

A Hard Woman to Catch

By [Eamon Evans](#) ArtsHub | Thursday, April 05, 2007

Lynne Kosky is a hard woman to catch. *Arts Hub* first sought a 20-minute interview with Victoria's new Arts Minister in February. Sorry, too busy, was her Chief of Staff's reply. The "Minister hasn't managed an arts interview with the Age since the new year," said John Dainutis. *Arts Hub* would have to wait until April.

A few pushy emails later, we're granted a 20-minute interview on Kosky's car phone – engine growling in the background, as she rushes from one appointment to another.

The car sound may be appropriate. One wonders how much of the busy is due to Kosky beavering away on behalf of artists, and how much is due to her other portfolio, Transport. The Minister is currently overseeing a \$4 billion upgrade to what's already one of the largest integrated rail, tram and bus networks in the world. You have to wonder if smalltime community arts organisations are getting all the attention they deserve.

It's a question that – along with many others – I never get to ask. The phone drops out midway through the interview, and, despite doing my best to badger her media advisor, I'm yet to get a call back.

Perhaps she's been busy doing art? Unlike many an Arts Minister, Kosky actually practices what she pilots. A self-described "keen amateur artist and artisan", her hobbies include painting, mosaics and textile work. She also knows how to build a dry stonewall.

This genuine interest in her brief has been noted. The arts community seems to have the new Minister a generally warm welcome after the bureaucratic torpor of the Delahunty years.

Her resume hasn't hurt either. As Education Minister from 2002-06, Kosky frequently strayed into the arts world, building the Education Centre at Heide Museum, co-sponsoring the Art4Athletes program, and introducing legislation to make students study creativity and design until Year 10.

Kosky returns the welcome, waxing enthusiastic about Victoria's arts community. "The talent is extraordinary, so it's been very easy to be Minister for the Arts so far," she says.

"The willingness of people to not only work on their own projects but to work together is something I'm really impressed by."

Another favourite Kosky hobby is reading – which may be why she lists Melbourne's bid to become a UNESCO City of Literature as one of her main focuses for the year.

"There's a lot that's happening around literature right across Victoria," she notes. "We all know someone in a book club, if we're not in one ourselves."

At the core of the bid is the \$8 million Centre for Books and Ideas to be incorporated into the State Library. It "will bring some of the different literature organisations [like the Melbourne Writers Festival, Express Media and the Emerging Writers Centre] together into the one spot and give them a proper home," Kosky says.

"A whole lot of ideas will come as a result of them working together, rather than being in quite disparate communities and disparate locations."

The value of "literacy" is also called on to justify another expensive government project. Already an "over-subsidised, taxpayer-funded financial black hole," according to the state opposition, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image will receive a further \$5.8 million under Kosky's watch.

"I think that the moving image is a really critical component of our culture, particularly for younger people. It's not the same crowd that go to the opera or the ballet or to the Arts Centre events. It's a form of literacy for them and we need to be able to celebrate that."

She admits there have been problems. "It's a young organisation and young facility and it needs to develop a bit of a sense of history and an audience, and so will do it a little tougher than some of the other more well-established arts organisations."

"I agree that when they started they probably didn't have a really strong focus... (but new Director) Tony (Sweeney) and the team have really shifted things around. I think they're doing a terrific job... It's well on the way to establishing itself as a very solid arts organisation."

When the conversation turns to another occasionally contentious arts institution, Kosky's language is a little more measured. She acknowledges that the Melbourne International Arts Festival – panned by some pundits last year for catering to an elite inner city audience at the expense of... everyone else – may not have got the balance right.

The Festival is about "looking at some of those niche markets and niche areas and really pushing some of the boundaries around the arts, but at the same time it is a festival for a broad number of people... There'll be some years when the festival is better than others, according to particular groups of people."

"That's part of the challenge, and certainly they're aware of some of the concerns that were raised last year and I think that the festival this year will take them into account."

The Federal Government's sedition laws – a longstanding bugbear for many arts organisations, anxious to preserve free speech – may also have not got the balance right, the Minister says.

"The Howard Government does want to control a lot of things... at times, it's too quick to respond to issues without really thinking about the broader, long-term impact on a community. I think that people are rightly concerned and right to question."

So can they take these concerns – indeed, any concerns – to her? Can ordinary, small-time arts organisations be sure of the busy Minister's ear?

Supposedly. "I'm very keen to get out to a lot of the smaller community arts organisations and talk about the work they're doing and the communities they're working with. The larger organisations are very good at putting forward their plans... so it's the smaller organisations that I'm very keen to make the connection with."