

National Cultural Policy Submission

fortyfivedownstairs

The arts are more than institutions.

Our governments response to COVID-19 was to provide financial support packages to the country's largest and most profitable arts institutions. We're calling for support for small to medium arts organisations that support the arts and artists from the grassroots up.

In the early 1970's there was a nascent recognition that the arts were more than a few institutions and institutional sectors dotted around the nexus of our eight capital cities. There was a push to encourage the flowing of arts to and from the suburbs and our regions and from the grassroots to the soaring heights. There was, for a time, a concrete offering of modern technologies available from the grassroots and suburban shopfronts.

What seems though to have been the case since then, is a return to a focus on support for and growth of large institutions with branches and satellites being set up to envelop a wider range of participatory art forms.

But art isn't the institution that houses it. Art is an individual or group expression of passion. What we see through the delegation of arts funding is that the established are supported and the emerging are not. This includes vital organisations that support grassroots, emerging to mid-career artists.

To even have the opportunity of gaining financial support from funding bodies, independent artists see that they need to fit the curriculum; to second guess the peer selection committee. Free expression is compromised to fit with the expectations and tastes of a small and select cohort. Art is not produced with passion but with a financial focus. It is proscribed before it has a chance to meet the public gaze. Of the commercial galleries, gallery owners and curators will seldom give an opportunity to an artist they don't see as being able to achieve commercial sales, the institutional galleries with few exceptions do not offer exhibition/sales opportunities to artists. Yes, curators may take a chance on a new artist to add their collection but there is not the opportunity for the general population to view a broader artist specific offering and to buy from within that offering.

This leaves the field for exhibiting and sales to a few artist-run, community and not-for-profit galleries. All relying on financial contributions from the artist to enable the display to happen. There is seldom room in the budget for glossy promotional materials of a major sales pitch.

Small to medium arts organisations need government support and the public agrees. Majority of Australians (58%) support a relief package for live entertainment and half (51%) support doubling funding for the Australia Council.

At least one change needs to be for visual artists to be granted the opportunity to apply for government funding to hire exhibition spaces and to mount exhibitions.

In the visual and decorative arts, only a few independent non-commercial galleries around the country can offer the artist a relatively unconstrained exhibiting opportunity. And unlike the performing arts field, there are few opportunities for exhibiting arts to include the cost of exhibition space in the few available grant and funding rounds.

For performing artists to have a hope of a grant and support they need to lock in venues into dates, in the hope that their show may be one of the lucky ones to receive funding body largesse. This puts many venues in a demanding situation. With venue calendars often being drawn up many months in advance and “pencilled” seasons sitting on diaries until funding announcements are made, venues can often be left in the difficult position of seeing a number of seasons cancelled because the funding submission of a grant-reliant theatre companies was unsuccessful. The financial pressures on non-funded venues through this process can be quite onerous and challenging.

Australia’s few independent un-funded theatres and venues face many challenges in remaining viable. Their continuity is achieved through lean management, venue rental and philanthropic support. When a season built on the hopes of producers receiving OzCo or relevant equivalent state government funding collapses filling the blanks whilst retaining staff and solvency and being able to continue paying outgoings can prove both stressful and problematic.

Again, it is often the independent venues, the not-for-profit, the community or artist run venues that are more willing to take the risk. To not be safe with an audience crowd pleaser. To give the emerging writer, producer, theatre company the chance to make it or the opportunity to fail, and by failing learn and grow. It is the independents, not the funded institutions who are prepared to risk a box-office flop

Organisations within the arts ecology that support mid-career and emerging artists have not only not been supported through meaningful funding, but existing funding has been slashed.

The arts and entertainment sector employs 193,600 Australians, making it a larger employer than finance, accommodation, electricity supply, heavy and civil engineering construction or coal mining. Arts and entertainment employs two thirds as many people as highly politically powerful sectors such as agriculture and construction. Supporting these organisations not only significantly supports arts workers, it provides significant platforms and support for artists to grow their respective practices so that they might develop and refine their crafts so that they may have a future in the institutions/organisations that support established artists.

In the future we need to look then at funding round changes, timeliness and timelines to find a way for venues and their staff to not have to bear loss when an independent producer fails to achieve a successful funding submission.

This may well be in allowing for cascading submissions or providing producers with a stage awareness of where their submission sits in terms of its success. Rather than currently a submission dropping into the Australia Council black hole for six months, waiting until the successful applicants are announced, a series of short-listing announcements may achieve greater certainty both for:

- A. Producers and contracted creatives who will often have more time to seek alternative engagement and for the company to look for alternative productions.
- B. Venues and associated contractors and suppliers who would also be able to avail themselves of a greater window of opportunity to fill the various booking gaps.

In conclusion, whilst recognising the public edifice of our many arts institutions around the country, their foundations are the thousands of creatives, artists and supporters and suppliers who have often worked with scant resources, who have, by necessity taken other jobs to survive whilst working in their chosen field. Who paint, write, sculpt act whilst the sand moves under their feet.

We need ensure the foundations of our arts, sit on bedrock, not on shifting sand for our institutions to hold and exist in a contemporaneous space. For whilst they hold a successful place in our world, they are all built from the struggles of the people who have created art.