

Arts – Cultural Maintenance?

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Frank Panucci discusses the evolution of Australia Council's arts policies

From the establishment of the Australia Council in 1973 the issue of multiculturalism and the arts has been a constant source of debate, creation and dynamism.

In the initial stages the issue of cultural diversity was categorised as 'ethnic arts' and the main thrust was that of maintenance of traditional and folkloric practices of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The philosophy of this approach was both one of the rights of individuals and communities to cultural expression and that the maintenance of cultural practices would assist in integration because it allowed for the recognition of diverse traditions. However, the 'ethnic arts' approach was still very much in the 'welfare model' approach - that is special assistance for a disadvantaged group and less attention to structural barriers which maintained the condition of disadvantage.

Then in the late '70s and early '80s the Council acknowledged that besides traditional folk arts, individual ethnic artists needed special assistance both in terms of accessing available programs and also specific support to assist them in refocussing their overseas acquired skills to the Australian context. One of the Council's strategies was to earmark funds for ethnic arts. The Council in 1983 established the Multicultural Incentive Fund which aimed to increase expenditure across all the boards of Council of projects which included artists or communities of non-English speaking background (NESB). These changes and

attempts to come to grips with issues in a changing environment were reflective of the wider debates both in the community and amongst public policy makers. Were targets an appropriate response or were they just another form of tokenism? Could new policies be seen as special treatment which lowered the standards for some groups to seek access support? These questions and the debate generally were still focusing on communities of NESB as discrete, and in some cases separate groups on the margin of Australian society and that there was some mainstream to which entry would be finally achieved once its conditions were met. In essence it was a static social and cultural model approach. The reality was quite different. Culture and society are in a constant state of evolution and concepts of mainstream, margins, excellence and professionalism were being questioned and redefined.

In 1988 the Australia Council's policy of Multicultural Arts took a major shift. Access and equity were seen as only one side of the policy but the emphasis was that multicultural arts "should be seen as integral to the enrichment of an Australian culture and the development of a distinctly Australian excellence." No longer was Council solely aiming at cultural maintenance or creating access to the mainstream for artists of NESB. The issue was now that cultural diversity was a part of Australian society and should be seen as central to its cultural product and representations.

At times titles given to policy can be shrugged off as mere semantics but the change in 1988 from Multicultural Arts to Arts for a Multicultural Australia is about ensuring that arts development in Australia includes the significant contribution of the contemporary arts practice of artists and communities from NESB to reflect in arts and cultural production

the multicultural nature of Australia.

The whole area of Arts for a Multicultural Australia is now moving into a new phase following the Creative Nation statement of the Prime Minister and the priorities it sets out for the whole cultural development and production area. The Council has now defined a new series of priorities which reflect the emphases in Creative Nation. These include audience development, international export and development, marketing, sponsorship development and linkages with information technology. These new priority areas provide an opportunity for Council to demonstrate how cultural diversity is a resource which allows us to develop a comparative advantage in cultural development and to be at the cutting edge in the new technology arena. In each of the new priority areas artists of NESB have an important role to play in developing new audiences within ethnic communities, in forging new artistic links with the countries of their origin and in articulating new connections within the global cultural economies - a role expedited by the new multimedia and broadcast technologies.

The future of cultural and arts development in Australia lies in understanding that our cultural diversity provides us with a strength both for developing exciting contemporary arts and placing us in a unique position on the international stage.

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