

Commentary on *Don't Give Up Your Day Job*



Jennifer Bott, CEO

Background

In 1981 the Australia Council established an inquiry into individual artists in Australia. The inquiry initiated research to determine the number of professional artists, their career patterns and income. This work had not been undertaken in Australia before and the information and recommendations helped to shape government policy and improve the understanding of culture and the arts in Australia.

Over 20 years and four reports later, we have a picture of the experience and challenges facing artists in Australia. The research looks at writers; visual artists and craft practitioners; actors and directors; dancers and choreographers; musicians, singers and composers; and community cultural development workers.

Most industry sectors obtain their employment and income statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, as does the arts. However, as most artists earn the majority of their income from other sources—such as the teaching or hospitality industries—the Census only captures about one third of practising artists. Therefore, this research by Professor David Throsby and Virginia Hollister has collected information that would not otherwise be available.

The report *Don't Give Up Your Day Job: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*, like the reports before it, was commissioned by the Australia Council but conducted and written independently by Professor David Throsby and his research colleagues. This commentary highlights key issues for the Australia Council and puts the findings in the context of earlier reports.

The Australian artist: a snapshot

Australia has about 45,000 professional artists. Music and the visual arts dominate artistic practice—one in three artists are musicians and one in five are visual artists. Together they make up half of all professional artists in Australia.

Australia has almost twice as many professional artists today as 20 years ago and this number grows each year by 2–3 per cent. Some artforms are growing faster than others—there are now nearly three times as many visual artists in Australia and more than twice as many writers. The declining numbers of performing artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s has been turned around, and both the number and income of performing artists is increasing. The trends in artist numbers over time are shown in Table 1 and 2.

Australian artists have strong international links and more than one third have exported or presented work overseas in the last few years. Australian composers have a particularly strong international presence, with 70 per cent having their work performed internationally.

The location of artists throughout Australia roughly matches the state distribution of the population¹. For Queensland this has meant an artist boom over the last 10 years—throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the proportion of Queensland artists was half what it is today.

There are some slight local specialisations in particular artforms, with higher numbers of actors, composers and writers in New South Wales; writers in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory; dancers in Queensland and Western Australia; craft practitioners in Tasmania, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory; and visual artists in the Northern Territory.

Regional areas have strong expertise in craft—about half of Australia's craft practitioners are located there. Performing artists are more likely to live in cities, where work opportunities and infrastructure are concentrated. Although performing arts touring programs go some way to redressing this imbalance, it is a significant issue for regional communities particularly in terms of presenting their own work and their own stories.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and *Don't Give Up Your Day Job*

Artists' income

Most Australian artists cannot make a living from their profession.

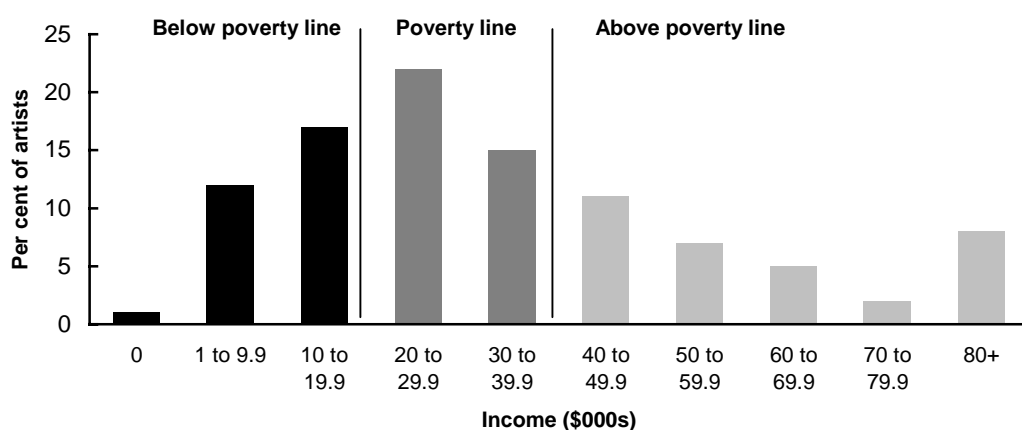
Fifty per cent of all artists earn less than \$7,300 from their art in a year, so they work two to three jobs—their art, a related arts job such as teaching, and non-arts jobs such as telemarketing. Even then, many artists earn less than \$30,000 from all jobs. To put this in a broader context, the average artist income from all sources is about the same as a casual factory worker. There are many artists that earn significantly less than this. Almost three quarters of all artists work freelance which, as one artist put it, often means, 'every time you finish a job, you go back to zero'.²

Don't Give Up Your Day Job notes that artist incomes continue to be affected by market failure:

The contribution of the artistic community to Australian life, when measured in cultural and social terms, is immense. Yet much of the value of this contribution is not reflected in the market prices that artists command when selling work—whether they are seeking to sell their labour... or the objects or works their labour produces... As a result the economic return to artists remains stubbornly low, and by no means represents a true measure of their contribution to Australian society.

While the average (mean) income from all work is \$37,000, more than one in three artists earn less than the poverty line.³ The incomes of artists in Australia compared to the poverty line is shown below in Graph 1. The median incomes by artform is shown in Table 2.

Graph 1: Artists income (from arts and non arts sources)



Low incomes affect the amount of art that is produced in Australia. Professional artists do not spend more time on their art practice because they cannot earn enough from it, and must therefore spend time on other work to earn a sufficient income. This is usually in an arts-related area, such as teaching. However, about 30 per cent of all artists will work one day per week in a job that is not related to the arts, such as at a call centre or café. On this one day an artist will earn one third of their weekly income.

While this situation indicates that Australia is missing out on the available pool of talent and expertise of our artists, there is some good news. The latest research shows that three times as many artists are spending all their time on their art practice as in 1993 and 1988.

Artist incomes differ significantly across artforms (see Graph 2), with musicians and writers earning above the average wage, and craft practitioners and community cultural development workers earning well below. The important role of audiences in the income of artists is demonstrated by these results. Musicians have large audiences, with one in four Australians attending a music event and spending \$770 million on CDs each year. In contrast, only one in 10 people go to a dance performance⁴. This is

² *Last Orders* Sunday Life October 5, 2003

³ Poverty Line Source: *Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research*. Note: Poverty line differs for single, married and dependents. The range on Graph 1 shows single without dependents on left, and married with two dependents on right.

⁴ Combined ABS statistics

why audience development and arts education initiatives are economically significant for artists as well as socially important.

Emerging trends

Don't Give Up Your Day Job reveals trends that could impact the future of the arts in Australia. The broader market environment and opportunities to promote work is crucial to increasing the incomes of artists. Today fewer artists have their work promoted by an agent than 10 years ago—13 per cent in 2001 as opposed to 21 per cent in 1988 (see Graph 3). This is a concern because an agent is a key factor in income. The average income of an artist with an agent is over \$50,000 and more than half of this income will be from their art. While this is a chicken or the egg scenario—agents will not represent artists that are not going to make money—it does not explain the decrease in agent representation. Using an agent also affects non-arts income, which is double that of other artists who sometimes or never use an agent.

The number of professional artists under 24 has declined over the last 20 years. While this trend is worth monitoring, it reflects broader labour market trends and longer periods in tertiary education. However, the number of professional artists aged 25–34 is also declining, contrary to labour market trends. Since 1993 there has been growth in the number of professional artists aged 35–54.

A small but growing number of artists working with digital technologies show some very different income patterns. While the mean income for digital technology artists is about the same as all artists, they make almost all of their income from arts and arts-related work. The median arts income is three times that for other artists; that is, most of them earn close to \$20,000 from their creative work, rather than \$6,500. They also earn larger incomes earlier in their careers: 70 per cent between ages 25–44.

Conclusion

Since the first individual artist inquiry in 1983 there have been many changes in the state of the arts in Australia. The number of artists has grown steadily and we now have strong artist populations in all states.

Twenty years ago one of the main challenges was to gain recognition for artists as professionals rather than hobbyists. Being a professional artist was not recognised as an occupation by some institutions and government departments. Today it is. Hardly any professionals had superannuation and insurance; today, this number has significantly increased although still needs to be improved. Women were under represented, whereas now their numbers exceed broader labour market representation. Overall, professional artists have greater recognition in Australia for their cultural, social and economic contribution than in 1983, and support for the arts in Australia from governments, business and individuals has never been higher. However, these benefits are not resulting in higher incomes for artists.

While the incomes of other professionals and occupations have grown since the 1980s, the income of artists remains the same. Artist incomes are low and significant numbers of artists earn less than the poverty line. Government support is an important part of an artist's income, with 25 per cent of artists receiving some form of government support between 1996–2001 and about 8 per cent receiving support from the Australia Council.

However, as the first report in 1983 noted, artists are the greatest subsidisers of the arts, through their time and the income they forfeit by continuing with their practice. This remains true today. While the decision to be a professional artist is rarely an economic one, Australia's capacity to create art is constrained by low income and economic factors. As a result, thousands of internationally and nationally recognised artists in Australia with skills, talent and experience are spending time away from their profession because of insufficient income. This makes Australian professional artists a significantly under-utilised cultural and social resource—they would create many more plays, artworks, novels and performances if the income they received for their art was even marginally increased.

TRENDS OVER TIME

Table 1: Artist proportions by artform

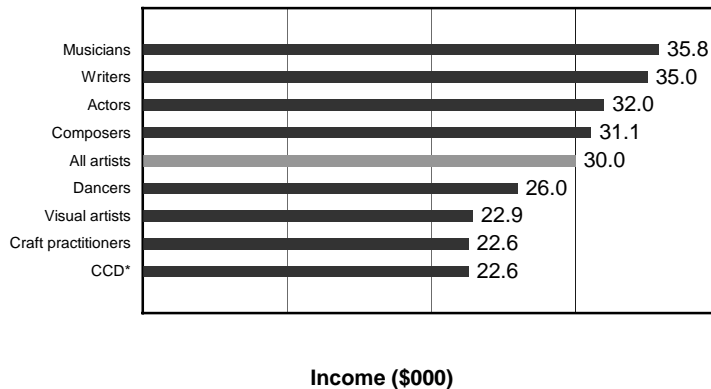
Percent of sector (%)	1983	1988	1993	2001
Artform				
Literature	10.9	10	15	16.2
Craft	14.2	14	14	9.6
Visual Arts	14	19	19	20.7
Theatre and Dance	17.3	11	13	17.3
Music	38.7	43	32	31.1
Community arts	0.5	3	8	5.6

Table 2: Artist numbers by artform

Number of artists ('000s)	1983	1988	1993	2001
Artform				
Literature	2.7	3.2	6	7.3
Craft	3.6	4.4	5.5	4.3
Visual Arts	3.5	6.2	7.5	9.3
Theatre and Dance	4.4	3.4	5.5	7.8
Music	9.7	13.7	12.5	14
Community arts	0.1	1.1	3	2.5
Total	25	32	40	45

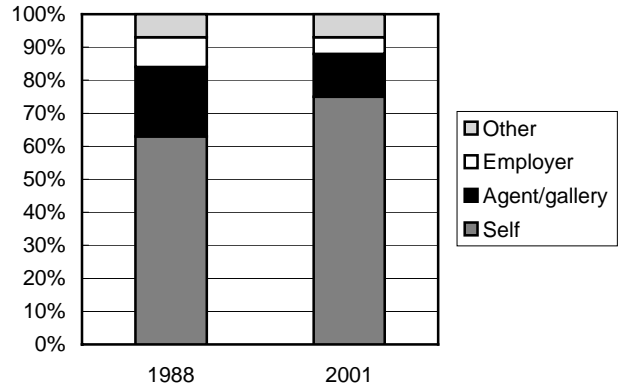
NB Due to changes in classification and survey approach over time these figures are indicative only.

Graph 2: Median artist incomes by artform



* Community cultural development workers

Graph 3: Promotion of work



Acknowledgements

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