

Dr Sam Whiting – Lecturer, Creative Industries

*Creative People, Products and Places (CP3) Research Centre,
UniSA Creative, University of South Australia*

Ph. (+61) 422 746 340,

E. sam.whiting@unisa.edu.au

Basic Income, Cultural Labour, and the Creative Arts: Precedents and Current Experiments

Abstract: Debates around Basic Income and the potential of the Public Purse have moved from the margins to the mainstream in the last five years. The idea has long roots and different, sometimes conflicting dimensions. It can be seen as part of a broad suite of ideas which have (re)emerged in the last decade – such as job guarantees, universal basic services, community wealth building, co-operatives, and others. This paper will investigate how these have, or might be, applied to the arts and cultural sector, specifically the implications of a Basic Income for Artists.

First, this paper will consider any existing basic income schemes or proposals for the cultural sector, such as the current BI for artists being trialled in Ireland or France's Intermittence du Spectacle unemployment insurance scheme. Second, it will discuss previous or existing pilot schemes not focused on culture, but which might have directly impacted on arts and cultural workers (i.e., the 'Dole' or previous social welfare utilised to fund cultural labour). Finally, it examines related ideas for supporting cultural sector employment (i.e., job guarantees, public works, a four-day week etc.).

This paper will provide an overview of the way in which artists have used various forms of public funding (i.e., 'the Dole', Intermittence du Spectacle, PhD stipends and other scholarships etc.) to fund their cultural labour, and how Basic Income could substitute such ad-hoc practices in future. It will also examine the nature of cultural labour and the way in which Basic Income might emancipate artists currently restricted by standardised systems of grant funding and other administratively burdensome monetary programs.

Keywords: cultural labour; basic income; creative arts

Biography: Sam is a popular music scholar and Lecturer in Creative Industries at the University of South Australia. His published papers explore the music industry, live music ecosystems, music scenes, small venues, issues of access and live music, alternative forms of capital within the creative industries, heritage, gender studies and cultural identity. Sam has presented at multiple international conferences and published research in *Cultural Sociology*, *Popular Music and Society*, and *Continuum*.

Introduction

Since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, new ways of thinking about macroeconomics and how it might better serve communities and society have gathered steam. Some of these are old ideas rebranded for the digital age. A federal Job Guarantee (JG)—popular in Western democracies during the post-war period when many of these economies pursued full employment (Mitchell and Wray 2004, pp. 12-13)—has re-entered popular discourse, often trailing arguments for its proposed funding mechanism, Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), and coupled with other state-administered social welfare programs, such as Universal Basic Services (UBS). Arguably an even older idea, Universal Basic Income (UBI) is another popular solution to the current insecurity and haphazardness plaguing labour markets. However, across the deluge of think-pieces, op-eds, and TED Talks on these ideas, their potential impact on the arts, cultural industries and cultural labour more broadly seems to have been largely overlooked. That is, until the pandemic thrust these already under-resourced and over-stretched sectors out of the frying pan of poor public policy and into the bin fire of lockdowns, zero funding support, and the mass exodus of experienced workers (Pacella, Luckman, and O'Connor 2021).

Since then, calls for a Basic Income for Artists have grown to fever pitch (Caust 2022; Harris 2022; Pledger 2020). Yet the idea, alongside the impact of heterodox economics on arts and culture more broadly, remains under-examined in scholarly research. Following what has been a monumental shift in the realities of what is possible for the role of public policy post-pandemic, in this paper I wish to discuss a basic idea: giving free money to artists to do their work. Sounds simple enough. Yet there are assumptions in this statement that require unpacking:

- Giving – By who, and to whom? What conditions are implied within this exchange?
- Free money – Why the caveat “free”? Why not just money?
- Artists – How do we define artists? Who defines this? What are their motives?
- Work – What is cultural labour? What are the material and social conditions necessary for cultural labour to take place?

To answer such questions would take more time than I have available within the confines of this working paper. However, the question of “what is cultural or ‘creative’ labour” is worth discussing in further depth.

‘Cultural’ or ‘Creative’ Labour

Work in the arts, cultural sector or so-called “creative” industries is commonly viewed, from a positive perspective, as desirable because it supposedly offers less alienating work, characterized

by aesthetic and professional autonomy; a less formal and hierarchical work environment than traditional employment; and greater levels of social prestige. Alternatively, many argue that the reality of creative work is one marked by insecurity, high levels of (self) exploitation and the corrosion of work-life demarcations, as the social networks of friends and family are put to work for business purposes (Luckman 2017; Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009; Blair 2009). Moreover, the extension of freelance and contract work in the cultural sector has affected the expectations of a new generation of young aspirants seeking to establish a career in the sector (Christopherson 2011, 2009). Notions of authorship, autonomy and desire also remain central to the process of creative work. Indeed, most research has stressed issues of strong commitment and identification with work, means of production, and product.

Cultural labour intersects with other forms of labour, such as immaterial and affective labour (Gill and Pratt 2008). However, it is distinct from these in its specific goal of producing “culture”. I refer here to Raymond Williams’ iconic three definitions of culture, specifically his third “independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (1976, p. 90). As Williams states, “this seems often now the term’s most widespread use: culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre, and film. A Ministry of Culture refers to these specific activities, sometimes with the addition of philosophy, scholarship, history” (ibid.). Within the context of this paper, cultural—or “creative labour” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013) as it is otherwise defined in the literature—refers to the material production of works of intellectual and artistic activity. However, this does not give us a fix on what cultural labour *actually is*.

It is important to note that cultural labour is never homogenous, and that the “tensions and contradictions between economics and culture, creativity and commerce” are organizationally and industrially specific and need to be identified when speaking of cultural or creative labour (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013, p. 9). Indeed, the effective funding and resourcing of creative labour is a particularly unique problem. Heterogeneous and describing many styles of ‘work’, creative labour—as both a) creative conception i.e., the individual or collective work of generating an original piece of art (e.g., writing a piece of music), and b) creative reproduction i.e., the reproduction of that art by skilled cultural/creative workers (e.g., performing that piece of music)—limits the potential to effectively style a ‘one-size-fits-all’ economic model to suit all creative practices and types of cultural production, as the mediums and working patterns of cultural workers differs wildly.

However, it is useful to think about how these labour practices are resourced. A painter needs paints, a studio space to experiment within, and canvas to explore. Musicians need instruments, and some sort of training. Whether self-taught or trained via more formal means, both require the investment of time and often capital. Video game designers need both software and hardware; dancers need specialist footwear and studio space; writers require an amenable space, materials, and often access to resources for research purposes. Whether you are a graphic designer or a classical musician, all creative labour needs to be resourced, which involves an initial and often ongoing outlay of either time, capital, or both. Therefore, any economic model that seeks to resource the arts broadly needs to keep this in mind.

What we can identify from this as being specific to cultural labour is spare, unmitigated, and unimpeded time to pursue one's work, as well as the tools and space to do it. In an academic context, cultural or creative labour has certain things in common with writing and research, or the 'scholastic point of view' as Pierre Bourdieu might term it (1990). Specifically academic labour and cultural labour both rely on certain elements of the concept of *skhole* (ibid.).

Skhole

As it is defined by Bourdieu, *skhole* refers to the leisured time that scholars and researchers have in which to explore new ideas and points of inquiry. Derived from the Greek for school, it implies spare time, leisure, rest, ease, idleness, and learned discussion. In his 1989 lecture on "the scholastic point of view", Bourdieu quotes Plato in reference to *skhole* as "to play seriously" (1973, as cited in Bourdieu 1990, p. 381). Although privilege and material abundance are implied in the pursuit of any such activity, the role of spare time is particularly significant, alongside the basic questions of resourcing (i.e., capital, tools, means of cultural production etc). Much like 'the scholastic point of view', the 'artistic perspective' requires spare time, for reflection and engagement. However, also like the academic experience, cultural labour is work; hard work, skilled work, difficult work, and any leisured time for reflection and thought is followed by the making, the doing, the work. Similarly aligned with this definition of cultural labour, Jo Caust identifies four material conditions necessary for artists to practice their craft successfully: a regular income, a place to do their work, capacity to do their work, and validation of their work (Caust 2021). In seeking to resource such work effectively, a radical yet simple idea is being trialled in Ireland right now: "giving free money to artists".

The Republic of Ireland has recently instituted a new scheme to provide three years of support to up to 2,000 individual artists (Cole 2022), piloting a form of basic income. While this does not meet the criteria of ‘universal basic income’ given its limited application within a specific sector of society, it does provide an opportunity to consider what artists are capable of when they are financially resourced simply for being artists.

Qualification for the scheme relies on meeting 2 out of the 3 following conditions:

- The artist may have previously earned an income from the arts,
- The artist may have an existing body of work and/or
- The artist may be a member of a recognised arts body, such as a trade union.

Such conditions allow for both emergent, established, and late-career artists to apply for the scheme, as the 2 out of 3 conditions allows some wiggle room in the assessment criteria.

Successful artists and creative workers will be given a weekly income of €325 (A\$479) and be able to earn additional money without this basic income being affected. Although this is slightly less than the current minimum wage in Ireland, it does provide a substantial financial floor for artists and cultural workers, providing them with the freedom to focus more time on their creative practice than they would otherwise.

While the Irish trial is the largest trial of a basic income for artists in recent times, with similar limited trials being offered in San Francisco (Small 2021) and New York City (Lalljee 2022), direct support for artists dates to the days of medieval patronage (Mellor 2017), which has been adapted by digital platforms such as Patreon to fund individual content creators. However, the key difference between the patron model, which promotes the production of culture favoured by those with spare capital lying around (i.e., those with privilege), and a Basic Income for Artists is that the BIA prioritises the artist and places no conditions on the types of culture to be produced.

Indeed, the beauty of a basic income scheme is not the income it provides, but the way in which it empowers individuals to make choices about how they want to spend their extra time and capital. Of course, the research demonstrates that when given ‘free money’, most people choose to spend it very wisely (Bregman 2014), as that trust and the level of self-esteem it instils means that recipients take the responsibility very seriously, fostering greater trust, independence, and creativity. Although this all seems rather out-of-reach within an Australian context, wherein the arts and artists have been denigrated by politicians and policymakers for such a long time, despite

its flaws and omissions, the recent Jobkeeper wage subsidy scheme provides a blueprint for a basic income for artists, something unthinkable prior to the pandemic. As a macroeconomic intervention within the cultural sector, Jobkeeper also had much in common with another successful example of basic income for artists, the French 'Intermittence du Spectacle' unemployment insurance scheme (Beardsley 2021; Bisker 2012).

'Intermittence du Spectacle'

Created in the 1930's to subsidise the income of film industry workers alternating between short-term contracts and periods of unemployment, the 'Intermittence du Spectacle' has since been expanded to cover a variety of cultural workers and guarantees a government-subsidised stipend eligible to those who have worked a minimum number of hours in a cultural or artistic field, acting as an unemployment insurance scheme and a form of basic income, albeit one that is conditional. Although the scheme has been under attack by successive neoliberal governments in France (Parenteau 2014), it still presents a gold standard in how to support working artists, lifting the standing of culture to one of national pride (*ibid.*). However, such a policy requires political consensus around the provision of culture as a government service and a public good, alongside health, education, and other social services. This emphasises a political economy approach to cultural policy, and therefore hinges on a refusal and rejection of neoliberal creative industries rhetoric that seeks to further privatise cultural labour and its products. And unlike a Basic Income for Artists, the Intermittence du Spectacle is administratively burdensome and prone to abuse by both workers and employers (*ibid.*). This is why unrestricted basic income without mutual obligations offers a viable alternative.

'The Dole'

Speaking of mutual obligations, unemployment benefit schemes in Australia, Ireland, and the UK, otherwise known as the 'Dole', offered a financial lifeline for many arts and cultural workers prior to the introduction of mutual obligations or other 'work for the dole' schemes (Freyne 2012; Cathcart 2000; Carmody 2021). In Australia in particular, an entire generation of artists, comedians, musicians, and actors emergent during the 1980s and early 1990s were able to draw a living wage from the dole whilst concentrating on their artistic practice (Castle 2006). Arguably the majority of Generation X that are still actively employed or engaged in the Australian cultural industries today have the Dole to thank for at least the earliest parts of their careers, as it offered an opportunity for them to focus on their craft when they were at the peak of their youth. Of course other material conditions such as cheaper housing, a well-funded arts infrastructure and a

much better resourced public broadcaster in the ABC, as well as a more vibrant community radio and media landscape, assisted this, but it is unsurprising that Generation X has managed to dominate much of the media and entertainment space in Australia, and more research is needed to explore the link between what was at the time an expanded and reasonable unemployment benefit scheme and a golden age in grassroots cultural production led by a young Generation X.

The ‘creative practice PhD’

Since the demise of ‘the Dole’ and the rise of creative practice research in Australia, another stream of public funding has emerged to resource artistic and cultural labour; that of the PhD stipend. Alongside other university and research scholarships, PhD scholarships in the Australian arts and humanities are often used to fund the pursuit of a creative project (Goldson 2020), with an accompanying exegesis attached to explain and critique the creative process, simultaneously justifying it as research.

When I first began my own doctoral studies at RMIT University in Melbourne in 2014, I was one of very few postgraduate students pursuing a traditional research thesis in the School of Media and Communications. Most of my peers in that cohort were creatives seeking refuge in the sheltered workshop of academia to work on their screenplay, or their book, or their documentary. Of course, such an avenue is often only available to the privileged, or the highly educated, or those that can nimbly jump through the hoops of university bureaucracy. This might produce interesting research, but it means that diverse and unruly artists not suited to the hierarchies and often brutal manner of the modern neoliberal university are frozen out of this potential funding stream. Again, PhD stipends offer an imperfect precedent outlining both what not to do when funding artists, but also what artists can achieve when resourced effectively and granted a degree of independence.

The Public Works of Art Project

Large-scale, public support for cultural labour is not radical and it is not new. The Depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA) of Roosevelt’s New Deal United States funded the Public Works of Art Project, hiring more than 10,000 artists to create public works of art across the country, in a wide variety of forms — murals, theater, fine arts, design, and more (Bruce 1934). This not only resourced artists to do the work in which they were most qualified during a time of economic upheaval, but also fostered a sense of national culture and identity in a period when fascism and authoritarianism was on the rise. Although fascist regimes also used arts and

culture as propaganda, the WPA and its successor programmes the Federal Art Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Theatre Project, and Federal Writers' Project empowered artists to take liberties with their depiction of modern American life at the time, as the only guidance the government offered on subject matter was that the "American scene" would be a suitable topic (Adler 2009). These projects helped to establish the careers of photographer Dorothea Lange, artist Jackson Pollack, composer Aaron Copland, writer Ralph Ellison and painter Mark Rothko, and had a lasting cultural impact that shaped the American psyche for generations (Lena 2019). Although the Public Works of Art Project and subsequent programmes have many more similarities with a federal Job Guarantee than a Basic Income, the impact of direct, unrestricted support for the arts was monumental and fundamentally changed America's cultural landscape (ibid.).

Conclusion

Other modern ideas aimed at reshaping our macro political and economic circumstances would also heavily influence the potential for cultural labour to thrive. The 4-day or 30-hour working week would expand the amount of leisure time available to hobbyist, amateur, or part-time artists without a reduction in real wages or salaries (Mackay 2022). Such an initiative would also free up time for casual enthusiasts and audiences to engage with cultural work more readily, simultaneously expanding the number of producers, participants and consumers of arts and culture.

Such an expansion in our ability to make, to create, to play, to entertain and to be entertained is really the end goal here. Not only because it would teach us to value cultural labour and to engage with it more readily, but because it would also greatly expand our general wellbeing, our sense of civic engagement, and our capacity to build shared values and stories. And although art may not be as badly needed now as vaccines, universal health care, or a rapid decarbonisation of our economy, funding artists to produce work that reflects these goals and our shared culture may heal a few other sicknesses in our communities.

Or to quote the motto of The Travelling Symphony, an itinerant Shakespearean theatre troupe performing to the remaining inhabitants of a post-apocalyptic former United States in Emily St John's Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*:

“Because Survival is Insufficient”

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