

SIMONE LEAMON



WHAT IS THE PRICE OF CREATIVITY? AND HOW DO WE VALUE THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN DESIGN?

Creativity seldom makes prime-time news, but a recent study of Australian artists' incomes put it firmly in the spotlight. The report *Do you really expect to get paid?*, by economists David Throsby and Anita Zednik, revealed that our professional artists are doing it tough: half of them earn less than AUD\$10,000 a year from their creative work, and while incomes have risen across the broader economy, this is not the case for artists.

This is bad news for artists. But they're not the only ones who should be worried: the report also carries major implications for the design community, because it speaks of the low value our society places on creativity. It seems that as a nation we are great consumers of creativity and culture, but we don't like paying for it – and when we do, we're getting it far too cheap. Our country's creatives are paying the price. Unless we can address this problem, trouble lies on the horizon.

Throsby, a respected cultural economist who specialises in creativity and the arts, has argued that by devaluing creativity in this way, we devalue our cultural life. In his academic work, Throsby points to the often-overlooked phenomenon of 'cultural capital' – the myriad forms of value that reside in an artwork, object or place, but which cannot be calculated in purely economic terms. Throsby has identified at least six different kinds of cultural value: aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic and authenticity. A work's social value, for example, may stem from the way it conveys our connection with others, an understanding of our society, or a shared sense of identity and place.

Artists are recognised as major dealers in cultural capital – but we need to realise the same is true for designers. Designers can no longer afford to view artists as 'the other'; we need acknowledge the parallels and overlaps between the two. Creativity has always been a quintessential part of design, but its importance is growing. Models of design practice are evolving in all sorts

of ways. For example, the design field is becoming more hybrid and interdisciplinary. Rather than being confined to a niche, designers are being required to exercise their versatility by working across several areas, running their practice in a way that straddles the increasingly interwoven roles of artist and design consultancy.

Design was traditionally framed as a client-funded service industry, but today's designers often invest their own time, money and research in projects, much as artists always have. Projects are not solely led by a client brief, but are being conceived and steered by designers. Design practice is also becoming more propositional and speculative: today's designers investigate problems in detail, conduct extensive research, test hypotheses, and think creatively; they often uncover unforeseen problems that require further investigation. Many of design's leading lights come from other disciplines, and/or regularly collaborate with artists. And just as artists traditionally present their work in public forums, opening it up to critique and dialogue, many designers are now following suit. These days it's not just about producing an object: a design outcome can successfully be an ephemeral piece, an event, or a conversation with a community.

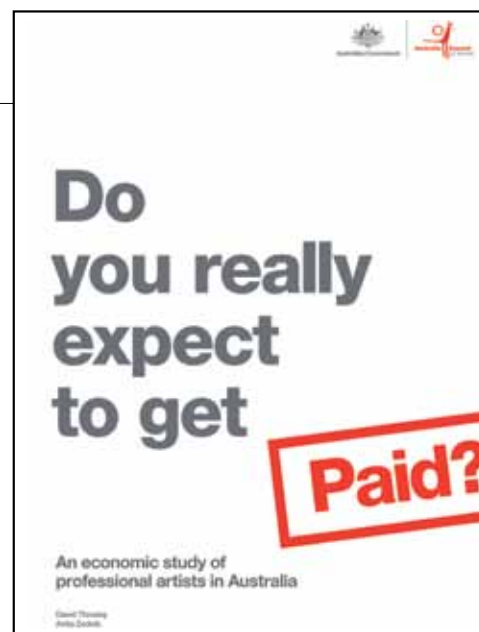
The language of design must broaden to reflect this evolution, and designers need to join the conversation. The Australia Council, our national peak arts funding body, which commissioned the Throsby report, is now grappling with the question of how to fund design. I recently took part in a forum exploring this topic. Part of Unlimited, the Asia Pacific Design Triennale organised by Artisan (Queensland's craft and design council), the forum examined how arts funding bodies are shaping new policy frameworks to deal with design. The questions on the table included: What type of design activities should be funded? What models of practice are today's designers using, and how are designers delivering cultural value in a comparable way to artists?

Creative practice enriches our cultural lives and our communities, and we have to start thinking about creativity as something we all have a vested interest in. We ignore this at our peril. If we want to grow as a nation, to have a vibrant sophisticated culture and strong economy, we need to value creativity – to make sure it is supported and fostered. Unfortunately, right now this happens largely through the generosity of creative practitioners, but the design industry can't afford to be complicit in this.

We must realise that design, like art, is not just about delivering fiscal value: increasingly, it's also about delivering the different kinds of cultural value that Throsby speaks of. We need to embrace design as a form of cultural production, rather than defining it purely as delivering a product or service.

Design shapes the world and our agency within it, and creativity is a designer's greatest asset. Alongside art, design forms part of a wider creative ecosystem, which will require careful nurturing to ensure its long term survival. If we want design to thrive here in Australia, we must ensure that it claims a place within that creative ecosystem.

Simone LeAmon is a designer, artist and the director of O.S INITIATIVE design and creative strategy studio.



ABOVE The cover of the *Do you really expect to get paid?* report by David Throsby and Anita Zednik