

National Cultural Policy Submission

Name: Murray Arts Inc

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation; On behalf of an arts peak body

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you?

First Nations

Murray Arts has a long-standing focus on championing First Nation Regional Arts Development in our footprint. Recent changes to the National, State, Local and Philanthropic funding landscapes, has made it really challenging for Non-First Nation organisations to apply for funding for First Nation initiatives. We understand the reasoning behind these changes but for context, in 2016 Murray Arts launched Burraja Gallery (our regions only dedicated local First Nation's gallery), during this time it has gone from strength to strength, with steady local First Nation employment, community engagement, excellent sales and exposure for local artists. At present we are no longer able to access funding to keep the doors of the gallery open & staff employed and at the end of August 2022 the physical presence of the gallery will close. It was always the vision for the gallery to become a local First Nation led organisation and we have been working on this for 6+ years now but it takes a lot of time, and we aren't there yet. We will keep working on it, but the reality is that without a continued physical presence it may fold. Consideration needs to be made for organisations who champion First Nation Arts Development, who are based in communities who currently have no First Nation led, arts focused organisations who can step forward.

A Place for Every Story

The sharing of stories and ideas is at the heart of all artistic endeavours and is such a powerful connection tool. We would love to see greater understanding and a culture shift nationally, for the sharing of stories, in all ways, shapes and forms, be recognised as an essential part of daily Australian life. The arts, in all its forms is integral to every Australian's day to day life and should stop being identified as a luxury or non-essential item. We require connection to place and others, as well as expression and learning every day and we achieve this by interacting with various arts & cultural mediums. Just like food and water, sometimes art & cultural experiences can be cheap/free/subsidies/basic and everywhere and other times they can be high end/expensive/highbrow and exclusive but as a society we seem to only focus on the latter.

The Centrality of the Artist

Ensuring that Artists are at the centre of all development and decision making is extremely important. Artist led initiatives is extremely important to us and we have seen too many examples of artists being engaged, their ideas being warped by bureaucratic decisions, and the soul of the concept being lost to cost cutting, the need to reach unrealistic KPI targets and due to things needing to happen quickly. Artists need to be supported with business and government partnerships and not fearful that their work/concepts will be diluted and or lost.

Strong Institutions Arts Infrastructure \$\$\$ is often splashed about but doesn't come with the staff or programming \$\$\$ needed to maintain a vibrant venue. Particularly in regional parts of Australia our town halls or memorial halls are old and underused infrastructure, they are not able to be heated or cooled, have limited seating, access to lighting & sound capabilities and often lack contemporary accessible qualities. These buildings were once the heart and soul of a community, bringing people together and now can be lucky to be used once a year. As a nation we need to work out the best use of this existing and aging infrastructure.

Reaching the Audience

Finding the balance between locally produced work and touring product is really tricky. As a nation we need to prioritise the development of our own work/stories and secondary have the opportunity to experience touring product from other communities and cultures.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

The shift nationally, in how hungry Australians are to learn more about the country they are on, the stories of our First Nations people and to develop a meaningful connection is so strong. Arts and Cultural opportunities are such an accessible and meaningful way to foster and build these connections. Something that we are very mindful of is the mental load it takes for our local First Nation Elders, Artists and Storytellers who are continually drawn on, often last minute to deliver a 'Welcome to Country', answer challenging questions and have 'Well Meaning' but hurtful things said to them. As non-First Nation arts workers and allies we need to be mindful of this, assist with the national education of the need to pay for a 'Welcome to Country' and our local First Nation peoples time to be present, share their stories, history and knowledge. It is such a joy to witness the shift nationally, of just how keen the community is to learn more and know more about our Aboriginal History and Culture and now we need to help by giving them meaningful and legitimate ways to engage and experience.

Strong Institutions

In the past 10 years the administrative load for Arts & Cultural Not-For-Profit incorporated groups has increased dramatically. There is so much reporting required of us from all funding bodies, ACNC, Department of Fair Trading, ATO, Audits, Grant Writing etc that means we get so bogged down in admin at the expense of the work we are meant to be delivering.

Skills shortages in areas such as project management, event management, performing arts design & tech, hospitality is affecting all elements of Regional and Metropolitan Arts & Cultural organisations. The devastation of the gig economy, due to the pandemic, has highlight just how reliant the creative economy was on freelance/causal workers. We need to create meaningful pathways to employment in these fields with security for these people that work from project to project, contract to contract.

Reaching the Audience

Although arts and cultural opportunities are readily accessible in Metropolitan and Regional Centres, it should not be the only way, everyday Australians can access arts and cultural opportunities. Ensuring that our outlying villages and communities are not missed and feel supported is so vital. We see this very clearly in the 'Touring Product' model, example a touring performing arts group, visits a small town, they struggle to find an audience and never return or cancel the show. The reality is that to build an audience it takes time, sometimes 10 people is a huge achievement and if relevant touring product is on offer regularly (more than once year), over time the audience will develop and expand. Financially this is a very hard model to deliver and ways to improve upon it need to be resolved.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

Supporting Independent artist to maintain a living wage.

Arts & Cultural Funding system are arduous. We would love to see the applications be streamlined, transparency around when funding rounds will open & close with decent notice, transparency of who is funded, meaningful feedback for those who are unsuccessful, efficient reporting, more accessible and frequent micro-funding rounds for individual artists and small collectives to work on creative development concepts.

Alyce Fisher

Executive Director - Murray Arts Inc