



A New National Cultural Policy Submission – Australian Theatre Live

This submission suggests several policy changes specific to the field of Digital Arts. Our reasons are outlined below but in summary we believe they should:

1. Establish a **Digital Arts Assistance Scheme** to create Digital Arts content for theatre, opera, ballet, dance and fine music.
2. Offer multi-year funding to organisations capable of collaborating successfully with arts companies and managing distribution networks.
3. Update the funding guidelines of principal funding bodies such as the Australia Council and Screen Australia to recognise and support Digital Arts production.
4. Adjust the Australia Council's independent assessors system to allow council specialists to have much greater discretionary powers.
5. Encourage partnership agreements with Digital Arts producers and arts companies of all kinds, mainstream and independent, across the range of artistic disciplines.
6. Allow digital media production companies access to tax and offset advantages similar to those offered through Screen Australia.
7. Establish a quote of arts programming through the ABC on Free-To-Air and streaming platforms.
8. Encourage buy-in arts grant funding through Federal agencies such as Tourism, Regional Development, Skills Training and Foreign Affairs.
9. Introduce a state-franchised National Lottery Scheme to subsidise arts and culture entertainment as operates currently in the UK.
10. Devise measures to allow greater access for film-makers to local cinema programming currently dominated by US and UK distribution companies.

It's Time to reinvigorate our Australian Arts ecology, broaden audience demographics and support the rebuilding of careers in all the major fine arts.

The matter is urgent.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the GDP percentage of Australian Government spending on the arts has been declining, now down to 0.72 per cent compared to 1.09 per cent in other OECD countries, shameful for a wealthy nation such as ours.

According to recent Live Performance Australia figures, audiences for theatre and opera have fallen over the past 18 years, (2.2m in 2004 to 1.5m in 2019 for theatre; 630k in 2004 to 435k in 2019 for opera), despite a 5 million population increase. Ballet, dance and classical music audiences have effectively flatlined over the same period.

Australian Theatre Live proposes we meet the challenge of rebuilding audience capacity by developing a comprehensive Digital Arts Assistance Scheme, (DAAS).

Many of the world's cinemas screen everything from live opera and ballet to rock concerts and sport. Now that almost all cinemas have replaced their traditional tools of mechanical projectors with digital technology, the possibilities for alternate content, known as Event Cinema, are endless.

Recent advances in the digital recording, distribution, exhibition and online streaming industries have fundamentally changed how people engage with the arts.

Millions of art lovers here and around the world are now literally plugged-in to a content provider of some sort.

It's not an exaggeration to claim that recognising, supporting and encouraging these new opportunities would, at a stroke, broaden the social, economic and cultural value of the arts in Australian society.

These developments have occurred so quickly, we believe neither the Australia Council, nor Screen Australia, is presently equipped to manage or develop this new industry using current funding guidelines.

Recently, an Australia Council assessor asked of our application for funding assistance, "why is this a theatre project and not a screen project?". And at Screen Australia, we were told assistance was available for scripted films only. While both organisations are very sympathetic to the problem, it clearly requires Ministerial intervention or policy revisions to resolve.

We suggest this scheme, DAAS, as a new Federal arts initiative to be administered through either the Australia Council, who have embarked on creating a Digital Cultural Strategy, or more preferably, through Screen Australia, which is more aware of film funding rules and requirements; are more familiar with film distribution networks and already connected with major online content providers here and overseas.

A new Cultural Arts Policy should recognise these significant and irrevocable changes to the entertainment landscape, not just to engage a wider audience but to reward artists, writers, performers and film-makers financially.

The UK's National Theatre Live productions now reach over 7 million people in 60 countries.

Theatre, opera, ballet and classical music concerts are now available in cinemas, arts centres and online via SVOD and TVOD digital platforms, - most of them foreign owned and controlled.

The digital arts industry also represents a golden opportunity to establish a global platform for Australian artists, directors and entrepreneurs eager to display the quality of our high-arts content and to share Australian stories and values with the world.

The opportunity is now, but the barriers against competing successfully in this new industry are high.

In cinemas, Australian content is dominated by the major US and UK distribution companies and available 'slots' for locally made films are restricted, - not to mention for the 40-odd Australian films made and released every year.

And according to the Screen Producers Association, the level of Australian content online, "is in a dire strait". The largest provider, Netflix, with over 6 million subscribers here, offers only 2 – 2.5 percent local content.

Also, research in the UK reports that while arts companies are keen to participate in creating digital versions of their productions, they struggle with the technology, the rights and royalties negotiations, and acquiring the film-making skills necessary to capture a quality product people are prepared to pay for.

That's understandable. Theatre, opera, ballet and fine music shows are difficult enough to stage without having to produce a digital version, no matter how exciting or valuable the prospects might be.

Only by forming partnerships in close collaboration with film production companies familiar with the conventions of theatre, opera, music and dance, will these opportunities be successfully realised.

New robust and innovative investment structures are needed to better align these creative partnerships. Tax-breaks, offsets and financial incentives offered in the film industry should also apply to digital arts content makers.

The benefit to arts organisations is significant. At a recent inquiry by the House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts, (2016), the Australian Ballet reported, "The digital environment that we are now operating in is of incredible value to us ... we are increasingly recording in digital quality the performances that we give to main stage audiences".

The same joint party committee recommended (8), “the Australian Government consider, as parts of its grants programs strategies to promote and support digital developments for arts delivery and engagement, providing funding and support (to): “emerging groups with innovative models, for example, Australian National Theatre Live, which is a new enterprise aiming to record, produce and screen quality Australian theatre performances to cinemas and locations across Australia”.

The Federal Government is yet to follow-through with comprehensive funding guidelines, but already seed funding on a one-off basis has achieved results.

In the years since that report, Australian Theatre Live has successfully captured 18 live performances of theatre and opera; negotiated rights agreements with unions, artists, theatre and opera companies and agents; screened in over 40 cinemas, arts centres and community halls around the country; written distribution deals with 2 international streaming platforms, and partnered with 15 major and independent production companies including the Sydney Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre, Melbourne’s Malthouse Theatre, and the State Theatre Company of South Australia.

Most of our productions have been funded through the now defunct Catalyst Program and through the Federal Government’s RISE initiative, which no longer exists.

Without further assistance we, and other digital production houses, risk missing out on the biggest growth areas of cinema and online programming happening today.

Research in the UK shows that Event Cinema content has successfully attracted new audiences to cinemas which in turn has attracted new audiences to live performances. (Pre-Covid-19, box office for Event Cinema was worth \$5M in Australia).

In economic terms, by far the biggest beneficiaries will be the arts companies themselves, marketing their brand and reputation more broadly, and open to new sources of revenue.

Where one play might enjoy good ticket sales over a short season in a big city, the digital version has the potential of increasing audience size tenfold over a number of years, providing much greater returns.

Advantages also flow to artists and creatives with extra income negotiated through rights and royalty agreements.

Drama and English students too will benefit from access to a library of live performances not previously available to them and gradually, an archive of our live-performance heritage will be formed.

In summary, a Digital Arts Assistance scheme will:

1. Make the arts more accessible and affordable to all Australians
2. Reach audiences across the country and around the world
3. Create new sources of revenue and jobs for arts organisations
4. Strengthen the sustainability of the arts and their institutions
5. Profile and celebrate artistic talent and achievement
6. Encourage all Australians to enjoy, criticise and participate in the development and direction of our artistic heritage.

A new Culture Policy should also include a strategy to address the dominance of US and UK cinema distribution businesses and devise ways to allow easier access of Australian film and digital arts content to Australian cinemas.

Millions in tax-payer funds are invested in film production with little attention paid to a film distribution system that effectively prevents most Australians from seeing them.

It’s also worth considering a state-franchised National Lottery scheme, as applies currently in the UK, to help subsidise the arts. Last year \$630M levied from their lottery scheme went to arts organisations.

Digital Arts enables all Australians to enjoy, criticise and participate in the development and direction of our artistic heritage.

It provides value for the investment most Australians already contribute in subsidies to artists and organisations with the promise of future sustainability.
A successful digital arts dividend would underpin our economy, encourage innovation and the quality of life for all regardless of distance, accountability or affordability.

Regarding Individual Pillars:

First Nations:

Most First Nation communities are beyond the reach of touring companies, but they are connected through wi-fi or cellular networks.

A Digital Arts Assistance Scheme meets the challenge of reaching and engaging First Nations people, particularly remote Indigenous communities, as never before.

Evolving developments in digital media production and distribution have the potential to reshape Aboriginal culture, especially for younger generations.

By connecting to the internet, it is now possible for First Nations audiences to enjoy, criticise and participate in the development and direction of our artistic heritage and share their own stories easily and affordably.

Easy access to the digital arts, - including dance, contemporary and classical music, opera and theatre, would also help build a sense of inclusion and develop the necessary pathways towards 'closing the gap'. Digital media as a social practice has also changed how youth in remote Indigenous Australia are using oral and written language.

A Place For Every Story:

A comprehensive Digital Arts Assistance policy would resolve current inequities of distance and economic disadvantage by creating an access point for Australians of all ages, occupations and backgrounds. Technological advances in the film recording and distribution industries enable the screening of significant live performances much more widely. Now cinemas, arts centres and community halls across the country can screen theatre, opera, dance and musical concerts to arts lovers everywhere and at cinema ticket prices. Online viewers, too can access high-quality performances recorded live as never before.

Ensuring equity in an era of accelerating digitisation is critical at a time when foreign arts distributors are busy colonising the local arts scene to our cost.

A Digital Arts Strategy will lower barriers to access and participation in the arts enabling artists to tell their stories and reach more diverse audiences in much greater numbers.

Centrality of the Artist:

Artists too will benefit enormously from a Digital Arts Assistance Scheme that will see their incomes increase with a share of performance rights and royalties. New business models will encourage investment as it becomes self-sustaining, growing skills and digital literacy in the arts at all levels, onstage, backstage, in front and behind the cameras.

A thriving Digital Arts industry will also cross-pollinate the creative skills of theatre, opera, dance and music with film, distribution and content makers across our entire arts ecosystem.

Artists of all kinds are due much greater recognition by the Australian public. They are the custodians of our national imagination, communicating our values locally and globally. With a wider audience reach, they'll be discoverable, profiled and celebrated as our sports stars and heroes are today.

Strong Institutions:

The arts help us to understand one another, and introduce us to new ideas and opinions, a necessary part of a healthy civic community. Access to the arts through a Digital Arts window will introduce students to a new mode of learning, reinforcing our

education institutions. A viable digital arts market will have spin-off effects across a broad range of government departments, including Trade, Tourism, Education, Health and Training, and in particular, Employment, and Treasury. Robust, and potentially lucrative, partnerships will form around live-performance, film, distribution and entrepreneurial industries.

However, current funding guidelines of our principal arts organisations need to be updated urgently to capitalise on this new and fast-developing industry. As an example of what's possible, the UK's Arts Council invested in digital theatre in 2009 through National Theatre Live. Now, NTLive productions have been seen by over 7 million people in 2,500 venues across 60 countries with millions more online. They are now a profit-making business recording and releasing between 8 and 12 plays per year.

One public institution which could do more to encourage and promote the arts is the ABC, perhaps by imposing quotas. Digital arts are a ready and inexpensive source of program content and where in the past, negotiating rights and agreements may have been problematic, those barriers are long gone with unions, artists and agents also embracing these new opportunities.

Our own organisation ATLive has successfully released 20 Australian theatre and opera performances, partnering with 18 production companies and dozens of artists, performers and writers. With the ABC's access to digital skills and broadcast networks reaching over 8 million people, including 46% of the five-city metropolitan population, they are perfectly placed to capture much greater audiences for the digital arts.

Reaching the Audience:

An effective Digital Arts Strategy is all about promoting patronage in the arts. Where now, access to the fine arts is expensive and beyond the reach of most Australians due to distance, affordability or opportunity, a Digital Arts Assistance Scheme has the potential to engage all Australians for the price of a cinema ticket or via a subscription platform.

That impact alone could be dramatic, given that taxpayers already subsidise arts companies and productions they'll never see, engage with, or participate in. Across all 3 levels of government, \$11.6B is spent on arts and culture per year, so a greater audience reach means much greater value for their investment.

And not just for local audiences. The Digital Arts has a global reach, providing opportunities to establish skills, ideas, networks and reputations worldwide.

New business models would foster multicultural collaboration between countries and international distribution networks, creating new sources of revenue shared with artists, performers, and practitioners.

Digital arts can reach parts of this broad country expensive touring productions cannot, not to replace but to complement the magic of experiencing live performance.

From cinema screens to iPhone screens, nobody is left out.

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