

Launching The Anti-Exploitation Academy With Unlimited

***Carole Edrich** uncovers what can be done about exploitation in the arts, with the launch of the Anti-Exploitation Academy*

We all know it happens. We've all been subject to it. If we're honest, most of us have imposed it on others too. The expectation of free labour in the arts isn't a dirty secret. It's standard operating procedure, even survival for smaller organisations. It runs through the sector like damp through old walls: in the unpaid consultation that's framed as a favour, the 'exposure' offered in lieu of a fee or the emerging artist told their enthusiasm should be payment enough. It extends well beyond the arts too. The gig economy, the internship culture, the corporate assumption that passion negates the need for payment.

But it hits hardest where resources are at their thinnest and power in its most asymmetrically distributed places. In the UK and most of Europe, that means disabled people – particularly creatives – bear a disproportionate share of the cost.

Systemic and structural incentives are stacked against change and organisations already running on fumes, goodwill and the ghosts of the fumes. So it's no surprise that organisations are looking to free labour to survive, or that individuals fear that saying no means never being asked again. None of this will be fixed quickly, or by a single initiative. But it can be fixed incrementally, practically and with the kind of clear-eyed honesty that refuses to pretend the problem is somebody else's responsibility.

In January, at the launch of the Anti-Exploitation Academy, Jo Verrent, Director of Unlimited explained: "When exploitation becomes normal, it stops being visible. We stop questioning it and start justifying it. But normal shouldn't mean acceptable." She added: "I wouldn't be in the role I am now if I hadn't done work for free in the past. I don't think this is right or fair. But it's true." She also says that she has lived both sides of this problem, and discusses more in her blog post at https://weareunlimited.org.uk/ive-lived-both-sides-of-exploitation/.

The Academy grew out of Unlimited's Nothing for Nothing campaign, which, back in 2023 surveyed over 300 disabled artists, creatives and arts workers (myself included). The findings were awful. We disabled people make up at least 23% of the working-age population (about 10.2 million), 86% of respondents had been asked to work for nothing, and only 2% said they never had. They followed that survey with case studies, resources, an organisational pledge scheme and a series of online events. But Jo wanted something with a longer reach. Not just a campaign moment, but a permanent practical tool. The Academy took a good year to build, and it's where much of her 2025 energy went. I'm on the Unlimited Board (we're all disabled, intersectional, have protected characteristics or are neurodifferent, and by 'we' I mean Board and staff alike).

i Unlimited launched *The Anti-Exploitation Academy* in January this year. It's Unlimited's first ever online course. It's free, anonymous, needs no login and collects no user data. Find it at ***https://tinyurl.com/2zch2xnw***. Jo says that change starts when we start to notice. I hope that noticing helps you as much as it helps me.