

Visual Art and Design

Industry Coverage: Creative Artists, Musicians, Writers and Performers; Professional Photographic Services; Other Specialised Design Services.

Industry Overview

Recent years have seen a resurgence of public interest in visual art and crafts. From the Etsy phenomenon to the ever growing popularity of exhibitions such as Sculpture by the Sea, Western Australians have embraced the global trend towards making, and consuming, more art. Informal maker spaces are emerging as exciting pools of potential talent. Perth and Western Australia are earning a reputation for having some of the most exciting public and street art in the world, and private investment in public art has been strong in recent years. For instance, between 2014-2017, Crown worked closely with Form to develop an art collection representing 35 Australian artists' work, over half of whom were Western Australian. The works, on display in public spaces across the Crown complex, comprise 11 3D artworks, 134 original 2D artworks, and 1245 reproduction artworks.¹

In every sector, visual communication skills are becoming increasingly essential. Every organisation that has a website needs to consider visual design and in our fast-data culture, infographical content has come to the fore as a succinct way to communicate complex ideas. The burgeoning digital games and animation industries both rely heavily on a visually literate, artistic workforce, and demand from advertising agencies and applications developers for visual communication skills is ever growing.

In this respect, graphic artists and visual designers are in a good position, with a skill set that is readily commercialised and able to be applied in the digital context. More broadly, the design sector is enjoying modest growth and taking advantage of new technologies like 3D printing to expand its capacity.

Meanwhile, amongst all of the creative sectors, visual artists earn the least, at approximately \$5,500 p.a., and on average earn only 15% of their income from their primary skill.² Opportunities for paid employment have dwindled following a number of years of constricted federal and state funding, reduced philanthropy, and gallery closures. There has been a 55% decline in per capita federal spending in the visual arts since 2008 and investment at the state level has also failed to keep pace with inflation.³ The visual arts sector is amongst the most productive in Australia, punching significantly above its weight in terms of economic value generated against inputs, and sector representatives continue to lobby for the recognition afforded to the arts in other economies to be applied here and supported with appropriate funding.⁴

Despite these challenges, the visual arts sector continues to be one of the most productive, relying heavily on a diminished workforce bolstered by volunteers. Sector bodies continue to offer a range of training and services to the mostly freelance workforce and organisations including Form, Country Arts WA, Community Arts Network, Art on the Move, the Aboriginal Arts Centre Hub of WA and peak body Artsource have all found ways to continue to deliver an exciting offer to Western Australian communities despite straitened times.

At the vocational and university level, visual arts education and training offers stand greatly reduced from what they were a decade ago. There remains some excellent training at the TAFE level - for instance that offered through North Metro TAFE - and industry believes it is vital that this is safeguarded with proper investment to support and grow professional practice in the state.

Whilst the visual arts and design sectors may be experiencing different fortunes, the digital revolution which is driving significant changes to the global economy is underpinning the need for workers in both sectors to be flexible and able to adapt to evolving digital technologies. The falling costs of technology are facilitating these largely freelance workforces, and workers need to be

able to take advantage of circumstances to manage their businesses and careers and market themselves to a global audience.

Current and future labour market conditions

Australia's creative and cultural industries contribute more than \$86 billion (or 6.9%) to the nation's GDP. The largest contributors to the creative sector include design (\$26.6 billion), fashion (\$11.8 billion) and publishing (\$7.6 billion). At the last census, those sectors employed an average of 769,800 people. Volunteer services across the creative industries were estimated to be worth \$756 million to the economy.⁵

With most visual artists earning the majority of their income in other occupations, attempts to capture the true size of the sector are hampered. Whilst the 2011 ABS census recorded 230 Visual Artist / Craft professionals in the state, WA peak body Artsource for instance, has close to 1,000 members.⁶

A cycle of instability brought about by constrained budgets means that sector bodies rely increasingly on a volunteer workforce. This has an impact on paid employment prospects for arts workers. It can also mean that some kinds of organisations tend to have a short life. Artist Run Initiatives (ARIs) are a key part of the visual arts ecosystem, providing vital pathways and opportunities for emerging artists, but heavy reliance on overburdened volunteers means they often fold within a few years.⁷ The Indigenous visual arts sector is a major contributor to the arts economy and is responsible for some of Australia's most valuable works of art. However the market has contracted in recent years and an oversupply of product has had an impact on artists' income.

There has however been a buoyant public art market in WA in recent years, which has provided opportunities for both artists and designers. Where income streams such as philanthropy and private buying have dwindled – seeing a number of private galleries close down and opportunities to exhibit contract – public art projects⁸, the development of public art policies by a number of local governments⁹, and investment in visual arts for hospitals¹⁰ have all created opportunities. A key feature of these income streams is that they are client driven and whilst not problematic in itself, when occurring in conjunction with a contraction in opportunities to produce artist driven works, the capacity for artists to employ freedom of expression is hampered. Designers compete with visual artists in this space, being trained and accustomed to working to a brief.

Local councils are emerging as significant consumers of visual arts and employers of arts workers. An increasing number include art programming in their community service delivery, maintain art galleries and collections, and employ the visual arts in place making efforts. Each council is structured differently though commonly arts workers are found within the community development division. Sector consultation has revealed councils have to employ workers from diverse backgrounds - such as marketing and community development - into these roles owing to a lack of appropriate qualifications.

Competition is high in the design sector, which is characterised by a predominantly freelance workforce; however demand is also growing in a number of areas¹¹. Advertising agencies are increasingly outsourcing visual communication, and in some cases whole brand management projects, to graphic designers and visual communication workers. The growth in digital content has flowed through to increased advertising agency spend and in turn to digital visual and graphic designers. Similarly, demand for digital visual communication skills is growing in the areas of web, games and applications development, and animation. The modest growth projected for the design sector nationally is mostly within this digital space.

Industry development issues:

The current economic climate has exacerbated longstanding challenges to sustainability for the visual arts sector. These challenges include: reduced financial contribution from business; reduced government funding; reduced disposable income across potential audiences; and for galleries, unaffordable rents, which have not decreased in line with reduced revenue.

Budgetary constraints limit the service that peak bodies are able to offer to the workforce, challenge the sustainability of smaller organisations and reduce opportunities for artists to exhibit their work. In turn this leaves the artists less prepared to manage their careers in a depressed market.

The design sector in WA is underrepresented, at 8.4% versus approximately 11% of overall Australian population, so there may

still be potential for the market to expand despite indications that competition levels in industry are high nationally.¹²

Designers producing digital content have been increasingly challenged in recent years by infringements against their intellectual property. Whilst 'copycat' designs of physical objects – especially fashion and homewares – have already become an issue for some, industry is concerned that the advent of effective and affordable 3D technologies is beginning to drastically reduce barriers to this form of theft.

Workforce challenges and issues:

The instability which persists in the visual arts sector limits the affordability and accessibility of visual arts careers for an increasing number of people, and this issue is exacerbated by the growing cost of education and training. In addition, the limited capacity of industry bodies to provide training under present budgetary constraints risks pushing the onus for upskilling back onto the artist, who is often already struggling financially.

An over reliance on volunteers in the sector inhibits career opportunities for artists and arts workers, and places volunteers under unreasonable pressure.

Whilst the picture is healthier in the design sphere, high levels of competition and freelancing make for potentially stressful careers, particularly if economic conditions begin to erode opportunities. The growing incidence of IP theft may threaten the viability of smaller design firms and independent designers if they are unable to identify or legally challenge infringers.

Given these challenges and issues, a number of skills areas come to the fore as being vital to both visual artists and designers.

Chief amongst those is intellectual property knowledge. Whilst this is of particular relevance to designers, visual artists are also increasingly accessing new markets online and in digitising their product, they risk it being copied.

A growing range of digital production methods are driving a need for artists and designers to upskill, for instance in 3D printing or augmented reality. As well as mastering the technology itself, the pace of change demands workers be flexible and adaptive to change, and able to engage in self-directed learning.

As web-based solutions continue to drive new business and consumer markets for Western Australia's visual artists' work, greater web development and digital marketing skills are required to facilitate best use of these digital platforms. Marketing, outreach and a comprehensive use of social media are essential tools to reach a targeted market. Small business management skills are also increasingly vital. Current off-the-shelf business training solutions being accessed by arts graduates are an ill fit for industry, and more tailored training is needed.

Current Training Council areas of focus:

FutureNow is continuing to work closely with its Visual Art and Design Industry Advisory Group which includes representatives of; peak bodies Artsource, the Design Institute of Australia, and the Australian Graphic Design Association; arts organisations CAN, Form and AACHWA; and training providers.

When facing challenges to the sustainability of their primary, artistic careers, having an in-demand skill could provide the stability that allows an artist to keep working on their art. It is currently estimated that visual artists make only 15% of their income from their art, and only 20% apply their skills outside of the sector.

Traditionally, visual artists have engaged in further training and education to work in fields including education and art therapy. A less common pathway has been to gain additional qualifications in the fields of design - however the projected growth in demand for 2D design would indicate an area of potential here.

Whilst visual artists and designers engage in different processes of learning and application, there is some synergy in their work which suggests a secondary career in visual communication could provide much needed security for some WA visual artists, although as with education and art therapy, it would require significant additional study. FutureNow is continuing work to raise awareness within the visual arts sector of the growing demand for visual communication skills and the potential for sustainable careers in this related field.

Similarly, opportunities are growing within the sphere of the local authorities, and a suitable qualification in this area could be well utilised by visual artists seeking a broader career with an arts focus. FutureNow is engaging with industry in preparation for an upcoming review of existing Certificate III and IV Arts Administration qualifications as outlined in the Cultural and Related Industries IRC's Proposed Schedule of Work. These qualifications may be suitably adapted to support arts workers in a local government setting.

Attachments

- [Examination of the Use of the Arts to Improve Health and Healing in Western Australian Hospitals](#)
- [National Association for the Visual Arts: S2M Report](#)

References

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