

Cuts to art subjects funding ‘walk us back 60 years’, says artist Helen Cammock

UK’s decision to slash subsidy is designed to stifle criticism from artists, Turner prize winner says



Helen Cammock was a late starter in the art world and retrained at 35 after a career as a social worker. Photograph: Stuart C Wilson/Getty Images for Turner Contemporary

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The Turner prize-winning artist Helen Cammock has condemned the government’s decision to halve higher education funding for some arts subjects, calling it a move that will “walk us back 60 years” and make the arts a pursuit for the rich.

Cammock said the funding cuts, which were signed off last week and will slash the high-cost funding subsidy for creative and arts subjects by 50% from September, were a cynical move designed to stifle criticism from artists.

“Established artists are using their voices to challenge what’s happening politically in this country, and I think [the cuts] are a cynical move to quell that,” she said.

“As far as I can see they’re trying to eradicate the subjects that encourage people to think, and the parts of culture that really loudly challenge the system that’s in place.”

Cammock – who unveiled artworks across the London Underground network on Wednesday – was a late starter in the art world and retrained at 35 after a career as a social worker.

She said the cuts would disincentivise schools from encouraging pupils from following the path she took by studying the arts because higher education courses would be harder to access. “I imagine what might happen is schools will be joining together with parents to try to encourage less privileged children to study subjects that will actually get them a career,” she said.

She added that the effect of the cuts would be that “we’re going to walk back 60 years”, with the arts becoming the preserve of the wealthy.

The decision to make the cuts came after a consultation by the Office for Students (OfS) and the education secretary, Gavin Williamson, which suggested halving the amount spent on “high cost” higher education arts subjects in England that were not considered “strategic priorities”.



Helen Cammock has unveiled artworks across the London Underground network centred on empathy and Black Lives Matter. Photograph: Thierry Bal

Ministers were accused of “one of the biggest attacks on arts and entertainment in English universities in living memory” by approving the cuts, which will affect music, dance, performing arts, art and design and media studies courses.

The Public Campaign for the Arts warned the cuts could lead to possible course closures and damage the pipeline of talent that moves from higher education into the creative industries in England.

Cammock’s latest work is a series of posters on the London Underground which are a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and touch on the Black Lives Matter movement.

The artist, whose work has been installed in Aldgate East, Charing Cross, Earl’s Court, Holland Park, South Kensington, St James’s Park and White City stations, created phrases such as “sit alongside and feel me breathe”, which are meant to provoke passengers to think about empathy.

“It’s something that I talked about in my work all the time: the worth and value of certain lives above and over others, and the subjugation of certain voices,” she said.

“For me it was about the idea of breath in crisis,” she added. “It was about the Black Lives Matter protests and George Floyd’s murder. It was about the breath of the planet that was being extinguished.”