

emerging artists

SUE ROWLEY REPORTS ON WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO BE 'EMERGING'

a view from art & design schools

Why do we use the term 'emerging' to describe a point in the career of an artist? Nobody refers to emerging accountants, doctors or lawyers. In these professions, the transition from student to employee, and commencement of a professional career are coincidental and clearly marked by graduation, acceptance into professional bodies, employment, and first salary payment. When does an artist take the first step on the career path? How is it recognised as such by the artist and others? The ambiguity of professionalism in the arts is evident in lack of coincidence between the various 'markers' of the commencement of artistic careers.

If the career begins with the first payment for artwork, then we should note that the 1994 Throsby and Thompson artists' survey found that 20% of all practising artists (including visual artists, crafts-practitioners, dancers, musicians, writers, etc) had earned their first payment for artwork before they began formal training; a further 40% received first income before they completed the training; and 19% received first income from their artwork within 1 year, and 8% between 1–3 years of finishing. However 9% of all artists (but 13% of all visual artists) waited over 3 years, and 5% had received no income from their art to date.¹

If career begins at graduation, then we should note that only half Australia's recent art graduates are in full-time employment.² Employment of recent graduates in visual and performing arts marks the lowest point for graduates across all disciplines, including the Humanities. One quarter of our sector's recent graduates are without work and seeking full-time employment; and almost one-quarter (22.6%) are in casual or part-time work while seeking full-time employment. There are no widely recognised rites of passage that celebrate the transition from training to professional practice. One effect of these discrepancies between the completion of training and the commencement of income and employment is the apparent late career starts reported in the 1994 artists' survey: 29 and 31 years for visual artists and craftspeople, respectively.

Emerging artists and crafts practitioners may find it difficult to pinpoint the moment when their career begins. For both the artists and crafts practitioners and the institutions that seek to support them, recognising the beginning requires a judgement to be made. It is precisely because the commencement of a professional practice is so ambiguously marked and so drawn out that institutional support is needed both from art schools and from the public arts infrastructure. In setting out the terms and conditions of grants and other support for emerging artists, the specification of who is eligible for assistance needs to be carefully made. 'Emerging' is, at least in part, defined by such specifications. The obvious example is specifications based on age: while many artists are under 25 years, age per se places no limitation on entry into practice as a serious practising artist.

Australia Council research reports frequently take the UNESCO definition of an artist as their starting point. The definition is useful because it doesn't set education, qualifications, employment or income

as the base line for artists' careers. Rather, it gives a qualitative definition of an artist as

"... any person who creates or gives expression to, or recreates works of art, who considers his [her] artistic creation to be an essential part of his [her] 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 [she] is bound by any relations of employment or association."

A definition of an 'emerging' artist may be extrapolated as one who creates or gives expression to, or recreates works of art, who intends his/her artistic creation to be an essential part of his/her life, and who asks to be recognised as an artist.

Self-definition and recognition by others are keys to professional practice, but they can be very unforgiving criteria. It takes a degree of self-confidence to define yourself as an artist on the basis of your participation in the graduating students' exhibition. More systematic attention and research is needed to identify the ways in which recognition is given to recent graduates—and those who have taken other pathways to artistic practice than attending art school. At present we have no reason to be confident that the most talented or committed of those who see their future as artists will be given a 'kick-start' through grants, residencies, exhibitions, galleries and other assistance. In spite of the deep commitment to equity and ethical practice which is shared across the arts in Australia, we cannot be confident that the support for emerging artists into professional practice is distributed equitably or on the basis of talent or achievement. It may be, for example, that the luck of the draw and sheer determination are the keys to entry into our field.

Nevertheless, from the art school perspective, a progression from student to emerging professional artist is anticipated and supported in the on-going studio and theory programs, as well as in subjects specifically intended to assist students in making the transition. Typically final year students are offered a subject called 'Professional Practice' taught by staff who are themselves engaged in professional practice in the arts.

From the perspective of many emerging artists, the art school experience lays the foundation of professional practice but their future depends on an additional ingredient, which needs to come from the art community beyond: recognition by other practising professionals. How this is given will play a key part in the dynamic renewal of Australian culture by new generations of artists.

endnotes

1. D. Throsby and B. Thompson, *But What Do You Do For a Living? A New Economic Study of Australian Artists*, 1994, Australia Council: cited in *Artswork: A report on Australians working in the arts*, prepared for the Australia Council by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, June 1997, p68.
2. 1996 Graduate Destination Survey: cited in *Artswork*, p67.

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