

# National Cultural Policy Submission

**Paul J. Ryan**

I am submitting as an artist and independent cultural researcher, as well as a 'mediator' of the interests and investment by citizens in society who are often excluded from the wonderful benefits offered by arts and cultural production – that can meet *their* need.

Note: 'mediator' is a new term and role in the arts sector, devised internationally as part of a paradigm shift in cultural production in the last three decades, yet underutilised in Australian institutions and government funding agencies.

My experience and observations of the Australian art sector span 50+ years at the coal-face of access and 'arts for all'. This practical work in civic action includes a major project investment and real world trial of what '**universal access**' and *whole of society cultural democracy* can look like, what mechanisms allow the 'public' to truly participate and undertake the development of activity from the 'front end' of cultural production. Remembering that 'citizens' are the *most* significant supporters of the arts; who provide funds to enable the arts, through taxes and yet remain the most absent from overt direct participation.

My focus is on what I would like to see in a National Cultural Policy. All the prescribed 'pillars' would, I believe, be better served with addressing the deficiencies I have briefly outlined herein and regrettable examinations of sector deficiencies, weakness of checks and balances of government arts services.

Presently, we have a sector that is largely a 'closed' deeply elitist, colonial arts funding system. It's been said 'the arts are the last bastion of colonial rule'. Australian arts sector is neither reflective of a humane pluralist democratic society, the potential of creativity hamstrung by a small circle with little interest in a greater or common good, the public and audiences reduced to 'passive' participants.

**So how can we decolonise culture if we are serious in a better deal, greater diversity and more inclusion for First Nations, for Every Story, for Valuing Artists, bringing Integrity to Institutions and the Honouring Audience?**

*'Killing Us Softly'* is a 30-year longitudinal examination of how poor practices within the arts sector diminishes the greater good and potentials of artists and democratic society.

*'Heartland Chronicles'* charts the extraordinary civic action and cultural adventure from regional north-eastern Australia to Paris and Berlin (for 501 patrons and 3,500 participants acting on behalf of an entire region - the size of Victoria). The Southern Hemisphere's major society based *cultural democracy* initiative has brought the attention of creative Europeans keen to develop this new and exciting paradigm shift in cultural production - where the public are in collaboration and are at the start and not an after thought at the end of the process.

Below are some suggestions, based in many witnessed deficiencies evidenced in poor delivery of arts and cultural services at both local, state and federal government levels.

### **Policy implementation**

- A National Cultural Policy be to congruent with Australia's responsibilities and obligations under our international commitments to various United Nations/UNESCO conventions and treaties including basic human rights and cultural rights, including the Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.
- Effective **mechanisms for addressing complaints** are almost totally absent from all three levels of government arts has been another awful experience, rendering the 'institutions' immune from accountability, checks and balances that sideline and impoverish artists, their supporters in business and the community.

**Inconvenient Truth:** I mention this because 'centralist' cultural practice in regional Australia means censorship of artists work, exploitation and unpaid wages of artist, blacklisting of artists without any statement of reason by a local arts officer, does occur and with little or with no recourse for artists or business art sponsors. FACT.

### **'Shining a light on it'**

'Centralism', rife as it exists in the arts sector could be the one great curse and bogey of colonial arts practice as we know it. So I will try to focus on how it effects all five prescribed pillars... and how the centralists, their lust for more power can overcome their harmful habit, by just letting go a bit...

CASE STUDY: The Australia Council's infamously 'successful'\* '*Cultural Places*' (2012-2016) trial project aimed to align the centralist interests of three levels of government as a dominant effective (for whom?) singular voice in cultural funding and direction. This top down secretive experiment had the disastrous effect in the region of displacing an *already* existing (\$1.4million) 'grassroots' driven civic action that was democratically developed in partnership with business leaders, small business and community. The type of 'market power abuse' by the Australia Council cartel has become a hallmark of centralised thinking and bad practise. This was colonial rule that damaged lives, was anti-philanthropic, diminished social capital and more aligned to a red nobility agenda. This was not about a 'fair go' and worked against locally determined community cultural development. The investment has taken many years and ten of thousands of dollars, help from Japan and Germany to restore the damage done by this act of arts 'centralism', with no apology no reconciliation from the Australia Council cartel.

\* CEO statement pilot reporting, prior to evaluation: 'successful', yes success in 'crowding out' business and community support for their own arts activity.

**The challenge remains, for true creativity to embrace the idea of a 'shared flourishing' as a correction for our times.**

## **The Centrality of the Artist**

- There exists a significant centralised network with its culture of group think that is counter to 'valuing the artist'. It discourages innovation, ignores evidence of need in favour 'peer wanky projects', is a circle of closed conversation. We lack centrality of the artist, artists need 'many doors' to overcome the feudalised centrality of that network.
- The centralised network results in crowding out other players, market power abuse results and the nation is poorer for it.
- Centrality results in cases of 'over-reach' and investment exclusions where artists and the public are rendered irrelevances in the centralists game plan

There is so much potential for a better world when artists and society work together to create solutions to improve society. We have shown this with over 500 projects in France, Germany and across Europe and with our humble undertaking in north Australia as a solo southern hemisphere activity.

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It is a sad indictment on the part of arts managers that after three decades of knocking on their doors, that we have to travel 17,000 kilometres to Paris and Berlin on the other side of the planet to get respect and acknowledgement for our hard won work in arts and cultural development here in regional north eastern Australia. We believe in arts and culture for all Australians, not just for the triangle of metropolitan of Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

We are tired of the Queensland projects historically getting 20% less of grant application funding and the Australia Council that fails repeatedly to solve the problem by not engaging with us.

The Australian public gets the Value of the Arts, umpteen sector driven papers and reports misses the point, that the arts managers need to value artists and independent thinkers are the key to change and support of 'discovery projects' as science does is how we improve inclusion, access and diversity.

We thank the Minister for the opportunity to accept submissions for this crack at a National Cultural Policy and hope it can be truly inclusive of all Australians and really be about diversity, and not just more words that have little connection with a betterment of the system.

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We may use some of your words as part of the National Cultural Policy Report. If we do, how would you like us to attribute your words?

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If requested, I can provide further information regarding background, context, evidence and the importance of the above issues to Australian culture and society.