

## A seat at the table – keeping it real

*Writer in Residence Simone Penkethman reflects on [Seat at the Table](#), part of Keeping it Real, one of the final events for the ACT Creative Recovery and Resilience Forum, 4 June 2022*

It's with trepidation, excitement, and a tinge of sadness that I walk through the University of Canberra on a grey Saturday afternoon.

I am trepidatious because I am navigating a university campus.

I'm excited to see people, a lot of artists all together in the same place and time.

I'm sad because the Forum, and my writer's residency, is drawing to a close. My feeling of reconnecting and being inspired by our wonderful community of artists is just being reborn.

Fortunately for me and everyone else attending Keeping it Real, my trepidation is unfounded. The organisers know that university campuses are impenetrable to the uninitiated. Their wayfinding measures include pre-event maps and videos, and prominent signage on site. Accessibility is a key feature of events in the Creative Recovery and Resilience Forum. They're not just ticking boxes but really thinking through what's needed.

Soon I enter UC's brutalist School of Design and the Built Environment. I love the aesthetic of concrete, exposed ceilings and vast sheets of glass, but winter has come in full force and I'm glad I dressed defensively! I mingle with the crowd. Everyone here has played a role in the Creative Recovery and Resilience Program (CRRP).

I wander through a buzzing multi-media exhibition documenting arts activities that are part of CRRP. There have been so many amazing projects; some I didn't even know were happening. It's like retrospective FOMO.

There are four groups of tables set up in a large, central space. The black tablecloths resemble theatre blacks, which seems fitting.

Soon we take our places for A Seat at the Table, 2 hours of facilitated conversations between a group of around 40 artists and arts workers.

Don Christopher, artsACT's Assistant Director for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Arts Engagement, acknowledges country. Don is a Gunggari man and an opera singer who joined arts ACT in December 2021. He shares a strong, positive energy throughout the afternoon.

Ketura Budd, Nick Delatovic, Zora Pang and Tom Campbell from independent arts organisation [You Are Here](#) (YAH) are our facilitators. They introduce themselves and set the scene, acknowledging that we are meeting in an educational institution on unceded land and that this can evoke a diverse array of feelings, depending on our own experience.

## **Framing the conversation: the known knowns**

The YAH team invest time in framing the conversation we're about to embark on. It's time well spent.

There are familiar issues that come up in conversations about the arts as an industry in general, and during the pandemic in particular. The YAH team are proactive in naming the 'known knowns' so we can take the conversation forward. They are:

- Arts are underfunded
- There are inadequate standards for employment in the arts
- A lot of arts labour is voluntary
- Most employment in the arts is unstable and insecure
- Most artists and arts workers have been underpaid and many continue to be
- Most working artists lost income due to disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic
- There is disbelief or doubt in ourselves and others about whether an arts practice can really be a job
- Everyone in the room knows the economic and social value of the arts but this is still not generally acknowledged by those in power

That seems like a pretty comprehensive list to me. I'll tease it out a little further. Having your work undervalued and your employment insecure leads directly to poverty and shame. That's a high price to pay for a career choice. I know artists, producers, marketers, teachers and managers who are highly educated in and dedicated to arts and culture, but who have moved to higher-paid industries so they can afford to fulfill basic human needs.

The disbelief and doubt we feel is well-founded. In acknowledging the 'known knowns' we are naming our own disadvantage.

## **Time at the tables**

The way the room is set up resembles a consultation or planning workshop but the focus of this event is on the here and now, what's happening live in the room. It's about how we can benefit from being together.

The pandemic experience is as diverse as the artists themselves.

A performing artist talks about how the global pivot to digital didn't work for them. Their practice is about a live connection between artist and audience. It's ephemeral, existing in time and place. There's a sense of grief for time lost.

A young emerging writer says that her 'COVID cocooning' was good for working through self-imposed blocks. She confronted and overcame negative self-talk. She spent time

journaling and going down rabbit holes and finally wrote pieces that she liked and submitted them for publication.

A musician says that no live performance meant there was more opportunity for procrastination.

An artist with a niche practice creates digital assets for hobbyists who make digital art. Demand soared during the pandemic. He usually works in waves, going hard for a few weeks then taking a break. Right now, he's been working non-stop for months and is looking forward to a holiday.

### **If you could have anything...**

I'm moving around activities; I've just visited the [Pitch Lab](#) workshop where artists are developing their visions that they will pitch to us at the end of the day.

I sit at a different table. The facilitator asks us what we would want if we could have anything. This is what I hear.

A venue: a blank space with smaller spaces attached, natural furniture, adjustable lighting, controlled acoustics.

An artists' retreat with access to nature and a chance to revisit ancestry; to reimagine what great artists did before us.

Artists need mentorship, particularly if they're on a non-traditional path. Mentorship stems from community and communities need resources. They also ebb and flow. Key people move away or die. New generations form, new cultures and communities.

We discuss how we don't need to re-invent the past, what we're doing now is yarning, it's just that campfires are few and far between.

Someone laments that Canberra hibernates in the winter – people just stop going out. While this is historically true, I can't help thinking that the moment contradicts that comment. It's the coldest June for years and we're all braving the weather to come together. As if to back up my musing, people start fondly remembering winter house concerts and art happenings in domestic spaces.

### **Recap - Bringing us back together**

The facilitators return to the front of the room and reflect for us the key themes from each table.

Zora's table: Support and care – we all got through the pandemic with support of those around us.

Tom's table: Admin and taxes – art is a business. Community members helped in that learning.

Nick's table: We are in transition from pandemic to endemic. What does that look like for artists?

Ketura's table: Challenges and values – what kind of support could work?

Then the floor is open to us at the tables. Our facilitators ask: What new ideas have been triggered over the afternoon? What did we enjoy hearing about?

The comments and observations came thick and fast. I scribble furiously and now I have way too many notes to include in this reflection. I'll finish by briefly discussing the first point raised in this final discussion.

*We've been reminded of the importance of relationships; it's hard to produce in isolation.*

This is so true and ubiquitous that it's easy to overlook. As much as we may crave time to retreat into our studios, darkrooms or computers, art is about relationships, the most fundamental being that between artists and audiences.

Throughout our careers we are nourished by our relationships with peers, teachers and mentors. Developing strong working relationships with collaborators such as producers, technicians, publishers, editors, gallerists, agents, publicists, patrons and arts managers is a crucial part of building a sustainable art practice.

The impact of our years in pandemic isolation remains unknown but it's clear to me that the experience of coming together in various CRRP activities has reminded us all that we need each other.

We break and the sound of animated chatter fills the room. Someone says that artist dates are a great way to take a break. Go see someone else's work.

I arrived full of trepidation, excitement and sadness. Now I circle the room feeling hope, curiosity and belonging.