

# CHAPTER 14

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## Conclusion

At the beginning of this report we pointed to a paradox surrounding the work of the individual artist. We noted that on the one hand, artists deal with timeless processes involved in the generation and expression of creative ideas. In a very real sense these processes, whatever the artistic medium, remain constant. On the other hand, artists live in a world which is changing rapidly, where conditions of work are very different from only a decade ago, and where new technologies offer both exciting possibilities and potential threats to the pursuit of a professional artistic practice.

The data assembled in this report throw a great deal of light on both sides of this paradox—on the fundamental role of creativity and on the effects the changing economic, social and cultural environment have on the way artists work.

In regard to the creative achievements of artists, we have tabulated their extraordinary range of outputs and activities undertaken over the course of their professional lives. The breadth and depth of work produced by Australian artists is evident whether examined individually or on an aggregate basis. 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 their work—whether they sell their labour (actors, dancers, musicians, community cultural development workers) or the works their labour produces (writers, visual artists, craft practitioners, composers). As a result the economic return to artists remains stubbornly low, and is not a true measure of their contribution to Australian society.

Of course there are well-remunerated artists, able to command significant fees for their work or their performances, but these are the few among the many. Half of Australian artists in 2000-01 earned less than \$7,300 from their creative practice before tax and half earned less than \$30,000 from all sources.

These very low income levels are almost the same in real terms as artists' income levels 15 years ago, as documented in the second artists' survey *When Are You Going To Get A Real Job?* (1987). In the meantime the income levels of other professional occupations requiring similar lengths of training and experience have been steadily rising. The ongoing disparity between the incomes of artists and other professionals is becoming more and more pronounced.

The survey shows that about one-third of all artists experienced some period of unemployment during the period between 1996 and 2001, and that about half of those applied for unemployment relief. This level of unemployment is disquieting, although the survey results clearly refute any suggestion that substantial numbers of artists are living off unemployment benefits at any one time. Indeed, the majority of artists deal with the problem of poor remuneration from creative work by taking one or more other jobs; almost two-thirds of Australian professional artists have more than one job. Non-arts work is a very important source of income for some artists, providing on average double the amount of income that can be earned from creative practice for the same amount of time worked.

In their creative work, Australian artists have little employment or income security. The vast majority of artists, 75 per cent, are freelance or self-employed. Of those working for other people, only 12 per cent are permanent while the remaining 13 per cent are casuals. The 'flexibility' of their occupational status may be appreciated, but it comes at a financial price. More than half of the artists surveyed indicate that they fear their savings for the future (including superannuation and all other financial investments) will be inadequate to meet their needs. Furthermore, some 40 per cent of artists live as single people, with or

without dependants, and thus do not have a spouse's or partner's income on which to fall back. Given the generally low incomes of the majority of artists, and the high percentage of single artists, the future of an ageing artist population is of concern.

As found in previous surveys, the two most significant factors restricting artists in the pursuit of their creative work remain the lack of work opportunities and the lack of return from creative practice. On average, Australian artists are able to spend just 50 per cent of their time on creative work, having to spend the rest of their time earning income from other sources to meet their basic needs. Only 15 per cent are able to spend 100 per cent of their time on creative arts work, and just 12 per cent can spend 100 per cent of their time on the type of creative work that they most desire to do. So, despite their talent and desire to work, it would appear that the economic circumstances of their creative practice—the number and types of jobs available, and the prevailing low value attached to their work—prevent a greater creative output from Australia's professional artists.

The broader implications of our work are much as they were at the conclusion of the earlier surveys in this series. The disadvantage suffered by professional artists should be a matter of concern for all Australians, since we all benefit as a community from the contribution that artists make to our cultural life. Such concern can be translated into action through improved community awareness of the importance of the arts, especially through the education sector and the media.

The situation can also be improved through cultural policies pursued by federal, state, and local governments. All three tiers of government do provide substantial resources in support of the arts and culture, but there is always scope for more targeted support or for innovative approaches through a variety of fiscal and regulatory mechanisms.

Finally, there are many ways in which artists can help themselves, not only through improvement in their own skills at managing their professional lives and promoting their work (the latter an avenue that most artists recognise), but also through collective action in asserting their legal rights and professional standing. In this regard, arts infrastructure organisations, unions, professional associations and service organisations are particularly important.

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