

National Cultural Policy Submission

Kenneth Mills

Submitted: As an individual

First Nations

My organisation has a strong record working with the local Indigenous community within a Community Arts & Cultural Development framework. During that time it has been rewarding to observe the growing recognition of Indigenous artists and the contribution that their art can make and has made to the community.

A major challenge in this area lies in the incidence of cultural appropriation and the lack of community-based intellectual property rights to protect Indigenous culture. In some cases cultural appropriation is outright exploitative, as where articles depicting aspects of Indigenous culture and style are produced by non-Indigenous manufacturers and sold in a manner likely to mislead buyers and undercut genuine Indigenous artworks. In other cases it can arise through a lack of understanding, as where a portion of a mural of a former Aboriginal elder was included in a publication produced by a local organisation with a caption printed across the face of the image. Amendment of the Copyright Act 1968 to provide protection for Indigenous works which are collective community property rather than that of an individual artist should be a priority.

A Place for Every Story

The title used here does not seem to convey what I presume to be the intention behind the issue involved. It implies a focus on story-telling—which while important is only a part of the overall picture. Participation in art and cultural activities may or may not tell an obvious story. Whether or not it does so is really immaterial. The process of participation in itself has been shown to produce many and varied benefits. In his 1997 work *'Use or Ornament: the Social Impact of Participation in the Arts'*, Francois Matarosso identified no less than 50 such benefits.

My organisation believes that it is important that these benefits are accessible by everyone without having to navigate barriers associated with cultural or social identities, disability, or financial disadvantage. Our credo is 'Access to the Arts and Culture for Everyone.' Our operating strategy is to provide equitable access to programs by delivering them at no cost and in ways and at locations chosen by participants themselves.

The financially and socially advantaged have no difficulty in gaining access to arts and culture, whether as participants or observers. What is important is that access is facilitated for those who lack that privilege, but may well have both a greater need for the benefits of participation and something valuable to contribute to the community. A more direct focus on identifying and removing barriers to participation should be at the forefront of future planning and delivery.

The Centrality of the Artist

This heading borders on the tautological! Without artists there can be no art. I argue that we should be asking 'who are the artists?' And my answer is 'everyone—or at least everyone who wants to be'. A focus on elite practitioners risks missing the opportunity to capitalise on the established benefits of participation in arts activities.

We have many highly skilled artists within our communities, all of whom deserve consideration of their needs for development and support. I suggest that the conditions of providing such support should include a strategy that entails applying their knowledge and experience to provide community members (whether recognised as artists or not) with the chance to be inspired and to learn and benefit from working alongside them.

Strong Institutions

Arts organisations are central to providing meaningful artistic and cultural experiences in regional areas. Visiting performances by metropolitan artists or organisations who breeze in and out (often taking significant ticket proceeds with them) may provide brief entertainment but do little to foster and develop arts in the regions. To do so requires an ongoing presence and commitment that can only be delivered by organisations based within regional communities.

Community Arts organisations are committed to fostering and supporting the development of local artists and to utilise the potential of arts and cultural activities to build supportive community networks and to bring about social change. Unfortunately having a strong record in attracting funding for project delivery, providing quality experiences for participants, and producing a range of exceptional outcomes does not assure support to meet the basic costs of existence—costs such as rent, insurance, audit, accounting, administration, grant application and acquittal process etc. Securing the core funding necessary to provide the base needed to sustain project delivery is an ongoing difficulty. Inadequate core funding leads inevitably to paid staff hours being reduced while workload remains unaltered. The few funding opportunities available are highly contested, which places pressure on organisations to maximise activity and outcomes in order to be competitive when the next application and assessment round arrives. I know that key staff feel obliged to work unsustainable hours—night after night to midnight and beyond—just to keep their organisations running and projects being delivered. This is clearly unsustainable in the longer term, and can only be resolved by access to sufficient recurrent core funding to support existing activity levels, or else by acknowledgement that achieving an appropriate level of sustainability may require a substantial reduction in activity. In order to prevent the development of a ‘vicious cycle’ characterised by this reduced activity leading to reduced competitiveness at the grant table, and then to further funding reductions.