

In residence – looking backwards and forwards

“Coming across the CRRP prompted me to ask myself whether I’m still an artist. That was, in retrospect, a step toward recovery” – Simone Penkethman wraps up as Writer-in-Residence

My role of Writer in Residence for the [ACT Creative Recovery and Resilience Forum](#) is nearly done. It’s been a challenge and an honour to do justice to the rich array of experiences, discussions and ideas presented in the programmed activities of the forum.

It’s well over two years since our first national COVID 19 lockdown. Inequality has skyrocketed across the country. Creative industries were some of the hardest hit sectors in Australia and the world.

I feel the need to start at the beginning and remember what we’re recovering from.

This, my final piece, is a more personal reflection.

I remember the last day of 2019

I went to a 1920s themed New Year’s Eve party. We sat outside, drinking whiskey and gasping bushfire smoke. I drank so much that I felt a jubilant sense of optimism for 2020. We all felt it. Things simply had to get better.

The next morning I woke to the worst air quality in the world.

The fires kept burning until late February when, like a sting in the dragon’s tail, a family property where I was married was all but destroyed. Further south, someone I fancied in my teens was incinerated.

My mother’s 80th birthday was in January 2020. I planned to host a garden party to celebrate – we’d been preparing for months. Loved ones were coming from everywhere, including her dying younger brother from Queensland.

The heat and smoke were so extreme that it wasn’t safe to travel to Canberra. Like so many outdoor events in that black summer, our party couldn’t go ahead.

My uncle lived until the winter of 2021 but COVID border closures meant that we never saw him again. We watched his funeral on Zoom.

I’m sure your story is at least as turbulent as mine.

Am I even an artist?

In late 2021, I’m looking for a new job after taking a few months off for family travel and home maintenance. The travel plans were squashed by the COVID Delta lockdown which began only a few days into my freedom.

As I scroll through opportunities, I come across the [ACT Government’s Creative Recovery and Resilience program](#).

It’s an enticing program with paid opportunities for artists to produce work; undertake inquisitive residencies; network; improve their marketing; and develop skills and knowledge.

My interest is piqued but I think to myself, am I even an artist?

I used to write songs, play gigs and make records.

I used to write stories and poetry that I performed and published.

I used to cut through red tape to create raw, quirky and inclusive art interventions in urban spaces.

I taught a generation of young people about singing, acting, playing instruments, forming bands and making shows.

I used to make things happen!

Did I mention how much I love Canberra?

In late March 2022, I organised to meet with [Emerging Artist in Residence for Cross-sector Engagement, Miriam Slater](#) (Mim) to find out more about their practice.

At this stage, I'd written one piece as Writer in Residence, a response to the first event which was online in December 2021, [Keeping it Together](#). Artists at this event identified a silver-lining for artists in the pandemic: funding bodies were more open to supporting creative exploration that doesn't necessarily have a tangible or performance outcome. Mim's residency seems to exemplify the success of this funding approach.

During their residency, Mim was working from the [rehearsal room](#) at Belconnen Arts Centre and also from an office at the University of Canberra.

The rehearsal room is a great space for physical exploration, or as Mim says, "rolling around on the floor". You can see Mim's work in progress and appreciate the space in this [short video documentary](#). I love the way that we can see the chaotic movement of the traffic through the windows and how this contrasts with Mim's deliberate, focused movement work.

Mim and I bonded over our shared excitement for site-specific performance, particularly around the natural environment and brutalist architecture of Canberra. I had recently reviewed a dance work, [Less](#), at a huge, concrete water feature in the Dairy Flat precinct. Mim had also created work in the same space. Unfortunately, Mim's work was cancelled due to COVID.

The Pandemic wasn't kind to Mim. Without direct audience connection, they found it hard to produce. With the support of the residency, Mim tells me, "I've made more work in the past 3 months than in the past 2 years."

Later, in mid-May, I attend a workshop by the [Mid-Career/Established Cross Sector Engagement Artist in Residence, Dr Kirsten Wehner](#). Kirsten and I also have a shared connection to Canberra through growing up in Weston Creek. Kirsten's residency was all about creatively exploring and understanding Weston Creek – not the district, the actual creek itself. She hopes her work can change people's relationship with the waterway.

In this [short documentary video](#), Kirsten says, "The drain was one of those places that my mum always said, don't go down there. It's dangerous. But like most kids, I was drawn to water."

Kirsten's workshop solved a decades-long mystery from my own childhood, "Where is the creek?" Answer: it's in that concrete and rock drain that runs under Dixon Drive and onto Molonglo.

At the workshop, I connected with citizen scientists, other artists, and the creek itself. I even found out what happened to all the frogs that were around when I was a kid. There was a frog pandemic in the early 90s and they still haven't recovered.

Zoom out

We're now well into our third year of the COVID 19 pandemic. The [OECD](#) in 2020 and [UNESCO](#) in 2021 both published studies highlighting the disproportionately high impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Arts and Cultural sectors.

The pandemic experiences of artists and arts workers in Australia are mixed. Many independent artists and creatives didn't qualify for JobKeeper, the most significant Federal Government support initiative. Others who worked in part-time and low paid jobs for arts organisations found that they were eligible and that their incomes actually increased.

In the ACT, a range of government funding programs supported some artists to continue their practice. Both locally and across the world, some artists thrived in their isolated cocoons and others successfully pivoted their practices to online delivery. But many more struggled without connection to their audiences, collaborators and peers.

In February 2021, just before the end of Jobkeeper, the Australian data collection and advocacy initiative "[I lost my gig](#)" conducted a wage support survey of Australian performing arts workers. They found that 18% of respondents received no wage support at all while only 12% received Centrelink's JobsSeeker.

Of the nearly 2000 survey respondents, 66% were receiving JobKeeper and 55% were considering leaving the creative and live entertainment industry.

This kind of attrition in the creative sectors concerns me. It threatens the transmission of knowhow from one generation to the next, putting our intangible cultural heritage at risk.

Endless lockdowns, unviable occupancy limits and border closures have left our industry fragmented. In the words of Mim Slater, "Damage has been done."

What's working?

Over the course of Forum, I experienced and witnessed a range of supports that enable artists and arts workers to regroup, recover connect with each other.

Artistically, I am much less hands-on than I used to be. For the past 10 years I've been a community cultural development manager and served on boards for arts organisations. I review theatre for [Canberra City News](#) and I'm a long-standing member of Canberra Critics Circle who present the annual [ACT Arts Awards](#). I'm part of the arts but I'm not really a maker.

Coming across the CRRP prompted me to ask myself whether I'm still an artist. That was, in retrospect, a step toward recovery.

Support through the application process extended across all CRRP activities. I attended two online workshops and had a one-on-one conversation with a staff member from the University of Canberra's Centre for Creative and Cultural Research (CCCR) to discuss my options. These opportunities to connect with the people making decisions helped me to decide where I might fit best in the program.

I knew that Writer in Residence was the right role for me when the application, far from being onerous, was a meditative pleasure to write. I methodically trawled through [Trove](#) to find references to anthologies containing my stories and poems. I fondly remembered the community connections around these publications.

It felt great to frame myself as a creative writer again.

Faces behind the numbers

[Seat at the Table](#) was one of the final events at the forum. It brought around 40 artists and arts workers together in discussion about our local creative industries. The participants, with their lively and diverse stories and ideas, put a human face to all the statistics mentioned above.

Some artists talked about their experience of staging shows in partnership with local businesses as part of the CRRP'S [Good Company project](#). As part of the support, each applicant had a conversation with a producer to refine their idea before submitting their application to [You Are Here Canberra](#).

Dianna Nixon's show, ['The Gentleman's Companion'](#), was staged at Louis Louis bar. She said that talking her show concept through with a producer was an important part of its development.

Marlene Claudine Radice and Miriam Slater presented their show ['Roar'](#) at Wanderlust Gentleman's Club. They collaborated with dancers from the club and made use of the in-house features including an on-stage shower and fire feature. At Seat at the Table, Marlene and Mim spoke about how performing artists and sex workers had similar experiences of losing both income and connection with their audiences during the pandemic. They hope to continue to work with the Wanderlust dancers.

I look forward to building the connections I've made through the Forum as my city and I continue to recover and build resilience.

My heartfelt thanks go to the CCCR and ArtsACT for offering me this role, particularly to Vahri McKenzie for her ongoing support and thoughtful feedback.