

National Cultural Policy Submission

Nexus Arts

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

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

First Nations arts are crucial and central to an intercultural understanding of Australian arts; in turn, an intercultural understanding of Australian arts is vital to a thriving and relevant sector. Nexus Arts recognises First Nations arts and artists as occupying a fundamental place at the heart of our culture. We recognise that Australian arts and cultural institutions must undergo a process of decolonisation in order to move towards reconciliation. We acknowledge the work to be undertaken, and we commit to ongoing and considered learning and listening. We believe that these processes must be embedded in all publicly funded organisations, and that narrative and measurable outcomes must be considered, especially in all major performing arts organisations, noting that the small-to medium sector currently leads in this regard despite their inequitable funding status

A Place for Every Story

In Australian arts, true representation is still a goal and not a reality. Our main stages are still overwhelmingly monocultural, and there must be concerted efforts made to ensure that the aspirational statement of “a place for every story” is supported through concrete measures. Nexus Arts points to the excellent submission made by Diversity Arts Australia, co-signed by our organisation, for policy suggestions and rationale in this particular regard.

The Centrality of the Artist

There remains a dire and pressing need to find a way to keep artists practicing within the sector, through creating pathways to sustainable careers and through a redefinition of success, acknowledging its different meanings within distinct cultures and individuals. The message that “arts work is real work” must be promoted, and the value (in both economic and intangible cultural and societal terms) of the artist as part of contemporary Australia must be rebuilt following the active work undertaken by previous governments to undermine this.

Strong Institutions

Nexus Arts champions the role of the small-to-medium sector within the Australian arts and cultural ecology. The S2M sector needs significant investment at a federal level, beginning with an inspirational and legacy-making level of funding input into the Australia Council for the Arts that is quarantined to this sector and that will support more organisations to access 4-year funding. In the most recent 4-year funding round, numerous South Australian doing excellent and vital work were either defunded or unsuccessful: simply put, more investment means stability for the diverse, sector-leading, S2Ms that provide the essential “middle” layer within the cultural sector between independent artists and major organisations. The reliance on project funding for core activity experienced by most organisations in the S2M sector is deeply problematic, and can only be addressed by a significant increase in funds in the organisational funding pool.

Within the S2M sector, unrealistic expectations of the stretch of the funding dollar abound within funding bodies. Salaries (speaking from a South Australian perspective) are well below industry

standard, and burnout in artswriters extremely widespread. All this can only be addressed through increased federal funding support, bringing S2M organisations to a base sustainable level where they can, for example, dedicate capacity to fundraising and development activities: something well beyond most organisations who struggle to support a base level of organisational activity.

While support of institutions is essential, Nexus Arts believes that the artist must be centred within the institution. Challenges on this front abound, but can be addressed through measures including representation of artists on Boards, and diverse leadership including the support of part-time leadership roles for artists within arts organisations.

Reaching the Audience

Art must be for everyone, and participation must be universal. Nexus Arts believes that this begins with the education system, which must see arts and culture embedded from R-12 (P-12, K-12). There is a desperate need at present to elevate the status of artists to valued and respected members of society: not beyond this, to cult or celebrity status, but to a base level where their important work is acknowledged alongside that of other professions, and where a career in the arts is seen as viable. This must begin with our education system. Arts in schools must be mandated, and specialist teachers engaged to deliver these subjects.

There must be continued investment in research that leads to the dissemination of concrete and actionable outcomes. In 2021, Nexus Arts published the Toolkit 'You're Welcome: A Guide for Arts Organisations to Increase Cultural Diversity in Their Audiences', following a 2-year research project. Diverse projects of this nature, led by well-placed organisations/bodies across Australia, must be supported.

It must be acknowledged that pure "audience numbers" do not alone indicate success, as it is vital that all parts of Australian society are engaged in arts and culture, and at times this will necessitate targeted initiatives for smaller demographics. What should be measured is the impact and legacy of engagement: how does art serve its audience. This should be a mandated reporting line for funding agreements.

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

While economic arguments, and the centring of the argument that "arts work is real work", are vital to the rebuilding of the sector in the coming years, the values argument must never be missing from cultural policy. We must promote the essentiality of arts and culture. We must trumpet its values: its benefit to society, its ability to promote cohesion and wellbeing, and the power of storytelling. We need to redress the active work undertaken by the previous government/s in diminishing and undermining the role of the arts and remind ourselves that art is central to humanity. For a long time, the arts sector has been told to prove its worth in economic terms. We've done this, and demonstrated our significant impact, and we've still been ignored. It's time that policy is led by a recognition of the core and inherent values of the arts to and in our lives: humanity, connection, storytelling, sharing, entertainment, beauty, challenge, enrichment. If we are to understand the essentiality of the arts, we must look to the less tangible.