

Submission to the public consultation for the National Cultural Policy

Professor Mathew Trinca AM FAHA

Director, Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies, Australian National University

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in the public consultation for a new National Cultural Policy that builds on the successes of *Revive: A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place*.

The launch of *Revive* in 2023 was a landmark in the evolution of arts and cultural policy of nation. Its five pillars, *First Nations First*, *A Place for Every Story*, *Centrality of the Artist*, *Strong Cultural Infrastructure*, *Engaging the Audience*, established a strong foundation for innovation and coherent action to advance Australia's arts and cultural life. We are enjoying the proceeds of this policy now.

Revive was notable for the breadth of its interests across the cultural sector, but the emphasis on *First Nations First* properly ensured that the remarkably diverse cultures and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples took centre stage. Moreover, the *First Nations First* pillar encouraged us to think wholistically about the cultural life of nation, and to realise its value and worth as something inherently much more than the sum of its parts. This is the greatest of *Revive*'s legacies – it invokes an Indigenous way of seeing and understanding the fundamental links between the continent and its cultures and urges us to see them as naturally joined, as parts of a whole, rather than as separate spheres of action.

In that respect, I note the words of Christos Tsiolkas and Clare Wright, authors of the introductory essay who wrote:

Culture...is the sum of our stories and our music, of our paintings and our craft, our films and our games, our songs and our dance, our architecture and design, as well as the history of our wars and conflicts, our arguments, and accords. It is the story of our comings and goings, our migrations....

(G)overnment's role is to invest in our creative infrastructure. To preserve the structures and facilities that make cultural memory possible: our libraries and museums, our galleries and archives, our national broadcasters. It is also to fund the organisations, institutions, technologies, and training systems – small, medium and large; metropolitan, suburban, regional and remote – that generate new cultural representations and forms.¹

¹ C. Tsiolkas and C. Wright, 'A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place' in Commonwealth of Australia, *Revive: A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, pp.11-12

There is now an opportunity for a revised National Cultural Policy to build on its five pillars and develop this embracing vision of our cultural life. We have an opportunity to **bring together policy, funding and administrative arms of the Federal Government responsible for the visual and performing arts, literature and music, the GLAM sector, and place-based heritage to create a new First Nations inspired vision for the cultural ecology of our nation.**

Two fundamental structural changes would serve to encourage and sustain greater linkages and connections between the varied aspects of our arts and cultural lives, and allow for the establishment of 'creative clusters' across Australia to serve our communities and the nation. They are:

1. **Reunite performing, visual, literary and musical arts with place-based heritage and the cultural collections (GLAM) sector at a Federal level for the first time since 2010. It could do this by joining the Office of the Arts to all aspects of place-based heritage in this country, inclusive of the work of the Australian Heritage Council and Heritage Branch of the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water.**
2. **Ensure that the collections (GLAM) sector benefits from a statutory national advisory, policy and coordinating body focused upon its interests - either by widening the remit and resourcing of Creative Australia, or that of the Australian Heritage Council, to cover moveable cultural heritage and place-based heritage, giving these interests the same policy and coordinating architecture as arts industries and workers.**

These structural changes would join the presently divided aspects of our arts, cultural, history and heritage industries together, in a way that makes more sense in intellectual, policy, administrative and common-sense terms.

Moreover, it would properly serve the interests of First Nations people and their communities, who see no reason why their cultural heritage should be split by government *fiat* into two separate administrative, policy and funding areas. This militates against their interests and indeed their fundamental world view, and we should take this opportunity to join these aspects of cultural life together.

The effects of portfolio separation

The fragmented nature of arts and cultural governance at a national level has restricted development of research, policy and funding streams which might more effectively deal with existing obstacles to achieve greater cultural equity, and to derive optimal value

from the breadth of arts and cultural practice in this country. We should be striving, for instance, to connect the different domains and genres of art and cultural enterprise in this country in ways that allow for coordinated work at scale, that reach more people and deal with structural inequalities, that pump-prime creative economies and which ultimately lead to better strategic outcomes.

Our failures in strategic policy and funding across these spheres is particularly apparent when we look at the uneven development of responses to First Nations cultural interests – rather than a coordinated, and ‘joined up’ way of dealing with the need to decolonize our cultural institutions and practices, for instance, we are left with uneven and uncertain ‘piecemeal’ efforts that do not address fundamental questions of First Nations cultural rights and interests in a strategic, comprehensive way.

These policy and administrative divisions have also led to our continuing failure to develop adequate digital cultural infrastructure which might enable greater research and public use of cultural heritage assets. The fractured and at times competing calls for investment to make collections knowable and accessible online has failed to impress successive Australian Governments, despite the advances that have been made in this regard in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

Supporting the cultural ecology of nation

We have never needed our creative enterprise and cultural institutions and practices more than we do now, not for what they tell us, but more for what they enable in our collective interest – strengthening our public culture, demonstrating the value of dialogue, allowing for the respectful contest of ideas, investing in creative and cultural economies across the breadth of this continent.

Approaching this in governance terms wholistically is the first step in nourishing the *cultural ecologies* of our cities, towns and regions, networking and connecting our artistic and cultural practitioners with our heritage assets of all kinds. It is consistent with a First Nations approach that sees culture as indissoluble from Country, and which is fortified by connection and collaboration.

To that end, I would argue that we need to expect more of our cultural governance structures and demand they create opportunities for artists and cultural workers of all kinds to step outside the tramlines of their conventional responsibilities and establish relationships and engage with a host of cultural agents and practitioners in the wider community. We need to connect artistic and cultural genres and practices within the wider ‘cultural ecology’ of nation. And in so doing, to create opportunities for dialogue and debate, for new ground upon which we might *transact* the diverse interests we have in the nation, rather than seeking to reconcile these questions within their walls.

It is no longer tenable to think that investments in organisations and individuals in these sectors should proceed in line with conventions that have persisted over time, largely because no one has been minded to ask for any better. Instead, it might better serve our purposes in this age if we look at the opportunities that come from networking our cultural producers across genres and thinking how this will both fortify our public culture and drive material benefits from the creative economy. We need to stop thinking of cultural practice in silos and imagine the wider cultural ecology of our cities, towns and regions.

This kind of thinking seems to better acknowledge the interrelationships between production and consumption of art, creativity, ideas and other cultural productions, and undermines the conventions of a linear flow between producers and consumers in this area. Secondly, it broadens our understanding of cultural and creative actors or agents and their actions and motivations, and transcends the narrower, more instrumental language of 'cultural economy'. And lastly, it undermines the conventional approaches to governance and management in the cultural and creative sectors.²

The consequence of taking this 'ecological' or 'ecosystem' approach in our arts and cultural spheres is evident in the UK Art and Humanities Research Council's Creative Industries Cluster program which funded connections between universities, GLAM institutions and creative industries partners. The creative clusters approach requires that our institutions, such as museums and galleries, must work dialogically with communities of artists, performers, writers, musicians etc. in mutually supportive and engaged ways - and that all of this should be tied in a programming sense to the needs and interests of our communities, our people, who are searching for ways to navigate the challenges of the present and be reminded of their value, and the role they have in building place and community.

Joined up thinking in arts and cultural spheres is precisely what we need to ensure that the great strengths of First Nations cultures and societies achieve their place in our wider community life that they deserve. At the same time, the coherence that the structural and governance changes proposed here would provide a foundation upon which we might build our vision for dealing with technological change, and artificial intelligence in particular, within arts and cultural practice.

It is my hope is that the next National Cultural Policy will be that which establishes new possibilities for artistic, creative and thinking endeavour of all kinds by rationalising governance structures and putting in place the conditions by which we can develop the research, policy and funding processes needed to achieve greater coherence in strategy and vision for the arts and cultural life of nation. Thank you.

² M. de Bernard, R. Comunian and J. Gross, 'Cultural and Creative Ecosystems: A Review of Theories and Methods, Towards a New Research Agenda', *Cultural Trends*, vol. 31, no.4., 2022, pp.338-9