

Creatives, Communities & Economies

RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

Acknowledgment of Country

RMIT PlaceLab acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

RMIT PlaceLab respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present, as the original and continuing Makers of Place.

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RMIT PlaceLab initiative

RMIT PlaceLab is a new urban initiative connecting community, shaping place and taking a radically different approach to research.

Designed to free research from the campus and bring researchers street-side to connect with local government and groups, RMIT PlaceLab facilitates site-based research to support the co-creation of new ideas, partnerships, and systems that grow positive community impact.

Dynamic, actionable and accessible, RMIT PlaceLab research projects are bite-size and community-engaged, generating insights, ideas and solutions that can be implemented together with our government and place-making partners.

Creatives, Communities & Economies Research Project

Key research themes and issues:

1. Social Enterprise & Humanitarian
2. Creativity & Design Thinking; and
3. Commercial, Creative & Cultural Value Creation & Capture,

The above key research themes and issues, all important to the RMIT PlaceLab initiative, led to the collaborative project **Creatives, Communities & Economies** with academics from RMIT's School of Art including Associate Professor Grace McQuilten, Associate Professor Marnie Badham, Dr Alison Bennett and Dr Alan Hill.

Creatives, Communities & Economies is an exploration of how creative practitioners are responding to the ongoing challenges facing the arts through hybrid and digital approaches. It explores what working life for creatives is like in Brunswick, and how creative practices might evolve sustainably beyond existing economic and social models. This includes new methods for artists working in community contexts, new working models for photographers, and how creative social enterprises activate communities, artists and economies for social change.

The research recognises the economic crisis facing the arts nationally and locally, in key creative districts such as Brunswick, while federal, state and local governments have positioned new forms of economic sustainability as a priority. **Creatives, Communities & Economies** tests new models of economic organising and showcases emerging research in this field relevant and applicable to the local creative community of Brunswick.

Artist-researchers

Varuni Kanagasundara, Jody Haines and Channon Goodwin.

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The role of the artist and photographer has become hybridised, digitised, and increasingly responsive – activating public space, documenting our times, and innovating for the future of work. We know there is an ongoing crisis facing the arts nationally and locally – new and radical strategies for economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability are a priority across government, arts organisations; and the subject of our research. **Creatives, Communities, & Economies (CCE)** is an exploration of how creative practitioners are responding to the ongoing challenges facing the arts through hybrid and digital approaches.

The CCE Research Project asked a range of interrelated questions:

- **What does work life look like for creatives in Brunswick/Merri-bek?**
- **How can creative practices evolve sustainably beyond existing economic and social models?**
- **What new artistic research methods do creatives use to gain insight into community and place?**

The CCE Research Project proposed a range of activities including workshops; interviews with local creative entrepreneurs, artists and photographers; and collaborative art making with local residents and community partners. A series of experimental and collaborative arts projects were proposed to engage practitioners, students, and the local community in real-world issues. This included gaining insight into how creative enterprises activate communities, artists, and social economies; what the new working models for photographers are; and exploring creative and experimental social art methods for artists working in community contexts. The CCE research proposed to share engagement and learnings through creative workshops, publication, and art installations.

The Research Project focused on four phases of inquiry:

Artist-Researcher Residencies (Led by Associate Professor Marnie Badham)

The first phase of inquiry explored the ways in which artists engage with, facilitate and activate communities, with a place-based focus in Merri-bek. The project engaged three RMIT HDR (higher degree by research) artist-researchers, Varuni Kanagasundaram, Jody Haines and Channon Goodwin, in separate socially-engaged arts projects based out of RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick. These artist-researchers each tested and reflected on their individual place-based methods, exploring the themes of

- **Thresholds:** material-based installation using textiles, clay and found materials through community art workshops by Varuni Kanagasundaram commencing in September;
- **Creative Sites of Resistance:** imagined futures: relational photographic and public artwork making from Jody Haines in October; and
- **Common Knowledge:** a dialogic arts practice via interview/yarning with Channon Goodwin commencing in December.

The Working Photographer (Led by Dr Alison Bennett)

The recent closure of Australian photography institutions indicates that there are fundamental changes taking place in the ecology of the industry [AIPP, IDEA, Michaels Camera Store]. Since the introduction of the smart phone in 2007, the growth of the internet and the diffusion of photography with ubiquitous computing, the ecology for the photographic image has fundamentally reshaped. The economic drivers on which a commercial photography practice was based in the 20th century have reformed in new, and sometimes unforeseen, ways. For example, the 21st century has seen the emergence of ubiquitous photography. In 2014, Mary Meeker estimated 1.8 billion photographs are uploaded every day, rising exponentially since 2007. In an era when everyone produces photographs, what economic opportunities exist for professional working photographers? This second phase of inquiry examined the experiences of independent photographers in Merri-bek through qualitative interviews and business model analysis.

Creative Social Enterprise (CSE) (Led by Associate Professor Grace McQuilten)

The third phase of inquiry explored the development of new economic models in the creative industries, with a specific focus on the model of social enterprise – as a response to the challenging economic and social context of the creative industries. Social enterprise offers a model of operating that brings together financial goals with non-economic values, including the pursuit of social and environmental goals. At a time in which the creative industries have been rocked by global crises – from the COVID-19 pandemic to global market fluctuations and ecological change – creatives are looking at strategies to adapt and forge more hopeful and secure futures. This part of the research mapped the emergence of the model of creative social enterprise in the inner north of Melbourne; and then undertook qualitative research with a group of creative social entrepreneurs to understand both the opportunities, and challenges, of the CSE model. This part of the research focused on practical support and tools that could foster the development of the sector.

Doing Visual Politics (Led by Dr Alan Hill)

The final phase of inquiry, *Doing Visual Politics: Creative Practice as Civil Action*, turned towards the question of how emerging creatives come to understand their role in the production of visual culture – both locally and globally. Working with creative students in Australia, Nepal and Bangladesh, the project enabled inter-cultural creative exploration to foster connections between creative practice, civil action, and practices of democracy. It asked the central question: How are creatives implicated in, and navigating, ethical issues of visual representation? The project supported the development of a model of studio education where student-led inquiry is driven by critical engagement with artist mentors and local communities and contexts.

Together, the four phases of the project have enabled insight into the ways in which creatives in Brunswick/Merri-bek are supporting new forms of community, collaboration and entrepreneurship: while simultaneously transforming and challenging conventional ways of working, with a particular focus on championing values of social justice and sustainability.

The CCE Research Project unfolded through four distinct phases of inquiry introduced above; (1) Artist-Researcher Residencies; (2) The Working Photographer; (3) Creative Social Enterprise; and (4) Doing Visual Politics.

Each phase had different research questions and methodologies. The overarching methodology was qualitative, community-engaged research drawing on creative practice methods. We applied for and received ethics approval to conduct workshops and interviews and to use creative practice methods as part of the artist-researcher residencies. Together, the research paints a picture of the complexity, significance, disruptions and opportunities for the creative industries in Merri-bek.

Outlined below are the specific methodologies for each phase of RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick's CCE Research Project:

3.1 Artist-Researcher Residencies

The artist-researcher residencies for CCE brought together diverse socially-engaged art practices with residencies in a place-based context to focus on creative engagement with the community. The artist-researcher residencies focused on the social as method and centring the values of relationality and care. Before we commenced the residencies, we brought together the artist-researchers and RMIT PlaceLab stakeholders to first socialise ideas, while identifying urgent concerns, local priorities, and interests. This included:

- **Community mapping:** sites of loss, sites of creativity, and sites of creative potential. An initial group mapping workshop was undertaken before the residencies, with stakeholders including CCE academics, RMIT HDR students, RMIT PlaceLab staff and Merri-bek local government representatives from the areas of Arts and Culture, and the Brunswick Design District (BDD). This scoping process was a way to hear and think through local priorities and concerns from the arts community, through dialogue and visualisation.
- **Residencies:** Following the initial community mapping session, we embarked on three different artist-researcher residencies.

Residency 1. Thresholds by Varuni Kanagasundaram (commenced in September)

This residency asked the questions: How do we experience transience and uncertainty in a world that has conditioned us for certainty and control? How do we engage with the unfamiliar and what do we notice? The creative project aimed to capture how the community is responding to current times of uncertainty, the inequities in society being exposed locally and globally; and what gives meaning as a diverse community to notice the experience of others. The concept of the Threshold Crossings creatively explored transformation at thresholds through materiality and gesture, responding to what occurs in our daily surroundings. In Varuni's creative practice and current PhD research, she uses locally sourced clay, transformed into paint, to draw onto bark. This evokes the ritual and cultural practices of women from South Asia, who decorate the thresholds of their home each day. Traditionally, the threshold drawings signify events happening in the household that day.

Residency 2. Creative Sites of Resistance: imagined futures by Jody Haines (October)

Creative Sites of Resistance: imagined futures was a new collaborative project by artist-researcher Jody Haines. The social portrait project for women, by women*, was created during Jody's time as an artist-researcher-in-residence at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick.

*Female-identifying, trans and non-binary persons.



Creative Sites of Resistance process, Jody Haines, RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick, November 2022.

Creative Sites of Resistance recognises a significant and persistent problem in the way that women are visually represented in our public spaces. *Creative Sites of Resistance* aimed to shift the current visual narrative through collaborative portraiture. It was a project by women, with women, made for use in public space. The project challenged the typical experience of having your portrait taken, where time can be rushed, and the photographer can dominate through giving directions. Even the language of photography – shooting, capturing, and taking – is reconsidered. These forceful, even violent, words are replaced with making to describe a collaborative approach. The portraits for *Creatives Sites of Resistance* were each made during a 2.5 hour, informal, participatory and social session. Together with Jody, the participants explored how they experience resistance and connection, and still dream of radical possibilities. Questions raised in the conversations considered gender equality, feminism, and how each woman would like to see themselves in a portrait.

Residency 3. Common Knowledge by Channon Goodwin (commenced in December)

The goal of *Common Knowledge* was to create a new “knowledge commons” in the form of a series of interviews and field recordings, which resulted in a listening station at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick and a map that acts as an accessible aggregation tool, linking together the stories, creative practices, small-businesses and collectivist initiatives of community members across diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Our neighbourhoods represent complex creative ecologies with distinct character, values and economies. Communities consist of dynamic clusters of cultural groups, distinct architectural legacies, and contemporary waves of development and gentrification. Through this series of interviews with artists and arts organisations across Merri-bek and with companion field recordings of the environment in which each subject is located, we located bespoke knowledge and represent a community’s tangible and intangible, creative and civic assets.

3.2 The Working Photographer

This phase of inquiry utilised semi-structured interviews to investigate current and emerging business models that describe the working life of a selection of client-centred photographers based in Merri-bek.

The interviews included the following open-ended questions:

- **Tell me about your career since you graduated.**
- **How have you generated income streams?**
- **How has the rise of digital technologies, media and cultures shaped your practice?**
- **How do conversations about ethics come up with clients?**
- **What do you imagine is the future of photography?**

Responses were mapped against the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder 2005). Six photographers were interviewed in the second half of 2022 and one in early 2023. Qualitative analysis of the interview data will be developed into an accompanying document alongside this overall research project report.

3.3 Creative Social Enterprise

The objective of this phase of inquiry was to illuminate some of the developments happening in the inner north of Melbourne and in the Merri-bek community, around creative social enterprise (CSE), and to acknowledge the challenges of the last few years with the COVID-19 pandemic. The research responded to four research questions:

- **How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact creative social enterprises (CSEs) in Merri-bek and the inner north of Melbourne?**
- **What are the challenges of operating CSEs, that may be hard to articulate to funders and stakeholders?**
- **What are the specific marketing challenges and opportunities for CSEs?**
- **What are the opportunities to support and develop the sector?**

This part of the project was undertaken in the following four stages:

Stage 1: Mapping the CSE sector

An initial mapping took place that involved desktop research and consultation with key stakeholders, including Merri-bek City Council, Social Traders Victoria and local philanthropic organisations supporting CSEs.

Stage 2: Identifying key CSEs

We identified a list of CSEs operating in Brunswick and the inner north of Melbourne (see Appendix 1).

Stage 3: Focus group

Data was collected via participation in a focus group comprising of four social enterprises operating within Melbourne's creative industries. The aim was to understand key challenges and opportunities for CSEs.

Participants Name	Social Enterprise Name	Location	Creative Industry
Nick	Etiko	Brunswick/Merri-bek	Fashion/ Footwear
David	Go Kindly	Brunswick/Merri-bek	Bedding/ Bed Linen
Jennifer	Second Stitch	Brunswick/Merri-bek	Fashion/ Textiles
Max	The Paper Joint	Brunswick/Merri-bek	Art Workshop/ Gallery

Stage 4: Analysis and dissemination of findings

Analysis of the focus group has been developed into an accompanying industry report for sharing with Merri-bek City Council and other project partners. In addition, a graphic illustration was developed live by a graphic recorder, that distilled the key points that emerged during the focus group.

3.4 Doing Visual Politics

The New Colombo Plan funded intensive program Doing Visual Politics: Creative Practice as Civil Action took place at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick from 5th-19th December 2022. This phase of inquiry saw an interdisciplinary group of nine RMIT students collaborating with lecturers, mentors, RMIT PlaceLab Research Assistants and the local community, as well as peers and mentors in Nepal and Bangladesh. A public exhibition of the resulting creative outcomes including a booklet – ‘Learning Merri-bek: Fragments of Connection’ – was held at RMIT PlaceLab’s Brunswick Research Studio from 19th December 2022 to 13th January 2023.

A second stage of research activity will involve interviews and focus group methodology exploring the lived experience of lecturers, students, and mentors as they engage in a range of activities and learn from the different contexts in which they work and study. Focus groups are being conducted with students to enable relational and shared knowledge creation, and individual interviews will be conducted with academic staff and mentors to enable deeper reflection. The outcomes of this second stage of research activity will be published in the future.

4.1 Artist-Researcher Residencies

While the experimental short-term residencies were only a small dip into engagement in Brunswick/Merri-bek, the emergent findings from this phase of inquiry have two primary streams of interest. The first, is an expanded understanding of knowing 'place', while the other focused on methodological articulation. This is currently being unpacked via an article co-written with the project's artist-researchers in residence, to accompany the project's overall report.

Community Mapping

The community mapping workshop identified three key elements of interest in Brunswick/Merri-bek: sites of loss, sites of creativity, and sites of creative potential. Alongside broader RMIT PlaceLab engagement, the maps were used in other elements of the **Creatives, Communities & Economies** Research Project, including Channon Goodwin's Common Knowledge residency and Dr Alan Hill's Doing Visual Politics student intensive program. While only a workshop of a few hours, this community mapping process enabled deeper clarity for the artist-researcher team to confidently approach the residencies with expanded notions of place.

Residency 1 Findings. Thresholds by Varuni Kanagasundaram

The community art workshop, undertaken with local Brunswick residents at Shrivings Day Centre in Brunswick, was based on Varuni Kanagasundaram's creative practice and current PhD research, incorporating material-based installation using textiles, clay and found materials. During the workshop, Varuni invited people to respond to how they felt about Shrivings as a place and how they were feeling. This prompt encouraged many responses about connections to each other, as well as thinking about the importance of home. This pilot residency has led to further engagement of the artist with the residents.



The workshop in progress at Shrivings Day Centre, Brunswick, led by Varuni Kanagasundaram, October 2022.

Residency 2 Findings. Creative Sites of Resistance: imagined futures by Jody Haines

The final portraits were created and printed with different colour filters to represent personal associations with connection and resistance. A short film of vox pop responses complemented the portraits, with an accompaniment of birdsong and the sounds of creek. Although the outcomes were treasured by the participants, it was the process that made this project particularly meaningful.



The Process and Outcomes, Jody Haines, RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick, November 2022.

The findings from Creative Sites of Resistance included reflections on place in a less didactic form. Place was interpreted as 'site' which explored individual concepts of 'resistance' and change, which for each participant, were very personal

Residency 3 Findings. Common Knowledge by Channon Goodwin

The conversations that arose in the residency Common Knowledge responded to the concept of "the commons", which refers to a wide range of resources, systems and situations, such as civic infrastructure and cultural works, as well as various models of resource-sharing. The resulting recordings that make up the Common Knowledge project begin to remap the creative arts ecology in Merri-bek by forming a mappable index of the commoning practices (the activation of common resources through community action and governance) of community members.



Common Knowledge's Listening Station at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick, December 2022. Image: Channon Goodwin



Common Knowledge's Interview with Aaron Billings at Pink Ember Studio. Image: Channon Goodwin.

Commoning in Merri-bek happens in official and unofficial ways. Organisations, physical sites and properties, and public projects are official ways that creatives organise and share resources. However, much of the commoning activity in Merri-bek remains 'off the radar', resisting formalisation and focused on peer sharing and gathering.

Residency Series Findings: New social ways of thinking about place

The creative experimentations with community were proposed as a meditation on place and the 'hyper local'. Each artist-researcher had a unique methodology and research question to test and deepen. Varuni was interested in making work about 'thresholds' to think about place and change through both physical (e.g., doorways in domestic settings or movements through migration), and symbolic (e.g., mindsets shifting through age, gender etc.) through public engagement and community workshops with a local housing estate. Jody's work focused on 'creative sites of resistance' and 'imagined futures' through yarning with her local collaborators, while Channon interviewed Brunswick-based artists and arts workers about "the commons" (what local resources are shared and how these are managed).

Instead of collecting quantitative or even qualitative empirical data about the neighbourhood, this expanded and more metaphorical rumination on place emerged and elicited powerful narratives about identity, care, connection and local culture in the neighbourhood. Following the isolation and disruption of COVID-19 for creatives, communities and economies in Merri-bek, the artist-researchers reported that this approach to more intimate engagement was welcomed by their collaborators.

4.2 The Working Photographer

Emergent findings from this phase of inquiry suggest significant shifts in photographic business models have occurred in response to transformations in photography specifically and through developments in the creative industries more broadly. Interim analysis of the interviews undertaken confirmed that all the photographers interviewed have had their business models significantly shaped by the context of online image culture, the growth of social media and the impact of mobile phone camera technology.

Perhaps the most striking finding was that 83% of the respondents derived some income from providing consultancy to CGI (computer-generated imagery) companies to advise on how to make computer-generated images look more photographic, primarily for real-estate developers. The photographers were not employed to take photographs but rather employed for their expertise in visual photographic language.

One Merri-bek business, interviewed as part of The Working Photographer, is specifically finding new and/or alternative opportunities in the market that have arisen from the changes to the image economy of the 21st Century – namely the reduction in the mainstream market for photographic film. Film is no longer widely produced and distributed, with the closure of the Kodak Factory in Coburg being just one example of this decline. However, there is still a demand from some commercial photographers, as well as hobbyists, who are interested in photography as a craft. To meet this need, the interview respondent now provides a business service that repackages cinematic film for use in still photographic cameras.

4.3 Creative Social Enterprise

The findings emerging respond to the research questions that underpinned this phase of inquiry and, as a result, focus on four themes:

- The Pandemic;
- Cone of Silence (things you would like to say but cannot): The Challenges;
- Marketing; and
- Opportunities and Interventions.



Graphic Recording from the Creative Social Enterprise workshop at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick. Image: Zahra Zainal.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The issue of the pandemic prompted the participants to disclose and discuss the challenges that were faced during this time, and what developments or changes to their practices/activities arose as a result. Comments from the participants revealed that the pandemic presented challenges and opportunities simultaneously. Opportunities arose in relation to e-commerce with three of the four participants reporting an increase in online interest and sales. This increase in e-commerce was, however, tempered by obstacles relating to distribution and specifically the policies adopted by Australia Post. During the pandemic there were increased waiting times and a rise in postage costs significant enough to absorb any profit margin our participants would normally make on sales. The impact was serious enough to motivate David's business partner (from Go Kindly) to get involved in a media campaign calling for Australia Post to reconsider the rise in distribution costs significant enough to absorb any profit margin our participants would normally make on sales.

Health and safety measures around the pandemic led the CSE Second Stitch to shift product development towards the retailing of masks, which in turn led to a sales boom, albeit short lived. This shift in product offerings was widespread across the ethical clothing sector with Pro Bono Australia (Michael 2020) reporting that Ethical Clothing Australia's (ECA) website crashed due to an influx of online visitors soon after Victoria made mask wearing mandatory. While the pandemic had less effect on local supply chains, the impact on international supply chains and social enterprises (SEs), such as Etiko, was significant. Supply chain disruptions meant difficulties in receiving deliveries, low stock levels and a resulting drop in sales.

Government financial support was acknowledged as having been vital for those negatively impacted by the pandemic, particularly regarding paying employee wages. Businesses were also challenged with navigating the needs of employees with parental responsibilities that were adversely affected by school closures and students learning from home.

Cone of Silence: The Challenges

A key point made during the focus group related to the contradiction in government support for ethically produced and/or Australian-made products while demanding competitive pricing. Participants cited tenders and contracts that were lost due to the pricing of their locally produced, ethically made products being non-competitive with those made through international supply chains that use cheaper labour costs in developing countries. It was then noted that calling out such inconsistencies in support for Australian-made products would potentially result in these business being blacklisted and losing out on any potential future opportunities. There is a fundamental problem here in that a capitalist-driven push for enterprise to engage in a race to the bottom to provide the cheapest prices possible is at odds with the principles of ethical practices. It was suggested that a monetary value needs to be attached to Australian produced goods if they are ever to compete with non-Australian-made products.

A further issue voiced in the focus group was the difficulties in navigating the complex bureaucracy involved in applying for government support/grants, particularly in relation to website design. The time, human resources and finances (wages) required to navigate these processes has proven to be too much for our participants to deem it an economically viable option to pursue. It was further suggested that SEs that manage to reach a point of economic viability without government support could perhaps be rewarded in some financial way for their efforts.

Marketing

Participants commented on the human resources required to make the most of new marketing channels, such as social media, and the need for simple cost-effective means to create content. It was further suggested that the algorithms of social media platforms require a monetary spend to boost posts ensuring that content is viewed by existing and potential customers. In this sense the social media model is perhaps set up for businesses with higher margins on their product/service offerings.

Participants further commented on a lack of marketing knowledge and how this could be greatly improved with training on analytics analysis and how to produce cost-effective content creation. Several scenarios where finances were spent on marketing content that didn't yield results were presented in the focus group, illuminating that a higher spend on marketing did not necessarily ensure a wider reach.

Participants also noted that CSEs with existing cultural capital appear to be better able to create effective marketing strategies and campaigns. The Paper Joint was cited as an example of a CSEs that has benefited from the involvement of a network of other creatives in the creation and dissemination of marketing material.

Opportunities and Interventions

Participants discussed many of the operational challenges faced by CSEs and the ways in which they were able to adapt and overcome these challenges. Participants also provided valuable insights into some of the bureaucratic obstacles they confronted that impeded their ability to adapt and thrive.

- CSEs able to adapt/diversify product development (e.g., masks) found it easier to respond to the impact of the pandemic.
- Australian-made CSEs were able to avoid some of the inevitable disruptions to international supply chains.
- CSEs often lack the available budget to fund required marketing costs.
- CSEs often lack the specific marketing skills and capabilities in-house.
- CSEs are impeded from voicing concerns or objections with industry bodies, councils, and government for fear of losing potential future business and opportunities.
- Australia Post was too slow to adapt to the need for special consideration for Australian businesses during the pandemic.
- There is a contradiction in procurement policies that support ethical, Australian made products, while still pushing for low prices.
- Government funding and support is too bureaucratic and costly to navigate.
- Government and community support is needed for Australian-made CSEs, to ensure a level playing field with larger global businesses.

4.4 Doing Visual Politics

The intensive learning and teaching course at the core of this phase of inquiry in the broader RMIT PlaceLab CCE Research Project took place in the second half of December, with the interviews and focus groups being undertaken in March.

There are several threads of inquiry emerging, including questions about how creative practices can meaningfully engage with forms of activism. This is particularly relevant when we are 'guests' of one form or another. We have seen evidence that engaging emerging practitioners in contexts that are not their own is a valuable pedagogic approach, and that political theory can be used as a tool for comprehending notions of 'community' and the role of creative practice in supporting civic life.

Overarching CCE Research Project Findings

Across the four phases of inquiry in the CCE Research Project, we identified the key role that creatives are playing in supporting innovation and social cohesion in the local community of Brunswick/Merri-bek. Artists and designers are creating opportunities and space for complex discussions of place, identity, and social values. Artists and designers are critically enabling innovative approaches to issues of social inequity, as well as addressing problems in visual representation. Moreover, the creative economy is vibrant in Merri-bek with a range of innovative informal and formal approaches, including new photographic business models and the emergence of creative social enterprise, responding to local and global challenges and crises in the creative industries including rapid change, reduced government funding, the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and labour precarity.

Additional CCE Research Project Outcomes

Each of the four phases of inquiry within this CCE Research Project report will be developed into the additional, accompanying outputs as listed below:

- **Artist-researcher Residencies:** A fuller discussion paper and peer reviewed journal article, exploring methodology with an emphasis on relational, dialogic and 'small stories' are both underway and coming soon.
- **The Working Photographer:** A working paper "Emerging business models for sustainable client-centred photography practice in 21st century Merri-bek: a post pandemic reframing" is also underway.
- **Creative Social Enterprise:** An industry paper "Opportunities and challenges for creative social enterprise in Merri-bek and the inner north of Melbourne" has been completed.
- **Doing Visual Politics:** This residency is now being evaluated by Dr Alan Hill, Dr Marnie Badham and Dr Kelly Hussey-Smith for a forthcoming book chapter titled "Doing Visual Politics: Photography, collaboration, and creative practice as civil action", which has been accepted into the book "Democracy as Creative Practice: Weaving a Culture of Civic Life" edited by Tom Borrup and Andrew Zitcer.

Opportunities for project partners and stakeholders:**5.1 Artist-Researcher Residencies**

The residencies in this phase of inquiry illuminated the potential that artists possess to rethink ways of working with community: to forge new models of thinking about place, to model modes of collaboration and “the commons”, and to engage residents in creative and collective practices. The application of socially-engaged arts practice as a methodology for the artist-researcher enabled a ‘third space’ to explore and effect local issues, supporting the argument for the value and benefits of longer-term artist-residencies across a range of local council areas, including health, justice, education and placemaking portfolios.

5.2 The Working Photographer

This phase of inquiry revealed opportunities to support photographic business in Merri-bek. Photographers have significant opportunities to leverage their skills in photographic language outside of the business of photography, for example in computer graphics and real estate. This can both generate new career trajectories; and supplement and enhance income from a photographic practice. Photographers are experts in photography as a visual language, not just the technical act of making a photograph. These are skills that are expanding into multiple domains, such as the implementation of AI and machine learning in CGI (computer-generated imagery).

As confirmed by the semi-structured interviews undertaken, the ecology and economy for creative practice is being fundamentally reconfigured by the ubiquity of the networked image and the evolution of digital imaging practices. This is flowing through to commercial photography practice and resulting in changing needs on the ground in terms of infrastructure needs. In some instances, businesses have moved into Merri-bek looking for larger premises, such as in the case of the business ‘Splice Boys’ who needed larger spaces to accommodate their ground-breaking photogrammetry rig. In some cases, the flexibility of shared studio spaces is necessary for emerging innovative businesses such as ‘B2’. What is not yet known, is the potentially fundamental impact of emerging AI applications.

The viability of these businesses will rely on their adaptability, while appropriate infrastructure, in terms of flexible premises, will be key. There is a prime opportunity to support photography businesses with premises/rent and co-working spaces.

5.3 Creative Social Enterprise

This phase of inquiry brought to light significant opportunities to promote and advance the CSE sector in Brunswick/Merri-bek and the inner north of Melbourne; and to forge connections and opportunities for business growth. We identified several practical opportunities to support the development of CSEs in Brunswick/Merri-bek. These include:

- **Develop a ‘hub’ or precinct from which social enterprises can work.**
- **Develop a digital CSE network/directory that will enable CSEs to connect with each other and promote their businesses, and will support outreach into industry, government and community.**
- **Work with the Merri-bek City Council and landlords to temporarily occupy and activate empty storefronts for creative use by CSEs, such as along Sydney Road.**
- **Investigate CSE interest in partnering with researchers and industry to develop technical innovations in product development, as well as opportunities to boost local manufacturing potential.**
- **Allocate local government funding for the development of creative workshops focused on CSE capability and promotion.**

- **Increase opportunities for local council representatives to further understand specific CSE needs and opportunities.**
- **Develop a community awareness campaign about CSEs to increase knowledge about the benefits of the CSE model, and how to support, buy, engage, and volunteer.**
- **Feature CSEs in local paper articles, industry association and council websites to share stories that create opportunities for brand awareness and promotion.**
- **Provide opportunities for CSEs to partner with local artists, photographers and emerging creatives to support their creative marketing campaigns.**

5.4 Doing Visual Politics

This successful phase of inquiry, as a pilot, points to the significant potential for partnerships between local government and higher-education partners to promote cultures of democracy through community-orientated project-based collaborations. Merri-bek City Council, the Brunswick Design District (BDD) and RMIT are all well-placed to leverage these opportunities given Merri-bek is established as a creative community where both the BDD and RMIT reside. In particular, we note that the name change to Merri-bek has opened unique possibilities for community conversations about place in coming years. There is an opportunity to amplify the knowledge of local artists, activists and communities, with Wurundjeri knowledge at the centre, to rethink how creatives and businesses understand their 'place' in Merri-bek.

6. Afterword

The outcomes of RMIT PlaceLab **Creatives, Communities & Economies** Research Project strengthens our understanding of the key roles that creatives are playing in supporting new, innovative working models, and building social cohesion and collaboration in the Merri-bek community. The research project identifies and investigates some of the opportunities that Merri-bek artists and creatives are facilitating within the community to explore ideas of place, identity and social values.

RMIT PlaceLab proves what's possible when local community knowledge and expertise informs world-class research. Together, we're tackling real-world, urban challenges and seeking innovations that improve liveability, community resilience and connection, evolving spaces into places.

Delivering benefit for local government and partners by making research inclusive, practical and hyper-local to achieve real impact.

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Ethics

This research project has been assessed and approved by the RMIT University College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN). Ethics Reference Number: 25586.

Research involving human participants is consistent with the guidelines contained in the Australian National statement on ethical conduct in human research and Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no declared conflicts of interest associated with this research project.

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Appendix 1

Creative Social Enterprise (CSE) & Charities		
CREATIVE SOCIAL ENTERPRISES: BRUNSWICK/MERRI-BEK		
Name	Type of CSE	Location
Second Stitch	Textiles; Clothing alterations, sewing training, ethical production; Supporting migrant, asylum seeker and refugee women	Coburg
Clothing the Gaps	Fashion; Victorian Aboriginal led and controlled, and majority Aboriginal owned social enterprise	Brunswick
Etiko	Clothing and footwear; Ethical, sustainable, and socially responsible	Brunswick
Go Kindly	Pillows, quilts, mattresses; Supporting women experiencing homelessness	Coburg
Happily Made	Soft toys and textiles; Supporting Cambodian women; Online/ Instagram connected to Brunswick	Brunswick East
Tempo Rubato/ The Piano Project	Live classical music venue; Profits support the Piano Project, which provides access to music education	Brunswick
Youthworx	Social enterprise film and video production company; Not-for-profit, philanthropy, and trade union	Brunswick
Creative Opportunities	Australian Disability employments Enterprise within The Salvation Army; Sustainable business; Supporting people with disabilities through individual training programs	Brunswick
Schoolhouse Studios	Not-for-profit creative spaces; Foster community connection for artists, creative businesses, activists, and social enterprises.	Coburg
Enable Australia	Online sustainable social enterprise; Upcycled and recycled tech and computer equip (also known as 'In the Click' Social Enterprise)	Broadmeadows
The Beautiful Bunch	Florist supporting young women from refugee backgrounds; The only Victorian not-for-profit (registered charity)	Fitzroy North
Multicultural women's sewing group	Community group for women and children of all socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, and faiths; Provide opportunities to teach and learn sewing skills	Brunswick
Kind Boys Club	Online store of tees offering onesies, prints; Value-driven, committed to raising future generations to be kind	Online
Nightingale x good cycles	Soon to open Brunswick Good Cyclees, full-service workshop & bikes; Not-for-profit organisation; Sustainability principles; Youth Employment Program	Brunswick
Last Hurrah Funerals	Creative approach to funerals; Offering a gentle and secure circle of support to those grieving a loss; Funeral support for struggling artists	Thornbury

CREATIVE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE: INNER NORTH AND MELBOURNE		
Name	Type of CSE	Location
Bus Projects	Artist-run interdisciplinary collective; exhibition, events, residencies; CLOSING end of 2022	Collingwood
Arts Project Australia	Promoting artists with an intellectual disability to showcase their work	Northcote
The Social Studio	Up-cycled fashion as a vehicle for social change and to uplift people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.	Collingwood
Homie	Fashion label supporting youth experiencing homelessness	Fitzroy
Ngali	Fashion label supporting indigenous artists and communities.	Melbourne
Sisterworks	Retail/ fashion; 'Empowerment Hubs' to support women from migrant, refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds	Abbotsford
Brunswick Industries	Leading employer of people with a disability; Supportive training programs and contribution to inclusion and well-being of people with disability	Reservoir
Resparkle	Natural and affordable cleaning products with ingredients sourced from Australian businesses; Contract filling and packing to Brunswick Industries to support local livelihoods and people with disabilities.	West Footscray
Merchant Rd	Weddings and events; Training women from refugee backgrounds	Fitzroy North
Big Little Brush	Bamboo toothbrushes; Supporting remote indigenous communities; B Corp	Online/ Melbourne-based
Boots for All	Supporting sport and social inclusion across Australia; Also operates Australia's first social enterprise sports store - Sport for All, providing training & employment pathways for people with barriers to employment.	Online/ Briar Hill
Many Coloured Sky	Supports LGBTQI+ organisations and communities in discriminatory, resource-poor and complex settings	Collingwood
Blakademy	"A dedicated critical Indigenous learning space for First Nations Creatives and a home for First Nations community collectives"; Hot desks for study or group workshops, reading and writing and community meeting space.	Brunswick
Y Lab and Y Lab Studio	Co-design and consulting social enterprise; Focus on intersectional justice and youth-led innovation	Melbourne
Melbourne Social Enterprise Village	Home to Good Cycles, Community Grocer, Dragonfly Collective, Moral Fairground, SENVIC; launching soon	Melbourne CBD
Whitebox Enterprises (Australian Spatial Analytics)	Data analytics firm that hires neurodiverse and autistic people	Richmond
Renew Australia	Work with communities and property owners to take otherwise empty shops/ buildings and make them available to incubate short term use by artists, creative projects and community initiatives.	Newport

We hope this report sparks more important conversations.

**We'd love to hear your thoughts via:
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**Find out more about the RMIT PlaceLab initiative
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