ANY NEW FUNDING OR INCREASED RECOGNITION FOR THE ARTS AND THOSE WHO LABOUR IN THEIR SERVICE IS CERTAINLY TO BE ENCOURAGED AND APPLAUDED. SO ARTS PRACTITIONERS AND ACADEMICS WILL WELCOME BOTH THE RECENTLY ANNOUNCED FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE, ARTSTART, AND THE INCLUSION OF CREATIVE WORKS IN THE 2009 ERA (EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH FOR AUSTRALIA) DATA COLLECTION TRIAL CURRENTLY UNDERWAY IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES. ALTHOUGH THEY ARE TARGETED TOWARDS DIFFERENT COHORTS OF THE CREATIVE ARTS COMMUNITY, BOTH SCHEMES WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS THAT ARE OFTEN RELIED UPON TO PROVIDE A REFUGE FOR ARTS PRACTICE IN THIS COUNTRY.

Importantly, the schemes provide pathways for emerging graduate artists and recognition for the work of creative arts practitioners who double as educators and academics. That said, the reception given to Artstart and the ERA guidelines by those in the field is, quite rightly, tempered by concerns over unanswered questions and a caution borne out of past experiences. The elevation of the status of creative arts practice as a career path, as it applies in these cases to both graduates and those working within the Academy, inevitably comes at a cost. That cost is tied to the degree to which creative arts practice can be measured and audited by those who determine how funding and recognition will be allocated and rewarded.
how funding and recognition will be allocated and rewarded.

**artstart minus social security**

Artstart will deliver $9.6 million over four years to be allocated as “one-off grants to help graduates start a business as professional artists.” The scheme will be administered by the Australia Council, with applications to be called for later this year. To date, no announcement has been made about the criteria which will be used to assess the applications. However, given that the scheme will cover visual artists, musicians, sound artists, filmmakers, writers and performers, the process will almost certainly take place outside the normal panel structure the Council uses when assessing funding applications. Grants of up to $10,000 will be offered to 200 applicants per annum. The grants differ from traditional arts funding in that they can be used for activities other than the production of works. So, for example, an artist might apply for funding to purchase expensive equipment or for the establishment of a small arts business. Artstart falls short of the Rudd government’s pre-election promise to “develop a ‘Social Security and the Arts’ policy that harmonises current Australia Council, Centrelink and the Australian Tax Office rules [as well as] determines the most equitable way to treat earnings and royalty payments for artists currently receiving welfare” (Arts Minister Peter Garrett’s 2007 New Directions for the Arts policy speech). That said, it must be counted as a step in the right direction.

**artstart or jobstart?**

Responses to the scheme from those I have consulted within the creative arts sector are mixed. Anna Munster, artist and Senior Lecturer at UNSW’s College of Fine Arts (COFA), points out that while “there’s a need for something at the lower end of the funding scheme…the ‘speak’ in which it’s couched suggests a kind of alignment with Jobstart.” She suggests that it might have been better to follow the UK model which allows artists to receive unemployment benefits for a period of time while working on an art project. Niall Lucy, Research Fellow with the Australia Research Institute at Curtin, concurs arguing that, “there’s a need for meaningful government funding of ‘meaningless’ arts programs, as opposed to all too predictable outcomes-based vocational training.” This kind of thinking can also be found in the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) pre-election call for Labour to deliver on its promise to provide a “living wage” for two years after graduation for art practitioners engaged in professional activities.

**for the moneywise & grant savvy**

Artstart will certainly benefit those young people who are capable of tapping into revenue streams. Ross Gibson, Professor of Contemporary Arts at Sydney University, points out that “where there are young people in the arts who really, really need money, then there’s a need for Artstart. But the trick will be to find a way to make the scheme amenable to people who are not used to money, people who never grew up around money, people for whom money is not a part of their culture.” Ross Harley, Head of School of Media Arts at COFA, also notes that there is such limited funding for so many graduates. This reinforces the point that Gibson is making—the money savvy, grant savvy graduates are the ones who will benefit most from the scheme. All of those I spoke to agreed that these grants will certainly reinforce the need for educators to ensure that graduates understand how to take advantage of any government largesse directed at them. However, as Anna Munster points out, “There are not that many tertiary institutions that don’t expect some kind of ‘finished’ product as the result of a finished degree these days. But ones that serve students better provide less
‘vocational’ finished products. The best courses provide students with a set of mutable and flexible skills: critical thinking, project management, teamwork and cross-platform training (by which I mean encourage students to make work in pop bands, curate, write articles, build simple websites, coordinate live events and so on). These kinds of students don’t necessarily need Artstart but they will probably do very innovative things with it.”

**art work after 30**

There was also general agreement that some of the funding might well have been directed towards ensuring that once these artists reach 30 they can find sustained employment in the arts. Artist and RMIT academic, Martine Corompt says “it does seem sometimes that there is a constant support/celebration of emerging artists. But no matter how you prepare artists for the next 10 or 20 years there just aren’t enough teaching positions or commercial galleries to support them all. Perhaps there should be greater support for initiating new venues outside of the CBD (studios, galleries, performance spaces) which would create positions dealing with curating, management, administration and so on. The added benefit would be the transformation of districts/precincts in suburban or regional areas in need of rejuvenation.” As Ross Harley asks, “What happens after, when you’re a mid-career artist? Once you’ve received the ‘seed’ funding, should that then set you up to be self-sufficient?”

**creative work: legitimate research**

Corompt, Munster, Harley and Gibson, and many others like them, have been able to sustain themselves financially as creative arts practitioners through their work as creative arts educators. However, as Margaret Seares from the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) points out, “the issue of the status and recognition of the work of academic artists, in terms of research, has been an often fraught one. The national system for collating, auditing and, ultimately, rewarding research outputs—known as HERDC—did recognise creative work for a time, but for the past decade this has not been the case. This has meant a degree of marginalisation for academic artists when the research performance of their university has come under discussion or review” (M Seares, “A new era for Creative Arts research”, www.chass.org.au/articles/ART20090430MS.php). This marginalisation has had a significant impact on the status and workloads of creative arts academics, tied as they are to demonstrable research performance. The inclusion of creative works in the 2009 ERA data collection trial is designed to directly address this issue by reinstating the recognition of creative works as legitimate research outputs.

Under the ERA guidelines, eligible research output types include original creative works, live performance of creative works, recorded/rendered creative works and curated/produced substantial public exhibitions and events. Each work needs to be accompanied by a statement identifying the research component of the output, which must be made available in an institutionally supported repository (such as a university sponsored Research Bank). The statement must be a maximum of 250 words and must outline the research background of the work (field, context, research question), the research contribution of the work (in terms of innovation and new knowledge produced) and the significance of the work in relation to research excellence.

University based artists and writers certainly welcome these changes. Recognition of creative work as research is long overdue. That doesn’t mean, however, that those
affected by these changes don’t have some reservations about whether the scheme will produce real effects. Darren Tofts, writer and academic at Swinburne University, notes, “There is still a lot of work to be done to change the research culture within many universities to acknowledge and accept that the creative arts do contribute to the intellectual and research capital of both the academy and society more widely.” Anna Munster agrees. “We have argued for years that creative works should at least count as research so here we finally have an opportunity to make that recognition happen. Hopefully, it will track and make visible the enormous contributions to research that artists do in fact make and put them in a more competitive position when it comes to applying for other kinds of external university income.”

creative limits
Ross Gibson remains circumspect. “[I]t will benefit artists who are keen or able to engage in some extra, fairly traditional routines of academic scholarship, adding some linguistic discourse onto their productions. The ERA probably won’t benefit artists who happen to teach in academies but who are not that interested in being the new-style creative arts academic. The rules are pretty clear—knowledge has to be made explicit and communicated. The arguments will occur over whether the creative art work, standing alone, is explicitly communicated knowledge. My reading of the national intellectual scene is that we’re nowhere near persuading enough people that this is true.” Niall Lucy believes ERA could also have the potential to “limit the possibilities of what may count as ‘creative’ work in terms set by university and Canberra bureaucrats.”

Artstart and the inclusion of creative works in the ERA are positive moves in the right direction for emerging artists and creative arts academics. Whether they take us closer to equitable, sustainable, workable outcomes for those working in the creative arts remains, for now, to be seen.

Image note: Installation layers in the form of a section, a video extract and a floor plan for installation work, On Track, by Petra Gemeinboeck, artist and Senior Lecturer in Interactive Media Arts at College of Fine Arts, Sydney. “A disaster-prone scenario unfolds as the protagonists, apparently set to clean, spill, interfere with and hinder each other, creating an ever more slippery mess in intricately choreographed ways.”

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