

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation; As an artist; As an individual

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:

A Place for Every Story

As a queer person/artist stemming from lower socio-economic (poverty) and extreme levels of domestic violence (including 5 years of childhood sexual abuse/rape), I have always struggled with the effects of the violence from my childhood, have faced more classist and ableist attitudes and actions than I can count. More understanding, through consultation with people with actual lived experience of poverty, abuse and resultant, later life, disability, needs to be engaged.

In 2015 I was finally diagnosed, by an autism expert, as being autistic/ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition) and then in 2016 as also having significant ADHD. I was then again diagnosed, by an even more reputable autism expert, in 2020, as autistic and ADHD in order to receive the disability support pension (DSP). This was an extensive 12 month diagnosis. Late 2021 I was accepted into the DSP program.

My partner and I (along with my autism and complex trauma specialist) are in the process of applying for NDIS in order for me to have an assistant around all the difficulties I face professionally on a day-to-day basis.

I've just been published in the latest edition of Artslink – Sensoria: Access and Agency. If you might be interested to know a little about how unorthodox, though innovative, my movement/dance practice is. I am finding more and more these days that I need to work outside the national dance community in order to have a more hopeful and less judgemental career in dance as a senior artist. This is also subject to the trappings of living and working from / within a community with less population than say, the UK, US etc. But it's also a far smaller community with even smaller possibilities of securing funding – especially if you live with a disability that overwhelms you to the point of collapse, and often. We don't want people's pity, we want your ears and hearts to be a little more open to understanding our contexts. There's so much talk about embracing diversity, but who is opening and closing the gate around what this actually means?

When I first 'came out' – trying to claim space and my rightful identity - as living with disability, I experience some intense discrimination (from individuals and agencies – with the arts and elsewhere), around my disclosure. Whilst several close friends embraced my needs to move away from shame and claim my space, too many others found it laughable, even incredulous. I was subsequently sidelined, minimized, told things like, "Oh Dean, that's just ridiculous!" etc.

But these sorts of ignorant attitudes are nothing new to me – I've experienced this all my career for having tried to cross over aspects of my queer performance practice with my more mainstream dance practice, as well as having put much of my lived experience of poverty, abuse and disability into my

works. So much shunning and disapproval. And I am not the only one who has experienced such things. I know of many artists, several who gave it all up as a result, who've experienced one form or another of prejudice and cold-shouldering – just for claiming our space for the people (then the artist) we are.

What these people and agencies don't know is that, under the psychosocial definition of disability within the Australian Government (since 1993!), the chronic Complex-PTSD from severe and prolonged childhood abuse is also classified as a disability. The struggles I've more often than not, faced as a leading dancer/choreographer/educator and movement researcher, have been with me ever since I 'found dance by dance' when I was 21 years old.

I have often felt like a fraud – imposter syndrome – because so many people I've worked with in contemporary dance and performance come from middle/upper middle and upper class backgrounds with education and, often, money coming from their parents to pay their way through Uni and even through their first years as an artist.

I have worked outside the arts community on countless times – outreaching to youth (in particular, LGBTIQI+) and people of all ages living with disability, since 1996. Back in the day I was often scoffed at for taking on such work. But it was not only a way I found I could earn money because of my own lived experiences and my fast-growing skills as an autistic artist (who had zero exposure to the arts as a kid), it was also assisting in my own ability to find agency and leadership where I otherwise felt quite out of place in the mainstream arts. Even as an independent dancer and choreographer.

But look, there's really so much more to say here and I am very tired as I've only just today (deadline day) found that this survey was happening. If anyone would like to consult me more, I'm ready and willing. I'm also in the first stages of writing a book about it all. I also have several articles published in recent years through people who do give a damn and want my voice heard – something I've never really experienced.

The Australian government defines disability in the following ways:

Sensory, Intellectual, Physical, Psychosocial, Head injury, stroke or acquired brain injury, Other.

<https://www.apsc.gov.au/working-aps/diversity-and-inclusion/disability/definition-disability>

Also:

“Persons are considered to have a disability if they report they have a limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least **two years** and restricts everyday activities”.

The Centrality of the Artist

I'm not so sure I understand what is meant by this, as being an 'artist', in the first instance, remains a pipe dream for so many incredibly talented people I see and work with out in the wider public. I mean, I can't even get heard by the bigger, faster and ignorant systems that prevail out there and that are still being run by people who don't want to listen to many years of actual lived experience. There's just so much nepotism out there too.

I'm co-director of a relatively new company, Weird Nest, alongside my partner, composer, performer and producer, Andrew Batt-Rawden. I have been really struggling with being a leader in this regard, even though I really want to. I have knocked on many doors for assistance but many who know me cannot seem to reconcile that I struggle (have always struggled), to the degree I do.

Still too many people do not comprehend the degree to which an entire childhood of abuse and trespass can be a life-long disability. And yes, "even for someone like me". They only see my innate talent and skills and not the immensity of my context – even though so many of my performance works have wrestled with class issues, domestic violence, sexual abuse, severe domestic and social homophobia (including home and queer phobia within the arts!).

I've sat on so many funding panels, boards and even audition panels for Uni intakes, and I've often been appalled by the degree of ableism, classism and other prejudices – to the point that I had to stop taking these offers. A disability story in itself.

Strong Institutions

In my 30 year experience, many institutions have too often been impenetrable and for several reasons. I've also had the creative heads of these companies absorb my methodologies – many that have come from my diverse outreach work – and I've seen significant aspects of them and the ideas within them, put on stage without a single credit to me. But given my opportunities for employment are limited, I had to just swallow it and not make waves so as to keep being able to pay rent.

I've approached institutions – tertiary and edifice-size venues – many times in an attempt to articulate what they doing wrong and how I and others could help them be more truly diverse. But again, my ideas haven't been taken on board with my permission and I've watched other companies reap the rewards of my extensive communications. Heartbreaking and infuriating.

Reaching the Audience

All my career (since 1991) I've sought to outreach to as many diverse communities as possible – queer, disability, lower socio-economic. My audiences have often been made up of the people from these communities I work with. But many within these marginalized community have disclosed that they feel really intimidated by attending events because the venues feel really higher class. They experience feelings of anxiety, even panic, that there is a whole world that is otherwise so foreign to them and therefore closed off to them. I know things are changing in this regard, but more of those artists – like myself – with lived experience of poverty, violence, queerness and disability need to be taken seriously and consulted. We have so many valuable perspectives to add to the wider audience attraction to the arts.

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:

A Place for Every Story

I feel like I've answered this in the above section. Sorry, claiming access needs here as I've had an already overwhelming day.

I'm also just really so tired of giving info out like this and not seeing or feeling the resultant benefits. I can be contacted [REDACTED] should you wish to know more.

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

Sure there are – but I am exhausted for the time being, however I would like to be contacted about my answers if you are interested.