

Funding the Arts: Sustaining Cultural Labour in the 21st Century

Sam Whiting

CRISIS

The arts reflect our values and identity. However, a changing economy has shifted the role of welfare, grants, philanthropy, and commercialisation in funding the labour of artists and creatives, increasing precarity. Following the pandemic, this precarity has resulted in many creatives leaving the sector, while more organised forms of creative labour are fighting back. The largest industrial dispute in the US since the 1990s is currently being led by Hollywood creatives. These creatives are at the pointy end of issues facing all workers. These include:

- Precarious labour and the gig economy,
- AI/automation replacing or grossly devaluing labour,
- Wages failing to keep up with inflation,
- And the challenges posed by digital disruption and streaming.

CHANGES

Meanwhile and somewhat in response to these crises, novel models of arts funding have arisen. In Australia, direct state support for the arts in the form of Jobkeeper, a temporary increase to Jobseeker, and other industry support funds—both state and federal—emerged during the peak pandemic years, reasserting the role of the state in keeping not only the arts and cultural industries but all industries afloat in a time of great crisis. In Ireland, the recent trial of a Basic Income for Artists has obvious implications for creatives. This is in addition to already progressive cultural policies and funding models in much of continental and northern Europe, particularly France.

Considering the challenges facing the creative arts and entertainment sectors in the post-COVID age, this paper will explore the opportunities and threats presented to these industries by this new political landscape, and will investigate preliminary findings and results from the current Basic Income for Artists being trialled in Ireland, as well as established funding mechanisms like the French Intermittence Du Spectacle and more generalised basic incomes trials such as the youth basic income in Korea, to provide insights into these initiatives and their application.

CASE STUDIES

BASIC INCOME FOR ARTISTS - Ireland

CONTEXT

The Republic of Ireland has recently instituted a new scheme to provide three years of support to 2,000 individual artists, piloting a form of basic income. While this does not meet the criteria of “universal basic income”, it does provide an opportunity to consider what artists are capable of when they are financially resourced simply for being artists.

Eligibility for the scheme relied on meeting 2 out of the 3 following conditions:

- Have previously earned an income from the arts,
- Have an existing body of work and/or
- Be a members of a recognised arts body, such as a trade union or professional association.

Such conditions allowed for both emergent, established, and late-career artists to apply for the scheme, as the 2 out of 3 conditions allowed some wriggle room in the eligibility criteria.

Out of approximately 8200 eligible applicants, 2000 were selected by lot, which allows for a genuine representation of the artistic community in Ireland. A further 1000 eligible applicants were selected as a control group to measure the outcomes against.

Successful recipients are now receiving a weekly income of €325 (KRW456,237) and can earn additional money without this basic income being affected. Although this is slightly less than the current minimum wage in Ireland, it provides a substantial financial floor for artists and cultural workers. Beyond the eligibility barriers, the trial fulfills most other components of a basic income. However, recipients have cited a substantial level of reporting, which would be considered conditional.

The proposed benefits of the scheme include:

- Novelty: A bespoke BI scheme specific to artists addresses their relative lack of bargaining power and reduced ability to advocate for fair wages and conditions due to both the atomised nature of creative labour and the excavating of the welfare state beyond that.
- Decentralisation: Unlike most arts fundings schemes, such as bursaries or grants, the BIA is largely decentralised, providing artists with autonomy and a greater degree of agency.
- Medium-term: The three years of guaranteed funding is enough time to have a significant effect on financial planning and security.

- **Publicity:** It generates discourse and puts basic income into the public eye.
- **Time:** The relative lack of conditionality allows artists time to ruminate, reflect and revise their work processes. Interestingly, anecdotal evidence has revealed an increase in applications to the major Irish Arts Council bursary grants and other funding initiatives during the first phase of the Basic Income trial. This indicates many interested artists may not have had the time to apply for such grants previously, and that the BIA and the time release associated with receiving it has improved equality of opportunity for more conditional funding.
- **Hardship:** Receiving the BI reduced the impact of hardship caused by issues such as evictions, which have increased due to the housing crisis in Ireland.
- **Solidarity:** Artists in receipt of the BI can show greater solidarity or advocate more readily against bad in employers on behalf of precarious artists. This may have a broader empowering effect across the Irish artistic community, improving advocacy for artists as workers. Certainly, control group participants have been quick to emphasise that stress due to the lack of time available to them reduces their ability to build solidarities and participate in collectivist activities.

Following the initial phase of the trial, recipients have stated several potential weaknesses or drawbacks:

- **Conditionality:** Despite its proposed lack of conditionality, initial descriptions of the reporting processes for recipients seem administratively burdensome and add an accounting element to the workload of recipients that has made them more self-conscious. On a BIEN Arts Lab seminar, recipient Alisha stated that she felt self-conscious about evaluations and began questioning “How much leisure time am I allowed to have?”
- **Exclusions:** Interestingly, craft and artisanal workers were excluded from the program.
- **Monitoring:** Involving detailed reporting on recipients’ finances, work patterns and wellbeing, which may have a negative effect on recipients’ experience of the program.
- **Pressure:** Some recipients stated that they felt an increased pressure to perform, understanding that they were being surveilled and that the results of the trial would influence future policy decisions.
- **Secrecy:** Due to the selective and limited nature of the trial, artists are reticent to disclose whether they are receiving the BIA and are self-conscious about their privileged status as recipients. A New York Times article reported that they had had a difficult time finding recipients willing to speak to the press.

This combination of pressure and secrecy has resulted in a perceived social responsibility to produce more work, which can be framed as both a positive and a negative. I have noticed that there is a general unwillingness to talk about finances and its effect on recipients' wellbeing, which is both common to artists (who feel a lot of guilt around this due to cultural stigma) but also, without wanting to stereotype, the Irish as well, who are generally humble and greatly dislike big-noting. That's anecdotal, but certainly something I've observed.

Finally, there is also the legitimating factor of the government having deemed a recipient a capital "A" artist that might be met with either discomfort or pride depending on the recipient's attitude.

Concluding remarks

The Basic Income for Artists trial is being heavily monitored by Irish policymakers and researchers, and I am very much looking forward to getting my hands on that data once it is released. Until then, we only have largely anecdotal accounts to draw on. The length of the trial has given recipients financial security and the ability to plan more effectively. A number have stated that if it weren't for the basic income, they may have abandoned their artistic practice as a professional pursuit. There is also a reported sense of urgency and social responsibility; a pressure to make the most out of the experience. However, this has come with a level of anxiety that these artists might not have experienced otherwise. Evidently, conditionality and other limitations remain a key barrier to discerning the effectiveness of this basic income scheme.

INTERMITTANCE DU SPECTACLE - France

CONTEXT

The Intermittents Du Spectacle or IdS is a French unemployment insurance stipend that applies to performers and other audio-visual workers that declare at least 507 hours of activity over a 12-month period. Such declarations are made by employers and are counted differently per activity, for example one performance by a musician counts for around 12 hours' work.

Created in the 1930's to subsidise film industry workers alternating between short-term contracts and periods of unemployment, the Intermittents du Spectacle was expanded to cover a variety of cultural workers in the 1960s, and guarantees a government-subsidized stipend. Like compulsory superannuation in Australia or other employer-dependent pension schemes elsewhere, whenever creative workers are engaged for work, they and their employers are obliged to pay social contributions into the scheme, known as 'declarations'. Workers can then claim a basic income

designed to compensate for periods between jobs. “IdS therefore protects against the uncertainty of project-based employment, but may also subsidize perpetual underemployment in certain environments (Menger 2012)

Although the scheme has been under attack by successive neoliberal governments in France, it still presents a gold standard in how to support working artists. However, such a policy requires political consensus around the provision of culture as a public good, alongside health and education. And unlike a Basic Income for Artists, the Intermittents du Spectacle is administratively burdensome and prone to abuse by both workers and employers.

Pros

- **Established policy:** The IdS is a point of national pride for the French, and given its almost 100-year history, serves an important role in promoting the role of culture in shaping national identity, as well as the status of artists and performers as workers worthy of ongoing public support. Any changes or threats to the scheme therefore come at a great political cost.
- **Centralisation:** The centralised nature of the scheme means that there is a great deal of oversight and therefore a greater ability to research and evaluate outcomes. However, this also heavily politicises the IdS.
- **Solidarity/Mutual Aid:** There is a cultural practice observed among artists’ who have met their minimum number of hours sharing additional hours with their peers. This is particularly evident among musicians.
- **Creative Autonomy:** Receiving IdS payments affords creatives opportunities to specialize in particular artistic niches, minimizing the reliance of artists’ on commercial work. (Umney, p. 722)
- **Reduced precarity:** The IdS means that creative work is much more feasible as a career, as the state is underwriting much of the risk usually associated.

Cons

- **Interventionist:** Many French artists see the IdS as an intolerable level of state intervention into their artistic practice, and many are suspect or sceptical of it.
- **Corruption:** Like compulsory superannuation in Australia, many employers and workers undermine the scheme by forgoing declarations for greater pay up front. This is commonly

referred to as 'black' work – informal engagements that are not 'declared' and where social charges are not paid.

- Circumstantial: The IdS system exerts different pressures on different people, reflecting their own circumstances and priorities. This obstructs the emergence of greater solidarity.
- Atomisation/Individualisation: More collectivist minded recipients stated that, far from providing a collective platform, IdS assigns a highly personalized set of decisions to every individual: 'the pernicious effects of intermittence is that it has atomized everyone, all artists: everyone for his or her own dossier'. P. 723
- Commercialism vs creative integrity: Declared work is more likely to be commercial in nature, and therefore many performers see the obligation to do this kind of work as a threat to their artistic integrity. The association of 'declarations' with commercial work serves to stigmatize IdS status in the eyes of participants. Some are hostile to it, dismissing it as 'institutionalized' art supported through public subsidy. However, many artists outside of France would deem this attitude as ungrateful, and perhaps rightly so.

Overall, the most significant finding from research on the IdS relevant to a discussion of Basic Income for Artists is that *"Efforts to impose material regulation on the creatives labour market are rejected if they interfere with creatives own individual decisions"*. Creative autonomy is seen as sacrosanct, so the capacity for IdS to either materially support or institute obligations that interfere with creative autonomy shape recipients' attitudes towards the scheme. A BIA largely alleviates this problem, due to its lack of mutual obligations.

YOUTH BASIC INCOME - Korea

CONTEXT

Although I have been unable to find research specifically on creatives that might have received a basic income as part of the Gyeonggi Youth Basic Income (GYBI) trial, broader research findings from the scheme can be elaborated upon to include artists and creatives.

For context, eligibility for the Gyeonggi Youth Basic Income was limited to participants that were 24 years old as of the trial's institution in April 2019 (born in 1995-1995) and were living in Gyeonggi-do Province. Recipients received (1 million Korean Won) a year.

Pros

- Age: 24 is an ideal age to explore the effects of a Basic Income for Artists, as it represents a post-University, pre-family stage of life wherein expectations are beginning to conflict with opportunities.
- Broader cultural policy agenda: A Basic Income for Artists in Korea would suit the country's broader cultural policy agenda, which has poured a great deal of resources into the arts generally, but popular music, film, and TV specifically. Although this policy agenda has been delivered by institutions, a basic income for artists may improve the broader cultural infrastructure of the country to improve long-term results, as the current industrial concentration of this development leaves it open to risk.
- "Dream capital": Improvements in recipients' dream capital—conceptualized as an individual's total capacity for imagination, hope, optimism and resilience, feed directly into creativity and cultural labour. That an improvement in recipient's dream capital was documented as part of the trial research is a positive sign for its impact on creatives.

Cons

- Limited: As with the previous trials, the limitations of this trial make it difficult to extrapolate findings.
- Under investigated: The impact of the GYBI on artists and creatives requires further investigation.
- Tiny amount of money: Unlike the Irish BIA, the 1 million won GYBI recipients receive annually is nowhere near a living wage and is 1/23rd the scale of the BIA in terms of weekly payments. There is a reasonable argument then that the GYBI is almost negligible in its impact on cost of living and choices associated.

CONCLUSIONS

A political economy approach to cultural funding is necessary in discussions of a BIA, as public support for the arts is often a question of national priorities and identity. For the Irish and certainly the French, supporting working artists is about elevating the cultural status of those countries by treating art as a public good and funding it accordingly. Such cultural and political differences make it difficult to contrast and compare such schemes effectively, as each are very much a product of national values. A more helpful investigation of Basic Income for Artists might be to compare the BIA and IdS against welfare schemes utilised by artists to subsidize their creative practice, as the role of bargaining power and the way funding schemes might improve artist' bargaining power is observably the most significant economy wide implication of a Basic Income for Artists.