

AUSTRALIA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

SUBMISSION

NATIONHOOD, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND DEMOCRACY INQUIRY

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ABOUT THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL

The Australia Council is the Australian Government's principal arts funding and advisory body. We champion and invest in Australian arts and creativity. We support all facets of the creative process and are committed to ensuring all Australians can experience the benefits of the arts and feel part of the cultural life of this nation.

The Australia Council's investment in arts and creativity presents a vital opportunity to develop Australia's identity and reputation as a sophisticated and creative nation with a confident, connected community. Australia's arts and creativity are among our nation's most powerful assets, delivering substantial public value across portfolios: investing in the arts is investing in the social, economic and cultural success of our nation.

For half a century the Australia Council has invested in activity that directly and powerfully contributes to Australia's cultural identity and social cohesion.

Our vision *Creativity Connects Us*¹ is underpinned by five strategic objectives:

- More Australians are transformed by arts experiences
- Our arts reflect us
- First Nations arts and culture are cherished
- Arts and creativity are thriving
- Arts and creativity are valued.

As a funding, advisory and development agency, we work strategically and in partnership with others to grow and develop our cultural and creative industries. We leverage our networks and expertise to broker connections, provide strategic advice, increase co-investment and build the profile of Australian arts. Through our research, our deep sector knowledge and evidence-based advice we seek to inform and influence policy development, investment, arts activity and public debate.

We deliver a responsive grants program and evidence-based strategic activity. Our programs and strategic initiatives are designed to be integrated and complementary, supporting artists throughout their careers, increasing access to arts, culture and creativity, and building the capacity and vibrancy of our national cultural and creative industries – vital contributors to Australia's culture, identity, society and economy.

As a core priority the Australia Council supports the artistic and cultural expressions of Australia's First Nations peoples, underpinned by First Nations decision-making. Our First Nations strategy panel comprising senior arts leaders provides expert advice and our dedicated funding to First Nations people, groups and organisations through our grants program is assessed wholly by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peer assessors.

This forms part of our commitment to support and advocate for a proud and distinctive Australian creative sector that reflects and celebrates Australia's diversity, the benefits of which are experienced by all Australians.

¹ Our new strategy for 2020–24 is outlined in our Corporate Plan 2019–23, published in August 2019. It is available at: <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/corporate-plan-2019-2023>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our arts and creativity reflect who we are as a nation. Arts and creativity have a unique capacity to connect all of us, irrespective of our life circumstances and experiences and are crucial for reflecting and understanding our sense of nationhood and national identity. The shared stories of millions of diverse peoples who now call Australia home promote mutual understanding and respect and powerfully connect us to a global community. Now, more than ever, our artists have a significant role in helping Australians navigate rapid economic, social and cultural change.

- **Our arts shape and communicate our cultural identity**

The many and varied stories and perspectives brought to life through literature, music, performance and visual arts construct a sense of who we are as individuals, as a society, and as a nation. Australia's national identity springs from the stories we tell – to ourselves, to each other, to the wider world and to our future generations. Our sense of nationhood is heavily defined by creative expression, through which our stories are shared and transmitted over time.

The arts have an increasingly powerful role to play in bridging social divides, and building empathy, social cohesion and the health of our civil society. There is enormous potential to harness our arts and culture to forge and promote a more inclusive cultural identity for Australia in these rapidly changing and divided times. This is essential to shaping and conveying a contemporary national identity that brings together the many strands that make up the Australian community.

- **First Nations arts are central to understanding who we are as Australians**

Australia is home to the world's longest continuing living culture with a rich artistic context. Understanding and respecting First Nations cultures is essential to Australia's social wellbeing and benefits both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Australia's First Nations arts are a source of great pride to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. More Australians than ever are engaging with First Nations arts for their beauty, strength and power, and to understand who we are as a nation. First Nations arts also excel globally and drive tourism to Australia, playing a central role in developing international perceptions of our national identity.

Understanding and respecting First Nations cultures is essential to Australia's social wellbeing and benefits both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Constructively addressing our past is vital for a coherent national identity: our artistic expressions are the vital bridge that mutual understanding.

- **Our diverse artistic expression is reshaping our contemporary national identity**

Australia has one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the world. We also have more than three million people living below the poverty line and there are diverse experiences among Australians living in regional, remote and peri-urban communities.

A diverse sweep of artists are interpreting this multiplicity of 'Australias' for us, providing unique opportunities that go beyond day-to-day encounters – for insights into the cultures and communities of others and deep connections with one's own cultural and community roots. By providing engaging ways to interact with the tensions and extremes of other

peoples' worlds from a safe place, the arts can strengthen communities by replacing fear, misunderstanding and stereotyping with insight and empathy.

Our diversity also places us in a unique and powerful position of having shared stories and histories across the globe and is a major soft power strength.

- **Our creative expressions are an antidote to declining public trust and social divisions**

Globally, and in Australia, there is growing evidence of pessimism about the future and cynicism about institutions of all kinds, private and public. This coincides with rising concerns about job security, the cost of living and increasing divisions in society.

The arts have a particularly powerful role to play at this moment in time: in generating empathy that can bridge social divisions, and in creating a future where diversity is celebrated. The arts and creativity are an antidote to these social divisions and threats, through their ability to inspire our collective imagination, engage and connect us and challenge our assumptions. They enable a plurality of voices to be heard, including those who feel they are being left behind by rapid social change.

In an environment of increasing polarisation, the arts provide vital space and opportunity to navigate multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and to engage with complexity and challenging ideas from a safe space. In this way our arts and artists provide invaluable conduits to helping rebuild trust in our institutions and in each other.

SUBMISSION

Our arts shape and communicate our cultural identity

Our arts and artists play a critical role in our collective imagination of what it means to be Australian. Australia's national identity springs from the stories we tell – to ourselves, to each other, to the wider world and to our future generations. The majority of Australians believe that the arts have a 'big' or 'very big' impact on shaping and expressing Australian identity.² Our culture is deeply informed by various forms of artistic endeavour: our arts inform our sense of who we are, how we work and why we value what we do. As such, our sense of nationhood is heavily defined by creative expression, through which our stories are shared and transmitted over time.

The arts have told and retold the many and diverse unfolding stories of our nation – in the paintings of Tom Roberts, from shearing sheds to Coogee beach; the bush poetry of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, from the Drover's Wife to Waltzing Matilda; in the struggles and humour of family and community life, from Ruth Park's *The Harp in the South* to Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*; in the migrant experiences of Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* and Ahn Do's *The Happiest Refugee*; and in the working class anthems of Jimmy Barnes and the songs of Paul Kelly, Archie Roach and Courtney Barnett, to name but a few.

War art and Australia's national identity

The successful and critically-acclaimed feature film *Gallipoli* (1981) written by playwright David Williamson and directed by Peter Weir, helped to shape the national understanding of Australian identity.

Weir noted at the time that views about the ANZAC story had become very negative. The film helped to re-establish respect for the ANZAC and Australia's contribution to the Gallipoli campaign. It reflected the soldier's sacrifice, provided a way to engage with ideas of Australia's identity and established mainstream representation of the spirit of mateship, courage, larrikinism and good humour. (Screen Currency, *Screen Australia* 2018 pg 10).

Gallipoli broke Australian box-office records, earning nearly \$12m in theatres, an enormous sum at the time. In 1982, the largest turnout for ANZAC Day commemorations to that time reflected the inestimable wider cultural impact.

The Australian War Memorial's Official War Art Scheme also recognises the important contribution art makes to the understanding of Australia's wartime history. The scheme is one of the longest running commissioning programs of art in Australia.

Archibald Prize-winning Afghanistan war artist Ben Quilty chose to show the impact of war on those affected, including expression of their experiences of PTSD, rather than the war itself. The paintings in the *After Afghanistan* series had a significant impact on the Australian public and their understanding of the realities of war for the individuals returning from conflicts.

² Australia Council 2017, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*.

Throughout history, works of art and culture have changed society – from an 1862 book that had enormous influence in addressing child labour,³ to a television drama that provoked national debate about homelessness in England; the advocacy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* for justice and empathy for all races; photos that shifted public perceptions of the war in Vietnam or Syrian refugees; and gay characters on our screens that demonstrated these were people like anyone else, long before the legalisation of gay marriage.⁴ Historical narratives brought to life through arts and culture provide immense cultural value in their ability to capture a collective memory that is sacred to Australia’s national life.

Countless Australian cultural works have had significant bearing on how we understand our national identity and our history. Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and its film adaptation helped change national understandings and conversations about the Stolen Generations. Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and Andrew Bovell’s stage adaption of the same continues to inform international understandings of Australia’s colonial past and its impact on our First Nations peoples.⁵ Contemporary musicians like Briggs and Jessica Mauboy have significantly shifted non-Indigenous perceptions of First Nations contemporary culture. The films of George Miller, Stephan Elliot and Baz Luhrmann have taken the Australian landscape, people and perspectives to wide international audiences, showcasing our talent and creative vision.

The arts have an increasingly powerful role to play in bridging social divides, and building empathy, social cohesion and the health of our civil society. There is enormous potential to harness our arts and culture to forge and promote a more inclusive cultural identity for Australia in these rapidly changing and divided times. This is essential to shaping and conveying a contemporary national identity that brings together the many strands that make up the Australian community.

Social cohesion and national identity are about a sense of belonging. Yet, as highlighted by the legacies of war, this sense of belonging must not be exclusive, and our empathy cannot be reserved for our fellow citizens alone. The shared stories of millions of diverse peoples who now call Australia home promote mutual understanding and respect and connect us to a global community.

First Nations arts are central to understanding who we are as Australians

Australia is home to the world’s longest continuing living culture with a rich artistic context. This is a unique strength, unsurpassed globally, of which all Australians can be proud.

Cultural identity is complex and multi-layered in colonial settler societies such as Australia, which have been built on migrancy. Understanding and respecting First Nations cultures is essential to Australia’s social wellbeing and benefits both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Constructively addressing our past is vital for a coherent national identity: our artistic expressions are the vital bridge that mutual understanding. In forging a more inclusive

³ Kingsley C, *The Water Babies*.

⁴ Bazalgette P 2017, *The Empathy Instinct: How to create a more civil society*, p.263–283.

⁵ Miller, N 2019. “Unmissable, 'genius': Australian Indigenous drama takes on London” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 August 2019.

contemporary Australian cultural identity, First Nations arts, culture and history must be central in our national story and public life.

Over decades of Australia Council investment, we have seen a flourishing of expressions of the world's oldest continuing living culture. Australia's First Nations arts are a source of great pride to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a reflection of cultural strength, resilience, innovation and artistic excellence. More than ever, Australians are engaging with First Nations arts for their beauty, strength and power, and to understand who we are as a nation. Four in five Australians agree that Indigenous arts are an important part of Australia's culture (80%) and seven million Australians attended First Nations arts in 2016 – a record number of attendance and double that of 2009.⁶

First Nations Australians' culture is frequently recognised internationally as Australia's genuine and legitimate culture. From bark paintings to contemporary performance, First Nations arts excel globally and stand out as uniquely Australian, playing a central role in developing international perceptions of our national identity.

Domestic capacity building and building international development skills for our First Nations artists are paying enormous dividends in a rapidly growing offer of excellent First Nations artistic work that is eagerly being taken up by international markets and audiences, feeding the significant and growing levels of interest in Australia's First Nations arts and culture.

Our First Nations cultures are driving tourism: over 820,000 international tourists engaged with First Nations arts while in Australia in 2017, marking an increase of 41% since 2013.⁷ More than one in four international tourists who engaged with the arts in Australia in 2017 engaged with First Nations arts, and more than one of three of those who travelled outside of capital cities. Arts tourists who visited regional areas of the Northern Territory had particularly high levels of engagement – eight in ten attended a First Nations arts activity in 2017 (79%).⁸

Retelling Australia's history through the strength of First Nations culture and knowledge

Bruce Pascoe is an award-winning Yuin, Bunurong and Tasmanian author who is helping a national and international audience understand the strength of Aboriginal culture and knowledge and its centrality to Australia's history and cultural identity. His award-winning non-fiction book *Dark Emu*, published in 2014, is a monumental work of scholarship that disproved the long-held myth that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were nomadic hunter gatherers before European colonisation.

Dark Emu has also been adapted for the stage by Australia's premier Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performing arts company Bangarra Dance Theatre and toured nationally in 2018. The value of long-term investment in First Nations arts organisations is evident in the work of Bangarra Dance Theatre which continues to receive national and international acclaim for its powerful dancing, distinctive theatrical voice and unique soundscapes, music and design.

Bangarra's production of *Dark Emu* broke box office records, reaching audiences of 42,500 people. Through dance, the production celebrates Aboriginal peoples' strength, resilience and profound knowledge of agriculture and aquaculture.

⁶ Australia Council 2017, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*.

⁷ Based on Tourism Research Australia's International Visitor Survey.

⁸ Australia Council 2018, *International Arts Tourism: Connecting cultures*.

First Nations peoples' self-determination, cultural authority and leadership are vital to our collective prosperity. In order to maximise the rich contribution that First Nations arts and cultures make to Australia's cultural life and identity, it is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the tools to control and protect their cultural expressions and to realise the economic, social and cultural benefits of participation in the arts.

This includes measures to prevent inauthentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'style' art and craft products, which harm First Nations cultures and communities as well as Australia's national identity and brand. It also includes the importance of First Nations-culturally based solutions in Indigenous affairs, and the elevation of First Nations voices in Australian arts and culture and in our national discourse.

The Australia Council is currently providing interim secretariat support to the First Nations arts sector for the development of a National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority (NIACA), including the facilitation of a national consultation process.⁹ This has been underway since October 2018 and will culminate in a national gathering in 2020.

The need for an independent NIACA has been identified by the First Nations arts and cultural sector as a significant gap in the existing structures and has been discussed for many years. Momentum is building nationally in support of an independent central peak body for the First Nations arts and cultural sector, providing First Nations artists and cultural organisations with a national voice across all areas of practice.

Our diverse artistic expression is reshaping our contemporary national identity

Ensuring Australians feel part of a shared civic community is vital to the success of our democracy and nationhood in the 21st century. Under the pressures of globalisation, including the borderless digital world, identity, belonging and social cohesion are pressing public policy concerns. Coherency of national identity alongside and living together with diversity is a growing challenge.

Three in four Australians believe the arts are an important way to get a different perspective on a topic or issue.¹⁰ Two in three believe that the arts impact their understanding of other people and cultures and allow them to connect to others.¹¹

Australia has one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the world. One in three Australians were born overseas and more than 300 languages are spoken in Australian homes.¹² There is immense potential for the arts to support the Australian Government's objective of sustaining 'national unity in cultural diversity'¹³ and a 'united,

⁹ See: <https://niaca.com.au/>

¹⁰ Australia Council 2017. *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, p.12.

¹¹ Australia Council 2017. *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, p.12.

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017, *Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia, Stories from the Census 2016* (cat. no. 2071.0).

¹³ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, *Multicultural Affairs: Australian Government's multicultural statement*. Viewed 17/9/19 at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/our-statement>

strong, successful' multicultural Australia.¹⁴ Through our diverse arts, this vision can be elevated in Australian public life, and the value of diversity to our nation can be publicly endorsed and reflected.

Despite Australia's multicultural success, issues of identity and belonging remain key challenges, as they are for many modern nation states. Instances of conflict resulting from tribalism, usually fuelled by race and religion, and rising extremism, nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise. In 2018, 19% of Australians experienced discrimination based on their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion,¹⁵ and negative sentiment towards those of the Muslim faith, or immigrants from Muslim countries, was a significant factor of concern.¹⁶

Given these challenges, social cohesion is increasingly recognised as an urgent policy consideration, both at home and overseas. It is arguably one of the greatest public policy challenges of our times. An inclusive, contemporary cultural identity must embrace our success as a diverse multicultural nation, re-imagining the nation around our capacity for 'living together-in-difference'¹⁷ and the wealth of the tapestry of our people.

While many Australian neighbourhoods and workplaces are testament to Australia's diversity, the arts can provide unique opportunities that go beyond day-to-day encounters – for insights into the cultures of others and deep connections with one's own cultural roots. Seeing, feeling and hearing one's own experience expressed and reflected in creative expression is inherently powerful. Equally, there is power in seeing, hearing and feeling this experience reflected and valued in our cultural landscape.

The power of the arts to create a genuinely inclusive national cultural landscape

Counting and Cracking, an ambitious co-production by Belvoir and Co-Curious, embodies this power. A large-scale theatrical work telling a Sri Lankan-Australian story, *Counting and Cracking* has connected communities and continents and made a profound contribution to our unfolding national story.

Sixteen actors play four generations of a family, from Colombo to Pendle Hill, in a story about Australia as a land of refuge, about Sri Lanka's efforts to remain united, and about reconciliation within families, across countries, across generations.

Counting and Cracking expresses stories, narratives and characters that reflect the complexity of contemporary Australian experience and identity. The work speaks to an exciting new audience and the power of genuine community engagement – it has had a deep and profound impact on the local Sri Lankan community who saw for the first time their families' stories and histories placed where they belong, as part of Australia's story.

"If we want to be an Australia that asks people to limit themselves to fit in then we diminish our collective imagination; if we want to be an Australia that asks us to expand and present our full selves, we can help fulfil the potential of what this country can be, and I hope Counting and Cracking is the beginning of that." – S. Shakthidharan

¹⁴ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, *Multicultural Affairs: Australian Government's multicultural statement*. Viewed 17/9/19 at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/our-statement>

¹⁵ Markus A 2018, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation surveys 2018*, p.67.

¹⁶ Markus A 2018, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation surveys 2018*, p.62.

¹⁷ Ang I 2001, *On not speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*. London & New York: Routledge.

As a priority under our strategy *Creativity Connects Us (2020–24)*,¹⁸ the Australia Council is actively fostering diversity and equality in the arts – including in leadership and arts practice – to ensure our arts truly reflect, and benefit from, the breadth of our people and culture. Fully realised, there is potential to fuel the experimentation, artistry, connectivity and collaboration we need to confront some of our modern societal challenges.

The many and varied stories and perspectives brought to life through literature, music, performance and visual arts can provide a way for people to feel they are recognised – and can recognise each other – as members of diverse and evolving societies. The arts can provide points of connection about shared experiences, from the joyful to the traumatic.¹⁹ By providing engaging ways to interact with the tensions and extremes of other peoples' worlds from a safe place, the arts can strengthen communities by replacing fear, misunderstanding and stereotyping with insight and empathy.

Building relationships and belonging and enabling diverse voices to be heard

Akolkol Dastan Gesa is a community arts and cultural development (CACD) project that enables young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to be leaders in telling their own stories to large audiences across Australia.

Between May 2017 and April 2018, Akolkol Dastan Gesa engaged 40 young people between the ages of 12 and 29 to work with a team of professional artists to create a music video called SAME DRUM. The young people participated in song writing, beat-making, recording, dance, performance, filming and screening.

The music video launched on ABC during Harmony Week 2018 and was screened at film festivals across the country. The young artists also had their work broadcast on radio and online and were invited to perform at a 20,000-person festival. The song won Song of the Year in the World category at the West Australian Music Awards – a testament to the group's song writing talent.

An independent evaluation of the SAME DRUM project showed it was extremely effective in achieving its goal of empowering the young people, finding a range of positive impacts. More than 80% of participants identified 'relationship building' as the most positive experience followed by 'belonging', 'culture exchange' and 'self-expression'. Pre and post-surveys to identify impacts on mental health demonstrated positive trends in feeling 'closer to others', feeling 'more useful', feeling 'more relaxed', and feeling 'more optimistic'. Student engagement was ranked highly by the facilitating artists who noticed positive changes in students' confidence, self-esteem and relationships, as well as technical skills.

The community arts and cultural development sector is a leader in the use of the arts to support social inclusion and cohesion, enabling diverse voices to be heard and stories to be shared through great art.

¹⁸ Our new strategy for 2020–24 is outlined in our Corporate Plan 2019–23, published in August 2019. It is available at: <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/corporate-plan-2019-2023>

¹⁹ Mackay H 2017, 'Hugh Mackay: the state of the nation starts in your street,' *The Conversation*. Mackay H 2017, *The state of the nation starts in your street – Gandhi Oration 2017*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFoOHPfjTXU>

The Australian Government believes ‘*strong social cohesion is best achieved by projects that bring all Australians together and in particular create connections across the community.*’²⁰ The arts have a particularly powerful role to play in this space, including through arts projects, events and festivals which bring communities together, and enable engagement with the perspectives and voices of diverse artists and communities.

Arts, culture and creativity can also heal fractures of the nation along socio-economic, regional and age-based fault lines. Despite Australia enjoying consistent economic growth over the last three decades, poverty rates have remained high. More than three million Australians live below the poverty line and there is a stark division in our community between those getting ahead and those being left behind.²¹ Arts experiences can provide a great leveller, simply through their ability to touch people equally and simultaneously:

‘Music can cut through all barriers. So it doesn’t matter what social level you are at, you go to see a band and you can have blokes there who are doctors, lawyers, white collar, and they are standing and chilling out next to blue-collar workers, could be unemployed. Outside of that band and place these guys aren’t going to interact because they are totally different social groups, but you don’t care because you’re there to see the band. You don’t care if the bloke next to you is earning 100k or 10k. You are there to see the band. For X amount of time that’s all that matters. You don’t care about social status or money. You are just a bunch of people watching a band.’

– National Arts Participation Survey focus group participant²²

Working class hero

Scottish-Australian singer songwriter Jimmy Barnes has had a music career spanning more than four decades and is one of the best selling music artists of all time. Like many great Australian artists he is a product of one of the many waves of migration that have made Australia what it is today.

Through both his music and his books, Jimmy Barnes has told stories of working class people with Anglo-Celtic roots. Jimmy Barnes’ memoir *Working Class Boy* was one of the top 20 bestselling books in Australia in 2016,¹ debuted at number one on the bestseller list¹ and won the Biography award at the 2017 Australian Book Industry Awards. He continues to tour, drawing huge crowds to his arena shows.

Similarly, many regional, remote and peri-urban communities feel excluded from the national discourse of a buoyant economy and the technological opportunities of the fourth industrial revolution. The arts have a powerful role to play in ensuring that the stories and experiences of these communities are an integral part of Australia’s multi-layered cultural fabric and

²⁰ Australian Government Department of Social Services, Settlement Services: Diversity and social cohesion. Viewed 17/9/19 at: <https://www.dss.gov.au/settlement-services/programs-policy/settlement-services/diversity-and-social-cohesion-program-dscp/diversity-and-social-cohesion>

²¹ Davidson P, Saunders P, Bradbury B and Wong M 2018, *Poverty in Australia, 2018*. ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 2, Sydney: ACOSS.

²² Australia Council 2017, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, p.43.

identity. And across these regions of Australia, engagement with the arts enriches lives and creates stronger, healthier and more cohesive communities.²³

Our creative expressions are an antidote to declining public trust and social divisions

While digital platforms have made the world more connected than ever, in many ways divisions in society are growing. Populism, polarisation of views, identity politics, nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise, and social media is tending to encourage confirmation bias in many quarters. The level of trust in public institutions is declining and many Australians are justifiably concerned about issues like job security, essential services in their local area and the rising cost of living. Loneliness and anxiety are at record levels.

As part of the Australia Council's 2016 National Arts Participation Survey, social researcher and commentator Rebecca Huntley was commissioned to examine how attitudes to the arts interact with broader social trends and concerns:

Housing affordability; the rising cost of living including utilities, health, transport, education and childcare; anxieties about job security, the economy, immigration and climate change; pressure on household budgets and schedules; high levels of cynicism about institutions of all kinds, private and public. Australians have a shopping list of worries related to the present and near future. And so it is heartening to see that our involvement, interest and support for the arts are still strong, and that our perceptions about their positive impact on society and influence on our national identity have in fact increased.

– Rebecca Huntley²⁴

New Zealand's empathetic politics and wellbeing framework and budget

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has argued for seeing politics through a lens of 'kindness, empathy and wellbeing.'¹

A range of initiatives are underway that will embed an emphasis on New Zealanders' wellbeing as a policy objective, and an indicator of success. This includes development of a comprehensive framework to guide and measure the success of government policies and investment decisions and a wellbeing budget.

The intention is to move beyond simple measures of economic growth, such as GDP, to a more holistic view of wellbeing and impact across a broad range of measures – social, economic, environmental and **cultural**. The New Zealand government's renewed focus on arts, culture and wellbeing is resulting in highly positive and high profile media coverage internationally.

As part of the wellbeing framework development, the Australia Council is working with the NZ Ministry of Culture and Heritage, under the auspices of the Meeting of Cultural Ministers, on a joint project that will help both organisations measure and articulate the public value of arts and culture.

²³ Australia Council 2017, *The Arts in Regional Australia: A research summary*.

²⁴ Australia Council 2017, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, p.36.

Given rising social divisions, anxiety and xenophobia both at home and overseas, there is an urgent need to harness the dynamic energy of our multi-layered, multicultural, contemporary democratic society. The arts are an antidote to social divisions and threats, through their ability to inspire our collective imagination, engage and connect us, challenge our assumptions and humanise those with whom we may disagree. They enable a plurality of voices to be heard, including the disaffected and divided 'quiet Australians'²⁵ and those who feel they are being left behind by rapid social change. In an environment of increasing polarisation, the arts provide vital space and opportunity to safely navigate multiple viewpoints and engage with different perspectives.

Artists and farmers coming together to envision a new future

Arts and creativity have the potential to bridge the divide between people and communities over potentially contentious issues in society. Socially engaged art responds to urgent real world problems while simultaneously creating new collaborations, ways of engaging and ways of thinking. This provides both artists and communities with important new platforms and opportunities.

Wollongong artists Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein have been visiting the Mackay region since 2014 to explore the effects of sugar cane farming practices on the Great Barrier Reef and to investigate how artists and farmers can work together on large-scale human/ecology problems. Their in-depth engagement in the community informed the stories told through their exhibition *Sugar vs the Reef?* at Artspace Mackay from November 2018 to January 2019.

The outcomes of the collaborations in Mackay demonstrates that diverse communities – farmers, traditional owners, scientists and the general public – can be brought together through artistic events to improve general understanding of environmental and social issues that face us all.

Conclusion

Our evolving cultural identity is rich in contrasts, diversity and nuance, underpinned by robust democratic debate and ideals. This is the inclusive narrative we must embrace, which can be promoted, supported and reflected through our creative expression. Arts and creativity have a powerful role to play in shaping the collective imagination of what it means to be Australian.

Valuing our diversity and our arts builds our international reputation, cultural diplomacy and exchange and will ensure Australia is well positioned to participate in global dialogue about the goals, values and structures of a cosmopolitan society beyond the politics of nations.

This is in addition to the power of our arts and creativity to engage and connect our disaffected or marginalised communities; to generate empathy that can bridge social divisions and inoculate against social threats; and to create a socially cohesive future where diversity is celebrated and all Australians feel part of our national story.

²⁵ Seo B 2019. 'Quiet Australians' are disaffected and divided', *The Australian Financial Review*, 24 May 2019.

POLICY OPTIONS

- **Through the arts, elevate the Australian Government objective of ‘national unity in cultural diversity.’**²⁶ Harness the power of the arts to forge a more inclusive and contemporary cultural identity for Australia by promoting diverse arts in Australian public life and arts that help us understand the perspective of others. Sustained and meaningful engagement with community is important to achieve this objective.
- **Promote of First Nations culture in Australian public life and identity, including increased investment in First Nations arts and cultural expression.** Funding for First Nations culture made up 1% of total direct government expenditure for Indigenous Australians in 2015–16.²⁷ Culture has been determined to be a cross system priority through the Closing the Gap Refresh.²⁸
- **Funding for arts activities through the Department of Social Service’s Strong and Resilient Communities Program.**²⁹ This program provides grants to local community organisations to foster community cohesion by increasing people’s sense of belonging, social inclusion, engagement, acceptance from the broader community and self-worth. The arts have a powerful role to play in delivering against these objectives.
- **Funding for arts activities through the Department of Home Affairs social cohesion package for ‘Bringing Australians Together,’ similar to the funding stream providing investment in ‘Driving Social Inclusion through Sport and Physical Activity.’** The sport funding stream, managed by the Department of Health and administered by the Department of Social Services Community Grants Hub, provides grants for National Sporting Organisations, local community organisations and community groups for diversity and inclusion programs delivered through sport and physical activities.³⁰ These objectives can also be achieved through the arts.
- **Scaling up of existing programs to increase social and community cohesion through investment in arts and culture.** Investment in the arts reflects a commitment to the quality of life of all Australians and we know that even modest investments can deliver substantial impacts and returns. The Australia Council is prioritising support for diverse arts under our new strategy *Creativity Connects Us* (2020–24). Increased investment would deepen and elevate the impact of this strategy.

²⁶ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, *Multicultural Affairs: Australian Government’s multicultural statement*. Viewed 17/9/19 at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/our-statement>

²⁷ Based on Productivity Commission 2017, Indigenous Expenditure Report 2017 Advanced Database, accessed 2/2/18 from <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/indigenous-expenditure-report/2017>

²⁸ COAG Statement on the Closing the Gap Refresh, 12 December 2018, <https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/communique/coag-statement-closing-the-gap-refresh.pdf>

²⁹ Australian Government Department of Social Services, Strong and Resilient Communities. Viewed 17/9/19 at: <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/communities-and-vulnerable-people/strong-and-resilient-communities/Program-guidelines-viewed-17/9/19> at: https://www.communitygrants.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2019/sarc-grant-opportunity-guidelines-v2.pdf

³⁰ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, *Multicultural Affairs: Bringing Australians Together*. ‘Implementing sport 2030 – driving social inclusion through sport and physical activity.’ Viewed 17/9/19 at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/bringing-australians-together>