respondents (75%) took the time to write suggestions for addressing the issues, indicating a widespread desire for change.

One form of resistance is through solidarity and collective action. Recognising the power of the “mob,” some are banding together to provide mutual support. FITA grew out of this. Launched in 2023 and co-founded by choreographer Rosie Kay and former Arts Council England employee Denise Fahmy, FITA’s mission is to defend free expression in the arts and support those targeted. Several survey respondents explicitly mentioned groups like FITA and the Free Speech Union (FSU) as positive developments.

*“Now, we’ve got Freedom in the Arts, we’ve got Free Speech Union... If these things happened to me now [instead of 2018], I’d be far better equipped to fight back,”*

said one interviewee. He observed that there are “stronger associations, stronger networks than we had then.”

Another form of resilience is simply refusing to be cowed. Some interviewees – especially more established figures – spoke about continuing to voice their views despite the risks. “I’m very

*proud of being a TERF, of course,”* laughed one interviewee, noting she and other like-minded women have informal meet-ups for mutual encouragement. She celebrated a recent instance of pluralism in literary festivals: *“Helen Joyce and Julie Bindel are talking at the Oxford Literary Festival. That feels like a real breakthrough.”*

Respondents offered many concrete recommendations for change. A common theme was policy and leadership reform. They called on arts institutions, boards and funders to explicitly commit to free expression as a core value and take a neutral stance on political issues. *“Arts orgs should embed freedom of expression principles into their charters and hiring practices,”* one respondent wrote.

*“We need better leadership... leaders who publicly condemn bullying and back staff with unpopular opinions,”* summarised one answer.

Many felt that if bosses made it clear that thoughtful dissent is acceptable, the chilling effect would lessen. Some even suggested adopting formal free speech charters akin to the Chicago Principles<sup>8</sup> used in academia.

Another set of suggestions revolved around cultural attitudes: essentially, fostering a norm of tolerance for disagreement. One respondent simply pleaded for *“more tolerance of discussion – we need to agree to disagree without ostracism.”* Many echoed that restoring a climate of civil debate is crucial. This extends to funders and public bodies: respondents suggested that Arts Council England and others should more boldly reassure organisations that engaging with controversial art or artists will not result in funding cuts, to counteract the fear. There were also calls for government or policy intervention: a few proposed that public funding criteria could include a requirement to uphold academic-style free speech standards<sup>9</sup>, or that charity law (which governs arts nonprofits) could emphasise

viewpoint diversity. These policy-level ideas indicate that some believe systemic fixes are needed, not just individual bravery.

Encouragingly, some respondents cited legal victories as cause for hope. For example, Denise Fahmy’s successful employment tribunal against Arts Council England (for harassment due to her gender critical beliefs) was mentioned. *“She won her case – that’s huge,”* one interviewee said, *“It means our employers have to take note.”* Similarly, the Royal Academy’s apology to Jess de Wahls was seen as a glimmer that backlash against cancel culture can be effective.

Finally, respondents emphasised the role of speaking out and ridicule in changing the culture. Some noted that shining a light on the absurdities – for instance, through comedy – can shift norms.

*“Some of this needs ridiculed, like in comedy shows... once that starts there could be a domino effect,”* suggested one.

By normalising laughter at extreme intolerance, the taboo power might lessen. Others argued that simply having this conversation (as our survey does) is itself progress: *“Just breaking the silence is part of the solution,”* wrote one, *“We can’t fix what we won’t openly discuss.”* Indeed, multiple people thanked us for the survey, saying that knowing others feel the same has given them courage to speak up.

<sup>8</sup><https://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/update-on-freedom-of-speech-act/>

Conclusion

This study describes the perilous state of freedom of expression in the arts sector because of viewpoint intolerance, ideological orthodoxy, bitter, punishing reprisals against those who do dare to speak out and the corrosive effects of self-censorship.

The result is a sector that, in the words of one respondent, “*champions artistic freedom in theory but doesn’t permit real freedom of speech in practice.*”

The themes explored in this report are tightly interlinked. The dominance of a single worldview on matters of contemporary social and political debate creates expectations that anyone deviating will face backlash and bullying. Those working in the arts are much more likely to be impacted by orchestrated attacks because their careers are played out in the public eye.

It is worth reflecting on why this matters. If artists are creating in an atmosphere of fear, if certain stories aren’t being told or perspectives shared because they are deemed unacceptable, then the cultural sector risks stagnation. Innovation often comes from challenge and debate – from the mixing of different viewpoints and the bravery to offend or surprise. Moreover, as a publicly funded sphere (in part), the arts have an obligation to represent and engage a wide public. If they become an insular echo chamber, they risk alienating audiences and supporters.

What can be done? In other sectors the slew of successful employment tribunals is providing a measure of individual redress for unlawful bullying and discrimination - especially to gender critical individuals. What is happening in the arts sector is very different, potentially more dangerous and certainly more costly. Employment tribunals are not, usually, a redress open to the precarious world of freelance artists and art professionals. This manifestly increases the individual cost for not conforming to the narrow range of viewpoints permitted within the ideological orthodoxy,

because those who engage in unlawful behaviour do so with impunity in the arts. This is why the role of institutional leaders in the arts is so critical. They could start by making clear policy statements affirming employees’ and artists’ right to express lawful opinions, even if contentious. Arts organisations and funders must restore impartiality, and be seen to act impartially.

Our research reveals an arts sector grappling with a conflict between its liberal ideals and illiberal realities. The freedom to imagine and express is the lifeblood of the arts. Safeguarding that freedom, even when it leads to uncomfortable conversations, will ultimately enrich the arts and maintain its relevance as a space for all voices and stories.

# Appendix 1

## Case studies

### Birdy Rose

#### Visual Artist

Birdy Rose is a visual artist whose career was upended after expressing gender-critical beliefs. Once celebrated for her evocative paintings and gigs, she describes how the arts sector has shifted from valuing creative freedom to enforcing ideological conformity. Birdy was publicly targeted, accused of making others “unsafe” simply due to her opinions. And even became the subject of a song mocking her as a “snake,” written and performed by former peers in the grassroots arts scene.

She and her partner, a musician, received threats, lost work, bookings, and their community, despite having built their careers from scratch whilst living in a van. Birdy’s story exposes how dissenting views, especially on gender, can lead to career sabotage, social ostracism, and constant harassment online and offline. She continues to speak out in the hope of restoring true artistic freedom and resisting the climate of fear and conformity.

### Manick Govinda

#### Arts Producer & Curator

Manick has over three decades experience in the UK arts sector. Once a senior manager championing diversity and quality in programming, he found himself ostracised for defending free speech and challenging the politicisation of publicly funded arts institutions. His outspoken stance—particularly around antisemitism, institutional bias, Brexit and artistic freedom—led to professional isolation, cancelled opportunities, and personal attacks. Despite being “*hugely cancelled*” in 2019, Manick refused to apologise for holding alternative views, and now finds solidarity through organisations like Freedom in the Arts. Out of necessity, as well as new professional contacts, he also works much more internationally than before his cancellation. His story reveals the cost of dissent in the arts world, and how pushing back against ideological conformity is crucial to preserving genuine creative diversity

### Anonymous

#### Theatre Maker & Former University Lecturer

This former theatre practitioner worked at a UK university, teaching performance. She has extensive experience in radical European theatre, including working at Berlin’s famous Volksbühne in the 1990s. She left academia after becoming disillusioned with what she described as an increasingly ideological and censorious environment. She raised concerns about the growing influence of EDI frameworks and what she perceived as performative identity politics. After being subject to a student complaint based on her social media activity—despite never having taught or interacted with the student—she decided to take voluntary redundancy, citing a loss of academic freedom and mental safety.

*“I couldn’t be in an environment where I no longer felt mentally safe... This wasn’t about debate or openness — this was about conformity. I realised I was being targeted for having legally protected beliefs.”*

## Jenny Lindsay Poet & Educator

Jenny Lindsay is an award-winning Scottish poet, performer, and educator who was a central figure in building Scotland’s live poetry scene. Despite her accolades, including national awards for her poetry and leadership in the arts, Jenny experienced severe professional backlash in 2019 after expressing gender-critical views. Her work was removed from a major online poetry site, she was erased from events and histories she helped build, and she lost multiple teaching and performance opportunities. In 2023, she made the difficult decision to stop performing poetry due to what she describes as a hostile, censorious environment. Jenny links much of this climate to the influence of Scottish political institutions and their entanglement with arts funding.

*“It’s psychological, it’s social, it’s economic, it’s democratic... I’ve lost work, friends, my mental health suffered, and my creative drive disappeared. But I’ve kept my integrity.”*

She is now focused on non-fiction writing and calling for policy change, urging arts institutions to uphold neutrality on contentious issues and embed artistic freedom and talent—not ideology—into their values.

## Anonymous Writer & Arts Contributor

As a freelance writer and arts contributor she experienced targeted harassment and professional threats after expressing her views on sex-based rights and female-only spaces. Her social media activity—specifically liking comments about biological sex—sparked a backlash, including online abuse, threats to her job, and calls for her to be de-platformed from poetry events. She also lost a long-standing friendship with a trans actor, after expressing concerns over women’s safety in hospitals. While one poetry event stood by her, others cut ties or ignored her, and major journalism outlets distanced themselves under pressure.

*“The minute I voiced an opinion—even just by liking a comment—I was threatened with being reported to my job. I’ve seen behind the curtain. What I witnessed wasn’t equality—it was control, silencing, and bullying.”*

She believes the tide may be turning, citing increased public discussion and the Cass Review. She supports the idea of a database of arts organisations that uphold genuine viewpoint diversity and advocates for public funding to support female-centred art that reflects today’s challenges.

## Anonymous Poet & Teacher

This drama teacher and poet has seen a growing culture of conformity and self-censorship in the arts and education. He recalls early experiences with mandatory training on gender identity and changes to drama exam guidelines that have discouraged cross-sex casting, signs he believes of increasing ideological influence. He says that national youth focused drama institutions now require students to state their pronouns, effectively compelling belief in gender ideology, which he likens to a religious doctrine. While not directly cancelled, he describes the quiet pressure to conform, particularly among younger teachers and students. The most harmful effect, he argues, is self-censorship so that artists avoid challenging work before it’s even created. He believes strongly that the arts must remain a space for risk, discomfort, and truth, and sees resisting this cultural pressure as an essential part of artistic integrity.

## Anonymous Novelist

As a prominent novelist, she has been outspoken in her gender-critical views. This led to professional consequences including being dropped from judging a writing competition after pressure from a co-judge. She describes her sense of betrayal by professional bodies, such as The Society of Authors, who have failed to support members who express gender-critical views, and highlights the chilling effect this has had on freedom of expression across the arts. Despite a long history of feminist activism and literary credibility, she has experienced professional distancing from key festivals and organisations post-cancellation. She insists she refuses to self-censor, seeing it as incompatible with being an artist. While she has not yet written fiction directly addressing the gender debate, she expects to in time, especially concerned with the harm done to vulnerable young women. She emphasises that the arts must remain a space of empathy and fearless exploration and believes that greater public discussion and legal challenges will be essential in shifting the tide. She remains committed to protest, public conversation, and collective resistance to what she describes as an *“existential battle”* that reaches far beyond the arts, touching education, law, medicine, and the rights of women and gay people.

## Anonymous Political Cartoonist

A long-time political cartoonist, she was “cancelled” in 2020 after submitting a cartoon to a political newspaper commenting on the gender debate. Though it was published without issue initially, the Trades Union Congress swiftly intervened, threatening to defund the newspaper unless they dropped the cartoonist and agree to only publish pieces on women’s rights alongside trans activist rebuttals. No one from the paper contacted her directly—she discovered her cancellation through the media. The Free Speech Union, newly established at the time, supported her by demanding a response and securing a private apology from the editor, but no public

redress was offered. The cancellation ended her professional relationship with the newspaper, affected her ability to get freelance work, and led to harassment of authors she had previously collaborated with. Despite the trauma—including threats from trade unions and severe stress during the COVID-19 pandemic—she has become a committed campaigner for women’s rights. She continues to create more controversial artwork than ever. Her story exemplifies the chilling effect on freedom of expression within union-backed institutions and the arts, particularly when EDI ideologies are embedded without room for dissent.

## Rob Francis Writer & Academic

Rob Francis is a poet, novelist, and lecturer. In 2022, he was targeted by cancel culture when a bookshop—long supportive of his work—received an anonymous email branding him a ‘raging transphobe’ and conspiracist. The accusations stemmed not from his creative writing, but from supporting figures like Kathleen Stock and Rosie Kay on social media. To their credit, the bookshop stood by him and held a speaking event Rob had been booked for, but the incident left him deeply shaken. He described a strong fight-or-flight response, lasting paranoia, and a lingering fear of future attacks. *“Even when you win, you lose a little,”* he said. Rob sees a wider trend of ‘soft power’ in the arts, where only ideologically aligned work is promoted. Writers self-censor to meet unspoken expectations, and critical acclaim often reflects political agreement rather than artistic merit. Though he refuses to censor his own creative work, Rob admits he’s more cautious online, often liking instead of retweeting posts. He left the University and College Union (UCU) over its handling of the Kathleen Stock case and joined the Free Speech Union for its stronger stance on academic freedom. Attempts to screen the documentary Adult Human Female at his university were quietly blocked—not by overt refusal, but by a lack of institutional support.

*“There’s a difference between being told you can go ahead and knowing the institution has your back.”*

Rob believes the path forward lies in more public bravery, legal wins, and restoring backbone to institutions. *“Bravery produces more bravery.”*

Anonymous  
Visual & Conceptual Artist

Designer and Central Saint Martin’s graduate he entered higher education after surviving homelessness and mental health challenges, driven by a desire to use art for real social good. Instead, he found an environment dominated by bureaucratic groupthink and identity politics, where social justice had been hollowed out and replaced with conformity, censorship, and superficial inclusion. As a student rep, he witnessed firsthand how a small, ideologically driven minority, backed by administrators, held disproportionate influence. He described how talented, working-class students were routinely side-lined, while less skilled but socially advantaged peers advanced by parroting buzzwords and promoting the illusion of diversity.

He used satire and humour in his own work to challenge the system, creating a successful Masters project based on David Graeber’s concept of “bullshit jobs,” including university roles that *“find problems rather than solve them.”* He recalls how administrators prioritised ideology over student welfare, citing an incident in which a male student manipulated trans identity policies to intimidate a female peer, and says staff privately agreed with him but were too afraid to speak out.

*“Art school used to be about provoking people,” he says. “Now, it’s about not offending anyone—and that’s breaking down relationships, creativity, and comedy.”*

Graham Linehan  
Writer & Comic

Graham Linehan, acclaimed creator of Father Ted and The IT Crowd, describes being completely exiled from the UK arts and media world after voicing gender-critical views. Once celebrated with a lifetime achievement award, he now says he is *“a non-person”* in the industry, with colleagues

refusing to associate with him and opportunities vanishing overnight. His Father Ted musical was 75% complete when producers tried to remove his name and exclude him from rehearsals. Linehan refused to accept payment to stay silent, calling it a devastating personal and professional betrayal.

*“Even people who liked me couldn’t speak up,” he says. “It was like being airbrushed out of my own work.”*

He’s since relocated abroad and rebuilt a new life through journalism on Substack, but the cost has been immense—financially, emotionally, and socially. Linehan estimates he owes a significant amount in taxes and legal fees. He’s been on antidepressants for six years and describes the toll of losing friends, family connections, and creative opportunities. He calls for practical solutions, including contractual free speech protections in the arts and backup staffing for theatres unwilling to cave to activist pressure.

*“What the UK is saying is—we don’t want artists,” he warns. “We want obedient people who follow rules. But that’s not how you make great art.”*

Anonymous  
Choreographer, Dancer & Performer

She has experienced cancellation from all sides including audience members complaining about her performance, reporting her to a venue board and trying to force a public apology from her. She recalled how an offer of work was retracted the day before a job was due to start because a member of staff objected to her opinions. Although the offer was eventually reinstated she felt it was untenable to work there. She described how a venue retracted an agreed performance, ostensibly for artistic reasons, but on questioning said they had a duty to their artists to keep the space safe and her presence would compromise that. Another venue invited her to perform but then restricted post discussion with their team citing potential distress her work would cause the LGBTQI+ community and saying they would not have enough time to prepare the community for her work.

Rob believes the path forward lies in more public bravery, legal wins, and restoring backbone to institutions. *“Bravery produces more bravery.”*

Arturo Desimone  
Writer, Poet & Visual Artist

Arturo has experienced a quiet but persistent form of censorship—events withdrawn, projects dropped, and publications pulled without formal explanation. His poetry collection, Russian-Caribbean Requiem, was removed from a publisher’s pipeline after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, not because of content, but due to cultural paranoia. A respected Australian poet was discouraged from reviewing his book, About a Lover from Tunisia for fear of being labelled “Orientalist” or accused of “cultural appropriation”. He’s seen opportunities vanish after disagreeing publicly with a feminist, and even had a magazine fact-checker forbid him from using the word “censor” in an essay about Charlie Hebdo’s history. He says that what’s most damaging is the chilling effect—how young or outsider artists are erased before they’re even seen.

*“While high-profile cancellations draw headlines, it’s emerging and marginal voices that get buried by the fallout.”*

He says that contrary to public perception, the casualties of cancel culture are not just white, metropolitan men—it’s often artists from diverse backgrounds, working at the edges, whose careers are quietly derailed.

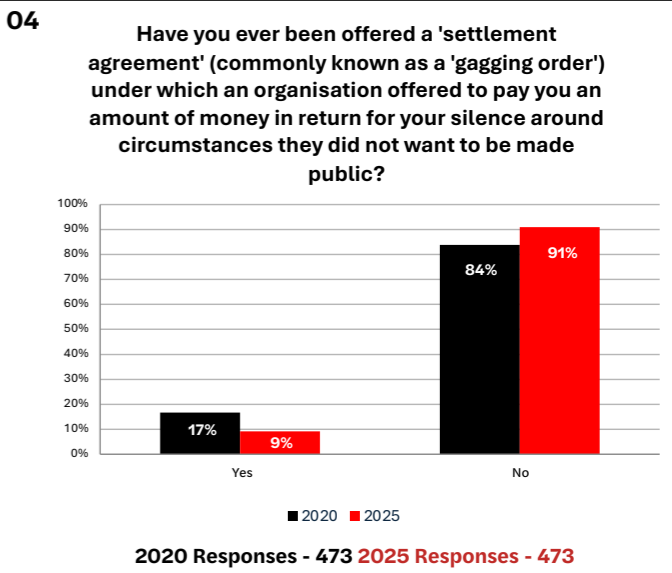
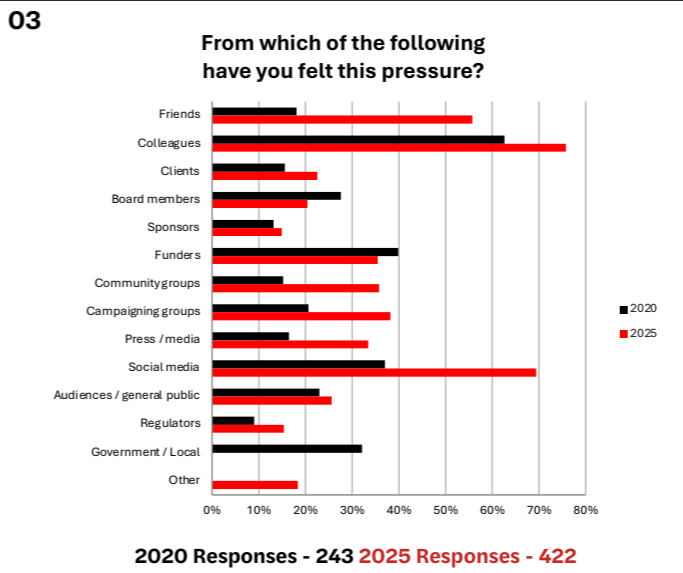
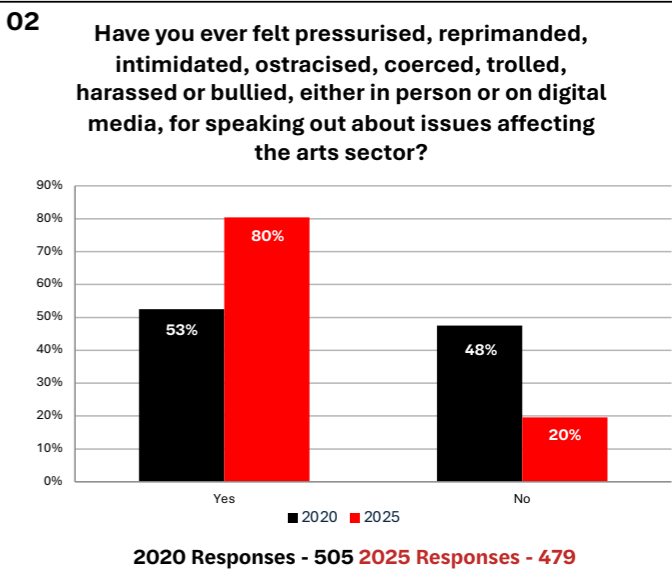
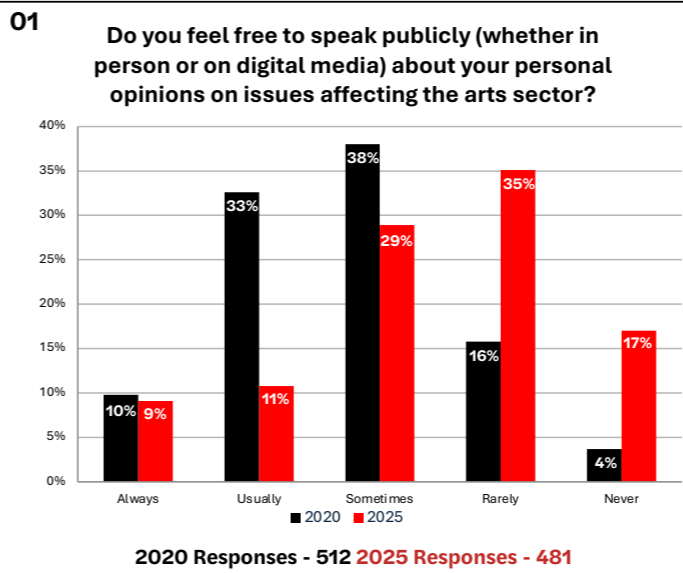
Sibyl Ruth  
Writer & Editor

Sibyl lost work as an editor as a result of expressing lawful gender critical views on her personal Twitter account. She started Tribunal proceedings and after settlement, prior to full court proceedings, eventually received an apology and a settlement. She would like the public to know how difficult it still is for anyone working in the publishing industry to speak and write freely about the simple fact that there are two sexes, and that sometimes sex matters. She says that as a result of this silencing important stories are not being heard

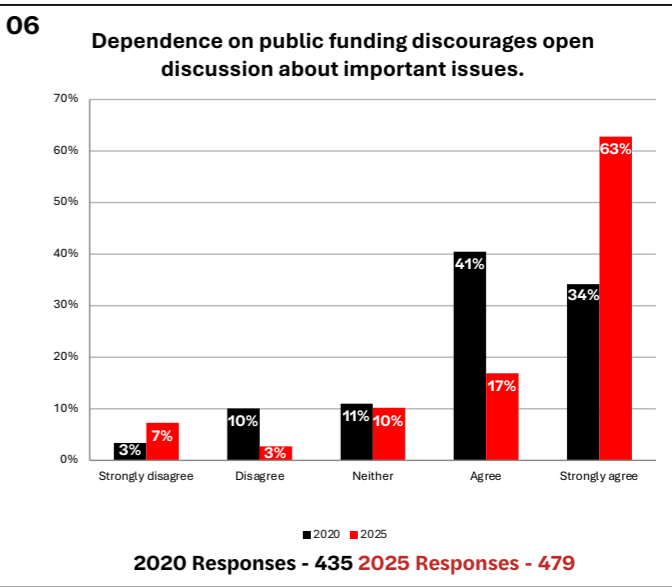
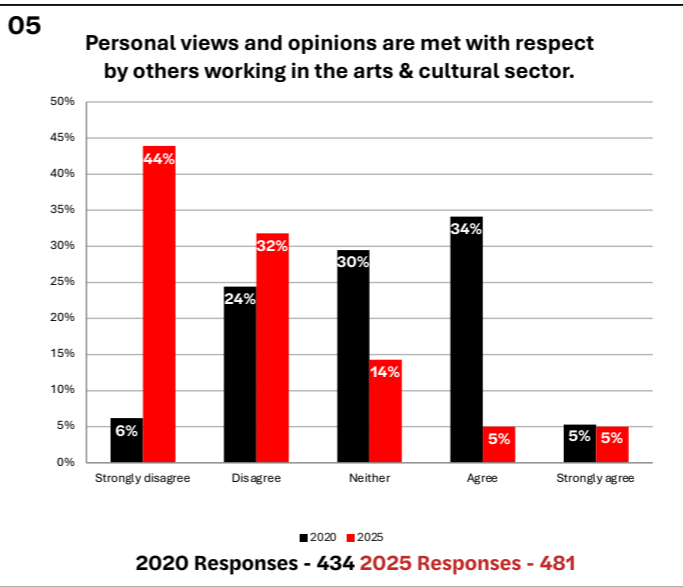
Claudia Clare  
Ceramicist

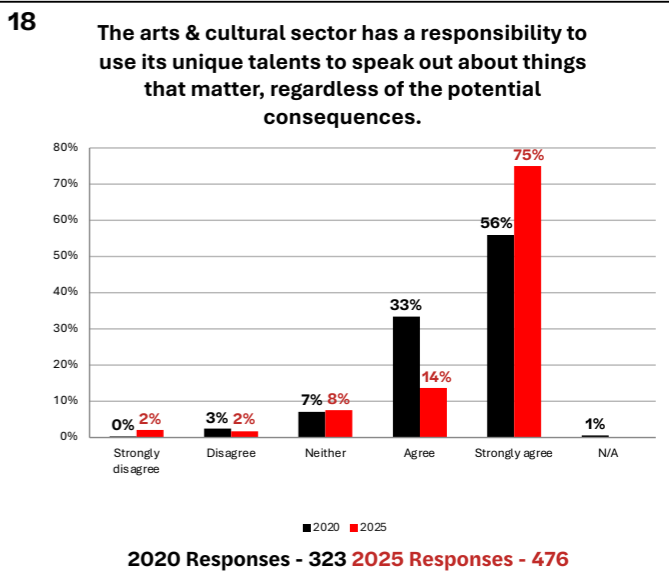
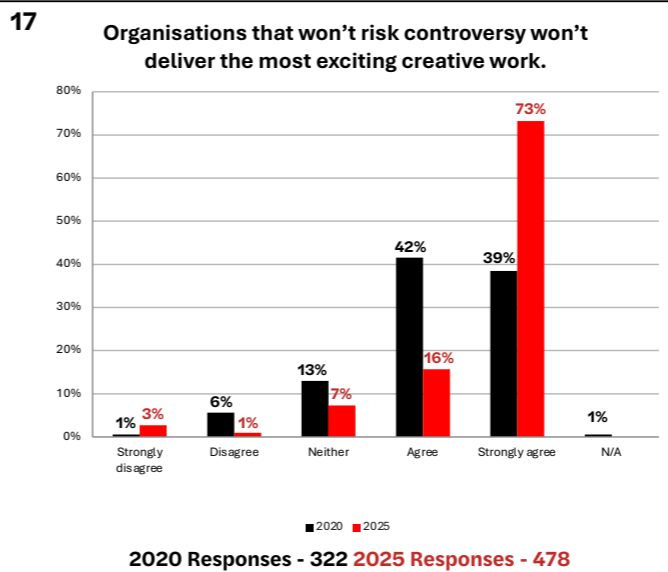
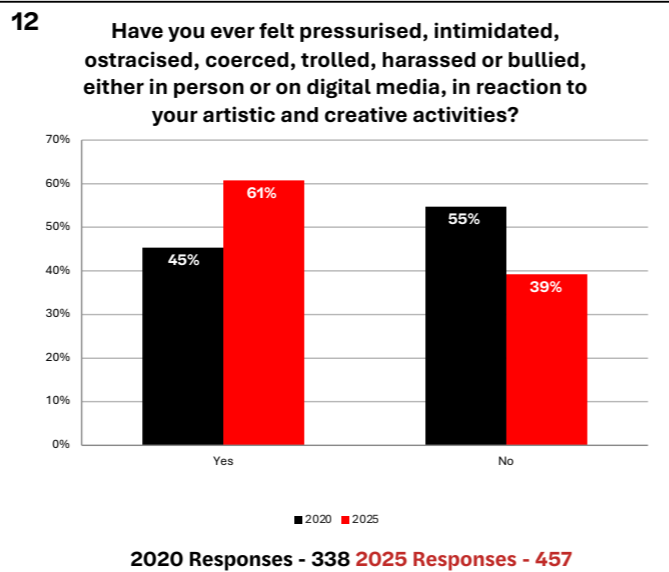
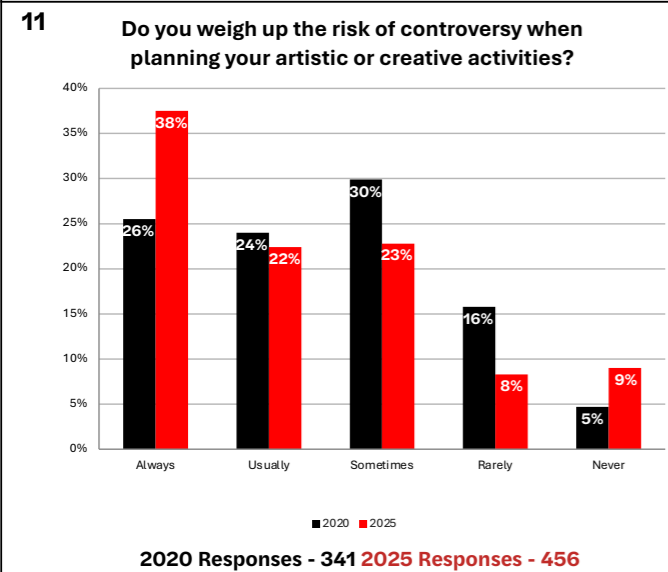
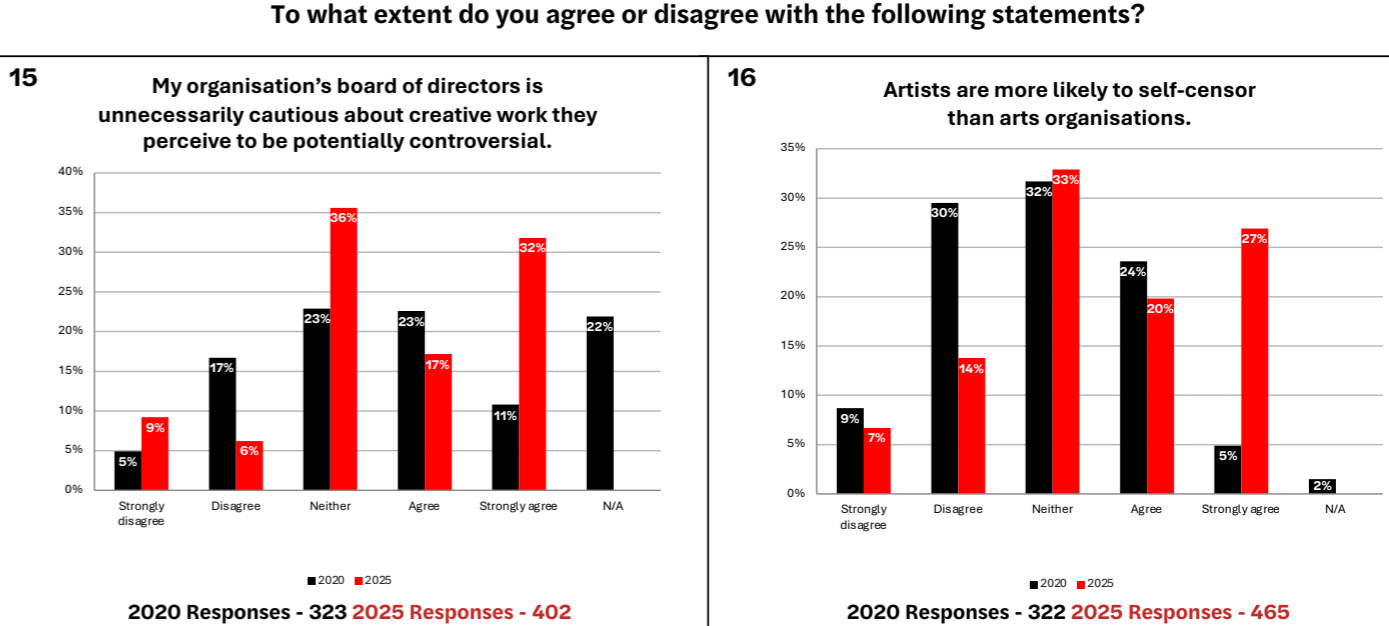
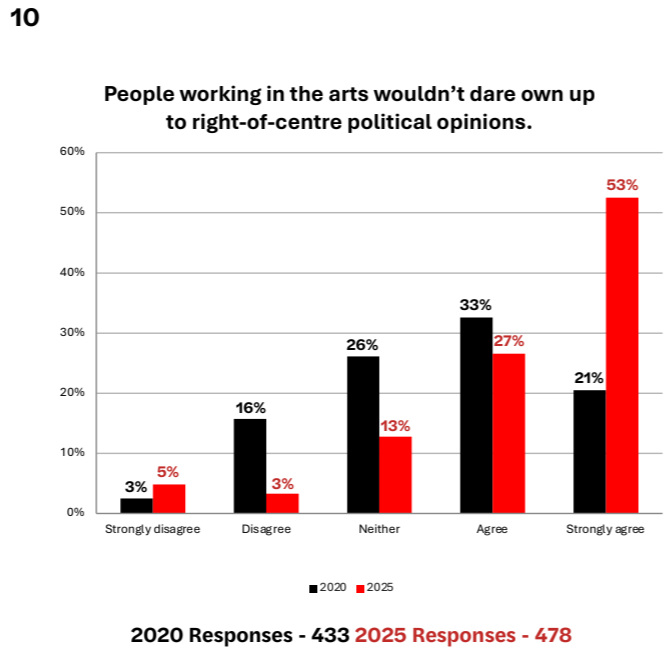
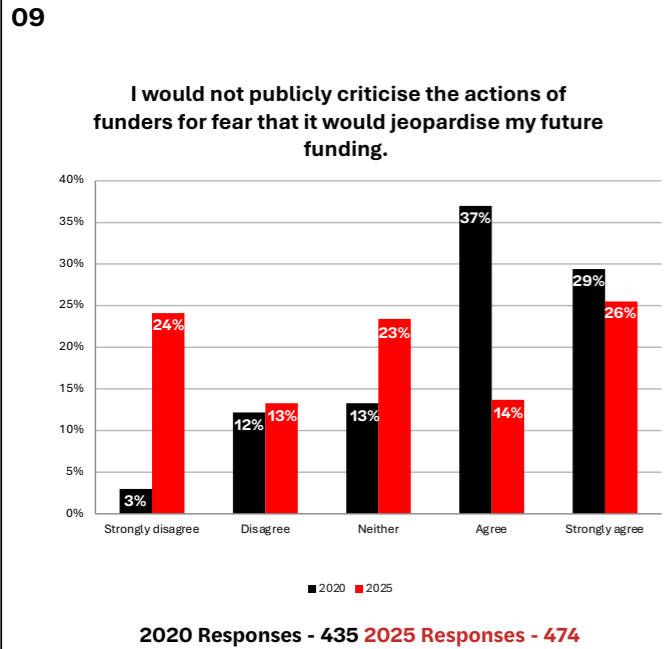
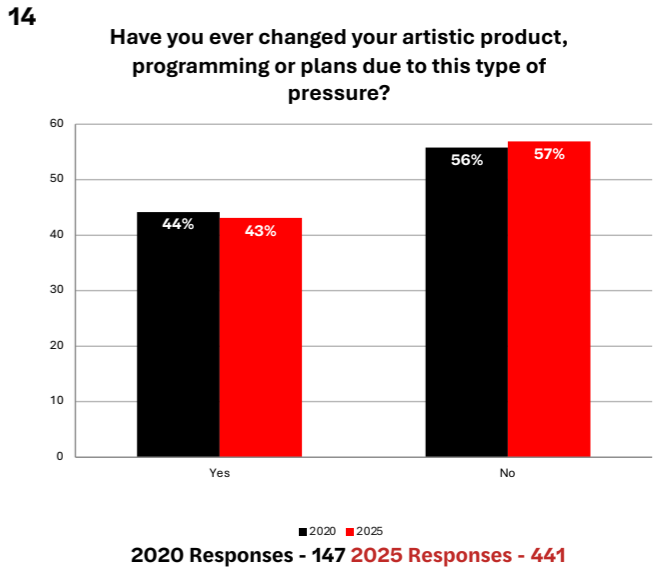
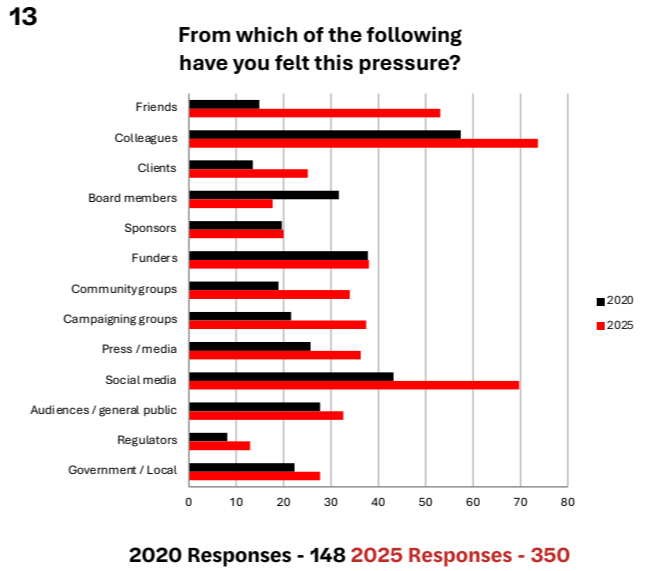
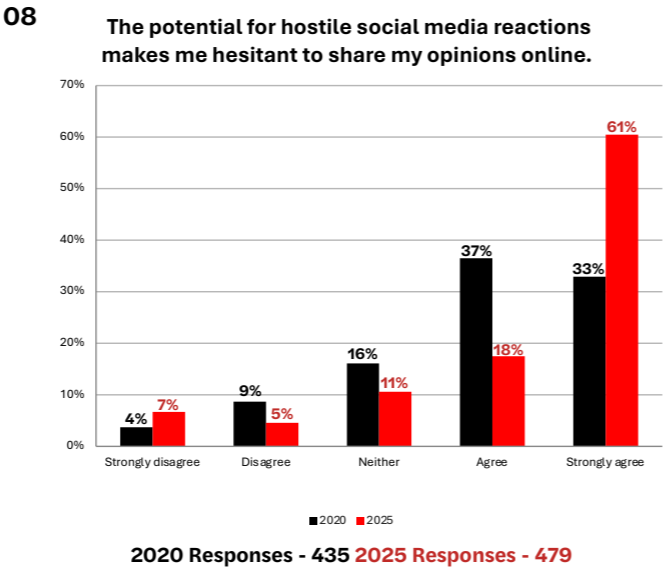
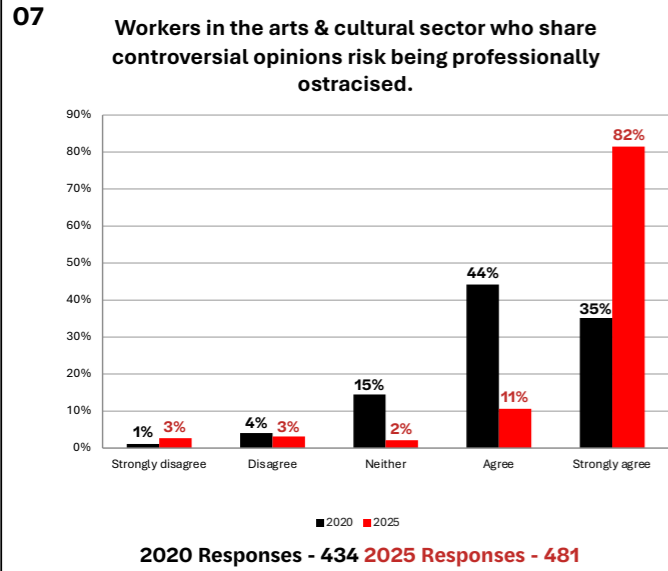
Since 2010, Claudia’s work has been removed or partially hidden. She has had events cancelled at short notice by at least seven UK venues, sometimes due to what she exhibits, but increasingly due to what she thinks. In 2016, one of her pieces was pulled from an exhibition called Ideas Worth Fighting For. She wryly observes however that not all ideas qualify. In 2022, she was expelled from Ceramic Art London for views she shared on social media. She took legal action against University of the Arts London and the Craft Potters Association. Her case settled in 2023 with an apology, a charitable contribution, and no gagging clause, something Claudia regards as a red line. Claudia notes that today’s censorship rarely comes from the state—it’s enforced by civil society, from national institutions to local venues, often led by fearful managers and unaccountable activist staff. She says the arts are becoming a hostile space for dissenting voices, with institutions scrambling to “cleanse” themselves of so-called heretics. Although she now exhibits and sells again at the Contemporary Ceramics Centre, operated by the Craft Potters Association, her most recent cancellation was just last month, and was only reversed after legal pressure. She argues things should not be this way, but growing legal recourse and awareness are starting to shift the tide. She adds *“It’s time we demand higher standards from our cultural institutions.”*

Appendix 2  
Data



To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?





# Who We Are

Freedom in the Arts (FITA) was founded in October 2023 by Rosie Kay, an award-winning choreographer, and Denise Fahmy, a seasoned arts professional. Both founders have firsthand experience navigating the challenges of today’s increasingly censored arts landscape. FITA emerged as a response to these challenges, aiming to safeguard artistic freedom and ensure a thriving, fearless arts sector.

# Our Mission

Freedom in the Arts champion artistic freedom as a fundamental pillar of democracy and cultural innovation. We believe the arts must be a space for open dialogue, bold creativity and diverse perspectives. By confronting censorship, supporting artists, and influencing policy, we aim to restore an environment where creative expression can flourish without fear, ensuring the arts continue to inspire and challenge society for generations to come.

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