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Artist Interviews: Key Themes

Prepared for the California Arts Council
by Institute for the Future

Nov 15, 2024



CREATIVE ECONOMY
WORKGROUP OF CALIFORNIA

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About the California Arts Council's Creative Economy Workgroup

Established in the 2022 California budget, the 2024 Creative Economy Workgroup (CEW) is tasked with developing a strategic plan to conduct a comparative analysis with other jurisdictions, evaluate existing financing models and government initiatives, identify opportunities for educational programs and earn-and-learn job training employment, identify geographic areas with the least amount of access or opportunity for a creative economy, and analyze existing initiatives and projects, including the role local governments can play in creating a stronger creative economy. The strategic plan is due to the Legislature by June 30, 2025.



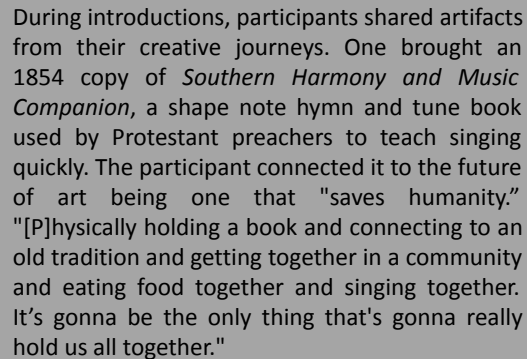
About Institute for the Future (IFTF)

The CEW has partnered with IFTF to provide research, support, and facilitation. IFTF is a nonprofit education and research organization with more than five decades of experience helping leaders, organizations, and communities anticipate the future and make better decisions in the present. IFTF's process is a forward-looking, systems-based approach to developing strategies for a competitive and vibrant creative economy that serves all Californians.



Outline

- California's Arts Workforce: Key Statistics
- Interview Goals
- Methodology
- Key themes



California's Arts Workforce: Key Statistics

According to the California Labor Lab:

- **1.1 million Californians** worked in arts-related occupation or industry, or both
- **732,260 people** (3.9% of the workforce) in California reported an arts-related occupation in main or secondary jobs in the month prior to interview
 - 52%** held two or more jobs
 - 56%** held arts roles only in their second job
- **51%** in arts jobs are independent contractors (vs. 20.3% overall economy).
- **42%** earn under \$40,000 annually in arts roles, despite an average wage of **\$202,410**.

Understanding the Workforce

- Numbers provide one perspective, but first hand artist stories reveal deeper insights
- Talking directly to artists can uncover their priorities, experiences, and how they navigate the future

Artist and Creative Worker Interviews

Interview Goals:

1. **To learn** directly from artists and creative workers experiences in the creative economy
2. **To identify** current shifts and sources of change across the creative ecosystem
3. **To map out** creative pathways and anticipate how these may evolve in the future
4. **To collect** views on the future outlook for California's creative economy
5. **To explore** what transformation for the creative economy could look like and the actions needed to get there

“Art is everywhere”

Methodology

- **Recruitment:** Electronic form distributed with CAC's help; selection based on expertise, career stage, and arts journey
- **Interview Format:** Began with 2-hour group interviews, transitioned to 90-min individual interviews for deeper insights.
- All interviews in English; participants compensated
- **Sample Note:** Diverse, not representative; focused on unique perspectives, not survey data

Participant Profile

Total Artists: 19

- Groups: 5 in Group 1, 6 in Group 2, 8 individual interviews
- Ages: 22–65, across career stages (emerging to established)
- Locations: Across California, including Sacramento, Visalia, Salinas, Los Angeles, San Diego
- Sectors: Music, dance, design, gaming, visual arts, film/TV, and GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums)
- Ethnic backgrounds and education (some college to Master's, most with Bachelor's degrees).
- Income from \$25,000 to \$150,000+; roles include full-time, part-time, freelance, gig, and self-employment (9 in multiple categories).

Key Themes

1. Attracting and keeping artists and creatives in California

2. Artists and creative workers expressed dissonance between the creative economy and how they see themselves

- Art and mental health
- Artists actively building their own infrastructure
- Artists are Multi-solvers: bringing transportation infrastructure and the art and cultural ecosystem together

3. Artists and creative workers are not a monolithic group. They face the future in different ways:

- Preserve
- Resist
- Acquiesce
- Embrace

Attracting and Keeping Artists and Creative Workers in California

How do we attract (cultivate) and keep artists and creative workers in California?

- One artist put it simply calling out the need for **stability**, **being paid your value**, and **recognition**.

“What we need to have would be to have consistent work, consistent work that will pay you what you’re worth. And that will credit you each and every time, even if it’s just the smallest thing ‘cuz I think that that plays a big role.”

Attracting and Keeping Artists and Creative Workers in California

PULL FACTORS: What is attracting and keeping artists in California?

- California's climate of acceptance, openness, and experimentation.

"California for me, has always felt like one of the most hopeful places to be in the country."

"California is very different than the rest of the country, and even if we do have a very conservative presidency going forward the next 10 years, California is kind of a little bit of a bubble."

"As I started coming to the Los Angeles opera, I started realizing, wait a minute, there's a lot of experimentation. ... There's been a lot of experimentation in Los Angeles in music and in the visual arts."

Attracting and Keeping Artists and Creative Workers in California

PULL FACTORS:

- Artists pointed to the significance of what some described as the scene– what we’ve come to define by pervasive creativity and an abundant opportunity for connection and community

“I built this incredible network of talented, artistic humans. And I got really familiar with the art scene here, with all the different venues and community groupings, and I fell in love with the people in the arts.”

“I get jobs from networking, from talking and from just being in the right place at the right time, and then putting myself in a position [to meet people].”

“So I’m kind of in the dead center of Los Angeles...And so I’m kind of in the thick of it. So a lot of my community building and collaborations and singing and stuff is just because of word of mouth. And you know, when 20 people gather weekly, they have friends, and they talk to their friends. So it’s literally just like artists and musicians in the same community.”

Attracting and Keeping Artists and Creative Workers in California

PUSH FACTORS: What is making it difficult to stay in California or to attract talent?

- Increasing decoupling of work from geography, the new reality of distributed work, shifting some parts of the creative production process and certain kinds of workflows outside cities and outside California.
- The lure of stability in other places. Perhaps the most cited factor more than the new distribution of work that is contributing to the creative exodus from California is the lack of affordability and instability that the high cost of everyday life in California generates.

“I don’t see LA as the place I have to be anymore where it was the place I had to be. It’s really sad. There’s something magical about the location that was so magical to me in 96 when I moved there.”

Attracting and Keeping Artists and Creative Workers in California

PUSH FACTORS:

- Precarity (the state of persistent uncertainty) is a common California experience where many of us face economic, health, and security risks due to the lack of or insufficient access to income, work, housing, food, health insurance, transportation, and so on.

“There’s really a lack of support for the arts in both state, local and national government, and so artists are kind of forced to be entrepreneurs. ... “[Artists] really have to scrape a living together, you know...the lack of health and safety services, like health insurance for artists. How, how, you know, like even just the very simple things that I think drive a lot of people away from being in the arts.”

“God forbid an artist is actually sick. I don’t know what they [would] do.”

“CA can stand to lead much more than just do what [the rest of] America does, which is undervalue the arts and under pay... underfund the arts. Wouldn’t it be great if California you know, led by example, and said, well, in California we care about art and culture so much that ... every artist that lives in California is entitled to health insurance through this you know the same health insurance that a city official would get ... when we’re talking about such a large economy [things] like that should be conceivable.”

Attracting and Keeping Artists and Creative Workers in California

PUSH FACTORS:

- We also heard about the pressure to reduce costs and how this often means squeezing savings from creative workers which only adds to the already heavy burden of persistent instability and uncertainty. Some even point to how short-sighted this strategy has been and will only result in gutting the next generation of talent.

“Incentivise people to stay here, live here, build this here, keep the talent here. You are creating a problem in 20 years, that is, where is the talent going to be? Unless you build that homegrown talent here [cultivate it], you have literally closed the idea of having the industry in 2-3 decades.”

Artists and creative workers expressed dissonance between the creative economy and how they see themselves.

Artists and creative workers expressed criticism of reducing their creative output/culture to a commodity to be monetized in the market. Many see their art and creative work as part of the care infrastructure, connecting art to health, education, community and economic development, and justice movements.

They practice fluidity blurring the boundaries between art and creativity with these domains, disciplines, and issues. They emphasize creative problem solving, participatory storytelling, and collective empowerment for facing change. There is often purpose, meaning, and a vision for change that drives these artist's pursuits.

Art + Mental Health

"I'm able to teach different members of the community how to weave, whether it's youth that are part of a mental health group, whether it's women who are survivors of domestic violence, if it's immigrants that have come here alone what we call unaccompanied minors, or people who have fled trauma in their home countries. Yeah, different things of that nature. I'm really able to work with these community members in providing these workshops, which we have found to be very therapeutic, very helpful."

Artists and creative workers expressed dissonance between the creative economy and how they see themselves.

Artists Actively Building Their Own Infrastructure

- Artists have the power to see possibilities where there were none before. This is why we at IFTF have long considered artists and creatives as futurists. The story of MusicLandria, a community space for musicians in Sacramento, is a great example. It started as an instrument lending library eventually became a music education center and a venue and now has aspirations to scale the model to other locations and cities.

"When we started at MusicLandria about 10 years ago, we were a library of music instruments. We realized that a lot of folks didn't have just straight up access. They were like dude. I don't have the resources or the ability to get my hands on a guitar or a drum machine, or a synthesizer or a PA for this backyard house party that I want to throw. So we really wanted to address that and we've grown a lot. And like I said, we've pivoted to address multiple needs. At 1st it was access, then it was education. How do people learn how to play that instrument? After they learned how to play the instrument we were like, Okay, well, now, they need a place to showcase their art. So we started a venue that helped build community. And then but also even more than just the community building we saw. It is like building family bonds with other musicians, and that was huge for me again, answering like who I am. I'm like a lifelong musician, but I had a really rocky start. And I didn't have a family unit. So it's really cool to be able to create an organization that helps fill those gaps for people that don't kind of fit into the school system right like that don't fit into that world, or are falling into like dramatic downward spirals, and don't know how to communicate their feelings, and don't know how to like who they are in this world. I think music is a great tool for some people to really explore that."

Artists and creative workers expressed dissonance between the creative economy and how they see themselves.

Artists are Multi-Solvers: Bringing transportation infrastructure and the art and cultural ecosystem together.

- One person in the Central Valley expressed the need for creative space, and imagined how the fast train could be transformative for the local creative economy, demonstrating once again that creative mindset at work locally-seeing possibilities where none were seen before.

“[T]he State of California is telling the high speed rail contractors, ‘you have to hire people who are disadvantaged business enterprises, you have to hire people who are veterans, you have to serve the minority.’ Artists are a minority, so I think we can get on board with adding art to whatever this new venture is. But before it even happens, before they start constructing the train stops, can we add a theater space there? So I don’t know. Maybe bands play at this theater space, and who knows? We get to decide if we get on board now.”

Artists and creative workers are not a monolithic group

Artists and creative workers face the future in different ways:

- Preserve
- Resist
- Acquiesce
- Embrace



How artists and creative workers are facing the future

Preserve

- Artists and creative workers cultivate and resurrect vintage practices and forms of creative expression that are under threat or at risk of disappearing

“AI is out the bag and it's going to keep growing. He believes there will be more and more people that gravitate towards preservation (from playing instruments from the 1800s to getting together and learning a 200 year old singing tradition) and feeling human. “There's going to be more of a need to feel human.” Pointed an example of how during and after the pandemic saw an increase in people who became “preppers” - who pickle their own vegetables, made their own food, learned how to bake bread- “back to truly human things.”

“The further we become linked to our phones and technology, the wider of a market there is for the opposite of that. And that's kind of what I'm looking for and trying to foster. And that's why I'm teaching this stuff so vigorously, because it's like making sure that that community lasts.”

How artists and creative workers are facing the future

Resist

- Artists and creative workers who reject new ways of doing things; they seek regulation or protections to resist change

“There needs to be regulation on AI across the board, not just AI art, but across the board. This needs to be something that people have to opt in voluntarily as the default, not the default, as ‘we can take whatever we want, and then you can raise a complaint later if we use your work in a way that you don’t agree with.’ So there needs to be real laws put in place that are limiting the abuse that can happen with AI in general. That’s for every job across the board. But specifically, in the creative economy it needs to not be legal that these machines can just take your artwork and repurpose it, that that needs to be illegal.”

How artists and creative workers are facing the future

Acquiesce

- Artists and creative workers that accept coming changes without protest; some may feel overwhelmed with the pace of change and face increasing loss of control, meaning, and worth.

“It was at that time that we learned to be technologically agnostic. It’s not about technology because technology is always changing.”

How artists and creative workers are facing the future

Embrace

- Artists and creative workers who accept the emerging future, adopt changes rapidly, practice agility with experimentation, build fluency in the emerging world and define new ways forward, e.g., practices, workflows, innovations, etc.

“I hope to be farther along with a lot of projects. Trying to find ways to use some of these new, emerging technologies to be more creative rather than less. Because even now ChatGPT can be like a research assistant. Where, like, I can talk through ideas with and kind of build things from like a brainstorming space all the way up to right before I actually start writing it myself.”

Concluding “Insights” Starters

- Think about the creative economy through the frameworks of Two-Curves
- Artists and creative workers are not a single monolithic group. Consider the variety of ways they face the future
- Static and Defined vs. Fluid and Emergent Pathways. Fluidity/Agility is critical capacity in an environment of persistent uncertainty. Giving Rise of the Creative Enterprise of One
- Weigh the prescriptions that add to the burden of empowerment (e.g., self-improvement) versus systemic change (e.g., cultivating the creative place terroir, milieu)



Thank you