

Media Release - Free the Arts

6th July 2015

Arts Sector gathers in Sydney to protest cuts and plan for the future.

National arts funding, advocacy and policy were in the spotlight in a series of arts industry meetings held in Sydney on July 2nd.

The meetings, organised as part of the #freethearts campaign responding to the cuts to Australia Council funding, involved more than 150 artists, small to medium companies, major performing arts companies and community members. Hundreds of others across the country participated online.

An afternoon meeting of people from small to medium arts sector and major performing arts companies met to identify common concerns and explore ways to work together to overcome current and future challenges. Meeting facilitator Anne Dunn reported:

“People recognise that the healthy future of the arts industry in Australia needs the whole sector to work together. A number of issues were generally agreed and there was a commitment to grow the conversations across the sector. The recent changes to national arts funding have been very divisive. This was a bit of a break through in the communications, and an important step forward in efforts of #freethearts to bring the whole sector together and speak with one voice.”

The main forum – Our Future in Our Hands - strongly reaffirmed growing calls for the federal government to immediately halt its decision to strip \$104.8m from the Australia Council. The forum identified the need for increased and secure funding for the arts. Anne Dunn reported:

“The arts sector is already under enormous pressure from last year’s funding cuts. People are clearly saying that Minister Brandis needs to bring new money to the table for his new program. He needs to grow the investment rather than sacrifice the small to medium and independent artists, who are critical parts of the sector ecology.”

The meetings also discussed the need for stronger national advocacy for issues that impact on the whole sector. Arts practitioner Fiona Winning, said:

“I have been bowled over by the dialogue within the sector - the media coverage, the buy-in from politicians and the success of getting the Senate Inquiry happening. Most significant is the intensity of energy, action and leadership by independent artists and small company delegates to advocate politically and get our stories into the local and national media. We have excellent state and nationally-based peak advocacy bodies but none that are resourced to work across art forms, and engage in cross sector debate such as we are doing ourselves, at this moment.”

The forum also identified the need for a national cultural policy framework. Creative Australia was axed by the current government and nothing has been put in its place. Free the Arts spokesperson Norm Horton said:

“These big national topics of funding, advocacy and policy are now firmly on the agenda and more gatherings are planned across country in the coming weeks. The momentum is really starting to build and the sector is talking, so I guess we have Minister Brandis to thank for that.”

Notes from the Forum are attached.

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Meeting Notes – Our Future in Our Hands

July 2nd – Sydney

#freethearts

Free the Arts held a public forum for people to consider the future of the arts in Australia. The need for increased and secure funding, the benefits of working together as a whole industry, and actions required to meet current challenges were all part of the discussions.

The following points were agreed by the meeting:

TOP THREE MESSAGES:

- 1. RETURN THE FUNDS TO AUSTRALIA COUNCIL:** The meeting calls for the Minister to return the funds to the Australia Council for the Arts immediately to ensure sustainability for the entire arts and cultural ecology in the immediate and long term future.
- 2. GROW THE INVESTMENT:** The meeting acknowledges that Minister Brandis has the right and power to establish the NPEA however, requests that he find the funds elsewhere. Grow the investment rather than sacrifice the small to medium and independent sectors.
- 3. RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY:** The meeting calls for the establishment of an advocacy body (distributed network such as Arts Peak) to become the advocacy and lobby group across all artforms.

Summary

Many people feel betrayed by the Minister. They have invested precious time in consultation processes initiated by the Australia Council to develop a new Strategic Plan, develop a further system that is considered more accessible and streamlined, refresh strategic programs, internal structures and staffing. Most importantly, the Australia Council has worked on the re-worked Key Organisational Funding Initiative for the past two years. The outcome of the National consultation process,

Australia Council Strategic Plan and the revised funding environment was both endorsed and launched by the Minister. Then without consultation of any kind the Minister created his own strategic directions and funding program that has had a significant negative affect on the Australia Council and will result in a severe reduction of funding to individual artists and small to medium companies.

420 organisations across the country were mid-way through the process and awaiting the outcomes of which companies would be progressing to Stage 2. Major disruptions have been made to projects, partnerships, employment contracts, the health and vitality of the small to medium and independent arts sectors in Australia.

Feedback on the Guidelines

- 4. AN ATTACK ON THE NATIONAL ARTS ECOLOGY:** The arts industry is a diverse and vibrant “ecology” – it is interconnected and interdependent with each part of this ecosystem needed to ensure sustainability, succession and pathways through the arts and for the whole to be effective. The introduction of the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) is a confusing introduction into this ecology. NPEA does not even acknowledge the ecology.

The Major Performing Arts Companies (MPAs) praised by the Minister, rely on the development of individual artists, partnerships with the small to medium sector and the audience development provided by other parts of the arts sector. Artists move across the ecology, refreshing their own practice and that of the companies with which they work. It is essential that this flow be protected.

THE NPEA IS NOW A PART OF THIS ECOLOGY AND THE MEETING CALLS ON THE MINISTER TO ARTICULATE HOW IT WILL RELATE CONSTRUCTIVELY TO THE WHOLE INDUSTRY (ecology).

- 5. GROW THE INVESTMENT:** The arts in Australia are already significantly underfunded. NPEA puts pressure on two critical parts

of the sector – individual artists and small to medium companies. The new program excludes individuals and small to medium companies will be competing with a much larger group of applicants. It is inferred that all individual artists and most small to medium companies will applying to the Australia Council for funding – a funding body with considerably depleted funds –up to half of the previous grants will now be available. The Minister’s NPEA may reach some people who were not funded by the Australia Council, either through ineligibility or the application of different assessment criteria, but this would be better funded through the introduction of new money for that program, rather than the diminution of critical parts of the arts ecology.

THE MEETING CALLS FOR: THE MINISTER TO IMMEDIATELY REINSTATE \$110 MILLION TO THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL AND FUND HIS NEW PROGRAM SEPARATELY.

6. UNETHICAL GOVERNMENT PROCESS: This move by the Minister to directly intervene in questions of what is excellent art and what arts and cultural activities should be funded is an ethical issue and can be seen in the broader context of the Government’s approach in a wide range of matters. This must be the subject of public debate. There are questions of secrecy versus transparency, small versus large and powerful and the separation of powers – for example; the encroachment by the Government on the role of independent statutory bodies and positions.

THE MEETING CALLS FOR: THE STIMULATION OF A PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE ETHICS OF THE CURRENT APPROACH BY THE GOVERNMENT TO ARTS FUNDING WITHIN THE BROADER CONTEXT OF THE SEPARATION OF POWERS.

7. TRANSPARENCY: The principle of transparency in decision-making is critical. It is noted with some concern that the draft guidelines for the program allow the Minister to withhold information about who has been funded. The identity of all recipients of public

money and the quantity of funds allocated should be on the public record.

Quote from NPEA guidelines: *There will be a register of who gets the grants but the Minister has retained the right not to disclose who gets a grant if 'officials assess that publishing grant information could 'adversely affect the achievement of government policy outcomes'. Post meeting, a spokesperson for the Ministry of the Arts informed us that the secrecy provision is included at the insistence of the Tax Office for all their grants and is required to avoid divulging private tax relief information.*

THE MEETING CALLS FOR: THE SECRECY PROVISIONS TO BE REMOVED FROM THE GUIDELINES.

8. **INAPPROPRIATE TIMEFRAMES:** Without appropriate timeframes, the NPEA will privilege larger companies and institutions as they have the resourcing to be able to respond more quickly. A coherent arts sector has a mix of art forms across all states and territories, in cities and in regions and across all ages. It is proposed that applications to NPEA will be considered by the Ministry, in order of receipt. It is difficult to see in a competitive program how an assessment can be made of the value of projects as well as what is the appropriate mix of projects in an ongoing funding program.

THE MEETING CALLS UPON: THE MINISTRY TO EXPLAIN THE TIMING AND APPROPRIATE MIX PARADOX.

9. **LITERATURE, WRITERS AND GAMING ARE OMITTED:** The guidelines appear to not recognise literature and writing – is this art form area expected to be funded through the new Book Council established by the Minister with funding taken from the Australia Council? The program also excludes digital gaming – a new area of particular interest to young artists.

THE MEETING CALLS FOR: CLARIFICATION OF SOURCES OF FUNDING FOR LITERATURE, WRITING AND DIGITAL GAMING.

THE MEETING CALLS FOR: AN IMMEDIATE UPDATE ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BOOK COUNCIL OR FOR THE FUNDS TO BE RETURNED TO THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL.

10. **INEQUITY:** For all organisations, multi-year funding brings stability, fosters the development of partnerships, ensures ongoing employment for more than half a million Australians and leverages funds from non-arts sources. However, as the NPEA focuses on projects and does not fund the administration of a company, existing multi-year funded companies and established training and collecting institutions (with their already funded administration) will have a considerable advantage in the new program.

THE MEETING EXPRESSES GRAVE CONCERNS THAT THE NPEA IS GIVING PREFERENTIAL CONSIDERATION TO THOSE COMPANIES, INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS THAT ARE CURRENTLY IN RECEIPT OF CORE FUNDING.

11. **NO DEFINITION OF EXCELLENCE:** NPEA's objective is excellence in the arts and the first criteria for assessment of applications is quality. These terms are not defined and unfortunately, Minister Brandis has indicated a lack of evidence suggesting that he shares the broad understanding of 'excellence' across the arts and outside the MPA's. In addition, the critical concept of artistic vibrancy is not mentioned. During the years of its Australia Council's 42 years of history, it has, in consultation with artists, developed definitions of excellence, quality and artistic vibrancy. The Minister could reassure that arts sector that he and the people assessing grant applications will be using those definitions, or if he is unhappy with the definitions could he clearly state what definitions will be used.

THE MINISTER SHOULD ADOPT THE DEFINITION OF EXCELLENCE (INCLUDING ARTISTIC VIBRANCY) AS USED BY THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL

12. PRINCIPLES OF ARMS LENGTH FUNDING: The meeting affirmed the essential principles of arms-length funding and peer assessment. There is concern for the ongoing sustainability and viability of the Australia Council and a call for the retention of at least one avenue for arts and cultural funding that is completely independent from political control. The principle of peer assessment is central to grant assessment. The meeting indicates that the Minister will choose external assessors that do not represent the peers of the Australian arts sector.. As much of the content of the guidelines is taken from Australia Council documents it would seem that the program has similar aims, funding streams, and assessment criteria . The difference then between the Australia Council and the NPEA can only be in its judgments and decision-making processes including direct Ministerial influence. The experience and acknowledged expertise of assessors will be critical.

THE MEETING REQUESTS THAT THE IDENTITY OF EXTERNAL ASSESSORS BE PUBLISHED AND IDENTIFIED THROUGH THE RIGOROUS PEER IDENTIFICATION PROCESS UNDERTAKEN BY THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

FUTURE ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN BY #freethearts:

13. #freethearts will be the umbrella for the whole campaign. All website activity, social media and advocacy tools can link to and from www.freethearts.com.au

14. Arts Peak, Feral Arts and MEAA working together to run a campaign to include:

- Senate inquiry responses by 17 July 2015
- Communication strategy with general public on value of the arts
- Marginal seat focus
- Cross bench focus
- Signing the charter
- Respond to the NPEA guidelines by 31 July 2015
- Ask the majors to stand with the rest of the sector, and arrange state and art form based meetings in collaboration with AMPAG

- Contribute to the #freethearts and MEAA Fighting Fund:
https://actuonline.nationbuilder.com/freethearts_donations

15. Establish funding and resources for the campaign

16. Identify what is the current context, implement a mapping tool to ensure we can assess and indicate the impacts of the Minister's decision in 12 months time.

End.