

National Cultural Policy Submission

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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

There will be a theme in my responses, which is the need for specific and practical aims as part of the cultural policy. Whilst I appreciate this may be more the province of a cultural strategy or plan, I would argue we need to ensure the policy has the capacity to lead to tangible and aspirational outcomes. Central questions, with regard to First Nations: How, specifically, are FN cultures celebrated, recognised and respected?

The challenges and opportunities here relate to the goals as expressed by First Nations peoples (not me), but I would offer that these goals/ambitions need to be concrete. They may relate to providing the right mechanisms for First Nations artists to tell their stories: training, mentorships etc. An opportunity, for example, may be to invest in Stephen Page, now that he is leaving Bangarra, to be a consultant on an emerging First Nations performance company. In fact, one aim might be that every state and territory in Australia has at least one first nations' led, cultural hub/organisation.

The Centrality of the Artist

The challenge here is that a national acceptance of the importance and value of the artist still escapes us. Certainly, when compared with other countries, the centrality of the "sports person" and the person who makes money, would have primacy in Australia over the artist. This notional aim is important but how is it enacted? I believe one of the biggest threats here relates to the liveability of our cities: Artists usually need to be where people are in order to communicate their ideas/work etc.. (this has shifted a bit with the internet, but still largely is true, particularly for the performing arts).

Being with people means living in cities, but cities become increasingly expensive which pushes artists out or they give up. The irony here is that artistic expression gives a city its quality of life – its why people want to go and live there – to be near artistic innovation/expression etc. So, the threat is that our cities become soulless because they are too expensive for artists. This is a big challenge.

Opportunities could be around providing a living wage for artists that means they do not need to go and secure part-time work to survive; more radically, perhaps its an opportunity to create subsidised artist enclaves in cities like Geelong, Newcastle, Cairns etc..as part of a strategy to increase population/business and art production in more regional locations.

Strong Institutions

The aims here need to be for innovation and excellence. Training institutions: The challenges relate (particularly in performing arts) to how we link institutional training to the needs of real world employment and artistic practice. As digital expression, innovation, and global connectivity increases, then we need to ensure training provides skills to prepare for these evolving practices.

Arts Institutions: These are the physical (and on-line) places that inspire our citizens through artistic expression and advocate for the centrality of the artist. Funding to enable these institutions to do their valuable work is critical: Opportunities: Which are the global institutions we aspire to be like? Where is the bar- set and how do we achieve it?

Reaching the Audience

As we move as a country to face significant challenges (climate change, inter-generational economic disadvantage, COVID legacies etc) we need to create a compelling policy that articulates why culture is important in these times of great change. As a nation we do not seem to have a problem understanding why sport is important. However, a collective understanding of why culture is important to all (and not elitist) is more elusive. Part of the answer is strong arts education programs in schools, another is in making quality arts accessible: how do we gather our citizens to experience quality artistic practice at a reasonable price? How do we create an understanding of the extraordinary skills required to pursue culture/art to the highest levels.

Part of the challenge here relates to building understanding around the centrality of the artist – and this can only be achieved if audiences are “reached”. The tyranny of Australian distance plays a role here – we are a very unusual country to “link” with one policy/strategy – its very hard. However, like with all suggestions, they inevitably are linked to money which is much harder within Australia’s geographical context, as it requires more funding to cope with our extreme geography. (see below) In comparison to other countries, our average ticket price is getting higher as a way of balancing budgets in the absence of increases in government funding. In the case of the Seymour centre, government funding represents around 5-10% of our turnover – the rest needs to be sourced from ticket sales, philanthropy, food and beverage sales etc.. The greater the ticket price then the more accessibility (reaching the audience) is reduced.

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

I would like to see an aim that the emergency funding levels provided during COVID (through RISE and various state and federal government initiatives) are used as a benchmark for ideal future arts funding. Currently the Australia Council simply has too little funds to enact any really useful, visionary and ambitious cultural change. Further, with a grant success rate often in the 10-15% range, it makes the work required for arts organisations to apply for grants high-risk with low return.