

# CHAPTER 1

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## Introduction

### **The changing role of the artist**

The last decade has seen extraordinarily rapid changes in the political, economic, social and cultural environment in which we live. The so-called communications revolution has transformed the ways in which information is stored, transmitted and received around the world. In this process, the rise of the Internet as a means of accessing and exchanging data, on a scale never before imagined, has been particularly important.

These developments form part of the broader phenomenon of globalisation, a word that has many interpretations but whose central elements are the growth of a global marketplace for goods and services and the liberalisation of the international movement of capital and labour. The communications revolution has also led to significant changes in the structure of national economies. Many observers talk up concepts such as the 'knowledge economy' or the 'new economy' to characterise the dynamism of an economy where information is the key to the future.

The implications of these developments for the arts and culture have been profound. Technological changes have had a number of important impacts on the way art is produced and distributed. More broadly, the concept of creativity—a central and indisputable element in artistic practice—has been coopted as the driving force in the new economy.

All sorts of creative people are seen as content providers for the information superhighway and as the source of innovative ideas in inventing the future. This has led to the identification of a 'creative class' within society, and of 'creative workers' within the labour force—artists, designers, scientists, researchers and others whose work generates new ideas, new processes and new products<sup>1</sup>. These concepts are associated with the emergence of the economic phenomenon of the 'cultural industries', referring to those sectors of the economy that produce cultural goods and services ranging from poetry to television programs to fashion design<sup>2</sup>.

Where does the individual creative artist sit within these rapidly changing surroundings? In some respects, art is immune from these changes; the timeless qualities of literature, music or visual art are located in a sphere of human existence far removed from the mundane material world. In other respects, art exists in a social and cultural context that has a profound influence on the way the arts are produced, distributed and consumed in contemporary society. Either way, it is important to ask how, if at all, the role of artists is evolving in response to changes in the political, social, economic and cultural environment in which they work.

In the decade since the previous survey in this series, we observe a number of ways in which the life of the practising professional artist in Australia has been affected by the developments described above. First, on a positive note, we identify a range of new creative possibilities opened up by digital technologies, especially in visual and sound media. There is now a significant group of artists whose creative output in text, sound and image is produced using techniques that have become available as a result of the digital revolution.

Second, we observe a continuing blurring of occupational boundaries within the arts, as artists acquire new skills and new interests, applicable across a range of artforms. Of course, there have always been crossovers between artforms. But we suggest that the range of skills derived from new technologies that many artists have mastered widens their creative spectrum.

Third, this breakdown in boundaries is also occurring between the arts and other industries. Increasing numbers of artists are finding opportunities to employ their creative skills in areas remote from their core or 'home' discipline. It is through these avenues that artists are increasingly providing creative ideas that percolate outwards, through the cultural industries and beyond, into the wider economy.

Finally, in today's labour market traditional job structures and employment contracts are often swept aside in favour of more flexible employment arrangements. As in other occupations, artists' working lives are affected by these developments. For example, instead of a long-term commitment to a single mode of creative practice, we now see greater fluidity in artists' career paths. Artists may move in and out of artistic employment, engage in further training, accept occasional short-term contracts in or out of the arts, perhaps from time to time finding periods of uninterrupted work on their core creative practice.

In all of these examples we see a variety of ways in which the life of the artist is changing. Nevertheless, there is also a sense in which nothing changes. The fundamental processes of creativity, the pursuit of an artistic vision and the passionate commitment to art that characterises the true artist—these things remain at the heart of what it is to be a practising art professional. For many artists the real challenge is to keep hold of these core values in such a rapidly changing world.

### **The rationale for this survey**

If, as a society, we are to comprehend how the arts contribute to our lives, it is important to understand how art is produced and what problems face those who produce it. From a social point of view, as a community we need to accord artists the respect they deserve as professionals who contribute in so many ways and with such dedication and skill to advancing our cultural life. From a policy viewpoint, an understanding of the conditions of professional artistic practice is essential if effective measures for nurturing the growth of the arts in Australia are to be developed.

A survey of individual practising artists, whereby statistically reliable information is gathered from a random sample of respondents, is the only workable means for compiling an accurate and comprehensive picture of the living and working conditions of professional artists in Australia at the present time.

This survey is the fourth in a series carried out over the past 20 years at Macquarie University, with funding from the Australia Council. The original survey, in 1983, was limited in scope. It was undertaken to support the findings and recommendations of the Individual Artists' Inquiry, initiated by the Australia Council at the time<sup>3</sup>. A larger and more comprehensive survey was carried out in 1987<sup>4</sup> and another in 1993<sup>5</sup>. All of these studies have yielded reports widely used by policy-makers, bureaucrats, arts organisations, artists themselves and the wider community. They have been used to provide factual information about the economic circumstances of professional artistic practice across all major artforms, apart from film. This survey, undertaken in 2002, updates and expands the information collected in the earlier studies.

### **Definition of an artist**

Not surprisingly, the first question to ask in any survey exercise is: What is the survey population? In this case we are dealing with artists across all artforms, including writers, actors, musicians, painters, dancers and so on. Even though the delineation of such occupations may seem obvious, the precise definition of 'artist' is not as straightforward as it seems.

Different government agencies and others use varying criteria for defining artists for the purposes of collecting statistics, gathering taxes, assessing employment opportunities and extending grant assistance. Similarly, membership groups such as artists' representative organisations, unions and professional associations may or may not require artists to meet a range of educational, training, employment and experience qualifications. Further blurring of definitions occurs because the skills associated with art practice contribute to many other industries. As we noted earlier, artists often straddle different artistic and non-artistic professions either by choice or through necessity—and it is hard to say at what point being an artist stops or starts.

One unifying element in all of this is the notion of intent and purpose. In 1980 UNESCO held an international conference on the status of the artist. It defined an artist as ‘any person who creates or gives expression to, or recreates works of art, who considers his [sic] artistic creation to be an essential part of his life, who contributes in this way to the development of art and culture and who is or asks to be recognised as an artist, whether or not he is bound by any relations of employment or association’<sup>6</sup>. Although such a definition may be appealing, it is too vague and general to be useful in the operational context of a survey such as this.

Our approach, as in the earlier surveys, has been to identify artists by their basic creative occupation. A total of 120 different artistic occupations were identified (see Appendix III). These were grouped in 11 generic categories:

- Writers
- Visual artists
- Craft practitioners
- Actors
- Directors
- Dancers
- Choreographers
- Musicians
- Singers
- Composers
- Community cultural development workers (formerly known as community artists).

Respondents to the survey were asked to identify which of these occupations they were ‘engaged in most these days, in terms of time’. The occupation designated was called the artist’s principal artistic occupation (PAO). For the purposes of statistical tabulation and analysis the above 11 categories were subsequently condensed into eight, by combining actors and directors, dancers and choreographers, and musicians and singers. These condensed groups were labelled actors, dancers and musicians, respectively.

Like the previous surveys, this one deals specifically with practising professional artists. This targets artists who are currently active or who have been active in the past 3-5 years. The professional requirement restricts the survey to serious practitioners operating at a level and standard of work and with a degree of commitment appropriate to the norms of professional practice within their artform. This requirement is intended to separate professionals from hobbyists and amateurs.

In order to identify whether a potential survey respondent qualified as a practising professional artist according to our criteria, a number of screening questions were asked before each interview to establish the artist’s track record, and whether he or she was currently practising or training in the arts. Income generation from arts practice was not a necessary criterion for inclusion.

Respondents were asked if, at some time during the past 3-5 years (depending on practice area), they had had a piece of writing published or performed; a work or works shown at a professional gallery, or work commissioned; had a composition professionally performed live, broadcast, recorded or filmed; had an engagement as a professional director or actor, or dancer or choreographer, with a professional company; had an engagement as a musician or singer in a professional venue; or contributed to the development of a major community arts project, festival or event. The full text of the screening questions can be found in Appendix III.

The survey embraces both full-time and part-time artists; employed and self-employed artists; and artists regardless of whether all, some or none of their income comes from art practice. For reasons explained further in Appendix II, this survey does not include artists whose primary involvement is in areas of design (furniture, interior, fashion, industrial, architectural or graphic); artists working primarily in the film industry; or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists working in remote Indigenous communities.

Despite the fact that many artists work across more than one artform and apply a variety of skills in their work, the great majority of artists were able to identify the area in which they essentially worked, whether it was with text, images, sound, performance, or another area. Therefore, almost all of the artists contacted were able to allocate themselves to a PAO, including most artists who characterise themselves as

new media artists. A very small number of potential respondents could not do so and thus could not be included in the survey.

To summarise, this survey, like its predecessors, is concerned with serious, practising professional artists. The seriousness is judged in terms of a self-assessed commitment to artistic work as a major aspect of the artist's working life, even if arts-related work is not the main source of income. The practising aspect means that we confine our attention to artists currently working or seeking to work in their chosen occupation. The term professional is intended to indicate a degree of training, experience or talent and a manner of working that qualify artists to have their work judged against the highest professional standards of the relevant occupation.

#### Footnotes

1. See further in Florida (2002).
2. See Caves (2000), Throsby (2001), ch. 7.
3. Committee for the Individual Artists' Inquiry (1984).
4. Throsby and Mills (1987).
5. Throsby and Thompson (1994).
6. UNESCO (1980), pp. 5.