

FOR A PROGRESSIVE ARTS AND CULTURAL POLICY AGENDA IN AUSTRALIA



ARTS AND CULTURAL POLICY is in a deep crisis in Australia. And it's not just because of the pandemic or years of cuts.

The fundamental basis of this crisis is generally accepted and is not of the arts and cultural sector's making. For decades governments have imposed a logic of market efficiency and individualism on many areas of our economic, social, and public life; and this has come at great cost to public policy, the provision of fundamental rights and services, and to our collective sense of citizenship.

However while sectors such as health, education, social services, utilities, and public housing, have been privatised and outsourced, they are still viewed as public goods and collective rights. This has not been the case for art and culture.

Art and culture has not escaped neoliberalism's gravitational pull; in fact, arguably, it has been more completely captured than many other areas of public policy. Art and culture's worth has been substantially reduced in policy terms from collective value and rights to a troublesome concoction of economic growth and non-cultural metrics, industry development language, and individual consumer experience.

So, while progressive and radical ideas are expressed in much artistic and cultural practice by Australian artists, they are far less reflected in the arts and cultural sector's policy work.

Reset Arts and Culture is a policy and advocacy initiative aiming to change this by putting progressive ideas back into arts and cultural policy, and art and culture back into progressive imagination and activism.

EVERYWHERE CAPITALIST REALISM – the idea that capitalism is the only viable economic system – is being challenged by a new generation of economists and activists.

Informed by feminist, socialist, ecological and First Nations thinking, there is a resurgence of ideas and proposals around commons, cooperatives, mutual aid, municipalism, and networked localism, that are turning economics on its head. Previously unthinkable policies such as income and job guarantees are now debated by mainstream political parties.

Not only does art and culture have something profound to offer these new movements, as a central component of programs for social change and liberation, in turn these ideas offer so much for a new cultural policy agenda – if as a sector we dare to embrace them.

funded and regulated, how its workers are treated and educated, how its audience-participants are respected, and how it interacts with public and democratic spaces.

Firstly, this requires breaking with the notion of ‘creative industries’, the dominance of which has come at [a significant political cost](#). Not only have governments ignored the shaky and over-inflated claims of the creative industry narrative, [the sector has allowed its self-understanding to be colonised by economic rationalism and neoliberalism](#).

We can see this in the default models for artists and arts organisations. Artists forced to masquerade as small businesses, the ubiquitous language of entrepreneurship and innovation, [so-called skills-based governance that infantilises artists](#) and sees non-arts corporates given control of boards, public agencies, and cultural institutions. Creative education that is increasingly hollowed out and given over to Business 101 programs.

The prevailing assumption is that ever-declining government art and culture budgets exist simply to plug gaps left by the market. This deficit model has distorted both the positive public value of art and culture, and the positive role of government.

Meanwhile vast global commercial monopolies dominate film, music, games, publishing, streaming, and media. Data extraction intrudes deep into our personal and social lives. Global economies of scale, precarity and the brutal reduction of labour costs, define the lives of workers including artists.

Challenging this current situation and recovering art and culture’s centrality to communal, radical and democratic imagination is a central challenge facing progressive cultural policy advocacy in Australia.

This type of policy change project requires divesting from a self-image of a disruptive, competitive, fast-growing industry, and relocating art and culture to the [foundational economy](#), its value in its contribution to a just society rather than GDP growth.

If this proposition is deemed unrealistic, it is no more so than the belief that the status quo will protect art and culture, and its makers. In fact, this approach locates art and culture within a wider set of powerful social change agendas that have gained serious traction in the years of austerity, climate crisis, and now the pandemic.

SO, LET’S GET BACK TO BASICS. Art and culture are as essential to the flourishing of human life and society as health, education, and the material infrastructures of everyday life.

Yes, just like anything else, art and culture can be reduced to a notion of ‘industry’ but this is a deliberate choice not an empirical reality, and it comes with serious consequences and distortions.

Like other sectors, art and culture has a mixed economy. It does have a significant economic footprint, and includes production that can be called ‘industrial’, alongside a broad system of public institutions, private firms, not-for-profit corporations, cooperatives, and individual creators and participants.

Taken together, art and culture should not be imagined as an industry primarily driven by private profit, but a diverse and interdependent ecosystem essential to the public life of contemporary democracies.

No matter how it is organised and delivered, art and culture’s primary value is its *public* value: it enriches us both individually and collectively. And governments have a responsibility to foster art and culture even when they do not supply it directly.

However, rather than having the resources to provide for expanding cultural and artistic aspiration and practices, art and culture as a public sector in Australia has been hobbled – by funding cuts, political bullying, ministerial power grabs, endless econometrics, [lobbying and accountancy firms](#), boards dominated by corporate representatives, the marginalisation of the skills and institutions required to deliver art and culture as a public good, [and landing on the wrong side of a culture war](#).

Moreover, art and culture, and its own inherent value, has been disappeared in the shift to creative industries, cultural economy, and other assorted instrumentalisms including ‘social impact’. While art and culture may be all around us, as we have been telling ourselves throughout the pandemic, it receives only minimal affirmative mention in progressive public policy.

This needs to change. We need to speak about the value of art and culture definitively and forge a new, progressive, public policy agenda.

BUILDING A NEW PUBLIC AGENDA for art and culture in Australia is a big task for a sector fettered by government hostility, its sectoral research resources stripped, resulting in a widening ignorance about itself, its labour force, its dynamics and possibilities.

[We need to relearn the language and practice of public value.](#) This requires actively aligning art and culture with other public sectors and their campaigns, and developing new principles for sector planning, regulation, and protection.

A new public agenda must include arguing for a federal arts and cultural policy that ambitiously speaks to and is organised around the value of art and culture. And yes, a well-resourced Ministry for Culture could greatly improve the governance and status of art and culture, and place it back into the centre of future government policy making. However a new progressive agenda can go much further.

In Australia much of arts and cultural advocacy has focused on increasing the grant funding pool. While this continues to be very important, especially after a decade of cuts, we need to more directly address the twin crises of access to dignified working conditions for professional artists and cultural workers, and arts education for all (both of which raise questions of class).

A new policy agenda would valorise art and culture's labour intensive low productivity. In doing so, and moving away from 'jobs and growth' rhetoric, [the cultural sector could join the wider debates](#) on the future of work, labour rights, the nature of care work, and decoupling income and work.

We need to bring our attention to establishing fair labour conditions as well as to the multitude of initiatives that could directly support artists and cultural workers such as [basic income initiatives](#), job guarantees, [fellowships and public employment schemes](#).

Winning these reforms, that could dramatically improve artists' working lives, means connecting to the broader union movement, alongside growing campaigns to combat precarity and poverty.

Similarly, the arts and cultural sector can be central to [public education campaigns](#) aiming to reverse the reduction of education to fee-for-service acquisition of employment skills. We can exemplify the value of life-long learning and experimentation, and argue that freely available education, in any field, is a cultural right of all.

If we take culture to be a civil right, essential alongside other rights, then embracing participatory democracy - and opposing threats to democracy - should be central to the work we must do.

A new cultural policy agenda would reclaim a far wider and more radical understanding of democracy, rejecting its cynical cooption by the Right and by free marketeers. And let's not mince words: monopolies, Murdoch and the undermining of media diversity, and [state capture](#), all heavily impact on art and culture in Australia.

Let's urgently prioritise creating new governance structures, [protecting and remaking](#) our arts statutory authority the Australia Council and Australian public broadcasters, [divesting from fossil fuel](#) barons and other billionaires, rethinking data, promoting anti-monopoly legislations, and connecting art and culture with the many global movements for new democratic forms, such as citizens assemblies and worker-run (and artist-run) platforms.

Returning our thinking about art and culture to the foundations of social life – the infrastructures, services and localised everyday economies that account for the majority of Australian employment – brings us into conversation with urban and regional planning, policies that recalibrate work, leisure and income, and new forms of common ownership and community wealth-building.

Let's advocate for arts and cultural policy that encourages local experimentations and concrete utopias, the communal luxury of public art and cultural institutions small and large, co-ops rather than start-ups, collective responsibility not individual risk, and the radical importance of everyday public infrastructures like libraries, parks and community recreation.

Let's talk about building communities around care, craft and culture. Let's relearn the community and union organising traditions that have been central to cultural work and art in everyday life.

A new cultural policy agenda would supercharge important sector work on justice, intersectionality, diversity, and decolonisation, learning from First Nations ontologies, and creating new artist-led and kinship-based leadership models.

The arts and cultural sector can be central to championing justice and liberation, not simply diversity and representation, for the many demanding to be reckoned with. First in the Australian context is centring First Nations leadership and sovereignty, truth-telling and deep listening, treaty and reparation.

A new cultural policy imaginary would centre Caring for Country and Culture, reject Australia's obsession with an economy built on extraction, and prioritise the global challenges of climate change and a post-growth world. In doing so it would be truly internationalist, not as a means to the ends of trade and diplomacy, but instead by promoting a new social license and purpose for art and culture in a world facing existential environmental and social challenges.

EARLY IN THE PANDEMIC, author Arundhati Roy noted that the crisis had created a portal through which we can reimagine - and fight for - the world anew. Anything is possible again. It was a call to action that resonated with many working for change around the world.

Relooking at arts and cultural advocacy through this kind of transformative lens is a task for all of us in the sector - not only our leaders, researchers, our under-resourced peak bodies, or those with the unenviable task of policy-making in the public sector as it currently stands.

It is a big challenge but we can make a start by looking outside of ourselves to other public sectors and precarious workforces, unions, progressive policy thinkers, new economy networks, and social change movements. It's here where we will discover new ideas and alliances that could transform our campaigning potential and the power of art and culture in Australia.

Reset Arts and Culture is a collaboration between cultural sector professionals and researchers from South Australia's three universities. We aim to combine our practice, research and activist knowledge and experience in a space for new ideas, policy engagement, advocacy and change.

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