

## Visual Arts

### Do art galleries need economists?

---

London's Whitechapel Gallery has appointed Mariana Mazzucato as its first economist-in-residence — to ask how society defines what is valuable



Mariana Mazzucato, who has been appointed the Whitechapel Gallery's first 'economist-in-residence' © Tania Cristofari

**Cristina Ruiz**

Published APR 29 2026

---

### Unlock the Editor's Digest for free

Roula Khalaf, Editor of the FT, selects her favourite stories in this weekly newsletter.

[Sign up](#)

---

The Whitechapel Gallery in London has teamed up with economist Mariana Mazzucato to examine the role of cultural institutions in an era of rising costs and declining funding. She will serve for three years as the gallery's first economist-in-residence.

“We radically, radically need something new, because old thinking isn’t getting us anywhere,” says Whitechapel Gallery director Gilane Tawadros. “In my 30 years in the cultural sector I’ve never known a situation in which so many major institutions — the National Gallery, Tate — are in such a precarious economic state. If they catch cold, the rest of us will get pneumonia.”

Both of those museums have struggled to return to pre-Covid visitor numbers and are now operating at a deficit.

The Whitechapel too is dealing with a significant funding shortfall. In the financial year ending March 31 2025, its deficit stood at £880,458, up from £207,377 the previous year, according to accounts filed with the Charity Commission. Less money was raised for exhibitions “due to the programme strategy of [showing] lesser-known, under-represented artists”; less money came from trusts and foundations because of greater competition for grants, and the cost-of-living crisis continued to affect both audiences and potential funders, the accounts say.



Installation view of 'Gabriel Chaile: Archaeology of Memory' at Whitechapel Gallery © Dan Weill

The gallery's public money, distributed by the Arts Council, has also declined from £6.1mn for 2018-2022 to £5.8mn for 2022-2026.

So how can an economist help? Mazzucato, a highly regarded professor at University College London and founding director of its Institute for Innovation & Public Purpose, is interested in rethinking notions of the public good and how society defines what is valuable. She has the ear of government, and Tawadros hopes she will help us “communicate the value that we create more effectively. It's important for us to have the benefit of somebody who understands the way governments think.”

Governments of all political stripes tend to undervalue culture, seeing it simply as a “cost,” says Mazzucato. This makes it vulnerable to cuts “every time there's a bout of austerity”. Instead, those in power should see the arts as a “strategic investment” that can help tackle a range of urgent social problems such as reintegrating the dispossessed and marginalised. “It can reach people who have been left behind so they can find dignity in their lives,” says Mazzucato, whose research has included studies of carnivals in Notting Hill and Brazil which “create immense public value for individuals and entire communities. These are inclusive, democratic events with year-round economic impact.”

Her focus on community dovetails neatly with one strand of the Whitechapel's programming. In July, the gallery will launch the Backyard Biennial: East, a summer arts festival organised in collaboration with more than 40 local partners across east London.



The Whitechapel Gallery in east London © Guy Montagu-Pollock

“We don’t have much money, we’re up against it like everyone else. But we do have a building which can act as a hub, so we can bring people together. And we can make a long-term commitment to do this, working with artists and local communities and helping to build cultural infrastructure,” says Tawadros.

The key will be communicating the value of such initiatives to both public and private funders. One challenge when dealing with government is that “cultural institutions are often asked to justify their public funding through metrics like visitor numbers that do not capture their most impactful contributions to society,” says Mazzucato, citing the example of the former director of Tate Modern, Frances Morris, who described her own greatest achievements as bringing people into the museum who had never visited a museum before and showcasing artists who are usually marginalised by institutions. This, despite the fact that “current funding and evaluation regimes encourage galleries to prioritise ‘blockbuster’ shows with famous artists and high ticket sales,” says Mazzucato.

This, at least, may be slowly starting to change. In 2021, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport launched the Culture and Heritage Capital (CHC) Programme, which aims to “create publicly available statistics and guidance that will allow for improved articulation of the value of the culture and heritage sectors in decision making.” One report it commissioned, for example, found that frequent cultural engagement has significant positive impact on peoples’ health. “My job is to persuade government of the value of the cultural sector using every argument I can,” says the CHC’s chair, Neil Mendoza.



'Down (Purple)' (1972)... © PrePress Express; Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery; Doug Harris



...and 'Drifting Leaves' (1972) by Senga Nengudi, included in a Whitechapel show of the artist and educator © PrePress Express; Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery; Doug Harris

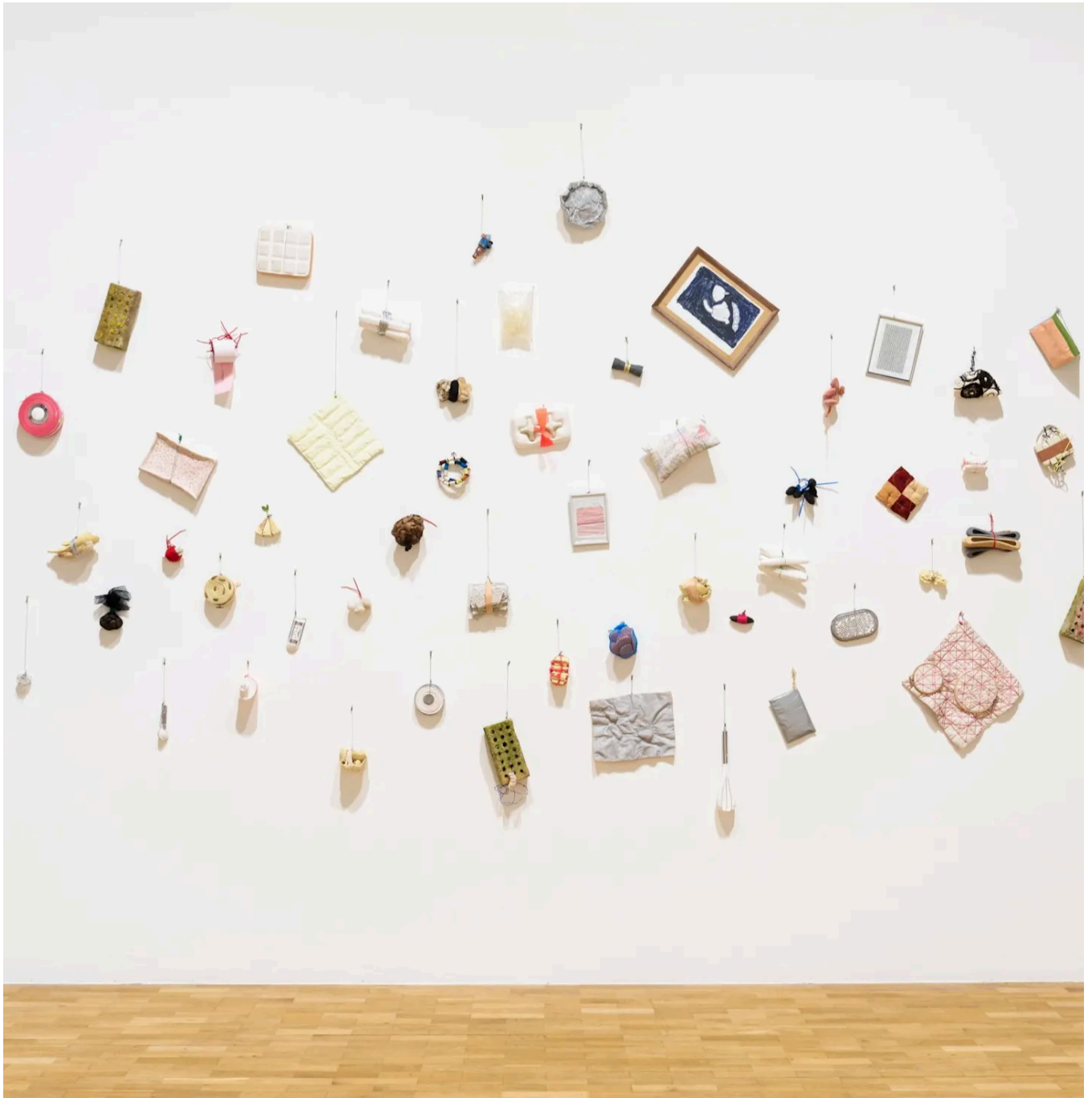
Another challenge is that museums and galleries are not being effectively promoted by their own leaders. While individual directors such as Tristram Hunt at the V&A have emerged as persuasive advocates for the sector, there is little sense of unified purpose across the industry.

The National Gallery's recent announcement that it will start collecting contemporary art, for example, breached a longstanding gentleman's agreement with Tate that it would not do so, contributing to the sense of competition rather than collegiality between museums.

“What the sector needs is collective championing. Many look back to the heyday of Nicholas Serota, director of Tate until 2017, and Neil MacGregor at the helm of the National Gallery and then British Museum until 2015. Like Nicholas Hytner in the theatre world, they seemed to relish the role of public servants, speaking out, together if necessary, for the public good. We have some excellent leaders of individual institutions, but perhaps it needs someone new — a new Tate director? — to help bring boldness and energy to the wider cause,” says Alison Cole, director of The Cultural Policy Unit, a think-tank.

“When you’re in a position of precarity and need to try and survive, it’s very hard as an institution to speak with confidence,” Tawadros says, noting that Serota and MacGregor served as museum directors at a time of much greater stability.

So how can the sector persuade government to invest more substantially in cultural institutions at a time of striking doctors, failing trains and no public money?



'Veronica Ryan: Multiple Conversations' at Whitechapel Gallery © Matt Greenwood

“Imagination is key. I keep thinking about the immediate postwar years in Britain when the country was ravaged, there were bomb sites everywhere, people needed roofs over their head and food to eat, schools needed to be rebuilt, teachers found. And yet, the Arts Council was established at precisely that moment and an economist, John Maynard Keynes, became its first chair to make the argument for how critically important art and artists are. We have to imagine the best possible society we can,” says Tawadros.

[whitechapelgallery.org](http://whitechapelgallery.org)

## Letter in response:

*[How London galleries were better in the Victorian era / From David Kennedy, Author of 'Art & Class', Ilkley, West Yorkshire, UK](#)*

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2026. All rights reserved.

---

## Follow the topics in this article

---

UK economy

Philanthropy

UK politics

Visual Arts

UK arts

