

National Cultural Policy Submission

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“A new National Cultural Policy is needed to establish a comprehensive roadmap to guide the skills and resources required to transform and safeguard a diverse, vibrant and sustainable arts, entertainment and cultural sector now and into the future.”

I’m thinking about a partner I once had whose Dad was a hotshot student composer in the 1970s. In lieu of scholarship support for his work, his university gave him a parcel of land that it had the title to on the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales.

I’m thinking about a project my friend was involved in that was a reincarnation of a site-specific theatre work created in the early ‘90s. It required a lot of physically intensive ensemble training, and the original artist was complaining about the lack of discipline in this new group - that no one was available or committed to ‘going all the way’. It then came out that this original crew were squatting in a disused warehouse while they made this show and once a fortnight, they’d take it in turns to cash in everyone’s dole checks.

I’m even thinking about not so long ago, when I was just starting out and got a grant from our national funding body - with no runs on the board - to simply go and see work at different fringe festivals around Australia. The idea of giving a 22-year-old money to simply explore and learn - it feels very far away now, much more than eight years ago.

I think about this, and then I think that I don’t want to get bogged down by how good it used to be and how far we’ve travelled away from there. Our world has changed so drastically that it would be a failure of us to try and loop our roadmap back in that direction.

So where might we go instead?

The “comprehensive roadmap” that I dream about takes the following route (although the steps below are in no particular order).

1. I can pay all the artists I work with the money that their work is worth.
2. Every arts organisation institutes a wellbeing framework, as independent artists continue to bear the brunt of Covid disruptions and the gig economy. Care is mandatory and rigorous and financial safety nets are never an afterthought. The arts is nothing without its artists.
3. Sameness is death. Same people, same processes, same programming - same outcome. Difference, all the time and in every way we can. It’s impossible for everybody to like the same thing – this is what’s so wonderful about art. Embrace the subjectivity. Program deeply and widely - make space for lots of work that invites lots of people in, that can hold space for difference in narrative and form and style and audience. This is how conversation starts and continues.
4. First Nations front and centre. Always.
5. Community is more than a buzzword - we are more than a group of individuals who are simply passionate about the same artform; we are a muscle, a voice, an effort, a movement.
6. Every council and every library across Australia has a rotating artist in residence. They are a reference point, a cultural guide, as easy to access as customer service. Dial 1 for having a conversation about the history of print-making, or to write a collaborative poem. Decentre arts practice from arts spaces. Bring it into community.
7. Box office doesn’t control creative risk-taking or experimentation in any way.
8. We treat our audiences as collaborators, as co-investigators, as human beings who are up for meeting our work. We raise the horizon of expectation.
9. Every member of the public can afford a ticket.
10. We have a theatre dedicated to new writing in every capital city.

11. Young artists are treated seriously. All internships are subsidised. Drama school is not the only way in.
12. We connect with our history. We look back before we look forward. Who are our elders? What did they do? What worked? Why? What bears repeating? What can be patched? What should be left behind? We think about lineage in practice.
13. We institute a five-year cap on artistic director tenure. These positions are equal parts creative and community leadership. They are rallying points for the sector.
14. Artist development sits at the heart of every arts organisation.
15. Practice is a long unfolding road, following curiosity and meaning and the unknown.