

National Cultural Policy Submission

Name: Joanna Mendelssohn

Submitted: As an individual

When framing the new National Cultural Policy I hope that you also look at the long-term impact of the most successful arts policies in Australia's history. I refer to that of the Whitlam government from 1972 to 1975, which rippled through decades of funding until the late 1990s. So much of what we take for granted in Australia's modern cultural life, including those great actors striding the world stage, is a part of the legacy of the 1970s, as well as the more generous approach to culture inherited from the late 1960s. As we are at last coming out of a dark age, it is worth looking at what worked when Australia was a more confident country. These are just a few suggestions:

1. When the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australia Council was established there was no market for Australian First Nations Art. Local art museums were not interested in exhibiting. Yet the board had a policy of buying what ever art was produced. The subsequent exhibitions (as well as the display of work in our overseas embassies) created the market. Here is a detailed account of this policy and its impacts: https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_4_no1/papers/inroads_offshore. Times have changed so much since then. Many of our established arts "stars" are themselves Indigenous. Some, such as Tony Albert, work with different communities. There is benefit in encouraging cross-fertilisation, but most importantly there is greatest benefit when working with, not for, the communities represented.
2. The 12 month salary grants to young artists, writers and practitioners in other art forms that started in the 1970s, ushered in what can be described as a golden age of Australian literature, art and performance. Those individual grants are so hard to get, and the bureaucratic process of applying for them is best described as daunting. It needs to be simplified, while still keeping the principle of "arms length", away from the whims of politicians.
3. Big institutions can always lobby philanthropists, corporations or governments for funding. But the most innovative and exciting work comes from what can be described as "nurseries" – artist co-ops, writers with experimental publications, actors who are effectively strolling players, musicians experimenting in spaces they can find. Small grants to start-ups and experimental groups are very cost effective.
4. In the 1960s and 70s the arts were valued in schools. Many artists (eg the late Richard Gill, Richard Larter) began their working lives as bonded teachers for the state school system, and so inspired a new generation. Elite private schools (eg Sydney Grammar, Cranbrook, PLC) have a long tradition of paying artists in residence, enabling leading artists to work with their students to stimulate their imagination and expand their intellect. If artists (from all art forms) were placed into public schools their presence in conducting workshops, producing school theatrical and musical performances etc would provide a stimulus to the students, from kindergarten to year 12.