

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted as an individual – not confidential

22 August 2022

I would like to see a robust defence from arts bodies such as the Australia Council and artform associations of **the freedom of the artist to invent and create.**

A thriving cultural sector is threatened by a drift towards righteous zealotry about what should be the content of art, and who can be the creators of what artworks and stories.

Practices to regulate culture are scattered but growing, as in ‘sensitivity’ readers, art that does ‘no harm’ and cultural ‘safety’. Limitations on artists and writers have emerged based on terms such as ‘lived experience’ or ‘appropriation’, or on what roles actors can play etc. Perhaps ‘problematic’ has become the new way to say ‘heretic’.

These issues are important and open for contestation and negotiation, but art is surely meant to cross boundaries, and great art relies on imagination and empathy, not identity. (And not all artists are nice, and art does not have to have a therapeutic function.)

The shift to more diversity and access in the arts is overdue. However, claims that an artist should not take up the ‘space’ of another seems to be fundamentally absurd. Competition for access to platforms or outlets heightens this rhetoric – the solution is more support and collaboration to ensure that excellence, however defined, always finds a place. (Is there a golden rule that says that a sector or entity must mirror the demographic statistics of the nation? People of different groups have different traits, interests, priorities.)

Usual benchmark terms such as developing talent and supporting excellence have become less important in shaping arts policy and funding decisions, unfortunately submerged by new mantras. Talent and excellence – a lot follows if this is done right, including audiences.

A successful arts policy will accommodate time for artists to observe, experiment and make mistakes.

The most insidious effect of cultural moral pieties is self-censorship amongst artists: hesitant an idea might get marked down by peers and gatekeepers, fearful of the wrath of social media, wary of banishment. Young artists especially can become paralysed with causing offense. In a decade, where will they be? Still in the arts?

Progressives dominate the arts and cultural sector. In these censorious times they would be well advised to use this power wisely and offer clear support for the artistic independence of primary creators, and publicly uphold the principle of freedom of expression.

A national cultural policy should reflect this principle across all areas.

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