

## Chapter 3: The convergence of arts and cultural policy

While the previous chapter focused on arts and cultural policy in Australia, there are parallels in many other countries. Governments of all persuasions, in all jurisdictions have experienced difficulty in formulating coherent and appropriate policy strategies for the arts and cultural sector. In particular, in most developed countries, support for the elite arts has been allied to a range of *instrumental* strategies in which cultural and creative activities are used to leverage solutions to a variety of social problems. These include unemployment, social alienation, regional access, disability, social welfare and therapy, and more generally, the creation of a sense of community and ‘well-being’.

### Re-Visioning ‘Culture’

In the United Kingdom, according to former Minister for Culture, Tessa Jowell, there has been a major shift in the arguments and strategies for under-writing culture — from support for culture on the basis of ‘what it does in itself’ to support for culture ‘in terms of its instrumental benefits to other agendas’ (Jowell 2004: par.12-13). Jowell argues that the result of this policy shift has been ‘a spiral of decline’ (Jowell 2004: par.24). Whether culture is supported because of its ‘intrinsic value’ or its ‘instrumental benefits’, Jowell’s successor, David Lammy, argues that ‘we still lack a coherent case’ to justify government investment in culture (Lammy 2006: par.19). So, on the one hand, government support is still assumed to be worthy and the sign of a ‘civilised’ regime while, on the other, support is decried as an indulgence of so-called ‘bleeding hearts’.

Possible reasons why cultural and creative organisations have found it harder to be sustainable might include:

- they are spread too thinly doing too many things; or
- pressure from competition with other agencies pursuing instrumental programs; or
- the broad brush approach undermines the original cultural or creative rationale of particular organisations or cultural practitioners.

It is also the case that governments in many jurisdictions have attempted to reduce the reliance of the arts and cultural sector on the public purse by facilitation and incentive policies designed to increase support from the private and non-government sectors. At the same time, increases in the number of cultural organisations, practitioner groups and artforms mean that competition for available funding has intensified. In addition, arts and cultural policy has been integrated within whole-of-government (or joined up) policy frameworks

spanning diverse agencies and policy agendas which, in turn, has served to shape the form of government-sponsored creativity and cultural production (Holden 2004, 2006).

A fracturing of the coherence of the domain of arts and cultural policy has also emerged. Although the traditional arts (opera, ballet, classical music, theatre) have been inscribed formally within the ambit of cultural policy, there is a growing uneasy tension between what counts as 'art' and what counts as 'culture' in terms of how practitioners and administrators view the competing domains and in terms of policy initiatives. Whereas the arts traditionally encompassed cultural practices that were cosseted by social elites (largely through the practices of direct and indirect patronage from private and/or state benefactors), the re-definition of arts policy as cultural policy in the second half of the twentieth century sought to remove the elitist tag from traditional arts *and* include forms of cultural practice that had broad popular appeal (e.g. Australia Council 2000; Hill Strategies 2005c).<sup>1</sup>

This trend was associated with the welfare governance agenda that gave priority to educational, social and quality-of-life outcomes as well as broader democratic and cultural citizenship objectives, such as producing a culturally literate society (cf. Craik, Davis and Sunderland 2000). Arts and culture were accordingly re-defined from strictly educational accompaniments to indicators of the acquisition of social and cultural capital. The broader the definition of culture, the more fragile, incoherent and tension-ridden this policy has become (cf. Craik, McAllister and Davis 2003). The problem becomes where to draw the line as to what counts as culture (and therefore uplifting) and what deserves support. Is an art program run in a hospital to enhance the self-esteem or healing capacity of patients a creative or a medical program? Is digital media training for unemployed youths a creative or a job skilling program? Have arts and culture as welfare been replaced by arts and culture as a social safety net?

## **Instrumentalism and Sustainability**

The instrumental approach to using art and cultural projects to revitalise a sense of community has been around long enough for evaluations to be made. Those in favour of such a strategy emphasise outcomes that have enabled individuals to re-engage with their local community, create a community ethos, improve 'social inclusiveness' and generally promote cultural sustainability. However, even those endorsing instrumental strategies acknowledge that there is a difference between 'good community arts practice' and 'shallow or inauthentic art practices' as well as flaws in evaluation processes that need to be addressed for instrumental arts and cultural projects to be effective (Mulligan 2007: 25, 31). In fact, it is the perceived distinction between art and culture that undermines efforts by government to unify these terms. As community development advocate, Deborah Mills, laments:

Unfortunately these arguments [about cultural sustainability] do not appear to have been well understood; policy makers often use the terms art and culture synonymously. Perhaps they think that the term *culture might have the broader appeal and help bring the arts in from the margins of government concern*. At other times they appear to be using the term culture as a means of insisting on an opposition between prestige art and community culture. In practice, whatever the policy conception of culture, the actual application of cultural policy by governments is too often reduced to *heritage and the subsidised arts*. Perhaps this is because culture and its role in everyday life are not widely understood in government. (Mills 2007: 36; my italics)

Arguably, attempts to democratise the arts by weakening the bonds of exclusivity practiced by the elite have backfired. The past decade has witnessed a widening schism between 'art' and 'culture'. This is irrespective of whether the policy environment is mired in the old politics of patronage or has promoted alternatives based on marketplace survival. The traditional arts have remained ensconced in a privileged but confined position – lacking in adaptability and administered by niche governmental bureaucracies in the form of specialist agencies (usually through customised cultural statutory authorities or/and government departments). Meanwhile, the rest of cultural policy has been absorbed within whole-of-government approaches across agencies.

Moreover, cultural policy has also become intimately tied up with cultural planning and cultural development (e.g. Florida 2002; Landry and Bianchini 1995; Matarasso 1997). Another advocate of cultural planning, Jon Hawkes (2001), has contributed the idea of culture as one of four *pillars* of sustainability, the others being economic, social and environmental development (cf. Gray 2004, 2006; West and Smith 2005; Merli 2002; Madden and Bloom 2004; Belfiore and Bennett 2006). For cultural development analysts, sustainable development and cultural development are co-dependent. Hawkes (2001: 2, 4) identifies three aspects of 'culture': *values and aspirations* which set the framework of a society's *raison d'être*; *practices and cultural media* through which culture is actualised; and the *visible manifestations and artefacts* of cultural practice.

In this approach to the management of culture, cultural diversity and difference are part-and-parcel of a commitment to cultural sustainability. As part of reconciling cultural sustainability with the other pillars, cultural policy becomes annexed to what I have called elsewhere 'lifestyle culture' or 'eco-culture' (Craik 2005) where art and culture become core planks of cultural planning and everyday 'lived' cultural experiences. The idea of eco-culture encompasses the diverse, ecologically sensitive, globally aware, yet locally responsive culture that characterises everyday civility. Using Walter Benjamin's term, the post-modern citizen is a 'cultural flaneur' in-so-far as s/he exhibits a greater

sense of cultural competence and possesses the skills to negotiate complex, and diverse, cultural environments, experiences and forms. Opportunities to partake of cultural experiences have become the *leitmotif* of contemporary life in developed societies. Some commentators have coined the term 'omnivores' to characterise people whose cultural taste 'ranges across genres and forms' (Savage et al. 2005: 6). Should the percentage of cultural omnivores in a society markedly increase then the division between arts and culture and existing modes of supporting and representing art and culture might change significantly.

## Reconciling Complex Culture with Cultural Engagement

Yet, the idea of the cultural omnivore has mostly been taken up in support of instrumental uses of culture. The assumptions underlying this are often benign and care-oriented. They are motivated by notions of human improvement. The cultural values on which the notion of cultural sustainability are built stem from a shared consensus of 'core' or 'universal' values that include a wide range of human concerns: participation and democratic rights; tolerance, compassion and inclusion; freedom, justice and equality; peace, safety and security; health, wellbeing and vitality; creativity, imagination and innovation; and even love and respect for the environment (cf. Hawkes 2001: 7). In a similar argument, Jowell (2004) stresses the importance of what she calls *complex culture* and *cultural engagement* (as opposed to simple culture and entertainment) as the means of developing 'personal value' that opens up a 'personal heartland' that enables a person to engage with new ideas, creative forms and cultural possibilities. While this has presented as a new approach to representing the value of culture as a tangible value that governments should recognise and support, her arguments, in many respects, go back to traditional arguments about the value of the arts as a strategy of civility. Indicatively she has argued:

Public subsidy produces what the market may not sustain — it is almost a bulwark against globalised commercialism that might not be sensitive or responsive to local and national cultural expression. It makes possible what might not otherwise be available, and it makes available the best ... Excellence has to be at the heart of cultural subsidy. (Jowell 2004: par.32-33)

Assumptions that link arts and cultural policy to excellence have persistently underpinned post-WW2 democratic governments (at least rhetorically). Since the 1960s, a second argument about cultural diversity has infiltrated arguments about the arts, yet has played second fiddle and generally referred to benign and non-threatening forms of culture. It is arguable that such assumptions have been challenged by the onslaught of security concerns, terrorism and non-Western ideologies that have dominated recent preoccupations about culture and humanity. Unquestioned regard for western forms of democratic rights and

human rights has been severely tested, especially by Islamic extremism. Diversity, most spectacularly in the form of multiculturalism, is under threat from cultural assumptions that challenge the belief that tolerance and inclusive policies can iron out clashes between radically different values, norms and behaviours. Has the clamour for universal rights and international declarations faded? Are they relevant in this new cultural climate? There has been a shift from the late twentieth century approach to cultural policy and its tenets of diversity and development to recognition of the perceived 'threat' of cultural difference, separatism and forceful rejection of the idea of cultural and inclusive and multi-dimensional. The question we need to ask is 'how should governments respond to this new cultural agenda and the fallout from the ongoing re-alignment of power and culture?'

One response to this situation has, paradoxically, been increased insularity of traditional 'arts' policy — restrictive, elitist and clientelist. This is partly because the lobbyists for cultural policy have largely come from the arts sector and focused on familiar arts forms as strategies to enhance cultural development. At the same time, the re-definition of cultural policy as cultural (or creative) industry policy and the emphasis on economic benefits and potential of culture to be sustainable — even profitable — has shaped emergent forms of cultural policy. Culture, usually arts and heritage, become implicated in the quest for sustainability although the bulk of support still is directed towards high end capital 'C' culture.

Despite the development of new approaches to cultural policy and arts funding through the twentieth century, the persistence of an artistic hierarchy<sup>2</sup> underpinning the policy sector has meant that at times of crisis and change, culture has reverted to 'Art' at each phase while culture has been given a broadbrush treatment as a panacea for insoluble social itches and uncomfortable truths. Rather than embracing major changes in cultural participation, education and consumption as the cornerstone of arts and cultural policy, the sector remains on the backburner of subsidy.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Examples include contemporary dance, digital arts, new media, community cultural practice, youth arts, circus or physical arts, architecture, fashion and indigenous cultural practice.

<sup>2</sup> An example of the exclusiveness of the cultural lobby's aesthetic hierarchy was evident following the death of the highly popular artist, Pro Hart, in 2006. Although 'a runaway commercial success', not a single Pro Hart painting was in a state or national gallery collection. A parallel was drawn with L.S. Lowry's struggle 'to gain institutional and critical acceptance' (Smee 2006: 21). The curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of NSW explained: 'Art galleries are elitist in the best sense. They try to collect the greatest artists, the ones whose works will have meaning over time. Pro, very early in his career, discovered a language, a voice that became very popular. It was very formulaic, but it brought pleasure to many people. But it's rather like comparing Slim Dusty to Mozart. There's nothing wrong with Slim Dusty's music. It just has a different appeal; it's a voice of the people.' Yet, as Smee observed, 'there are mediocre works galore in every state and national collection in Australia. Many of them are on permanent display.' After a flurry of debate about whether Hart's status as an 'outsider' was warranted,

curators modified their position. One described him as 'one of the most delightful illustrators of the Australian folk idiom, but let's not use the word art anywhere' (quoted by Sexton 2006: 10). Although some galleries have subsequently (and reluctantly one suspects) acquired token works by Hart, the nub of the problem remains that Pro Hart was too popular and appealed to 'the average Aussie'. As the former One Nation politician Pauline Hanson noted, 'I suppose we are in the same boat, because the elites of the political world never accepted me either'.