

## Reset Arts and Culture

### Submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation

August 2022



#### Who we are

[Reset Arts and Culture](#) is a collaboration between cultural sector professionals, artists, and researchers from South Australia's three universities. As a collective, we aim to combine our practice, research, and activist experience in a space for new ideas, policy engagement, advocacy, and change.

Reset is seeking to promote the public value of art and culture, and the necessity to re-establish art and culture's place in progressive public policy, through considering a wide range of ideas within the arts, heterodox economics, ecological thinking, people-centred design, and labour rights campaigning.

This submission has been prepared for the Reset Arts and Culture collective by Dr Tully Barnett (Flinders University, College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences), Jennifer Mills (author and activist), Professor Justin O'Connor (University of South Australia, Creative People Product and Place Research Centre), and Emma Webb OAM (Arts Industry Council of South Australia and Vitalstatistix). It draws on other co-authored writings by the collective.

#### Two provocations

A decade of LNP governments, and several more of neoliberalism, have done enormous damage to art and culture in Australia. It will take a lot of work and resources to undo this damage and requires a fundamental reappraisal of the relationship between Australian art and culture and Australian society.

Creative Nation positioned culture as central to Australia's future as a democratic, multicultural, globally engaged and economically diverse country. But thirty years on culture's role is marginal and confused, oscillating between a cutting-edge growth industry and a mendicant basket case.

A new National Cultural Policy is an opportunity to put art and culture on a new footing, positioned to meaningfully contribute to a changing, democratic nation on a planet in danger. This policy can help us reimagine culture as a public good, and think differently about how it is publicly funded and regulated, how its workers are treated and educated, how its audiences and participants are respected, and how it interacts with public and democratic spaces.

With an understanding that the new National Cultural Policy is the beginning not the end of a process of restoring the value and democratic governance of art and culture in Australian public policy, there are two questions the new policy needs to get right.

**Is it an economic policy or a cultural policy?** To truly recalibrate and recover art and culture in Australia, we must break with the assumptions and language of 'creative industries' and other types of instrumentalisation of art and culture.

This is not to be written off as ‘art for art’s sake’, but rather let us acknowledge its distinct contribution to society *as* art and culture - not as appendages to health, economy, social services or training. This unapologetic affirmation of art and culture’s definitive public value, which is newly asserted by the United Nations and happening in culture ministries globally, needs to be imbued throughout this new policy.

**Is it an ‘arts’ plan or a cultural policy?** The arts are central to any cultural policy, but cultural policy goes beyond these, to heritage, communications, media and aspects of trade, education, infrastructure and more.

A National Cultural Policy has the chance to be an epochal policy and vision statement by the new Australian Government. However, as it stands it will be limited in vision and in implementation without the establishment of a new Ministry for Culture. This should be the key announcement that comes alongside the new policy.

### **Taking these provocations further**

#### **Breaking with ‘creative industries’**

The ubiquitous rise of ‘creative industries’ and ‘creative economy’ rhetoric has come at a significant cost for the arts and cultural sector. Art and culture - faced with funding cuts, culture wars, and the ‘private good, public bad’ mantra - has increasingly embraced an economic view of its own significance. Not only have successive governments ignored the flaky and over-inflated claims of the creative industry narrative, the sector has also allowed its self-understanding to be thoroughly imbued with neoliberal fundamentalism.

We can see this in the default models for artists and arts organisations. Artists forced to masquerade as small businesses and start-ups, the pervasive language of entrepreneurship and innovation, governance models which infantilise artists, and creative education that is increasingly hollowed out and given over to Business 101 programs.

Like other sectors – such as health and education – art and culture has a mixed economy. It does have a significant economic footprint and includes production that can be called ‘industrial’, alongside a broad system of public institutions, private firms, not-for-profit corporations, cooperatives, and individual creators and participants.

Taken all together, art and culture should not be imagined as a growth-focused, competitive industry primarily driven by private profit, but a diverse and interdependent ecosystem essential to the public life of contemporary democracies.

No matter how it is organised and delivered, art and culture’s *primary* value is its *public* value: it enriches us individually and collectively. And governments have a responsibility to foster art and culture even when they do not supply it directly.

However, rather than having the remit and resources to promote an expansion of cultural and artistic aspiration and practices, art and culture *as a public sector* in Australia has been hobbled. Its own inherent value – sensory and experiential knowledge, unorthodox thinking, collective bonding, radical dissent, shared symbolic meanings, emancipatory imagining - has disappeared into creative industries, creative economy, innovation spillovers or as primers for Industry 4.0.

It is essential that the new National Cultural Policy ambitiously speaks to and is organised around the value of and right to art and culture, definitively.

### **For a new Ministry for Culture**

It's precisely this mixed economy, diverse ecosystem, and public value, that points to a key reason why a new Ministry for Culture would be the most far-reaching reform that the new Government could make alongside its new vision and plan for culture in Australia.

Over the past two decades the arts has been tacked onto many other departments. Instead, arts should be at the heart of a culture portfolio that draws together elements currently scattered across the cabinet. Currently, the arts are buried at the bottom of a drop-down menu, while media and communications (including public and commercial broadcasting), which overlaps extensively with 'culture', is the responsibility of another minister.

The last three decades have revealed a widening gap between the claims made for culture as having an impact on all aspects of our lives, and the stark reality of its absence from the public policy table. A culture ministry would allow the effective aggregation of the government's significant cultural expenditure across areas such the arts, heritage, our national collecting institutions, broadcasting, games, digital media, music, film and television, and more.

The models are there in the UK, in the Nordic countries, across the EU, in Canada and South Africa. Frame the new Ministry around cultural rights, equitable production, and citizen participation, rather than the language of creative industries, industrial growth, consumer choice, and export markets. Such a Ministry for Culture would have the weight to add its specific voice alongside those departments responsible for health, education, social services, as a public good.

Culture's continued absence from public policy making, significantly weakens that policy making. As Professor Hans Mommaas, Director of The Netherland's Environmental Assessment Agency, put it to us recently:

*In the midst of the various problem agendas... there is no clear place or storyline any longer for the role of culture—in the sense of creating and celebrating collective forms of imagination, communication, perspectives... [We] must have a rich cultural sphere in itself... for culture to be instrumental to these other agendas... So why not start with redeveloping the storyline that in the midst of the crises we find ourselves in, we urgently need a revival of a cultural sphere and that the current lack of this has been a big mistake... because it is producing [a] distrust in the future and [a] lack of collective imagination.*

A properly resourced Ministry for Culture would greatly improve the governance and status of art and culture, giving it the heft to take its seat at the centre of future government policy making.

### **Central concepts for the National Cultural Policy**

In this submission, we have chosen not to address each proposed National Cultural Policy pillar directly. Instead, we have found it more useful to raise some concepts that relate to themes within the pillars and within the five goals/concepts raised by the Australia Council for the Arts framing submission.

## **Caring for Country and Culture**

As is clear in the draft National Cultural Policy pillars and the Australia Council submission, support for “thriving and self-determined First Nations creative ecosystems” is essential. This needs to include centring First Nations leadership and sovereignty, and engaging in truth-telling and deep listening, treaty and reparation.

A new National Cultural Policy can learn from First Nations ontologies and follow the lead of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in understanding that culture is foundational to everything we do, including but not limited to identity, language, social cohesion, and care for the places we live.

The new National Cultural Policy should more explicitly centre the important First Nations concept (and practice) of Caring for Country and Culture.

We know that full acknowledgement of that concept presents a radical challenge to some beliefs and practices, of endless growth and unlimited extraction, of treating ‘nature’ as a dead instrument and humans as individual consumption units.

Encouraged and supported by a new National Cultural Policy, and a real commitment to listening to First Peoples, the Australian arts and cultural sector can take a lead in the radical reimagining that is required to meet the global challenges of climate change and a post-extraction, post-growth world.

## **The Right to Culture**

Article 27 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right of everyone to access, participate in and enjoy art and culture, cultural heritage, and cultural expressions. As a signatory to this declaration, Australia acknowledges that access to art and culture is a human right.

Instead of spending millions on ‘impact assessments’ conducted by Big Four accountancy firms, we need an audit of the Australian population’s de facto capability to exercise its full right to culture across a lifespan.

The Australian state should exercise its rights under the 2005 UN Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, to treat cultural goods and services as having both cultural and economic value, and thus subject to local cultural policy priorities. Any review would explore the re-regulation of publishing, audio-visual and ‘platform’ sectors in the light of the cultural rights and needs of the Australian people and the United Nations’ recent call for culture to be a ‘global public good’.

A National Cultural Policy that directly addresses the question of *rights* – cultural rights and civil/human rights – can then empower both government and the sector itself to address issues such as major barriers to access and participation in art and culture, the labour rights of makers, and access to arts and cultural education at every level of our education system.

## **Participatory Democracy**

‘Democratisation of culture’ has become a buzz phrase encapsulating increased digitalisation and access to information technology and platforms, and the impact of this on individual consumer choices. However, this is a very limited framing of democratic participation.

Cultural policy is an important component of democratic nations, and the new National Cultural Policy should claim a wide-ranging, collective, and participatory understanding of democracy. If we take culture to be a civil right, essential alongside other rights, then embracing the work of participatory democracy and justice should be central to everything we do.

This approach to arts and cultural policy brings it into dialogue with areas like education systems, urban and regional planning, telecommunications, media diversity, and decolonisation and reparation. It also empowers us to democratise arts institutions and to better embrace democratic forms of organisation at the grassroots.

A focus within a new National Cultural Policy on rights, democracy, and participation, should provide a pillar for new forms of governance and leadership, where the sector can re-examine its practices, including the outdated infantilising of artists and creative workers through an insistence on corporatised boards and rigid managerial leadership structures.

The arms-length funding of art and culture is a democratic principle which should be explicitly assured in a new National Cultural Policy. Within a Ministry for Culture, statutory authorities such as the ABC and the Australia Council would be funded at significantly more ambitious levels and given new protections from direct political interference.

## **Cultural Labour at the Core**

We are heartened to see that the centrality of artists’ cultural labour is a pillar within the new National Cultural Policy framework. We believe the more explicit this can be the better and that it should not be reduced to the broader area of developing thriving sector health and ecology.

Artists and other arts workers are some of the lowest paid and most insecure workers in Australia. We must confront the cognitive dissonance here – the promotion of the job creation, economic and social benefits of the arts while artists themselves are often not provided dignified employment conditions and earn average annual incomes below the minimum wage.

Artists have been made to masquerade as ‘very small business’, whittling out sub-standard incomes in the gig economy, missing out on entitlements (fair pay, leave, superannuation) that most other workforces take for granted, and subsidising public cultural life with unpaid labour.

Dealing with these issues will be a big task going forward; the sector has a widening ignorance about its own labour force (funnily enough this hasn’t been a focus of the accountancy firm reports) and this will need to be improved through public sector investment.

Explicitly highlighting cultural labour – and fair conditions of labour - in the new National Cultural Policy points to the bigger issue of where art and culture, and its workers, sit in the economy. Art and culture has a ‘labour-intensive, low productivity’ workforce – like health and education – and

in finally recognising this and moving away from 'jobs and growth' rhetoric, the cultural sector could join the wider debates on the future of work.

This priority in a new National Cultural Policy can open initiatives around regulation of the gig economy, procurement policies that link public funding with fair pay and conditions in the sector, and better ways of directly supporting artists and cultural workers such as basic income initiatives, job guarantees, fellowships and public employment schemes.

### **Beyond 'Australian Stories'**

While nobody expects a full-scale philosophical definition, the short-hand description of the public value of art and culture as promotion of 'Australian stories' is inadequate and restrictive. While it points to the importance of multiple voices and attempts to give shape to individual and common experiences, culture is more than narratives and it exceeds the bounds of our (debatable) 'national identity'.

Facilitating the full and equitable participation in the ongoing collective conversation that is art and culture should not be so easily reduced to narratives of national identity, however multiple.

This is not to deny the crucial importance of protecting and nurturing local production, and to ensuring diverse Australian voices are visible and heard, which should be components of the National Cultural Policy.

However, art and culture involve a complex, often dissonant, multi-faceted exploration of our individual and common experience in ways that exceed the bounds of scientific or administrative rationality. And artistic and cultural practice exceeds affirmative story-telling.

Moreover, Australia is entangled in the world to a greater extent than ever, and the pandemic and accelerating climate change has surely made us even more aware of a planetary co-existence. Culture is more than Australian stories and exportable 'content'. Beyond 'soft power' and cultural diplomacy, important as they may be, Australian art and culture should contribute to the planetary conversation, being a force for peace and democracy.

As such a new National Cultural Policy should include and celebrate a sense of internationalism. Australia should take its full place in global cultural conventions and forums, live up to its commitments in contributing to cultural development funds, and become again, through art and culture, an active global citizen.