

**'GOLD COIN SERIES/SPEECHES:
I'LL BUY THAT FOR A DOLLAR'
CRITICAL RESPONSE BY MEGAN SPENCER**



There can't be too many jobs or professions in our society, where it is such a difficult task to put a dollar value on the work of that job or profession. Excepting of course, if you happen to earn your income – or attempt to – as an artist.

How much is an artist worth per hour? How much is their work (let's call it 'art') worth? And can we all agree on what figure this should be, this 'monetary value'?

Furthermore, what 'award system' does the artist belong to, if any? What standards or professional guidelines are in place - for both the employer and the employed - to follow, when it comes to paying an artist, and the artist getting paid? There don't really seem to be any.

This age old question is what I fathomed to be fundamental to Paul Gazzola's Seedpod, 'Gold Coin Series/Speeches/Shop'. Gazzola gave the first of what he intends to develop into a series of 'speeches', and perhaps even a working paper, to be presented to the board of the Australia Council, the highest government body in the land set up to support Australia's various arts 'industries'.

(The supposition being of course that the members of said Board would a/ want to listen, and b/ Paul is able to wade through the miles of 'red tape' in order to deliver it. Good luck!)

The premise is so deliciously innocent that it just might work. Like the saying goes, "God (read luck) is with the dumb, the young (read innocent) and the drunk." I'm putting Gazzola in the 'innocent' category, a person approaching this goal "free from sin, moral wrong, or guilt through lack of knowledge of evil." (One of the definitions of 'innocence' you'll find in an online dictionary.)

Shop/Speech

The White Space at Punctum was divvied up into two, half set up as an installation entitled 'Shop', the other set for a talk, entitled 'Speech' – their titles were both spelled out in \$1 gold coins on the white floor.

The purpose of 'Shop' was to display a range of objects that Gazzola purchased from Castlemaine shops for a dollar each, and to display them with their receipts (proving their value), on the floor for us to view and then, "agree on their worth". (Personally I would have paid five dollars for the Bill Cosby record - Gazzola scored himself a bargain with that one!) We could also buy any of these objects by making him an offer.

Secondly, Gazzola stood at the lectern, introduced his speech entitled 'Economy, Art and the Power of Words To Change The World'. This was Speech #1, a "work in progress", where at the end of it Paul invited the audience to give him feedback, for which he would then issue us each a receipt for our time, once we agreed on how much our time was worth. (ie. 'Shop' meets 'Speech'.)

The 'Shop' installation and the receipt issued at the end were illustrative of the ideas contained in Paul's speech, the subject of which was oppositional, artists and society being *unable* to agree upon how much an artist's time and work is worth.

"Speech' in this first incarnation, revealed to well-researched and considered. It was academic in parts, dense with ideas and arguments – as it needed to be – and for the most part, delivered well. (Gazzola had a cold and perhaps was off his 'performance' game a little, when it came to getting into a good rhythm with the words.) It was playful at times, and overall, compelling. (I just couldn't hear it very well; the room's acoustics were prohibitive, which is problematic with a speech such as this, which requires a fair bit of focus to comprehend.)

If this was, as Paul intimated, a kind 'rehearsal' for a 'state of the nation' speech to a boardroom full of 'suits', then Paul's straight, 'state of the nation'-style address was fitting. (Making it 'quirky' or 'more performed' would be inappropriate for that kind of 'audience', and could be potentially damaging to the intended outcome.)

Back to the speech and its 'age of innocence'... In the text Gazzola made it clear that while he was perturbed that there is such little representation of artists on the OzCo Board, he would happily take it upon himself to be that "voice", in order to redress the imbalance.

And that this might present an opportunity for the Board members to learn first hand, something tangible about the conundrums of being an artist, in an economy that de-values art and values artists little – let's make it plain; a society that expects artists to *work for free*.

Invoking the words of English philosopher Bertrand Russell often throughout 'Gold Coin Speech No. 1' – made up of numbered sections and subsections – Gazzola pointed to the fact that historically, without artists and their work, society would find it very difficult to evolve. Moreover, by taking care of this kind of indefinable, elusive work, they therefore possess intrinsic 'capital'.

He and Russell argue that historically, it is artists sitting outside society and its systems who do the hard work of evolving it. It is artists who do the work of juxtaposing 'the impossible' to make 'breakthroughs' possible: eg the ephemeral and the aesthetic with the practical and the industrial; art with science; philosophy with engineering... In other words, were it not for these weirdo outcasts, social misfits, right-brain thinking folk, who dwell on society's margins, 'the centre' would collapse and all would be lost.

Thankfully, in his 'speech', Gazzola was not positing the artist as 'martyr' or 'victim', nor was he being romantic about the fringe-dwelling position of the artist in our capitalist/industrialist economy. He was being practical. And he wasn't crying poor either.

What he was doing was crying 'foul'. Why is it can't we put "a dollar value" on the work artists do? Ergo, if we don't, then are we endangering the 'greater good', ie evolution of society? ('Without you I'm nothing'); it seemed that Gazzola was asserting the relationship artists have with society, economy and culture is *inter-dependent*, not co-dependent. And if that is the case then it must be addressed or we are squandering a great resource – or 'capital', as Russell would have it.

What's next?

A practicing inter-disciplinary artist for many years, who works throughout Australia and overseas, Paul puts his money (or lack thereof) where his mouth is. His 'day job' is 'artist' on any form he fills in.

In 'Speech', Gazzola invites the artist to take as much responsibility for the state of affairs he outlines as he does members of the OzCo Board. This draft was delivered seriously but without hubris; it was constructive and critical (not cynical), and refreshingly, not blameful or finger-pointing. Paul is here to help; Paul is here to ask us all to pull our fingers out – artists and civilians alike – to work towards solving a problem that has plagued artists since time immemorial. I look forward to seeing where he will take his 'words' once he develops the arguments even further.

Gazzola is asking us all – including the Australia Council – to define the role of the artist and their work (let's call it 'art'), in society. And then to put a value on it, so artists can keep doing work that benefits all, as we would a scientist, cleaner, public servant or a plumber.

Get a publicist! Do a Ted Talk, Make it go viral! Armed with a sense of possibility and without the toxicity of righteousness, Gazzola might just take this important argument to the top.