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Editorial:

**The Art of Subsidy / The Subsidy of Art****Proposal**

In April 2020, when Australia went into its first series of lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, nearly half of the nation's arts workers were plunged into forced redundancy virtually overnight (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). As the virus continued to spread throughout the months that followed, lockdowns across the country were repeatedly extended. In a rare moment of unity, it seemed as though the whole spectrum of the arts sector—commercial, independent, and subsidised alike—was at a stand-still; each equally affected by prolonged venue closures, widespread event cancellations, and ever-shifting health restrictions (Fairley 2020).

This sectoral solidarity was soon fractured when the former Morrison Coalition government introduced their \$291 billion Covid-19 economic recovery plan (Frydenberg 2021). In contrast to the Rudd-Swan stimulus package delivered by the then-Labor government in the face of the 2008 global financial crisis, which distributed funds directly to the Australian public, the former Coalition government's plan provided funds directly to businesses reportedly affected by the pandemic (Pacella, Luckman, and O'Connor 2020). The centrepiece of this recovery package, the JobKeeper program, was a wage subsidy scheme administered to businesses to pay their employees. For the arts sector, this produced a troubling result. Independent and commercial arts companies were eligible for the subsidy and were able to keep their artists employed. Some of the subsidised major arts organisations were eligible, but due to the program's requirement for full time employment status, could only subsidise administrative and executive positions, as in the case of Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre (Flack 2020). Meanwhile, many subsidised artists—and not for the first time in the last decade—were left abruptly defunded (Eltham 2016, 1–2). The JobKeeper program was widely (and, in our view, rightly) criticised for its strict eligibility criteria that failed to recognise the kinds of irregular, precarious, or in-kind arrangements under which artists often work (Pacella, Luckman, and O'Connor 2020, 43–45; Williams, Lester, and Seivwright 2022). This

generated some modest public interest in support of the arts workers omitted from the program, prompting the government to establish a \$250 million dedicated arts recovery fund. But for those for whom subsidy provides a livelihood, or a lifeline for their art, the JobKeeper saga was another sorry illustration of what it is to work subject to shifting budgets, government priorities, and the whims of short-term funding programs. From relocating across the country to pursue funding opportunities, to precarious and prolonged underemployment, subsidised artists are well acquainted with the lived experience of what it is to make art contingent upon such volatile and unstable factors.

Before the country was ablaze in the summer that welcomed in 2020, before we knew what lay just beyond the horizon, arts workers in Melbourne had already spent their year scabbling together their scant resources to subsidise rebuilding the scorched site of Melbourne's iconic home of experimental theatre, La Mama, after an electrical fire had burned down the building (ArtsHub 2019). Many of these same artists were still recovering from what was dubbed "Black Friday" three years earlier: the Australia Council annual grants round that saw 65 subsidised arts organisations stripped of all funding (Carter 2016). This was a run-on effect of "the Brandis raid" in 2015, in which Arts Minister George Brandis diverted \$100 million of Australia Council federal funding to establish a horizontal arts funding body, the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (Eltham 2015; Meyrick and Barnett 2017). In their reflection on these years, Julian Meyrick and Tully Barnett put it mildly: "Even by the standards of a conflictual sector, this was a difficult time" (2017, 108). Four years later, Miriam Haughton's contemporaneous perspective captured the rising sense of urgency: "Covid-19 is not only a sectoral emergency, it's the *latest* sectoral emergency" (2021, 51).

Across the Pacific in Aotearoa New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was leading the country through the pandemic with a "politics of kindness", yet the subsidised arts sector struggled to sustain itself under the same imposed constraints (Mullen and Lythberg 2021). A retrospective appraisal of the achievements of the Arts, Culture, and Heritage portfolio under Minister Ardern observes that, much like the JobKeeper scheme, federal funds earmarked for arts and culture support overwhelmingly went to administrators (Wood 2023), with the \$175 million arts and culture emergency fund deemed inefficient and unsustainable against the extensive loss incurred throughout the pandemic (Wenley 2021). Just as we hit publish on this special issue, Creative New Zealand announced a new funding model that offers a form of "funding based around creation, not final production" (Big Idea Editor 2023). It remains to be seen whether this ambitious re-visioning of subsidy survives New Zealand's incoming centre-right Coalition government.

Feeling these difficulties acutely in late 2021, we found ourselves discussing the role of subsidy in what had proven to be an even more fragile sector than what we had suspected before the pandemic. As cultural academics and performance practitioners, for whom subsidy is either central to our research or enabling of our creative practice, we found ourselves regularly evoking the past as we talked through our reflections on

the present. It was a “new normal” with many familiar hallmarks (Watts 2020). At the same time, like so many, we were inspired by the creativity that persisted—in some cases, in spite of some of the longest lockdowns in the world. We marvelled at what artists could do with shoestring \$1000 grants. We celebrated the innovations; that performance was coming into the home; that it was accessible at a whole new level (Flore, Hendry, and Gaylor 2023; Main 2020). We were reminded of art’s essential role in our lives—though it is doubtful that we had ever quite forgotten it. More importantly, we were seeing this reflection was happening more broadly. The 2020 research summary from Creative New Zealand’s longitudinal study, “New Zealanders and the Arts: Attitudes, Attendance, and Participation”, found the population “more positive than ever about the vital role the arts play in our lives” (Creative NZ 2020, 8). During this moment of forced reflection, the editors of this special edition paused to consider the role of subsidy in the future sustainability of art-making. Inspired by the creative innovations offered by scholars and artists throughout this period, this special edition of *Performance Paradigm* is a consolidation of the historic reflections, critical responses, and imaginative speculations that emerged from this moment.

## Performance

Although the relationship between artists and subsidy is principally economic, we have resisted over-specifying this dynamic and reducing our view of subsidy to economic terms. As the articles in this special edition convey, subsidy operates as a complex of funding, bureaucratic function, and matriculation; as performance scholars, though, we also understand subsidy as an influential factor in *doing* and *making*. While authors in this special edition grapple with subsidy in its institutionalised and policy forms, the performance lenses of “dramaturgy” and “choreography” offered among these contributions remind us of the corporeal, embodied, and performative ways of *doing* subsidy. Several contributions to this special edition blend personal experience and practitioner expertise to offer insight into how subsidy enables and prohibits creative practice and the implications of this in a wider interrelated and interdependent arts ecology. Similarly, we recognise that subsidy has had diverse operations, effects, and outcomes in historically and geographically specific locations.

Avoiding ahistorical views of current funding models and sectoral discontent, this issue includes contributions that offer historic insights into subsidy in times and places beyond the present. Three retrospective articles examine arts subsidy from an historic vantage point, and illuminate significant moments in Australian arts policy that influenced subsequent arts funding paradigms. At the same time, and building from the lessons of the past, the final two articles offer forward-looking speculations as to how new approaches to subsidy might aid in a more sustainable sector, particularly through decentring the economistic register that currently determines subsidy paradigms. These articles take familiar structures and practice—arts evaluation frameworks and capitalist economies—and offer reimaginations of their logic and impact.

In “The Undoing of Australian Cultural Policy”, Julian Meyrick begins this issue with an exhaustive examination of a pivotal moment in Australian cultural policy: the 1976 publication of the *Assistance to the Performing Arts Report* by the federal government-appointed Industries Assistance Commission (IAC). The article conducts a prosopographical analysis of the IAC Commissioners responsible for the report in order to contextualise the social and intellectual milieu in which it was produced. In so doing, Meyrick lays bare the economic rationalist motivations of these individuals whose actions served to divest cultural practices of their inherent value, reducing them to economic and social impacts, and thus contributing to what he describes as “the cultural sector’s ailing and failing relationship with government over the last fifty years” (22).

Remaining with the structural influence of government policy settings on live performance subsidy, Izabella Nantsou then explores the release of Australia’s first federal cultural policy, *Creative Nation* (October 1994), and Victoria’s former state cultural policy, *Arts 21* (November 1994), in “Cultural Policy and the Integral State”. The article details the socio-political environment of economic recovery in which they emerged, resulting in artistic subsidy becoming “inextricably linked with neoliberal strategies of accumulation” (42). Drawing upon Antonio Gramsci’s theorisation of the “integral State”, Nantsou analyses these policies in order to demonstrate the way in which they have been “deployed to coerce the subsidised arts toward the imperatives of neoliberalism”—to the detriment of artists, and their practices.

The final historical perspective is offered by Gareth Belling in “Subsidy as a Choreographic Act”, which considers the emergence of The Australian Ballet (TAB) as a permanent national company, exploring how subsidy first “restricted, delayed, and eventually enabled” (60) the company’s emergence. In conceiving subsidy as a form of choreography—that is, as a force that enables some actions and not others—the article explores how the conditions imposed by subsidising organisation, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, served to constrain TAB’s performances, training, leadership, and artistic policies. Drawing upon interviews with dancers who danced for TAB between 1962 and 1975, Belling argues that the Trust was subsequently responsible not only for restricting the development of a distinctively Australian style of ballet, but also for impeding the repertoire, careers, and artistic practice of its dancers.

The issue then turns more fully to methodology, with a set of three papers that consider new approaches to tracing the effects of subsidy. In the first of these, “The Dramaturgy of Defunding”, Kathryn Kelly and Tessa Rixon introduce some preliminary findings and a methodological framework for an ongoing data analysis study tracing the defunding of Australian theatre organisations over the past five decades. Utilising Australia Council Annual Reports, the position paper seeks to pick the patterns of peer review funding decisions between 1975 and 2023. Combining their knowledge and experience as theatre practitioners with a dramaturgical sensibility, Kelly and Rixon assess this data through a dramaturgical lens in order to “illuminate the political and cultural impact of accreted peer review decision-making” (78).

Jane Woollard and Davina Wright turn our attention from defunded companies to unrealised phantom projects in “Rising and Falling”. The article reflects on their own experiences as directors and producers of independent theatre to explore what they call the “shadow side” of subsidy: not only the unpaid labour and in-kind support necessary to prepare funding applications for—and in many cases, *realise*—independent works, but also the “psychological labour of carrying (or abandoning) unfinished theatre projects” (88). Woollard and Wright interview a range of practitioners who, despite funding setbacks, have continued to make theatre, in order to understand how these artists reconcile funding failure within their practice, and how they “live with” those “phantom projects” that fail to receive the necessary funding.

Paying attention to who gets funded and where that subsidy eventually goes, Julie Holledge, Sean Weatherly, Alex Vickery-Howe, and Tiffany Knight then take us through the design and functionality of a new financial table in “AusStage Follows the Money”. For more than twenty years AusStage has been an invaluable resource for documenting Australia’s performing arts history. With new functionality, the database is now able to record financial data, making this “the first major Australian cultural dataset to store aesthetic and financial records in the same relational database” (106). Using the South Australian theatre sector as a case study, the article demonstrates how this new function might be used to support cultural researchers, and offers some distant observations as to how this economic data might be interpreted.

Through the final two articles, the issue offers two reimaginings of subsidy. In the first, “Careful and Curious”, Vahri McKenzie, Denise Thwaites, and Cathy Hope identify an inability in the quantitative evaluation processes currently employed by government arts funding bodies to “capture unforeseen insights that artists and communities may articulate through alternative forms of evaluation” (128). In response, the article sets out what the authors have termed a careful and curious evaluation framework: a creative approach that encourages artists and arts workers to appropriate existing methods of evaluation in order to support their own creative and community needs. They then relate their use of this framework in evaluating an industry-embedded project, outlining how their approach to gathering evaluation data produced evaluation artefacts that challenge existing understandings of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methodologies.

The issue closes with “Beyond Fantasy”, in which Molly Mullen, Mark Harvey, Jessie Anderson, and Elise Sterback argue that the failure of Aotearoa New Zealand’s current arts funding model can be attributed, not to the impact of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, but to the “Eurocentric and capitalocentric norms” (152) of the British arts council model upon which the system was established in 1963. Speaking from their own experiences as practitioners and researchers, the authors draw upon Gibson-Graham’s conceptualisation of diverse economies to consider global alternatives to arts funding, before presenting two speculative fabulations that—while seemingly fantastical—offer future alternatives to arts funding that are grounded in existing possibilities.

## Acquittal

As we put the finishing touches to this issue, the same day saw the election of the most right-wing government in Aotearoa New Zealand's recent history and the rejection of the Voice to Parliament referendum in Australia. Given the imbrication of politics, policy, and subsidy that this issue traces, these events will have immediate effects on the future of live performance subsidy in Australasia—but more broadly, they suggest that we might be collectively entering a new age of dis-remembering, where instead of re-entering or reimagining the past, we simply forget that it ever happened. We have confidence that performance will continue to resist this shortsightedness, but it is a luxury that subsidy can ill afford. For too long, we have asked the artists to do the dreaming: the time has come for new systems, and better subsidies.

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