

National Cultural Policy Submission

The Old Ambulance Station, Nambour

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

Challenges –

Timeframes – First Nations artists need to be able to work within timeframes that are respectful of cultural protocols. This can sometimes affect delivery of funded projects with pre-determined timeframes and outcomes.

Safety and Well-being – Management of historical disadvantage and intergenerational trauma related to the impacts of colonisation is required to ensure safe environments for all First Nations Artists.

Cultural Training and Awareness – There is a need to provide adequate awareness and cultural training for volunteers, other artists and arts workers.

Opportunities -

Voice to Parliament – The national framework currently being undertaken in adopting the Uluru Statement of the Heart and the Voice to Parliament will give hope to First Nations people wanting to have direct input into government policy concerning their future, including Arts policy.

Role of the Arts to facilitate healing - The creativity and expression of First Nations artists can play a role to help all Australians understand and reflect on the impacts of our colonial history and through that help all Australians in the healing process.

A Place for Every Story

Challenges –

Tyranny of Distance - As a sparsely populated and geographically large country, the need to support artistic expression across the entire nation – not just in the capital cities - can be overlooked in State and National policy making. The Arts have a critical role to play in shaping and expressing our sense of identity, especially in regional areas.

Local Government Centralisation – Although local government is well placed to facilitate community engagement with the Arts and support artists programs and initiatives in regional areas, there remains limited financial support for independent organisations outside of the local government framework.

The current Regional Arts Fund funds projects outside of the MM1 areas, which is the current classification for Nambour. This is limiting for a number of regional organisations and artists who wish to access this fund for art projects but do not fit the specific Monash Model criteria. Despite not meeting the criteria for the Regional Arts Fund, Nambour is a town at more disadvantage than some of the surrounding small towns which are currently eligible for this fund.

Opportunities -

The story of Australia cannot be told only in the capital cities; it is essential that we support artistic practice in all regions and support the institutions who facilitate this practice by funding them adequately to support the story telling and art making that is part of the national narrative.

Through this, we can have an enhanced sense of both our place and our story.

The Centrality of the Artist

Challenges –

Financial viability of careers in the Arts - The goal should remain that artists can have sustainable careers doing what they are good at – making art. However, artistic careers do not happen overnight and a lifelong dedication to practice is what has produced some of our greatest national artists. The choice to pursue one's talents, gain the required skills and embark on a career as an artist often comes at a financial cost and although we want to see artists have sustainable careers, the opportunity is elusive to many within a system that does not see social and cultural value in a system where economic value is dominant.

Opportunities -

The ideal would be that every person that has the ability and wishes to, has the opportunity to pursue an artistic career no matter what their socio-economic background. For example, one option to address this and continue to grow the sector and creativity of our nation would be the introduction of a Universal Basic Income scheme for artists to continue to provide the necessary investment of time and dedication required for creative practice.

Strong Institutions

Challenges –

Recent work on the Sunshine Coast has revealed that the sector here has some way to mature. Sunshine Coast Council has taken a very active role in promoting the arts across the region and this has been hugely beneficial. However, there are no independent small to medium organisations on the Sunshine Coast that are regularly supported by State and Federal funding which means the sector on the Coast is overall underfunded relative to other regions. We believe that a National Cultural Policy should seek to explicitly support the growth of mature arts ecosystems across the whole of Australia.

Regional art centres serve as cornerstones and hubs of regional communities but are often poorly funded and/or run on the significant input of social capital by volunteers. Without paid staff, the operational and management work needed to run these community art institutions is a huge load and brings with it an inherent risk of Board/Management Committee/Volunteer burnout.

At the national level, we also note findings of the report “The Big Picture 2: Public Expenditure on Artistic, Cultural and Creative activity in Australia in 2007-08 to 2019-20” by A New Approach (https://newapproach.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ANA-62237-Insight-Report_DC07.pdf) which states that: *“Cultural spending has not kept up with population growth, with a 6.9% decrease in per capita expenditure on arts and culture in the period between 2007–08 and 2019–20. Cultural expenditure from the three levels of government combined was \$282 per person in the 2019–20 period; in the 2007–08 period, it was \$303 per person (adjusted for inflation).”* If Australia is serious about supporting the Arts, as with other areas of public importance it needs to be matched by budget commitments.

Opportunities –

Strong arts institutions, particularly in regional Australia, have a unique capacity to engage communities with art and artists. They become hubs of the broader and artistic communities and help with social cohesion and isolation, community health

and well-being. Funding streams to support such institutions have the potential to deliver strong returns. We endorse the comment in the public submission to this process by Alison Fraser in regard to smaller organisations that they are *"the yeast in the dough – they keep things fresh, on the edge."*

The Sunshine Coast is well placed to grow; The Australia Council report from 2017, 'Domestic Arts Tourism' (<https://australiacouncil.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Domestic-Arts-Tourism-research-report-PDF.pdf>) identified that the Sunshine Coast was a 'creative hotspot' and *"...is the second most visited region in Queensland for the arts following Brisbane."*

Reaching the Audience

Challenges–

Post Pandemic Community Engagement in the Arts – The past few years have been challenging for the Arts with audiences moving towards consuming more content online. Drawing audiences back into theatres and live performance has its challenges in pandemic times and is often the way that artists/arts centres build relationships and make sales. For arts centres, fundraising through events and hospitality services has been made more difficult within already constrained budgets. Whilst digital programming can complement the live programs, there are still significant costs involved and these can 'price out' emerging artists and smaller institutions from doing so.

Diversity of Arts audiences – Engagement in the Arts is often seen as a luxury. Patronage of the Arts is often still a white, middle class and older demographic. This is often a default borne out by the cost of ticket prices to Arts events and access to leisure time to attend such events. Engagement with other audiences and cultural groups is necessary to ensure the Arts remain relevant to everyone.

Opportunities –

National campaign to promote the value the Arts as a part of everyday life.

Increasing Arts literacy and funding for Arts participation in schools and community education.

Programs to raise the profile and work of artists within the community such as Artist in Residence programs across all sectors of society. One such example is that of the 'war artist' where images and stories were captured to enhance our human understanding of the experience of serving and war.

Support for artists with a Universal Basic Income to place a base value on the work that artists do and re-write the narratives associated with choosing to pursue an artistic career.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to your organisation and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

The gallery, performance and studio spaces at The Old Ambulance Station in Nambour are ideal for supporting emerging and established First Nations artists and the organisation and the general region of the Sunshine Coast has a very engaged and active First Nations group of Gubbi Gubbi and Jinibara traditional owners and custodians with strong and ongoing connections to Nambour - the town in which The Old Ambo is located.

Our TAKEOVER Project is a recent initiative aiming to give artists paid residencies to activate our spaces for a set period of time. This opportunity in our gallery spaces was recently extended to a group of five emerging First Nations artists who made work in the gallery spaces for a three-week period resulting in a curation and display of a fully First Nations led exhibition. This exhibition, **Repatriate** in The Old Ambo galleries, went on to exhibit as part of the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair.

The Old Ambo would like to continue working with local First Nations groups and provide funds and space for projects and exhibitions of this kind and continue to make these opportunities available into the future.

A Place for Every Story

The value of an arts venue like The Old Ambo is its connection to place and to community. Despite its only 10-year history as an arts centre, the building is also an iconic piece of Sunshine Coast history.

The Purpose Statement from our recently completed Strategic Plan is:

"The Old Ambo is an independent and accessible multi-arts creative hub built on the shoulders of the community where artists can invest in their artistic practice and experiment with complete creative freedom. It is quintessentially 'Nambour', part of the town's renewal and a community pillar, distinctive on the Sunshine Coast, it draws audiences from across the region for diverse arts experiences."

The Old Ambo's vision to thrive as a community and artistic hub in a regional town with socioeconomic challenges and a shifting demographic due to the housing affordability crisis is ambitious but achievable with the right combination of community effort, resourcing and funding.

There is a great opportunity for artists to tell the stories of the building, the region and the town, expanding the community engagement with the Arts through the telling of stories to which people can relate to, have a connection with and are already personally invested in. As noted above, there are tourism opportunities which also arise from promoting the stories of the region.

The Centrality of the Artist

We see ourselves as a hub for facilitating the growth of artists' careers and practice in all art forms and across art forms. Housing an 80 seat Black Box Theatre, two visual art spaces and seven creative studios (tenanted by practising artists), we exist to serve the needs of artists and the community wanting to engage with the Arts.

Our low fees for hire ensure the venue can continue to be accessible to artists. The balance between providing affordable spaces for artists to use and being able to remain financially viable as an organisation (to be able to survive to support the artists) is always the challenge.

Strong Institutions

Currently the Old Ambulance Station is a volunteer run and led organisation however, longer term this model carries risks. The reliance on the social capital of the volunteers (who invest their time, energy and ideas) is a significant risk and inhibits the growth of the organisation and what the facility can provide to artists and the greater community. Our aspiration is to grow so that we can better serve our artistic and broader communities.

Increased funding for operations as well as to subsidise programs is needed to see the organisation and facility reach its full potential serving artists. This funding should come from all levels of government, local, State and Federal to ensure the regions have the strong artistic institutions to foster the careers of the current and next generations of artists.

To invest in smaller institutions like the Old Ambo is to invest in the future for artists.

Reaching the Audience

The Old Ambo has a critical role in connecting artists with audiences that is not filled by other venues on the Sunshine Coast. As noted above, we are the only independent multi-arts facility on the Coast and we are run by the community for the community. Such good will has its limitations in terms of what we can offer the community and the audiences we can reach.

More funding would expand our capacity to reach other audiences and engage with more diverse groups across our community.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

We support the revision of the National Cultural Policy.

We would like to see included for consideration –

- Universal Basic Income for Artists
- Increased funding to support regional arts ecosystems and for arts centres in regional areas
- Revision of eligibility for Regional Arts Funding (or other special purpose funding) to include regional towns of with demographics of disadvantage (such as Nambour) to be included.