Careers, Community, and Leadership in the Arts
Kim Goodwin
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I've never considered myself an "arts leader" in the traditional sense. When I finished high school almost two decades ago, I had a lot of trouble choosing what career to dedicate my one life on this precious earth to. As a lifelong creative, I knew I wanted to work in the arts. My values are strongly rooted in fairness and egalitarianism. I started various courses such as media, social work, fine art and the humanities. My parents knew I was loathe to commit to a single employment trajectory. In desperation they put me in touch with a careers counsellor to help me discern how I could translate my interests into the job market.

Little did I know then that I would later come to develop what Goodwin describes in *Careers, Community and Leadership in the Arts* a "portfolio career" made up of various community and arts-based casual and short-term jobs, curatorial projects, artist residencies, advocacy and eventually a PhD defending the value of art itself. Her book would have been of great comfort during many years of self-doubt. It also has reminded me, having spent years as an advocate for workers in the visual arts, how important good leadership is—as the negative effects of poor leadership in this space can be insidious and far-reaching.

Based in years of research collected across Australia, the United Kingdom and Asia, Goodwin's book explores how arts workers navigate complex career pathways, chronic precarity and inequality in a fragmented neoliberal job market. Community engagement and positive leadership are fundamental to challenging structural inequality, developing professional support networks and career sustainability. Research into arts leadership in Australia is lacking. Goodwin writes not only from an arts management perspective, but from that of arts workers, which makes her text a valuable contribution not only to leadership studies, but industrial relations in an underrepresented sector.

The first chapter, "Crafting Arts Careers" introduces how traditional approaches such as the "career ladder" do not always apply to contemporary arts professional trajectories. Arts workers are often gig workers, juggling multiple side projects and employers. Neoliberalism is now "embedded in everyday thinking" (Roper, Ganesh, and Inkson 2011 in Goodwin 2026, 28). A "portfolio career" arguably minimizes risk as workers engage with multiple employers and contracts. "Boundaryless" and "protean" careers are focused beyond a single employer—escaping traditional hierarchies, notions of advancement and measures of success. However, is precarious employment really a good thing? As Goodwin laments, "[t]he arts have often been the 'canary in the coalmine' for flexible, precarious work" (Goodwin 2026, 42). Boundaries blur between the social and professional as the arts worker is encouraged to sell the self as brand, hindering collectivization. Women, ethnic minorities and the working class are disadvantaged (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020; Eikhof 2017). Economist Guy Standing writes about the notion of the "precariat" - the gig worker class. The precariat is defined by "distinctive 'relations of production': so-called 'flexible' labo[u]r contracts; temporary jobs; labo[u]r as casuals, part-timers, or intermittently for labo[u]r brokers or employment agencies", plus a lack of "secure occupational identity" (Standing 2014, para. 5). Precarious workers are "expected to have a level of education that is greater than the labo[u]r they are expected to perform or expect to obtain," leading to immense "status frustration" (Standing 2014, para. 6). Despite this grim picture, Goodwin suggests perhaps the salve is shifting focus from shallow networking to community-building.

Goodwin's further chapters present a through and systematic examination of not only theories of leadership, but how community networks in the sector are vital to ensure success in a highly deregulated field. She argues that mutual aid networks counter neoliberal working environments. Social learning involves the leader working with others as a collective—much like in apprenticeships and guilds of old. Goodwin discusses "Creative Community Connections" at length—an extra-curricular program at the University of Melbourne's Arts and Cultural Management course that ran from 2022-2024 focusing on building a community of practice for belonging and career support. Goodwin also interviewed a variety of arts leaders internationally such as Jon, a manager at a collaborative art space in Leeds whose lived experiences have instilled the values of community, advocacy and solidarity influenced by his and his partner's religious and unionist backgrounds (Goodwin 2026, 53).

Much like the "art star," having charisma and personality is often conflated with good arts leadership, but this can have gendered connotations. Goodwin is critical of the Thomas Carlyle's nineteenth century "Great Man Theory" which frames leadership as the domain of heroic male figures with essential qualities. Language, including terms such as "leader", "manager" and "CEO," is not neutral. Art historian Griselda Pollock similarly argues that the word "artist" has been traditionally associated with a heroic male figure which immediately others everything else (Pollock 2013, xxix). CEOs may be managers, but they aren't necessarily leaders. The arts are becoming more corporatized, putting pressure on management to prioritize efficiency and competition (Boyle and Thorsby 2012 in Goodwin 2026, 51) and cronyism being increasingly common. Some arts workers find themselves reluctant to engage in leadership due to imposter syndrome or poor experiences of themselves. Goodwin presents community participation as an alternative.

Leadership types are discussed at length in *Careers, Community and Leadership in the Arts*, including hierarchical and relational, servant and individualistic leaders. Collaborative and non-hierarchical leaders put wellbeing and care for their workers first, whilst individualistic leaders utilize a top-down approach. This can vary based on what discipline leaders are working in, such as the visual arts, music or theatre. Grint discusses the fact that "care-full" leadership—that which puts the care and wellbeing of workers first—sounds good in practice but often ultimately fails because workplaces aren't democratic (Grint 2009 in Goodwin 2026, 98). Perhaps what is lacking in this otherwise largely comprehensive examination of leadership are radical alternatives to conventional hierarchical power structures which *are* democratic, such as worker-owned cooperatives. Mondragón, for instance, is a large worker-owned and governed cooperative in the Basque Country—spanning agriculture, banking, supermarkets and more—and is the sixth biggest company in Europe. Mondragón's leadership and workforce are democratic—meaning that workers have the opportunity to vote their management in and out and have a say in how the company runs. Profits are divided up amongst employees rather than delivered to shareholders, encouraging loyalty and quality work. Political scientist Robert Dahl considers what "economic democracy" means for society, asking whether the ownership and structure of organizations in which workers spend so much time should reflect the principles of equality in Cheney 2018, 10). Emerging from early twentieth century anarchist roots in Spain, Italy and France, it's hard to imagine such large-scale cooperatives in Australia being accepted. Benevolent or malevolent workplace dictatorships are culturally normalized in the Anglosphere due to increasingly weakened industrial protections and shrinking union power. A psychologically safe and successful work environment is one where workers' voices feel heard (Goodwin 2026, 163).

There is a difference between managers and leaders. *Careers, Community, and Leadership in the Arts* emphasizes the importance and power of community and aligning leadership skills with values and experience. The book's clarity and accessibility make it a suitable companion to the scholar, the arts management student, and future arts leaders.

Madeleine Thornton-Smith
PhD (Art) candidate
RMIT University

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