

National Cultural Policy Submission

Dr Kate Power

Submitted: As an individual

“whether it’s a company or an individual or ... a place, [a sustainable performing arts sector is] where the relationship between the performer or the place is so entangled in its community that it couldn’t survive without them.”

In 2019-2020, immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted research into what “sustainability” means to Australia’s arts and culture sector, analysing a decade’s worth of arts company annual reports. Some of this discourse analytic research has been published [here](#). I also reviewed the 2,000+ submissions to the 2014-2015 Senate Inquiry and interviewed performing arts workers / managers engaged at all levels of the sector – commercial, major, small-to-medium, festivals, venues, and independent artists. Some of that research was published [here](#); but most has not yet been published.

My interviews drew on Appreciative Inquiry, which is a “strengths-based” approach to visioning and change that invites broad participation to identify the best of what is, as a starting point for developing a shared vision for the future. My interview questions therefore included the prompt:

Paint a picture for me of sustainable [insert relevant artform] in Australia.

The remainder of this submission summarizes my interviewees’ responses to that question, by presenting selected (de-identified) interview excerpts.

A sustainable performing arts sector in Australia needs...

1. Government and corporate leaders who understand & value the arts:

- *What does blue sky look like... clear valuing of the arts ... a deep understanding of its value with a clear vision and ... then backing it with enough resources to deliver it successfully.*
- *a healthy environment [is] where you’ve got private giving through corporate and philanthropic, strong relationships with great advocates in bureaucracy and in elected positions and audiences coming in and buying tickets ... strong donor bases, clear value propositions to businesses in town and more money in the coffers of the government. What else needs to happen for that to take place is particularly the Federal level, if we’re talking blue sky, a true valuing of the arts*

2. Clear communication about the multi-faceted value of the arts:

- *To be really sustainable, we have to be able to articulate the value of our work and the relevance of our work in this century to everyday Australians.*

- *There's a major piece of work to be done reframing the arts and the performing arts in Australia. And one of the things that we need to do in and about that is around conversations outside of the art ... drawing the dots across government departments, outside of the arts, about the social implications of participating and getting Australians to participate in performing arts activities, as community building and personal development and resilience.*
- *there's a big question we haven't yet solved around how you get Australian audiences to value the arts and how you value the arts outside of financial terms ... a sustainable Australian arts industry and arts landscape has to find a way to value itself outside of that framework*

3. Financial management, planning & investment in creative development:

- *there's a lot of thought to do not just about where our money's coming from... but also looking at ... what do we do with that money to make capable of doing the most ... based around audience development and engagement and getting our community more involved and becoming a more sustainable art form that can exist on its own separate to the winds of federal funding*
- *we're committed to paying equity wages and correct conditions and working hours and those kinds of things.*
- *I really think that the next step though is to provide more support for creative development and investment in major works*
- *what it needs ... to be totally sustainable is obviously more funding ... but it needs people ... that will go out on a limb ... and for governments to reward that and let people ... build theatres and start up theatre companies and if they lose money, don't punish them for losing money.*

4. Greater community connection & relevance to audiences:

- *it has to come down to impact and relevance... a very obvious way of showing that is ticket sales ... [but] we do have to ... think about some of the challenges to our artform, so racial connotations on stage ... where's the First Nations influence ... that all comes under the banner of relevance today.*
- *we need to find out, through that life journey, how do we connect with audiences ... right from cradle to grave. We need to find a way where we can be relevant ... be a part of people's lives.*
- *I think for [art form] to remain relevant... it needs to reengage on a grassroots level with communities and with people that maybe feel intimidated by that idea of going to a concert hall ... I don't just mean taking it out of the concert hall and putting it in different venues. It's also about incorporating new technologies into the way that we present it, whether that's through streaming or closer engagement with broadcast partners*
- *there needs to be more openness to considering the impact of the work in the community and what the community wants, and audiences want different things at different times because they're comprised of people.*

- *we need to make sure that we are able to be flexible in how we can deliver [art form] in remote areas ... that is a uniquely – not necessarily uniquely Australian, but certainly a major concern for how we do things in Australia.*

5. Mutual support within the sector

- *The future is more about collectivism... we have to find more collective structures to approach some of the bigger issues ... people coming together exchanging ideas ... That always needs resources ... so that's problematic, but I'm seeing more and more of that.*
- *producers have to be really, really webbed, there needs to be a lot more fluid sharing of physical resources and intellectual resources, so advising each other and kind of being on the phone, and that happens to a large degree, but I think it needs to happen a bit more.*
- *it is actually about having a sector that can support the small companies and the independent artists to develop work and develop their careers and do it safely.*
- *definitely the sharing of resources is key ... We can share lots of resources across many organizations including staff, and department skills such as marketing.*
- *all of those different elements and forms and approaches to making [art] are working together and supporting each other and aware of each other, then one isn't at the exclusion of the other.*

6. Arts Education

- *it starts from grassroots, so [art] needs to come in at a younger age and it's about opening people's eyes to [art] and understanding the artform from a very young age, so it almost normalises the artform.*
- *What does it mean to educate someone to be intrigued by being invited into that space artistically? Can you teach people to give themselves the experience of something very beautiful that you can't see or touch but that you can experience for yourself in your own way in a live performance? and teach people that that's something that they can provide to themselves in their own life? ... it must start with education and appreciation at a very ... formative age.*

7. Diversity

- *letting a different set of thinkers into their camp ... also brings a different audience in and builds audiences in different ways. And sure, you do the sure-fire hits, but you also need those kind of risk-taking things, and the vibrancy of the artform.*