

National Cultural Policy Submission

Combined response from Inala Wangarra and Digi Youth Arts (DYA) input from Aunty Susan Knight, Teila Watson, Nic Innes-Currie, Ethan Enoch-Barlow, Leniesha Duncan, Che Skeen, Paige Parnell

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation, On behalf of an organisation with arts-components (e.g. community organisation, tourism, venue, health, education etc)

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

This response has been curated by First Nations organisations – Inala Wangarra and Digi Youth Arts. Both of our organisations are First Nations led and based in our communities. The creation and telling of stories that are grounded in a lived first nations experience is our core work. One that we have been doing for many years. This is the place where we live. Our work is based in First Nations principles, practice, frameworks and communities – not because this is now a policy focus but because these are our stories.

A facilitated discussion with Elders, artists and community members (who were all paid for their time, their knowledge and their contributions) acknowledged many opportunities, with the key one being – will our work NOW be recognised? Will those of us who ground our work in community, who understand and live and work by cultural protocols and who are held accountable by our communities finally have access to the same opportunities, funding and acknowledgment that other artists and makers have?

The discussion highlighted a number of concerns:

- How to maintain cultural integrity – as larger institutions and non-Indigenous artists and companies start to focus on the inclusion of First Nations (FN) work, how can we ensure that this is done with cultural integrity? There are hundreds of examples when the inclusion of First Nations work is done merely as a tick box exercise, where First Nations artists are treated poorly and with little respect, where the same small group of FN artists (who work well in the mainstream sector) get all the work, where artists who have not had the benefit of a mainstream education are excluded, where a mainstream education is seen as more valuable than working from a place and space that is grounded in protocol, lived experience and connection to community
- How do we have structures or frameworks that allow for FN artists to hold institutions, organisations, arts managers and administrators and artists – both FN and non-FN to account? How can we ask questions without being ‘blacklisted’, being sued for defamation? How does the community hold those practising in this space accountable?
- How do we emphasise the diversity of First Nations mobs all-over so-called Australia? FN people have a wide, rich, and diverse range of experiences from saltwater to freshwater, urban to remote, diverse customs, languages, and practices. How do we move past the idea that real black people live in the desert and produce dot art? How do we value the rich diversity of experiences when audiences may not be asking for this?

- How do we move past the fetishization of culture? How can we present our genuine lived experiences, as uncomfortable as they may make audiences. Where is the audience for this and who is responsible for supporting this? Will mainstream arts organisations have the courage to support us to do this? How can this policy support this work? How do we create a sector that wants the substance and not just the style?

- “We are made to feel small in these spaces” direct quote from a participant. Name can be supplied if needed. We are made to feel small in all areas of the arts sector – how do we trust the institutions that continue to do this to represent us and our culture? How do we trust that we will not be made to feel small again?

A Place for Every Story

Diversity implies that whiteness is at the centre. This is an assumption that should be challenged.

Until the boards, management and producing/ commissioning staff are as diverse as the nation there can be no place for every story. To adequately and accurately tell the stories of those who reside here we must start with First Nations first.

Only Black organisations should be able to apply for Black money. There should be quotas around the inclusion of Black artists, Black work within mainstage productions that moves beyond one work per season, one FN cast member in a show.

One of the key opportunities identified through this consultation was for FN artists to be collaborating more broadly with Indigenous artists worldwide.

The Centrality of the Artist

Artists are shut out by arts administrators. The presence of arts admin provides a layer of bureaucracy that sucks up funding and opportunity that could go directly to artists. How can this be addressed? How can a practising artist make a living wage as an artist and still be living above the poverty line?

How does an artist carve out time to maintain and develop their practice while still being able to maintain a living?

How do we develop ourselves and our careers when to apply for many funding opportunities or to quote for jobs requires layers and layers of bureaucracy and a need to understand how to work in a “white way”? Who is there to support this, to support us developing these skills? Should we have to develop these skills?

As FN artists our focus is on relationality and connection – how can these systems acknowledge this and work in our way instead?

Strong Institutions

Demand that institutions respond to the community – not to just those who have the means to access them. Strong institutions are open – to sharing power, to connecting to the community, to inviting people in and not shutting them out.

These are the spaces that make our community and us feel small. This should no longer be allowed and institutions that claim they are doing the work yet have no FN people on staff in decision making positions (and not just in admin) should be called out. How can this be managed? How can we ensure that organisations are walking the walk? How can institutions decentre whiteness? How can they genuinely understand cultural bias and how this impacts their decision-making.

Institutions should also understand their limitations and partner with smaller organisations that work in community on a day-to-day basis. Organisations that have the relationships, who have built the trust and who work tirelessly to ensure that the arts sector is open to all.

Reaching the Audience

FN arts is not about the audience in the traditional sense. Our communities and collaborators are our first and foremost audiences. Arts practice is integral in our culture and always has been.

Arts practice is the way that we pass our culture, stories, and knowledge on. It is integral that we can continue this. That this does not remain a privilege only for those who can afford it.