

James Catchpole
Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Friday, 27 May 2011

Dear Mr Catchpole,

I welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Federal Government's investigation of Australian multiculturalism, and I thank you for your offer of an extension on the advertising closing date.

A champion of diversity in the arts, Melbourne Fringe is the leading organisation for the independent arts in Victoria. We facilitate the presentation of contemporary work across all artforms. Each year, we work with over 4,000 artists presenting 300+ shows in 120+ venues around Victoria, representing the critical mass of independent artists who make the Melbourne Fringe Festival. Melbourne Fringe is pivotal to the success and the sustainability of the diverse independent arts community who make Victoria the state of the arts.

Myself an advocate and a champion of the arts, I am the Sydney-born daughter of Greek migrants. My first language was Greek, and I now speak several languages; having worked in a number of European countries, I have chosen Melbourne as my home – primarily for its cultural diversity and its prolific artistic community. I am a former chair of the Arts Industry Council (Victoria), a former board member of the Antipodes Festival and the Emerging Writers' Festival, a former community broadcaster and a former SBS staff member. My artistic work has been presented and published in several languages here and overseas. I make an active contribution to a diverse Australian culture.

This brief submission is focused on the power of arts, media and cultural organisations and projects in fostering a confident and innovative Australian culture – one which is always already multicultural.

Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

1. The role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda

Multiculturalism is the keystone of Australian cultural life. It's the reality of our past, our present and our future; it's our point of difference on the world stage; and within our country it's what strengthens all our economic and social outcomes. In his book *Faultlines: Race, Work, and the Politics of Changing Australia* (2007), George Megalogenis demonstrates via research and analysis the many ways in which the children of migrants have better economic, social, work and wealth outcomes than those born in Australia to Australian-born parents. This is one of a myriad texts and investigations which illustrate the overwhelming success of Australian multiculturalism.

The Australian Government has led the world in responding to and fostering our multiculturalism through specific policies and programs. Explicitly recognising that Australia has always been and will always be multicultural, the Australian Government's social inclusion agenda is buttressed by a sophisticated approach to individual and community engagement. Retaining and extending this approach through the arts, place-making, community broadcasting, community cultural development and social media will be key to its success.

2. The contribution of diaspora communities to Australia's relationships with Europe, the UK, Middle East and the immediate Asia-Pacific Region

Artists play a significant role in developing and enhancing Australia's relationships with specific world regions. Touring initiatives are especially important here – especially when supported by public

programming and other community development initiatives, such as Kultour's leading model in Australia. When they are led by culturally diverse independent artists as members of diaspora communities, residencies, exchanges and other cultural mission outreach activities are especially effective in enriching Australia's international relationships. It is through arts participation and cultural exchange that we foster real and meaningful connections, laying the groundwork for innovation and strong economic outcomes.

Settlement and participation

3. Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees, that support their full participation and integration into the broader Australian society

Supporting communities in empowering the creation of their own culture is the best way to foster a rich and harmonious Australian culture. As a former manager of the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council (NEMBC), I know first-hand the power of community broadcasting to make real impact on individual settlement and community participation. The NEMBC's new, emerging and refugee community projects, as previously supported by DIMIA, have set sector standards in outreach and outcomes.

At Melbourne Fringe, we are currently working in partnership with VicHealth, the Adult Multicultural Education Service, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Multicultural Arts Victoria, Kultour and the NEMBC on a large-scale spectator-as-performer arts project that will see two thousand people singing and dancing on Melbourne's city streets. The new confidence and new connections these people will create will have lasting impacts on their health and well-being, as well as presenting a welcoming performance of cultural diversity for the general public.

By way of further context, I enclose my published review of the 2010 National Multicultural Arts Symposium, offering a concise overview of some of the issues in the policy and program frameworks of contemporary Australian multicultural arts. It describes the positive outcomes across culturally diverse arts presentation, marketing and audience development, against the changing backdrop of political language and frameworks.

Leadership in multicultural arts and community media is ready to make an important direct contribution to the delivery of policies and programs for a multicultural Australia.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can provide any further contribution to this process.

Sincerely,

ESTHER ANATOLITIS CEO

MULTICULTURAL ARTS: ALWAYS ALREADY MAINSTREAM
Esther Anatolitis



Candy Bowers, *Who's That Chik?*
performing at National Multicultural Arts
Symposium 2010
photo: Andrew Dundon

Culturally diverse art is inspiring, innovative and marketable—and it needs your support. This was the clear message at a recent gathering of culturally diverse practitioners, each leading contemporary arts practice across a range of artforms and specialisations.

And yet that clear message is not so straightforward: needing your support means overcoming those persistent barriers that have confronted culturally diverse arts for decades. Identity, funding, leadership and the politicisation of its very vocabulary remain ongoing problems. All the while, the work becomes ever more sophisticated, attracts new audiences and tours internationally, joining that increasing array of Australian innovation that enjoys more brilliant accolades overseas than at home—or on our mainstages. So what's still at issue? And how can cultural diversity lead contemporary Australian arts with widespread recognition?

Held in Adelaide and presented by Nexus Multicultural Arts with Kultour, the National Multicultural Arts Symposium was preceded by two days of performances and exhibitions, with Candy Bowers' provocative *Who's That Chik?* setting the tone ("a hip hop tale of a brown girl with big dreams"; <http://whosthatchik.com>). Culturally diverse artists framed the symposium, with the work and the practitioners speaking for themselves. This too was questioned at the outset: Who speaks? Who names? Need every artist and every work represent an entire community?

Names and their political appropriation have long confused the Australian community, and frustrated the practitioners whose work they label. Christian (Bong) Ramilo, Executive Director of Darwin Community Arts,

saw little progress across two decades of advocating access, equity and representation. For Mirna Heruc, Manager of the Arts & Heritage Collections at the University of Adelaide (and former CEO of Nexus), “Sometimes labels have marginalised us, sometimes they’ve brought us to the centre, but nothing has changed.” Political decisions have seen successive governments adopt—and often, quietly reject—terms such as ethnic, multicultural, Aboriginal, Indigenous, cross-cultural, Community Cultural Development (CCD), disability, all abilities, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), Non-English Speaking Background (NESB), diverse, culturally diverse, and even culture itself.

When these shifting terms translate into shifts in policy, culturally diverse practitioners are—like it or not—drawn into their politics, needing to identify with the current language to achieve recognition or secure financial support. For Heruc, the best approach to these names is to reject them entirely; multicultural arts organisations should facilitate pathways into the mainstream, presenting work without any framing label. “Our job is really to get rid of this multiculturalism business, and just focus on the arts.” She adds, however, “We’re not close to achieving this.”

Independent producer Kath Papas, former director of Ausdance Victoria, distinguished between three kinds of diversity that focus her practice: form, content and philosophy. This approach overcomes the fraught cultural labels, opening diversity itself to a space beyond othering. Papas made particular mention of disability arts as informing her practice. “There’s a lack of engagement from the dance mainstream,” she says, and while there’s plenty of talented culturally diverse artists, “who’s going to take them on?” Papas identified flexible infrastructure, networking and skilling up as key issues. Without these essentials, “we lose those artists because they get too tired—you can’t self-produce forever.”

Not all artists make a conscious choice to self-produce, while for others the torch-bearing work of speaking for an entire community is central to the art. Khaled Sabsabi, visual artist and Creative Producer at Casula Powerhouse, saw no distinction between CCD and his own artistic practice. Karl Telfer, Kaurana Cultural Bearer and visual artist, described reconciliation as the driver of all of his work. Such practice is never about aligning itself to funding categories. As Sabsabi put it, “Art leadership is a resistance against the way things are.”

Many speakers lamented the rise and fall of leadership organisations; touring and advocacy body Kultour remains the only national multicultural organisation. Yet all speakers agreed that leadership is about the work itself, and its articulation into the community. Bowers spoke passionately about a new space in which diverse artists see themselves represented in the faces as well as the programming of mainstream arts organisations. “Beyond being ‘championed,’ or ‘helped,’ we want to be paid for being artists. We want the resources, we want the recognition.”

So, how do you position yourself in the culturally diverse arts? Head on. In fact, it’s a proven strategy. Karen Bryant, Associate Director of the Adelaide Festival Centre, presented a powerful argument for diversity as a strategy towards financial sustainability and artistic success. “We’re no longer a series of buildings,” says Bryant, “we’re a facilitator—which means asking, and then re-evaluating.” Direct engagement is essential: programming is developed in close consultation with emerging and established communities. In this way, the Centre overcame its empty seats and its venue-for-hire image. The results are inspiring: a 33% increase in audiences in its first year, and 25% in the second.

Similarly, Adelaide Fringe’s 2011 Director, Greg Clarke, aims at international recognition as a culturally diverse festival by 2020. Clarke sees this as an artistic as well as a commercial strategy for engaging with a majority of Australians. With a strong record in culturally diverse policy as well as programming, Clarke says the Fringe has prioritised diversity quite simply “because it was mind-blowing.”

Communications consultant and editor Fotis Kapetopoulos’ statistics demonstrated just how marketable

culturally diverse art is—both at home and overseas. “Our mainstream companies are caught up producing the same styles, but what we’re talking about is international.” Aaron Seeto agrees: “Internationally, diversity is our point of difference.” Seeto, Director of artist-run space Gallery 4A: Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney’s Chinatown, described the contemporary visual arts museum as “a self-replicating machine, a safe-house,” while contemporary culturally diverse work is “feeding into the international arena.”

Rather than engaging with and supporting this work, our own governments prefer to stick to the known. The major mass-marketing campaign in culturally diverse Victoria is Melbourne Winter Masterpieces, a showcase of well-known European artists from previous centuries. Kapetopoulos described the end of Sydney’s Carnivale as a cynical stroke: it was defunded by the NSW government at its peak demand and sustainability point because its audiences “had started to look too mainstream—it didn’t look like an ethnic festival.” Such ironies were not lost on a gathering of practitioners accustomed to being ‘othered.’

On the other hand, some mainstream arts organisations experiencing significant audience loss have been receiving funding boosts in recent years. Emphasising this particular irony, Opera Australia’s Artistic Director Lyndon Terracini used his morning keynote to ask the funding bodies in the room to “empower” his organisation through a funding increase. Opera Australia currently receives as much Australia Council funding as the other 900+ funded organisations and projects combined. Terracini, founder of Kultour member, Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA) in Lismore NSW, spoke of new Indigenous and Asian initiatives: “I don’t want to play to an elite audience—I’ve never wanted that.”

With all speakers projecting a future Australia of increasing diversity, governments will need to direct subsidies to culturally relevant work that’s artistically exciting as well as economically sustainable. The undeniable reality of Australian multiculturalism as always already mainstream can no longer be avoided; changing labels simply exposes a political reluctance to accept that diversity will not remain ‘othered.’

Fundamentally, such barriers aren’t specific to the arts. They’re generational; they’re administrative; they’re political. Ironically, they’re cultural—in the word’s corporate meaning, describing entrenched practices in establishment organisations. Culturally diverse art is ready to lead contemporary Australian practice, further developing audiences here and overseas.

Candy Bowers knows it. “How can cultural diversity lead the Australian arts?—Get out of my way.”

National Multicultural Arts Symposium 2010 **Diversity in the Arts: Theory + Action**, May 19-21, 2010, presenter: Nexus Multicultural Arts in partnership with Kultour

Esther Anatolitis is CEO of Melbourne Fringe, co-curator of Melbourne’s Architecture+Philosophy talks series, Chair of the Arts Industry Council (Victoria) and regularly consults with the small-to-medium arts sector on strategic planning and programming.

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