

BEYOND THE CULTURE WARS—ARTS POLICY FOR A NEW GENERATION

Arts policy can learn from sport's bottom up approach, writes **Cassandra Wilkinson**

Arts policy was briefly in the spotlight recently with Our Cate Blanchett and Opera House chieftain Richard Evans both stretching their hands out in opinion pieces for the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

These sorts of demands from arts policy big hitters used to attract more attention, especially from politicians. But lately politicians have stopped bothering. The Liberals went to the recent NSW state election with a few pages of vague commitments to support Sydney's creative future and caned the ALP, who failed to release any arts policy at all—a startling reversal for the party that gave us Paul Keating's Creative Nation.

Certainly there is plenty of art around us but questions remain about the efficacy and social value of government programs. The lack of political interest suggests the arts are no longer seen as a way to make friends and influence people. It suggests that a lack of art is no longer a social problem, and definitely not one worth solving.

The lack of clear policy is bipartisan as is the lack of any key champions of art. It's been a while since any politician got excited the way Malcolm Fraser, Don Dunstan, Gough Whitlam, and Paul Keating did about cultural policy as an opportunity for nation building, wealth creation, and cultural progress.

The arts can contribute to all these objectives—but only if they are widely relevant. The arts community understands this but approaches it in counterproductive ways. 'Audience development' has long been the goal

of arts bureaucrats, but it is based on the fallacy that people can be made to like 'good art' instead of whatever they actually enjoy. Like all central planning it doesn't work.

Cheap tickets for the under 30s to see chamber music and touring grants for the Museum of Contemporary Art help a few people enjoy some lovely work but have so far failed to achieve a sea change in popular taste.

Government public relations proudly proclaim how much Australians like the arts. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade tells visitors that 'almost 13 million or 88 per cent of adult Australians attend at least one cultural event or performance every year.' However, it goes on to admit what we already know: that the most popular art form is film (attended by about 70 per cent of the population each year) followed by live contemporary music (26%); 'art gallery or museum' (25%); opera (19%); dance (11%); and classical music (9%).

So the 'art' that people are enjoying is popular culture—mostly Hollywood films and to a lesser extent popular live popular music

Cassandra Wilkinson is the co-founder of F*Bi* FM Sydney's Australian music radio station, a Director of Music NSW, and author of *Don't Panic! Nearly Everything is Better Than You Think*. She has been recognised as one of Sydney's 100 most important Creative Catalysts by Vivid Sydney.

performances. The present approach isn't helping to make government-sponsored art more broadly relevant and widely consumed.

Art and sport

As TV writer and NSW Film and Television Office board member Geoffrey Atherden has written in the *Griffith Review*:

If artists were treated like sports people, there would be talent spotters who would offer places to gifted individuals at a major training centre, their projects would be fully funded and they'd be prepared for entry into competitions, biennales, eisteddfods, as part of a national plan to develop and showcase Australian creative talent.

Bigger cheques are not the only important lessons to be drawn from sport. Entrepreneurialism and mass participation get little attention from professional arts leaders but have been vital for sport and are delivering results for art too.

The philosophy in sport is that everyone can play, in contrast, art takes the opposite view that only a few have talent.

Australian sporting success is based on subsidies and on mass participation. It involves bottom up support of local clubs, incorporation into school curriculum, and more support for grassroots organisations than sports academies. Investment in local facilities has allowed excellence to emerge based on the law of averages rather than by 'picking winners,' which is how art is still funded.

The philosophy in sport is that everyone can play, and if everyone plays the extraordinary players will quickly become obvious and can receive extra attention. The talented can earn a living in paid positions that reflect the public popularity and interest that is a consequence of our mass participation.

In contrast, art takes the opposite view that only a few have talent, and only the extraordinarily talented will be trained. Their long-term careers will depend on the patronage of a small but highly discerning audience and committees. Those artists who prosper under each generation of funding committees obtain the recognition that sees them subsequently appointed to the funding committees; they in turn fund their own handpicked favourites in the next generation. This system is insular and self referential, and guarantees that the future is defined by the past.

Investing in the young

The current approach reinforces the perception that art is for the few who have fine taste. A program that repudiates this insular and elitist approach is El Sistema, a Venezuelan classical music education program that has recruited more than 300,000 children from poor and illiterate communities to play the most challenging music in the world.

If you believe as Picasso did that we are all born creative but lose this instinct over time, then it makes sense to invest in the creativity of the young, as we already do successfully with sport.

El Sistema now operates in the United Kingdom and Scotland, and recently began a demonstration project in Melbourne. In every jurisdiction, children are enthusiastic participants and experience improvements in educational and social outcomes as well as acquiring a love of music.

In addition to the broad benefits to all participants, El Sistema has produced many successful professional musicians and conductors the same way sports programs do—by a law of averages. By making good quality instruments, teaching, software and hardware available in schools, we can support the natural creative instincts of kids.

The plummeting price of participation in the arts means that for the first time in history, it's as cheap to make a record or a short film as it is to get outfitted for the footy season. Thanks to Chinese cellos, serious musical instruments are as affordable as cricket gear;

thanks to cheaper technology, kids are making Tropfest films for \$500.

Kids are already using cheap gear to make great art. Some of this content makes its way to FBi FM 94.5, the Australian music radio station I co-founded and have chaired since 1997. One day a month, we open our doors to all-comers and keep it open until all the new artists who come to visit have introduced themselves and presented their material. On one of these Music Open Days, Wolfmother played us a homemade CD so good we aired it that very day: the rest is history. The Vines, the Presets, Cloud Control, Red Riders, and hundreds more keeping coming month after month without a grant between them.

Recent Tropfest finalists have made their films for less than \$1,000. With better technology and more confidence, the current generation of artists are not waiting for permission from a committee to fulfil their creative ambitions.

The films the committees reject

While I strongly advocate the widespread teaching of classical music, I am equally impressed by the dynamism at other end of the spectrum—low brow popular culture.

It is no accident that the art forms with low barriers to entry and high levels of participation are flourishing. Low budget filmmaking and contemporary music have greatly benefited from the low cost, high tech revolution.

The plummeting price of digital production and distribution has allowed thousands of people to become filmmakers and recording artists. Many of them are very good and are flourishing in the art lobby's principal blind spot—youth culture.

The sub-industries that have been ignored by government and made their own luck have much to teach the rest of the sector. Contemporary music and horror films have consistently failed to attract significant interest from successive governments of both stripes. They have been paying their own way and creating careers and incomes for thousands of artists who never see a cent from the Australia

Council for the Arts. These sub-sectors are defined by their entrepreneurialism.

There is a widespread belief that without public subsidies, there would be no Australian film industry. But in fact the films that the committees reject have been putting their state-funded cousins to shame. Production of Australian horror films has trebled from 20 in the 1990s to more than 60 between 2000 and 2008. *Wolf Creek* (2005), *Rogue* (2007), *Dying Breed* (2008), *Undead* (2003), and *Storm Warning* (2006) all succeeded commercially. *Wolf Creek* made \$50 million worldwide from production costs of A\$1.4 million, and the *Saw* franchise (five and counting ...) is the most successful horror franchise of all time grossing more than \$1 billion.

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Queensland academic Mark Ryan has studied the hot springs of the horror industry and finds that traditional funding practices are not only unhelpful but actively antithetical to this independent movement in Australian cinema. The Spierig Brothers made *Undead* for less than A\$1million and went on to obtain US investors for the \$25 million follow-up *Daybreakers* (2008)—this was after the Film Finance Corporation told them to 'leave genre films to the Americans.' Somehow *Undead* with full local cast, locations and script is 'too American,' but *The Great Gatsby*—one of the all-time defining American novels—can be filmed here with Australian taxpayer money.

Ryan writes, 'Traditionally the preserve of high-arts, cultural policy is not suited to enterprise development or the fostering of commercial filmmaking practices.' Australian cultural bodies continue to regard success as exemplified by Sundance selection and not by popularity. He also notes that funding bodies don't favour youth oriented projects, which isn't surprising since arts policy as it stands is not only middle-class welfare but middle-aged welfare.

Like horror films, contemporary music is defined by both its isolation from government and its commercial success. The Presets, Wolfmother, Ben Lee, the Vines, Jet, Angus and Julia Stone, and the Waifs are internationally successful in a way that most Australian artists can only imagine. What they need to thrive is often not more government attention but less.

Microeconomic reform

This came to a head with the closure of iconic Melbourne rock venue The Tote—a travesty that can be confidently ascribed to an overdose of government regulation. The People of Melbourne took to the streets to protest the government's ham-fisted approach to alcohol-related violence, which had seen massive increases in costs forced on businesses for security they didn't need.

Sydney has witnessed a growth in local music since the repeal of the Place of Public Entertainment laws. Since October last year, entertainment is now defined as a usual activity at pubs, restaurants and clubs, and doesn't require additional red tape.

Arts policy needs to recognise artists as small business people, entrepreneurs and innovators.

This removal of the government's foot from the throat of music venues was a result of the Raise the Bar campaign led by John Wardle, a working jazz muso who has been tracking improvements since the change and has compiled a list of nearly 50 venues that have started hosting live music since the red tape was removed. In August last year, the World Bar removed 15 poker machines to make room for up to eight bands every Friday night and more music throughout the week.

FBI FM presented Wardle with a Sydney Music Arts and Culture (SMAC) of the Year award—an award voted on by the industry in recognition of his achievement. Renew Newcastle's Marcus Westbury went one step further, declaring 26 October as 'buy John Wardle a beer day.'

Wardle recounts the night the amendments passed:

It's funny ... I was the only person in the gallery and was called upon to assist ... there was no one around. I walked out later into the Sydney night by myself. Frankly, there should have been a bloody parade.

But microeconomic reform rarely gets you a parade and is rarely seen as a fundamental plank of arts policy. The history of Labor and LNP policies shows a supply side approach to culture that is well entrenched with both sides of politics favouring quotas and local content rules for TV and radio, subsidised production costs for 'quality' books and 'distinctly Australian' film, and stipends for handpicked 'talented' people.

Having spent 15 years in radio, I know these quota approaches encourage farming the subsidy as effectively as any EU agricultural policy. A dozen easy-listening artists get high rotation while the rest remain invisible—these are the policies that produced a decade of Farnsy and Barnsey.

Arts policy needs to recognise artists as small business people, entrepreneurs and innovators. Bands, theatre companies, dance troupes, art galleries, filmmakers, digital content makers, burlesque artists, and festival promoters are all business people. It's spurious to claim only managers are business people because the nature of the arts industry is such that there are almost no salaries: everyone is in 'business development' and working from contract to contract, tour to tour, booking to booking in a socio-commercial whirl of festivals that promoter Brandon Saul calls 'anarcho-capitalism.'

Not all artists are in business to make a profit, but they are all trying to get paid to perform. They range from commercial enterprise to social enterprise but the leaders of these companies and ventures are entrepreneurs.

Since so much of the equity in their business is literally as well metaphorically 'sweat

equity,' artists disproportionately suffer from external costs. Their regulatory compliance costs include public liability insurance, risk assessments, liquor licensing, legal costs, copyright, licensing fees, noise regulations, entertainment licensing, as well as the usual BAS, OH&S, and other costs of running a business.

Splendour in the Grass was a highlight of the NSW festival season. Willing customers paid good money to see a range of musical and performing artists until increasingly onerous planning regulations shut down the event. The bureaucrats and politicians only had to say yes, but they said no. Splendour moved to Queensland.

The elite arts community has resisted being treated like an industry: they insist that art is not mere entertainment. This approach has encouraged a widening gap between what the government calls art and what artists produce. Treating art like an industry may be just the ticket for future policy.

A regulatory impact review would be a good start to identify planning, licensing, copyright, and industrial and risk-management

requirements that can be relaxed. This would be the cheapest and most effective arts funding policy ever.

Second, a review of opportunities to move funding from supply side to demand side activity would help. Directly supporting some consumption, for instance helping local promoters bring art to regional and remote areas, makes sense provided that it is demand driven.

Third, if you want the whole community to engage then let them participate. The National Review of School Music Education confirmed what many of us suspected—it's substandard. People who play, paint, write and create not only enjoy benefits for themselves but they also come to appreciate the work of others.

One of my favourite little music businesses is Heaps Decent. They are DJs and musicians who teach kids in juvenile detention to make music. These kids are as far from the Opera House as you can get, but it takes them no time to develop a love of music with access to good teachers. In doing so, they find their own voice and a pathway back into community. Now that's an Australian story worth telling.

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This year's address will be delivered by prominent Zimbabwean politician, human rights lawyer, and pro-democracy activist, **David Coltart**.

Senator Coltart is a committed and active Christian, and was a founding member of the Movement for Democratic Change, now in uneasy but determined coalition with President Robert Mugabe. In 2009, Coltart was appointed Zimbabwe's Minister for Education, Sport, Arts and Culture.

He will discuss religious influence in politics.

Tuesday, 26 July 2011

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