

National Cultural Policy Submission

Submission: A New National Cultural Policy

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This submission addresses three connected concerns. First, it questions the centrality accorded artists in the terms of reference of the national cultural policy review, urging the need to place questions concerning support for artists in the broader environment constituted by the relations between cultural institutions and the cultural organisations that those institutions serve. Second, it emphasises the urgent need to consider the roles of cultural institutions in the context of the broader cultural ecology, and its competing priorities and values appropriate to Australia's position as a socially and culturally diverse country in a globalising world. Third, it argues forcibly for more regular and systematic statistical monitoring and evaluation of the publics targeted and reached by publicly-funded cultural institutions and practices in order to ensure a more equitable distribution of funding across different sections of the Australian population than is currently the case.

1. The Centrality of the Artist

In October 2011, two of us (Stevenson and Rowe) made a submission to the National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper in the quest for a successor to *Creative Nation* (1994). *Creative Australia* subsequently emerged in March 2013 under the then-Labor administration, only to be summarily dismissed and dismantled by the new Coalition Government. It is instructive for us to re-read this submission almost a decade later. On the specific subject of 'supporting the artist as worker and celebrating their role as the creators of culture', we regard it as still pertinent.

We raised in that submission the 'definitional challenge' of 'what is culture?'; the question of 'scope' regarding the aesthetic, economic and transnational aspects of culture, and the importance of the 'social dimension' as more than an aspiration that cultural policy will automatically enhance social inclusion. Our aim was to challenge the reduction of cultural policy to an arts (or, indeed, economic) policy and, in so doing, to contest the conception of 'the artist' as the pillar of cultural policy.

As the longer-term ramifications of the recent pandemic for the cultural sector become clearer, it is evident that it exacerbated rather than precipitated identifiable problems. Recognising approved forms of art as labour and celebrating it is nowhere near sufficient to the aims of producing a viable, equitable national cultural policy.

Instead of placing certain types and levels of artist at its centre, it should recognise that there are many different people engaged in diverse modes of cultural activity - as full-time, part-time and casual creators; as those engaged in education and training to create, collect and facilitate, and in the many permutations of production, practice, use and consumption that constitute the lives of 'cultural citizens' (Meredyth and Minson, 2010). This complexity of structure and practice is documented in Bennett et al (eds) (2020) *The Australian Art Field: Practices, Policies, Institutions*, revealing the requirement for policy to encompass the entire field rather than particular 'agents' within it.

We, therefore, recommend that:

1. The narrow concept of the 'artist' be broadened to that of the 'cultural practitioner' among many other 'cultural citizens', in recognising that a national cultural policy must be more expansive and inclusive than a national arts policy.

2. Strong Institutions

Cultural institutions can be distinguished from cultural organisations in that they are large, broad entities, usually of longstanding, that embrace several areas of practice involving people engaged in a range of activities at different levels and scales. It is desirable that institutions are strong because, while organisations may come and go, institutions have greater capacity to persist in the face of inevitable changes to the ways in which culture is made,

by whom and for what purpose. In the cultural sphere, as in others, there are advantages and disadvantages of robust institutionalisation.

A large, resilient cultural institution in, for example, the performing arts, broadcasting or literature, can stimulate and afford protection to those working in their relevant disciplines, but also may establish hierarchies and orthodoxies, and ossify in ways that are inimical to the free flow of ideas and practices, and to the wide distribution of available resources. A rationale for such a structural framework can be provided, as occurred in the period when the federal Arts portfolio was overseen by Senator George Brandis (Eltham, 2015), by emphasising the virtues of ‘excellence’ that, of their very nature, favour cultural institutions that already possess substantial cultural, political and economic capital (Bourdieu, 2010).

Cultural institutions, therefore, should operate in ways that facilitate activity across a range of areas of cultural practice and at multiple levels, rather than function as citadels that block much that is new and different in the name of self-reinforcing habits, expectations and interests. It requires cultural institutions to take a place in, but not dominate, a *cultural complex* consisting of all the organisations, processes, personnel, services, products and texts which combine in the creation of the broad, dynamic field of culture. This complex ranges from prestigious cultural organisations in the inner precincts of a metropolis to regional educational and community centres to informal clusters of cultural practitioners in demographically diverse urban zones such as Greater Western Sydney (Stevenson et al, 2017). It includes high-end cultural professionals, aspiring artists, hobbyists, and the ‘unfashionable cultural worker[s]’ (Stevenson, 2020) rarely celebrated (c.f. ‘The Centrality of the Artist’ above) in creative industry discourse that tends to be focused on young, inner-urban people (especially males).

The institutions embraced by this cultural complex must include units that are less glamorous, such as those devoted to education, training, collection and conservation. In this context, it necessarily involves a process of ‘nationing’ (Rowe et al, 2018) that should not be confused with cultural nationalism, but is attuned to the ways in which the ‘national’ in a national cultural policy handles globalisation, transnationalism, states, markets and diverse, mobile citizenries. ‘Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain[s] our arts and culture’ would be sub-optimal if it applies only to a horizontal spread at an elite level. Such support should attend to the entire cultural ecology at multiple levels involving diverse cultural activities able to permeate institutional membranes.

We, therefore, recommend that:

1. The strengths of cultural institutions should be assessed not primarily in terms of scale, prominence and longevity, but in their capacity to serve and encourage the multi-level and multi-form activities and tastes of a diverse cultural citizenry.

3. Reaching the Audience

It has long been an aspiration of Australian cultural policies that publicly funded cultural institutions and practices should be equally accessible to all Australians. The shortcomings in meeting this objective have, however, remained significant and are likely to have increased since the *Creative Australia* policy statement. In its framing submission to the current cultural policy review, the Australia Council for the Arts notes that 98 per cent of Australians engage with arts and culture. However, it also identifies a number of limitations to such engagements. These vary, according to the types of cultural institutions and practices concerned, across multiple dimensions: age, gender, social class, ethnicity, Indigeneity, location. But they do so in more significant ways, and to a greater degree, than the Council’s data typically suggest.

The findings of the 2014-2015 national survey of Australians’ cultural tastes and practices, conducted for the Australian Research Council funded project *Australian Cultural Fields: National and Transnational Dynamics* (DP140101970), are significant in this regard. Reported, among other places, in Bennett et al (eds) (2021) *Fields, Capitals, Habitus: Australian Culture, Inequalities and Social Divisions*, these findings demonstrate the significant social bias in existing arts and cultural funding priorities.

Variations in audience tastes and patterns of cultural participation were shown to be most significantly differentiated by social class. This finding applied especially in relation to those ‘flagship’ arts and cultural institutions that are typically high in the funding priorities of the Federal and State levels of government. The effects of class were pronounced in relation to the social composition of the audiences for art galleries and festivals,

involvement in literary institutions (festivals, book clubs), and high-status music institutions (concerts, opera). Participation in these activities was markedly strongest on the part of members of the professional and managerial classes. With some exceptions, the absence of any significant interest or participation in these institutions by those in working-class occupations was equally notable.

These patterns also correlated very closely with differences in levels of income and wealth, and with levels and kinds of education. Those with high levels of involvement in the visual arts, book culture and high-status music institutions were very likely to be university educated – and, indeed, to have postgraduate qualifications – with a marked bias toward Group of Eight universities. Working-class survey respondents were more typically limited to secondary and vocational qualifications, and below those levels. These patterns were reproduced across generations: members of the professional and managerial classes were more likely than members of other classes to have parents who both belonged to the professional and managerial classes and who had tertiary qualifications.

The research demonstrates clearly, therefore, that public funding of arts and culture in Australia continues to be strongly implicated in the mechanisms through which class inequalities are reproduced, thereby placing a further limit on the extent to which such policies might achieve multicultural objectives. The findings of the *Australian Cultural Fields* survey showed that social class had similar consequences for special samples of Indigenous, Indian, Chinese, Lebanese and Italian Australians, as well for the main sample of all Australians.

These findings are all the more pertinent given that the last decade has seen marked increases in inequalities of income and wealth in Australia, and an increasing polarisation of educational provision toward the private sector in benefiting the more affluent sections of Australian society. Developing effective counters to this tendency in ‘ensuring our stories reach the right people at home and abroad’ will require more focused and far-reaching measures than those envisaged in *Creative Australia*.

We, therefore, recommend that:

1. A unit be established in the Australian Bureau of Statistics to perform the role previously played by the ABS’s National Centre for Culture and Recreation, and that such a unit be resourced to monitor regularly the audience characteristics of publicly-funded arts and cultural institutions.
2. Where such data identify significant biases toward middle-class publics in the distribution of public arts and culture funding, that priorities are adjusted to bring about a more equitable distribution of such funding.
3. Urgently needed increased investment in public schools addresses directly the provision of the kinds of arts and cultural resource, now limited largely to the private school sector, capable of nurturing the capacities required for high levels of involvement in arts and culture across the Australian population.

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