

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: as an artist

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

The recognition of the centrality of First Nations peoples to Australia's national identity is paramount and I can't think of any artist who would challenge it.

A Place for Every Story

As one of the most successful multinational and multiracial countries in the world, diversity of voices and representation is similarly uncontroversial. But I'd like to point out that diversity doesn't stop at race or ethnicity or sexuality: working people also deserve opportunities to make art and be represented; unionists fighting for their rights; working mothers trying to support a family; working class children struggling for an education – These are also stories worth telling.

The Centrality of the Artist

This, I think, is the real key to reinvigorate Australia's declining cultural life. After decades of being ignored and even deliberately suppressed, artists have come to expect nothing from Government but open contempt, with the result that we have shifted our attention and work increasingly overseas. The arts can flourish in Australia, as we have seen in the past, but power should be in the hands of the artists themselves, and to this end I would suggest one important reform would be a guaranteed basic income of the sort being trialled in Ireland. Such a scheme would give artists the ability to work and experiment wherever they are, be it in Lithgow or Wilcannia or Surry Hills, and see the efflorescence of art and culture across Australia. And to the critic who says, "Why then, we'll ALL become artists," I can only reply: GREAT! That's exactly what we need to humanise this country. But the reality is that few people other than dedicated artists are willing to live on the small amounts involved (325 Euros a week in Ireland), but for those of us whose life revolves around producing art, even a small stipend like that would be a godsend.

Strong Institutions

The Australia Council, Screen Australia, the ABC and SBS have all suffered dramatic cuts and erosion of their independence under the LNP, and this must be reversed if a cultural efflorescence is to take place. The theatre sector has been crippled by the constant attacks, with the result that a generation of writers, actors and directors has been denied the opportunity to do their work, with their work being to reflect on the nature of Australian society in all the various ways they do. And we have been denied the opportunity to reflect on ourselves. Why hasn't there been one major mainstream play about Australian murders in Afghanistan? The atrocities in Abu Ghraib were exposed in part by an Australian whistleblower, and yet no theatre company thought it politic to commission a work dealing with such a crucial part of our national life. The Australia Council has overseen the closure of the Australian mind as it has been reduced to an empty office with an answering machine.

Some time ago, I left a message asking if anyone in Screen Australia knew who the Australian representative of Netflix was. Six weeks later I received a reply that "No, no-one knew." Our public institutions have been gutted and turned into outposts of mendacity and political correctness.

Reaching the Audience

The audience is our priority, first and foremost, but at least in theatre, the cut in subsidy has seen ticket prices blow out to the point where most people can no longer afford it. With the result that the theatre being offered is increasingly conservative and irrelevant to the interests of the majority. If people are to be brought back into the theatres, ticket prices have to be drastically cut, and theatres subsidised to do the work. With more ordinary Australians able to see theatre, the work itself will change to reflect their concerns. And the same applies to all the arts. Money is the barrier stopping most people from fully engaging with the arts. I would also like to see a return to the Art in Working Life program, that brought cultural products and activities directly to the work place and allowed people who had never seen live theatre or art the opportunity to do so.

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

Working with First Nations peoples is a gift and joy, and the more such opportunities can be found, the richer our national life will be. We can overcome the terrible history and legacy of colonialism by working together to make art, and this must be our highest priority.

A Place for Every Story

Diversity is crucial, and in my time as Head of Writing at Nida, the promotion of diversity was one of our main themes. But diversity is not, or should not be, a zero sum game, meaning that if you have a play on, for example, I can't; and vice versa. This is the politics of divide and rule that has poisoned cultural life now for many years. A place for every story translates in my mind to the creation of many more places, to address and overcome the closure and destruction of so many great platforms in the past. We need more theatres, we need a minimum quota of Australian television, we Australians deserve the right to find ourselves represented in whatever mirror we choose to look.

The Centrality of the Artist

As I said above, for me the key is a guaranteed basic income for writers, and an expansion of the platforms where our work can be presented. I think there should also be an acknowledgment that most new work is going to fail if it has any artistic pretensions at all. Art is hard, and rightly so. And if we are to cultivate art, we need to be aware how hard it is and have those institutional structures in place to support those failures. But art isn't unique in this. Most scientific experiments fail. The CSIRO is full of failures, and if they weren't failing, we'd be wondering why not, aren't they trying hard enough. But there is enough expertise in development now to know how to do it, and all we really need is to utilise those resources in order to create a robust environment within which new work can be developed and tested. And right in the middle of that is the artist. A great film producer once said to me that the role of the producer is to create the space where the artists can play, and this seems to be a

piece of wisdom generally lost on most arts bureaucrats.

Strong Institutions

Australia's arts budget needs to be tripled to be brought up to the OECD average, and a strong set of independent institutions need to be put in place capable of implementing a bold vision of Australian creativity.

Reaching the Audience

The main thing stopping people from enjoying more art is accessibility, including geographic and financial. We don't need better marketing campaigns or even more buildings, what we need is more art.

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

Art was regarded by the LNP as a sop to middle class pretensions, and of no intrinsic value. The idea that accessibility to art might be one of the defining characteristics of a location's liveability escaped them; as does the idea that art and culture are central to anyone's idea of their place in the world. The end result of that neglect and open hostility to the arts has been our national shrivelling and decay, with this playing no small part in the growth of hopelessness and despair evident in the climbing rates of suicide, the endemic cynicism rampant everywhere and the worrying distrust of every level of Government. I would propose the following thought experiment: what sort of place would we like Australia to be in five or ten years – where would we like to live? – one where the local theatre or cinema is putting on a new Australian production, after which you might go to a local coffee shop or bar where you'll be surrounded by other families also out enjoying the night, debating, discussing and engaging with our neighbours; OR what most people have now: a night of Netflix watching Stranger Things and experiencing what it's like living in a decaying America. Living in art enriches life and humanises us, and that's the reason people gravitate toward the cities: for the opportunities they offer, not only economic, but more importantly, experiential. Humans crave art, and without it feel dead. Brecht was wrong. Human society does not arise from "Eats first, morals after," but the reverse: "A sense of purpose and meaning first, and then we know why we're eating." The last Government encouraged us to be pigs at the trough. I'm hoping this Government can help us recall our humanity.