

# Thousands of Australian artists living in poverty

Don't give up your day job by David Throsby & Virginia Hollister, Macquarie University

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*Don't give up your day job*, a report released last November into the economic circumstances of professional artists in Australia, reveals that the overwhelming majority of artists are living in dire poverty. Funded by the Australia Council, the survey is the fourth in a series by the Department of Economics at Macquarie University over the past 20 years. The series investigates the living standards and working life of those professionally involved in all major art forms, apart from film.

Prepared by David Throsby and Virginia Hollister and conducted by the market research company AC Nielsen, the study surveyed 1,063 participating "practising professional artists" from across Australia, including writers, actors, directors, musicians, singers, composers, visual and craft artists, dancers and choreographers. A "practising professional artist" was defined as someone currently active or active in the past five years, who was not a hobbyist.

There are currently about 45,000 professional artists in Australia with musicians being the largest group, numbering more than 12,000. Dancers have the lowest numbers, between 1,000 and 1,500. The total number of professionals has risen by about 13,000 between 1988 and 2001, with the number of artists increasing at around 2-3 percent per annum over the past 5-10 years.

Financial problems and time constraints are identified as the major factors inhibiting the development of an artist's career. Limited work opportunities, poor financial return and lack of access to funding or financial support forces artists to take on other paid work, thus making it difficult for them to sustain their creative work.

The survey found that most artists were unable to work full-time in their chosen profession. Sixty-three percent of those interviewed had more than one job: 56 percent had two jobs while 7 percent had three. For those employed in their principal artistic occupation, only about one-quarter worked

as employees on a permanent or casual basis with a regular wage. The remaining three-quarters operated as freelance or self-employed individuals.

While 40 percent of those surveyed reported that they had earned some income in their field of work before completing their training, 15 percent had to wait more than three years after completing their courses before receiving any income for their artistic work.

On average, artists spent just 50 percent of their time on creative work; for the rest of the day they were forced to earn income from other sources. Only 15 percent were able to spend 100 percent of their time on creative arts work, and just 12 percent could allocate 100 percent of their time on the type of work they most desired to do. About one-third of all artists experienced some period of unemployment between 1996 and 2001. The average cumulative time out of work was 17 months, or around 3 months per annum over this five-year period. For some, this involved long periods on unemployment benefits (11 months on average).

Most artists' incomes were too low to support their basic needs. The survey showed that while a tiny minority of artists were high earners, the majority lived far below the poverty line. Based on figures from the 2000-2001 financial year, half the artists surveyed earned less than \$7,300 before tax from their creative endeavours and half earned less than \$30,000 from all other income sources.

*Don't give up your day job* concentrates on median income, the halfway point between the better off artists and the poorest. High-income earners lift the overall median income for creative workers to just over \$17,000 per annum, or just \$340 per week. Actors and musicians, however, had median creative incomes of only \$10,500 and dancers \$12,900. Visual artists registered the lowest median creative income, earning only \$3,100 per year. Female artists earned considerably less than males, with median income for males

\$9,400, compared to \$4,500 for women.

The median total income of \$30,000 per annum for artists (including all other work) is considerably less than other occupations that require similar periods of professional training. Moreover, there has been no long-term increase in artists' earnings over the past 15 years—a period when all other occupations have shown an increase in real terms.

The implications for an aging artistic population are also significant, particularly where 40 percent of artists are single, and thus have no partner's income to fall back on. More than half of the artists surveyed indicated they feared that their savings, including superannuation, would be inadequate to meet their future needs.

*Don't give up your day job* concludes by declaring that the economic and professional disadvantage suffered by artists is a "matter of concern for all Australians" and should be addressed in three ways:

1. Through improved community awareness of the importance of the arts, especially through the education sector and the media.

2. Through new "cultural policies," with the three tiers of government—local, state and federal—providing substantial resources, and a more "targeted" or "innovative approach" to arts funding.

3. By artists helping themselves by managing their professional lives and promoting their work "more effectively" and asserting their legal rights and professional standing through collective action.

The authors write enthusiastically about the openings provided by the Internet and digital technology. "Where does the individual creative artist sit within these rapidly changing surroundings?" they ask.

"The concept of creativity—a central and indisputable element in artistic practice—has been co-opted as the driving force in the new economy. All sorts of creative people are now seen as 'content providers' for the information superhighway ... The market's thirst for innovative ideas has led to the identification of a new class ... a labour force made up of artists, designers, scientists, researchers and others whose work generates new ideas, new processes and new products. This, in turn, has spawned the economic phenomenon of 'cultural industries', i.e., sectors of the economy that produce cultural goods and services."

These claims, however, constitute a barely disguised embrace of the capitalist market with artists directed to become mindless providers for the so-called cultural industries.

Despite the scandalous poverty affecting the overwhelming majority of professional artists in Australia, the report makes no call for a massive increase in funding for the arts. Rather, it emphasises that artists should become

more proficient managers or develop better professional associations, service organisations or unions in an attempt to improve wages and conditions. In other words, artists have to find a way to survive without relying on government funds. Nothing could better serve the interests of the corporate elite.

And what of the creative outcomes that such an approach will produce? Artistic work will become even more dominated by whatever the market demands—commercial, conformist and profitable products of the type churned out by the corporate-controlled "mass entertainment" industries. This will not just affect the development of the individual artist, but of popular culture as a whole and lead to a further debasement of the arts. Many artists surveyed referred to the negative impact of being forced to tailor their creative work to the demands of the market.

Government arts funding, which has failed to keep up with inflation, has already led to cuts in museum and gallery programs and driven many theatre and dance companies into oblivion. In recent years several damning inquiries, including the Myer report into the Visual Arts and Craft Sector and the Nugent Inquiry into the crisis in the Performing Arts, have highlighted the serious decline in artistic and cultural life.

With federal elections due this year, the Howard government has allocated some additional funding—\$19.5 million over four years for the visual arts and craft sector, and \$45 million to the major performing arts. But this is a pittance and will do nothing to overcome the dire situation confronting thousands of struggling artists, or adequately address public needs, or elevate the cultural outlook of broad masses of the population.

What is required to rescue the arts and artists? From the outset there needs to be a dramatic and immediate increase in government funding to ensure that professional artists enjoy decent living standards and state-owned cultural institutions—art galleries, museums and theatres—are expanded and improved.

While *Don't give up your day job* provides some valuable data, it fails to acknowledge that a society that refuses to provide adequate resources for the development of challenging artistic work, is one in serious decline. Instead of challenging the status quo, the report calls on artists to adapt themselves to it.



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