National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: On behalf of an organisation with arts-components (e.g. community organisation, tourism, venue, health, education etc)

This submission focuses on the second pillar of the proposed new national cultural policy: 'A place for every story: reflecting the diversity of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.'

The need to recognise the multicultural make-up of Australia has long been presented as a key priority in cultural policy. The 2012 Creative Australia national cultural policy acknowledges that 'cultural diversity has become a defining characteristic of 21st century Australia' (p. 96). Yet the rhetoric of 'cultural diversity' remains largely unfulfilled in practice: numerous recent reports and surveys have demonstrated that the official cultural sector lags stubbornly behind in fully representing the nation's cultural diversity – in terms of organisational production and staffing, in terms of cultural content, and in terms of audiences and constituencies (e.g. Diversity Arts Australia 2019; Ang 2022). Targeted, proactive policies are therefore required to facilitate the flourishing of a cultural sector where cultural diversity is no longer peripheral to an otherwise mono-cultural mainstream, but a central component of it.

In this submission we highlight two essential requirements to effect this structural change: a comprehensive *set of principles for cultural policy and programming* to ensure there is 'a place for every story', and comprehensive *cultural leadership* to help bring these principles to life. By 'comprehensive' we mean the need to nurture diverse cultural expressions at all levels from the work of individual artists, creative partnerships, arts and cultural infrastructures, and organisational change. In this regard this submission is also relevant to all other pillars of the proposed new cultural policy, in particular the centrality of the artist, strong institutions, and reaching the audience, in a context of fundamental recognition of and respect for First Nations at the centre of Australian arts and culture.

Working Principles for Promoting Diversity of Cultural Expressions

Based on our report *Promoting Diversity of Cultural Expression* for the Australia Council and UNESCO (Mar and Ang 2015), we propose here five key principles to guide policy development to enable greater cultural diversity in arts and culture. These principles can be applied to artist-mediated, community, or industry-based approaches to artistic and cultural work and initiatives.

1. *Truly relevant and energetic creative work will come from working across cultures.* Cultural diversity is the everyday context within which artists work. Artistic work with diverse communities can draw on numerous partnerships and engagements across culture and society.

2. *Building cultural capabilities is best served by developing strong cross-cultural partnerships.* Effective support of the diversity of cultural expressions requires active promotion of relevant cultural skills and capabilities. This means that creative practices located outside accepted mainstream activities need to be viably maintained within the cultural life of the nation.

3. *Locating arts practice within 'culture cycles' will facilitate a broader understanding of the diverse forms of 'value' generated by cultural expressions.* UNESCO's use of a 'culture cycle' model supports interventions that incorporate the value chain of artistic work and cultural activity from creation, production, dissemination, distribution and access. Understanding the cycle of culture means recognising the range of roles artists, producers, distributors, educators, public institutions and professional organisations play to determine the value and reach of cultural expressions. Artists and cultural practitioners could be encouraged to think more broadly about extending the areas within which cultural activities can be embedded.

4. *Inclusive curatorial processes enhance the diversity of cultural expressions.* Curating is a pivotal cultural process in an increasingly networked world, joining the dots between artists, artworks, collections, cultural institutions, interpretive strategies, publications and audience development. The curator can create a vital space for exchange, criticism and dialogue to enhance public engagement with diverse cultural expressions.

5. *Supporting diversity of cultural expressions will enhance art's ability to resonate and make a difference.* Art can be more than an autonomous cultural activity. It also has social functions that can benefit relevant cultural groups and society in general. The integrity of such work lies in the way in which relations are established and maintained with different communities of interest.

A prominent First Nations example of embodiment of these principles is the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists (now ANKA), which supports Aboriginal Art Centres across vast regions, 'working together to keep art, country and culture strong'. The scope and spread of ANKA's support increases awareness of these centres and their ability to make a difference.

In the multicultural field, there are many small-scale, often short-lived examples. *Visible* (now de-funded) was a long-running music mentoring and support program developed by Multicultural Arts Victoria, catering to musicians from new refugee, immigrant and Indigenous Australian communities. *Visible* supported experienced musicians to access and negotiate all stages of Australian culture cycles through mentoring, recording opportunities, marketing, live opportunities, and more broadly supported the cultural development of emerging communities. Another, community-driven example was the Arab Film Festival Australia, which was initiated by Information and Cultural Exchange (now Arts and Cultural Exchange) in Parramatta and ran from 2001 to 2017. The festival provided insight on how to achieve inclusive programming, distribution, and contributing to more diverse cultural dialogues affecting Arab diasporas and beyond.

The five principles are a starting point for evaluating ways of designing cultural initiatives to enhance 'a place for every story.' Realising such initiatives, however, requires sustained and energetic cultural leadership that focuses on changing and diversifying the national cultural landscape.

Arts and Cultural Leadership in a Multicultural Australia

Multicultural artists bear the burden to generate the opportunities as the main producers of content that represents and interacts with multicultural Australia. We should be cautious in placing sole responsibility onto the (often underpaid) multicultural artist to transform Australian society. However, their creative leadership roles amply show that their work and processes can produce new narratives and cultural expressions that are recognised by their peers as innovative creative content that highlights diversity and resonates with the public.

Performing arts examples include the western Sydney-based artist of Sri Lankan heritage and cofounder of the arts company Curious Works, S. Shakthidharan, whose debut play *Counting and Cracking* won multiple awards, and Chinese Australian creative producer Annette Shun-wah, whose pioneering work with Contemporary Asian Australian Performance (CAAP) has nurtured many young Asian Australian artists (actors, writers, directors) to find their place on national mainstages.

The role of the artist in delivering different ways to promote cultural diversity carries practices of accommodation and negotiation across a wide sphere of leadership and advocacy. Due to the 'lag' between cultural policy and practitioner experience, multicultural artists are required to navigate their practices with determination and creative persistence.

Cmielewski (2021) details three domains of leadership —creative, institutional and organisational — that are required to tackle the challenges and opportunities in extending the diversity of cultural expressions in the arts. All three forms of leadership are crucial in enhancing a cultural milieu that is more supportive of artists whose work contributes to 'multicultural arts' practice.

Creative leadership refers to the creative role of the artist. Institutional leadership refers to multicultural arts advocates within institutions (for example, the former Australia Council Multicultural Advisory Committee, defunct since 2007). Organisational leadership refers to those cultural brokers who establish partnerships between organisations. Change is enabled when these roles are all able to work in synergy, as shown in the exceptional leadership performed by many multicultural practitioners, such as Shakthidharan and Shun-wah.

The crucial importance of such leadership in generating structural change needs to be acknowledged, and more importantly, more properly nurtured and resourced. Funds should be directed towards multicultural artists and organisations where such innovative leadership tends to be found, rather than current practices that favour allocating 'diversity' funds to established institutions such as the Major Performing Arts companies.

Australia does not have flagship multicultural arts companies, such as the UK-based, internationally renowned Akram Khan Dance Company or the London-based research and exhibition centre for cultural diversity, iniva. While small multicultural arts organisations with excellent leadership operate throughout Australia, there is a need for a more large-scale, authoritative national organisation that has both strong leadership *and* sustainable resourcing to invest in in-depth R&D that champions 'cultural difference' at the centre of creative activity, encouraging a high level of ongoing critical dialogue and facilitating collaborative art and cultural projects within a national network of artists, academics, community organisations, cultural institutions, funding agencies and sponsors.

In summary, a National Cultural Policy framework needs to encompass and support:

- Active engagement with the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

- Capacity building that focuses on cross-cultural partnerships, particularly at industry level.

- Creative activity and interventions that support diversity within 'culture cycles' as a whole.

- Strategic initiatives that allocate funds directly to multicultural artists and organisations and empower key cultural leaders in the field.

- A long-term consultation committee of multicultural artist representatives.

- A national flagship multicultural arts organisation that can champion excellence in ensuring a 'place for every story'.

References

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