



Jacqui Shelton, *Framing everyday negotiations: never confuse movement with action*, 2013, single channel video installation, 31:38 min

## An artist in a waitress's body

### Australian twenty-somethings pursuing an artistic career

NAIMA MORELLI

The other day, waiting for the tram, I was lazily browsing through a lifestyle magazine. An ad captured my attention. It said: 'Don't you deserve a job you love?' In the corner of the page was the name of the graphic design school that would ostensibly make such a job possible. The tram arrived.

'We all want a job we love', I was thinking (seated next to the typical Melburnian drunk vomiting on the floor) but it feels like it's the first time in history we can actually think of deserving that luxury. It's no mystery why; in the last decade, the number of people working in the arts (or associated creative professions) has increased at a much higher rate than general employment. A creative and fulfilling job is one of the great aspirations of the post-Baby Boomer generations. In the healthy Australian economy this desire does not seem so outlandish, unlike in Europe where, in these times of economic crisis, you are lucky to have a job of any kind. In Australia more and more people are actually working, or studying to work, in the arts industry. Just looking at the people in the tram, aside from the amiable drunkard, everyone under the age of thirty seemed to exude some kind of creative attitude. The pink-haired girl in front of me held a folder of drawings. Two hippie friends near the door carried guitar cases. And a guy at the back of the tram seemed to not have paid his travel fare – which in my Italian hometown is a form of art as well, especially if you manage to not get caught.

The tram left me in Elizabeth Street, a short walk to the lane where the artsHub offices are located. artsHub is a portal which helps Australians to find employment in the creative sector. It's not just a directory of job opportunities but provides insightful advice for people who are starting out in the creative field. I asked Deborah Stone, artsHub Director, why Australians' desire to work in the arts has so significantly increased:

I think the Internet has given more people access to creative experimentation and creative experience than previously. My great grandparents could only listen to music by playing it themselves on the piano. My grandparents had a record player. My parents had TV and a cassette player. My kids have mp3 players that they never detach from, and a computer on which they can download any film or image anytime they like. So I think that this desire for working in the arts has to do with the integration of creative and expressive experience into our lives thanks to the technology.

According to Stone, another factor to take into account is the pursuit of life satisfaction. Emotional fulfilment has become particularly sought-after in a complex and more economically driven society: 'People find in the arts the capacity for expression and self-fulfilment that gives





1 + 2/ Fiona Morgan, *Untitled # 34 & 35*, 2013, acrylic on ply, 40 x 40cm

All images this article courtesy the artists; images of work currently showing in *Repeat Offender*, representing the work of 5 Melbourne-based emerging artists, The Gallery @ Bayside Arts & Cultural Centre, Melbourne, until 19 December 2013; see *Artnotes Victoria*, p. 63

meaning and joy to their lives.' No doubt people are expecting much more from their job compared to the previous generations. As philosopher Roman Krznaric put it: 'We have entered a new age of fulfilment, in which the great dream is to trade up from money to meaning.'

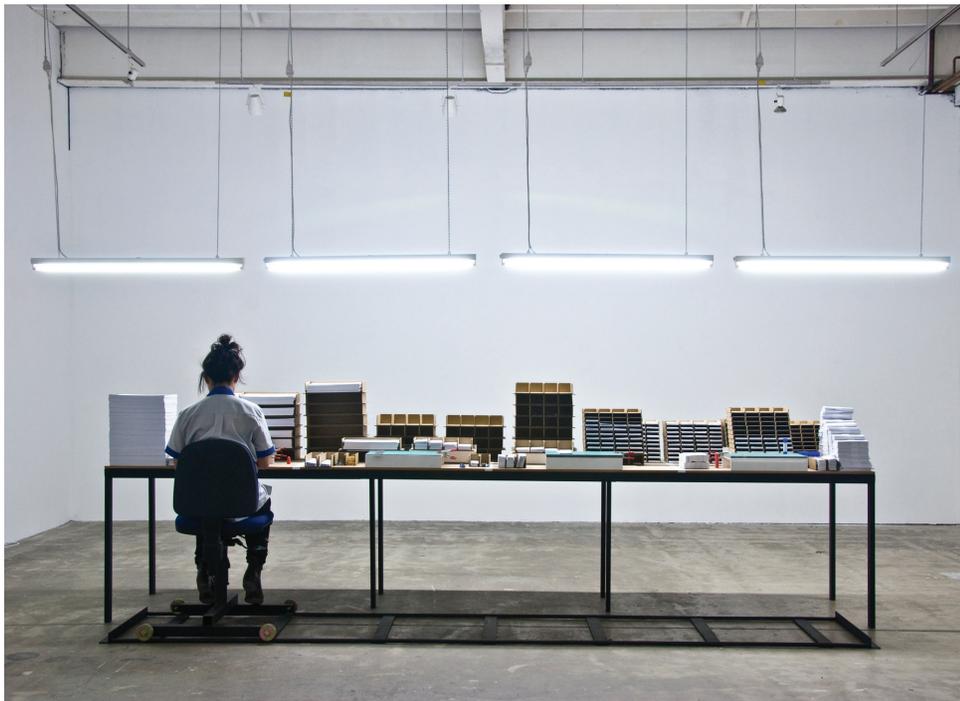
Melbourne is famous for its artsy coffee shops. If you ask many baristas what their job is, they will hesitate: '... do you mean where I make money from, or ...?' The more direct will tell you straightaway: 'I'm an artist in a waitress's body'; 'I'm an independent curator with bad karma'. The Australian economy is very far from being damaged by the overcrowding of creative industry. Wannabe artists have to pay the bills and – along with students and working holiday visa holders – they are an important part of the necessary cafe workforce. Stone admitted that, generally, jobs in the arts are not well paid compared to those in other sectors; often, in fact, they are not paid at all: 'Arts organisations depends heavily on volunteers because there is never enough money to pay everyone who wants a job. At the same time, a volunteer job is a way for people to experience and engage in the creative world, even if they are not professionals in the field. Very often the young use volunteer jobs as a stepping stone to a paid job.' According to her, volunteering is a win-win situation. In this sense, being an artist gives many twenty-somethings a viable, cool option, compared to other kinds of creative jobs that require particular skills, training or techniques. The numerous artist-run spaces in Melbourne are a great chance for artists to start out. The Australian government supports contemporary art, even the more experimental and ephemeral types, contributing to Melbourne's reputation for creative vitality. It's not extremely easy to get funded, however; there is competition for the limited amount of money available, but there are still quite a few opportunities for someone who is really committed (and willing to fill in grant application forms).

Georgina Lee is in a slightly different position compared to her colleagues. Not only does she work in a corporate job instead of the typical hospitality or retail sector, she also makes her day job a subject of her artistic practice. Her installations and videos reflect the life of the office, and she's quite critical of the corporate environment and lifestyle. For a while she curated an art blog reviewing exhibitions in Melbourne, and now she's studying at the Victorian College of the Arts. To make room for all of these activities she has cut her work from full-time to part time. She studies on her days off and dedicates the weekends to art. Aside from exhibiting in artist-run spaces, she is applying for funding for her new projects. Georgina is not represented by a gallery yet, but this seems to be one of her goals:

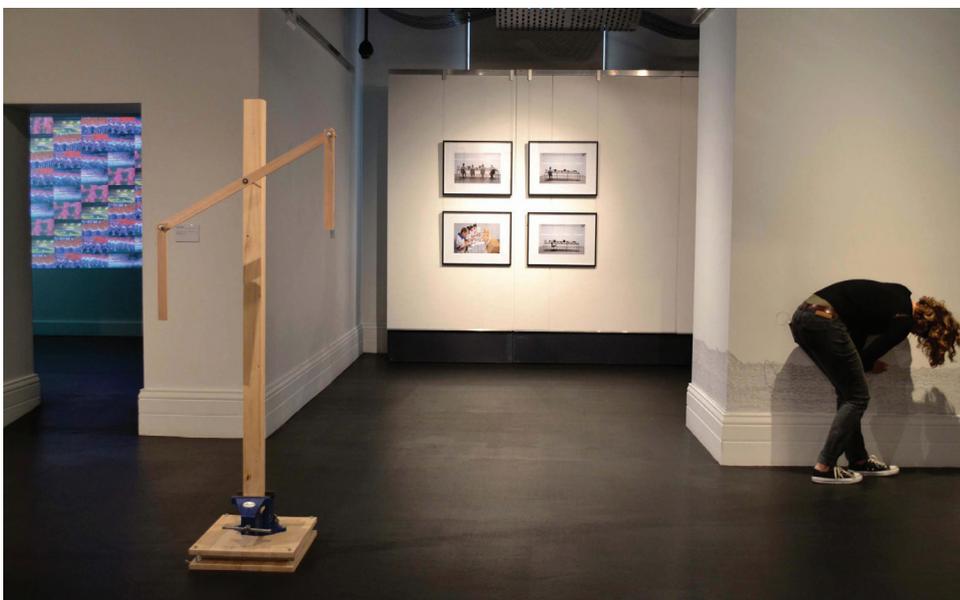
You can start from artist-run spaces, but then you get to this point where you realise you can't just do that forever. It become less satisfying after a while, because you're actually just showing your work to your friends and other young people you would speak with anyway. You also pay a lot of money for exhibiting in these spaces. Artist-run initiatives are good, but you have to move to something else after that. Not everyone is trying to get into a commercial gallery, but at a certain point you have to try to make some money.

In a nutshell, everything looks great until you hit your thirties. That is the time for you to get a real job, one you get paid for; that will be part of your identity for the next thirty years or so. If you want a family, to own a house, financial stability, you may start considering another job before it's too late. Emerging artist Boe-Lin Bastian has thought a lot about this problem recently: 'I've a lot of questions on my mind about whether I can continue to be an artist ... how long I can go on





1/ Kay Abude, *Production line # 3*, 2010, photographic documentation of installation and performance, 50.4 x 65.5cm



2/ Installation view, *Repeat Offender*, 2013, with artist CJ Conway (pictured) enacting her site-specific drawing installation *Circling the square*, The Gallery @ Bayside Arts & Cultural Centre

with it. Because there are other things in my life that can be very conflicting with the artist's lifestyle. Trying to be an artist, I won't have enough money.' She was considering studying for an MFA to buy time to make her decision: 'It's time dedicated to my practice, but at the same time it's two years further away from being able to have another job. It's hard to decide. Because you want to do it, but if you're being practical about it, not many people make it.'

Boe-Lin works with video and installations and so far has been quite successful exhibiting in different cities in Australia and in Glasgow. In her work there is always a tension and invisible struggle. One of her videos shows athletes trying to hold the same position or perform the same movement over and over again, until they physically can't do it

any longer. But her artwork is ambiguously colourful and cheerful. What I see in her work is not pessimism, but a sort of Sisyphean courage. Her recent work *So Long, Larry* consisted of a big pink balloon tethered to a lawn chair. She was inspired by Larry Walters, an American truck driver who took flight in a homemade airship. The 'flying machine' consisted of an ordinary patio chair with forty-five helium-filled weather balloons attached to it. As soon as Larry landed, a TV crew asked him to explain the reasons behind his undertaking. He replied: 'A man can't just sit around wasting his life. You have to try to live your dream.'

Naima Morelli is an independent Melbourne-based arts writer.



## EXHIBITION DATES

7 December 2013 - 23 January 2014

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Saturday 7 December 2013

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