

# EARNING A LIVING: The artist's changing workplace

Positive Solutions was engaged by The Ian Potter Cultural Trust engaged to review the impact of the Trust's support for Australian artists, and advise on strategies for the future. As context for our advice we prepared a scan of some factors impacting the sustainability of artists' careers – a key focus for the Trust. With the Trust's permission the following is an edited version of the context material we prepared, highlighting some of the issues raised by artists.

**David Fishel**, Aug 2022



## Artists' Earnings

In a report for the Australia Council David Throsby highlights two of the key constraints affecting artists' creative earnings – financial challenges and time constraints.

The former arise from a variety of sources, including lack of work opportunities in the artist's artform, lack of financial return from creative practice, and lack of access to funding or other financial support. Time constraints—a lack of time to do creative work—arise through a variety of external pressures and responsibilities such as the need to undertake research and development for new work that may be unpaid and time-consuming.<sup>1</sup>

Pre-Covid, artists' average total annual income was \$48,400 – 21% less than the average Australian wage level – with just \$18,800 from creative work. Between 2007-08 and 2014-15, adjusted for CPI, mean creative income declined by 19%.<sup>2</sup>

## Sources of Support

In 2017, two-thirds of artists reported some reliance on a spouse or partner's income to support their creative work, with 32% considering it extremely important. Half of Australian artists were looking for work outside the arts, work which reduced their time to devote to creative practice. The preparation of the Trust report took place against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic – an event which has had a further major impact on artists' earnings for the last three years.

Reflecting this challenging environment, artists consulted during our work for the Ian Potter Cultural Trust placed a high value on future support in the form of artists' wages, living allowances, paid internships or fellowships.

The great majority of public sector support to the arts in Australia is provided to organisations. There are some Foundations in Australia and overseas which provide direct support to artists. Examples include The

Myer Foundation, Keir Foundation, Gordon Darling Foundation, Minderoo Foundation (WA) and Independent Arts Foundation (SA), as well as the Ian Potter Cultural Trust. Most Foundations are confined to institutional giving, and many focus their arts giving on projects with evident social and health benefits.

The Myer Foundation funds the Sidney Myer Performing Arts Awards. Since 2020, the number of Awards recipients has been expanded to eight (three Individual Awards, three Group Awards and two Facilitator's Prizes, each worth \$25,000). Since 2011 The Sydney Myer Creative Fellowships have also been offered to individual artists at \$160,000 spread over two years. These are intended for artists in their 'early mid-career'.

The James and Diana Ramsay Foundation offers the biennial \$100,000 Ramsay Art Prize to an artist under 40 and a Guildhouse Fellowship valued at over \$50,000.

Funded residencies of varying duration are a well-established means of supporting artists – through provision of space and time for development processes, and sometimes the inclusion of mentoring. The Beyond the Studio: Early to Mid-Career Dance Fellowship is a recently launched program delivered in a partnership between Create NSW and the Sydney Dance Company to support the development of emerging leaders in dance in NSW. A dance practitioner is being selected to undertake intense periods of engagement with the company over a 12–18 month period, supporting their career progression towards a future leadership role in the industry.<sup>3</sup>

Artist consultees expressed clearly their concern with the narrowing range of support:

*Opportunities for Australian artists have become smaller and smaller. The art world feels increasingly limited in its possibilities, increasingly corporate and closed off from experimental creative practices. I don't believe that I am able to sustain myself as an artist in Australia. I am better off living in Asia or looking for funding in Europe. It feels that Australia, as a nation-state, does not value art and artists as anything more than a commodity.*

Overseas, there have been initiatives designed to supplement artists' income, and the income of ancillary workers in creative industries – such as technical support staff. One example is the 'Intermittents' scheme in France, which was created in the 1930s – originally targeted at the film industry – as a form of assured compensation for workers who did not qualify for annual or permanent contracts with their employers, because of the short-term nature of their jobs. In 2011 there were more than 250,000 registered with this scheme.<sup>4</sup>

A second example is the UK's Paul Hamlyn Foundation, which provides 10 awards each year of £60,000 (c.Aus\$100,000) to individual artists. The Foundation has narrowed down to support for visual arts and composers currently, on the basis that it takes less resources in these disciplines to buy the artist time to think and create.



2021 Sydney Myer Performing Arts Award Winners – Speak Percussion. Image: Bryon Jackson



Du Yun – recipient of the 2022 Creative Capital Award – *For Ever More—FutureTradition: An XR Opera Garden* [still] (2022). Image courtesy the artist.

*The awards are made at a timely moment in an artist’s career, offering significant support with no strings attached. The awards are not prizes in any conventional sense, but are instead given on the basis of a mix of factors – talent, promise, tenacity and need, as well as achievement to date. They do not prioritise any particular age group and consider artists from as broad a spectrum of visual arts practice and composition as possible. Recipients are given full autonomy to decide how the award can best support their life and practice as an artist.*<sup>5</sup>

The ‘no strings attached’ approach was endorsed strongly in the consultation Positive Solutions undertook with the nearly 300 Australian artists through survey and interview. A much-repeated message was the value which artists place on being provided resources for development of new work, or for exploring new practices, without narrowly-defined project outcomes having to be met.

Finally, Creative Capital in New York supports artists who are pushing boundaries and asking challenging questions. The Creative Capital Awards in 2022 total US\$2.5 million in artist support:

*The grants will fund the creation of 50 new artists’ projects by 59 individual artists working in the performing arts, visual arts, film, technology, literature, and socially engaged and multidisciplinary practices. Each project will receive up to \$50,000 in direct funding, supplemented by career development and networking services to foster thriving artistic careers . . .*

There are several notable features underpinning the success of Creative Capital – including its focus on multi-year projects, on-going career development during that period and beyond, and assistance in accessing other forms of financing such as loans. It is notable too that “the 2022 awardee cohort comprises more than 90 percent Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx artists of all abilities and genders from their 20s to their 60s”.<sup>6</sup>

One gap in career support was identified repeatedly by artists consulted by Positive Solutions – the support needed at the mid-career stage:

*There are opportunities for early career and fellowships and large commissions for established artists, but the in-between (mid-career), somehow, we are missed*

*Mid-career and established artists need support also – this seems to be forgotten by many agencies, by the glamour of supporting an emerging artist.*

## Technology and Digital

Technology has become increasingly important for artists, with a focus on using technology to create and sell art. Streaming has assumed a growing importance in the music industry, with revenues growing by 19.9% worldwide in 2020. With 75,000 songs uploaded to Spotify every day, the artist faces a daunting prospect to achieve visibility and sales, unless with support from the ABC, community radio or Indi communities.

Seismic changes in the music industry are described in a recent report for

the Victorian Music Development Office (VMDO):

The music industry worldwide is currently in a period of growth that has come about after more than a decade of extreme upheavals, particularly related to technological and organisational changes. While in the 1990s the recording side of the industry was generating huge revenues, the rise of downloading in the 2000s, and the initial failure of the industry to adapt to this new technology (in conjunction with other factors such as the Global Financial Crisis), caused a downturn in profits so extreme that predictions of the 'death of the music industry' became common. The industry had only just started to find ways to make downloading profitable in the early-to-mid 2010s when yet another new technology, music streaming, quickly superseded it. This uncertainty around the profitability of recorded music meant other aspects of artists' careers, such as live shows and merchandise, increased in importance. Alongside this, the rise of social media fundamentally altered how communication about music happens. . . . This has all meant significant changes to where and how people encounter music, how they find new music to listen to, and ultimately how profits and risks are distributed in the industry.<sup>7</sup>

In music and the visual arts non-fungible tokens (NFTs) are a potential game-changer – for a small number of artists. The revenue implications are very different from a vinyl being sold second-hand. With NFTs income continues to flow to the artist. Small groups of artists are already pushing the boundaries with NFTs. But these require big investment and a strong creative team – beyond the reach of many artists. More broadly harnessing technology within creative practice comes at a cost which is typically higher than traditional making/producing materials and processes.

The introduction of e-books was predicted to be a major blow to traditional publishing. However, while known sales of e-books have steadied at roughly 10% of the overall market, the market share enjoyed by Amazon is unknown, and doubtless significantly increases this percentage.

As a creative practice digital art has expanded substantially since the inception of IPCT in the early 1990s. The Ian Potter Cultural Trust's major commissions partnership with ACMI during the last ten years reflects the maturing of this field of work. Gaming is also a significant commercial force and, in Australia, is a very fast-growing sector, having doubled its revenue in the five years to 2021.<sup>8</sup>



Angela Tiatina – Recipient of the 2022 Ian Potter Moving Image Commission, ACMI – *The Pearl* (2021) [installation view] at Art Gallery of NSW. Image: Diana Panuccio.

The affordability and availability of suitable artists' workspace has been an issue of concern for decades, both in Australia and overseas. In some traditional artforms – painting, sculpture, acoustic music, dance – the issues are sufficient provision, location, and cost of rent or hire. In technology-dependent practices there is the added dimension of the costs of or access to specialised equipment. It is unclear whether the current shift to home-based working prompted by Covid-19 will persist in the longer-term for artists. For some practices this will not be feasible.

## Workspace

Funding agencies, education and training institutions, and artist-led groups have made various interventions – from integrating workspace into new, or adaptive re-use cultural facility developments, to negotiating temporary access to premises between more commercial uses or prior to development – typically for exhibition/retail purposes. A long-observed phenomenon is the attraction of artists to low-rent properties, for example in post-industrial areas. As urban development and regeneration extends, the artists are priced out by rising rents.

## Tertiary Training

### CREATIVE PROGRAMS UNDER PRESSURE

In mid-2021 the Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Creative arts (DDCA) commissioned a snapshot of creative arts activity in Australian higher education between 2019 and 2021.<sup>9</sup> In June 2020, fee structures for Australian undergraduate education were overhauled, to direct students towards programs the government believed were more employment-targeted. Through 2020 and into 2021 creative arts departments in Australia had been the subject of a series of reviews, restructures and threatened or actual closures. Notable examples include closure of the Monash University Centre for Theatre and Performance and ongoing restructure of HASS and Creative Industries at University of Newcastle.

Survey responses submitted by tertiary institutions to DCCA indicated that creative programs fluctuated or had declined in numbers, except for design and creative media. The range of offerings decreased, as institutions closed programs with low and declining numbers. Major trends were reported as:

- > Gradual but sustained decrease in enrolments in music and visual arts
- > Several creative programs discontinued following internal review by the University
- > Minimal growth in some programs driven by the closure of others
- > Factors identified as contributing directly to these trends included:
  - The promotion of job-ready STEM programs since 2014, turning students away from the arts
  - Institutional cost-cutting targeting smaller and resource intensive courses
  - The closure of international borders, preventing international students from arriving

Sustaining a healthy tertiary arts training sector is beyond the resources, and perhaps the remit, of individual agencies. But the knock-on effects for future artists and other creative workers are a cause for concern.

### CAREER SKILLS

Tertiary creative training and education often lacks breadth in preparing the artist for a real-world career in the sector. Much is still posited on the model of an individual earning from their creative practice – and requiring only excellence in that practice to succeed. There remains a lack of preparation in business and entrepreneurial skills, understanding of rights



Monash University Centre for Theatre and Performance Musical Theatre elective show, *The Dressmaker* (2018). Image: Sarah Walker

and legal contexts of the work, funding and grantsmanship, marketing, networking and collaboration – or leadership. In addition to failing to provide the individual artist with a full suite of career skills, this gap also impedes the pipeline of tomorrow’s cultural leaders. During Positive Solutions research for the Ian Potter Cultural Trust an appetite for broader business and career-skills training was expressed by artists.

In 2017, the Australia Council indicated that 51% of artists were working across more than one art form. Whilst some crossovers seem natural such as a composer also performing as a musician, others suggested a redefining and blurring of genres, and the emergence of new practices. This is accompanied by a growing trend to interdisciplinary practice.

There is a rise in artists applying their artistic skills in other industries. In 2017, 51% artists had used their creative skills outside the arts (up from 36% in 2009), with 83% of those generating income from that work. Inter-disciplinary thinking is one of the core skills for innovation.<sup>10</sup> It is increasingly rare for an artist working alone to create a work from beginning to end – collaboration and teamwork is often required. This calls for new roles in the development of multi-disciplinary projects such as that of Producer – skills which are not taught in the traditional educational curriculum.



Chantelle Lee Lockhart, Lillian Banks and Courtney Radford in Bangarra Dance Theatre's *Terrain* (2022). Image: Daniel Boud

The arts sector, and the government agencies supporting the arts, have become increasingly sensitive to the need for the sector to reflect the diversity of Australian society if the arts are to be considered connected and relevant to an evolving community. There is an acceptance that traditional grant-giving processes have often disadvantaged First Nations, culturally diverse and disabled artists, by placing unwitting barriers within selection procedures. These may be based, for example, on assumptions regarding literacy which are irrelevant to the artist’s creative capabilities or the quality of their work; on using communication channels which are not well-gearred to reaching some sections of the community; or on the unconscious cultural biases of officers, assessors, decision-makers.

In order to reduce these barriers to the flow of talent from all artists responses have included proactive programs, such as assisting with application processes, providing information sessions, and making application forms available in multiple languages. In some cases affirmative actions extend to earmarking specific support for First Nations or culturally/linguistically diverse artists, and artists with disabilities – an approach which is informed by the view that a process of ‘levelling up’ is necessary to redress previous imbalances.

## Accessibility

The short-term impacts of the pandemic on the creative industries are partly known. The longer-term impacts are a matter of speculation. The same is true for several other elements in the cultural ecology and economy. Further transformational changes in technology may occur, at any time, with both positive and negative consequences. National and transnational policy changes to address climate change, and altered community perceptions of the practicality and morality of frequent long-distance travel, may reshape the nature and frequency of touring, of international festivals, and of the resulting employment opportunities

## Uncertainty is Certain



*Making Art Work [Installation View] (2020).*  
Institute of Modern Art, Judith Wright Centre  
for Performing Arts Belltower. Photo: Rhett  
Hammerton.

provided for creative workers. Environmental impacts – including natural disasters – created by climate change will continue to affect artists in their direct impact on studios, equipment loss and the capacity to travel.

An implication for success and financial sustainability in a creative career is that the artist will need to accompany excellence in their creative practice with a broader mental agility, resilience and flexibility; and with a capacity to think laterally and openly about the ways in which their creative skills can be deployed in different sectors and in changing circumstances. For many this will include adopting a 'portfolio' approach, treating their creative ability as the kernel of a 'business', and being proactive in creating new opportunities as well as responding to those that arise through commissions and engagements. Artists will not consider this to be 'news'. It is what they are already experiencing.

The question for funding agencies – both public and philanthropic – is how they can best respond in such an unpredictable environment. Traditionally, the purposes to which a government or foundation grant may be put have been narrowly prescribed. There are signs that – at the margins – this is beginning to shift, with a number of modest initiatives to open up untied funds for artists. This is strongly endorsed by the artists consulted for the Ian Potter review project, reflecting that artists are the best-placed to understand their short- and medium-term needs. Fellowships and other untied support for new work and practice development, emerged as highly valued by both emerging and experienced artists. ●

- 1 Making Art Work: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia, Australia Council for the Arts, 2017, Making Art Work, p46
- 2 Making Art Work, p84
- 3 Beyond the Studio: Early to Mid-Career Dance Fellowship with Sydney Dance Company, Create NSW [[www.create.nsw.gov.au/funding-and-support/arts-and-cultural-funding-program/fellowships-nsw-dance-beyond-the-studio](http://www.create.nsw.gov.au/funding-and-support/arts-and-cultural-funding-program/fellowships-nsw-dance-beyond-the-studio)]
- 4 Intermittence du Spectacle, The Theatre Times, 2014 [<https://thetheatretimes.com/intermittence-du-spectacle>]
- 5 Principles, Paul Hamlyn Foundation [[www.phf.org.uk/our-work-in-the-uk/ideas/awards-for-artists/principles](http://www.phf.org.uk/our-work-in-the-uk/ideas/awards-for-artists/principles)]
- 6 The 2022 Creative Capital Awards, Creative Capital, 2022 [[www.creative-capital.org/2022/01/12/the-2022-creative-capital-awards](http://www.creative-capital.org/2022/01/12/the-2022-creative-capital-awards)]
- 7 The Victorian Music Business Career Life Cycle, RMIT University, Melbourne, for the Victorian Music Development Office, Catherine Strong et al, 2020
- 8 Australian game development industry doubles revenue to \$226 million over the past five years, IGEA [[www.igea.net/2021/12/australian-game-development-industry-doubles-revenue-to-226-million-over-the-past-five-years](http://www.igea.net/2021/12/australian-game-development-industry-doubles-revenue-to-226-million-over-the-past-five-years)]
- 9 The Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Creative Arts, DDCA [[www.ddca.edu.au](http://www.ddca.edu.au)]
- 10 Making Art Work, p23



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Prior to co-founding Positive Solutions in 1990, David managed arts organisations ranging from small-scale touring theatre companies to arts centres and theatre venues. David enjoys harnessing his skills and experience in organisational development and cultural planning to make a visible difference in communities throughout Australia and overseas. His work ranges from improvements in board performance and the effectiveness of individual organisations to operational and management planning for major facilities and precincts. David has been a board member of several cultural organisations, and Chair of Circa, Creative Enterprise Australia and Brisbane Writers Festival, and council member of QUT. David is author of *The Book of the Board*, now in its third edition, a handbook for board members of non-profit organisations, published by Federation Press.

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