

## **Submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and Craft**

Australians value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and creative practices, view them as the foundation of national identity and expect them to be prioritised by governments, investors, policy and business leaders

13 December 2021

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and Crafts Productivity Commission  
GPO Box 1428  
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

## **The need to prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and creative practice through a National Cultural Plan**

A New Approach (ANA) is Australia's leading arts and culture think tank, with a vision for an Australia that celebrates, benefits from, and invests in arts, culture and creativity for the benefit of all Australians. This submission outlines evidence for prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and creative practices in the development of cohesive public policy settings, including a National Cultural Plan. It draws from ANA's qualitative research as well as a review of national and international evidence.

**The Issue:** As the arts and cultural sector recovers from Covid-19, it is critical to explore the issues in Australia's visual arts and crafts market and examine the value, nature and structure of the markets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts are of global cultural significance and an important part of Australia's shared identity. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, art is a way to share stories and spiritual beliefs to future generations. It also generates income for artists and creates economic opportunities for communities. However, Covid-19 is rapidly accelerating changes within the arts and cultural sector in Australia and there is a need to ensure that First Nations artists can anticipate and respond to these changes and take advantage of the opportunities they bring.

**A National Solution:** Ensure the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are considered and included through opportunities to co-design a National Cultural Plan to support industry recovery, participation, employment and innovation for the benefit of all First Nations people.

At a Policy Leaders roundtable held by ANA in 2021, all participants including First Nations participants acknowledged the need to ensure that arts and cultural opportunities are created and produced in every place, in every part of Australia and that a National Plan that supports this would allow both domestic and international audiences to experience the breadth of creativity that would come from people in regional, rural and remote areas having access to the same opportunities as those in urban areas.

Policy Leaders also suggested that a National Plan would assist in better focusing efforts to assist the arts and cultural sector, including First Nations artists, to take advantage of the changes accelerated by Covid-19. At this time, rapid transformation is needed to not just benefit from the Covid-19 recovery but to be deliberate and ambitious. A National Plan would be an effective way to drive this transformation.

ANA understands there will be many specialist submissions to this Inquiry with detailed knowledge of the issues. To support this, ANA has sought to provide useful context around the role and relevance of arts and culture in Australia. Finally, in our role as a philanthropically funded, independent think tank, ANA is happy to provide further advice about options for the recommendations outlined in this submission and would welcome the opportunity to discuss them.

Warm regards,



Kate Fielding, CEO, A New Approach (ANA)

Contact

Find

Send

# A New Approach (ANA)

## SUMMARY

### KEY INSIGHTS

- Australians value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and creative practices, view them as the foundation of our national identity and expect them to be prioritised by governments.
- Strategic investment in arts and culture deliver social benefits to communities, including First Nations communities. Arts and cultural participation builds community, belonging and trust; raises the quality of life for First Nations peoples and must be a critical part of any effort to address situations of disadvantage.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and arts organisations are also successful both within Australia and abroad. The arts and cultural sector is a significant contributor within the Australian creative economy, however First Nations artists have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and creative practices have endured in Australian arts and culture policy settings but more attention is needed as highlighted by recommendations in the recently released report *Sculpting a National Cultural Plan* by the Standing Committee on Communications.
- A National Cultural Plan would help ensure the perspectives of all Australians, including First Nations people, are considered as changes to policy, investment and legislative settings are made.

### KEY OPPORTUNITIES

- Prepare and implement a National Cultural Plan to inform more coherent, non-partisan policy settings and investments and clarify responsibilities across the three levels of government.
- Position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and creative expression as a core, shared part of Australia in the 21st century including recognising the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and creative practice in public policy measures designed to address equity and justice issues.
- Australia's arts and cultural content should reflect the diversity of our population, including the stories of our First Nations peoples, to help deepen Australians' understanding of different people and perspectives, and share Australia's diverse stories to international audiences.
- Prioritise schemes, incentives and requirements that support production and distribution of diverse Australian content and iconography including First Nations perspectives.
- Draw on Australia's cultural inheritance to create international public diplomacy initiatives that celebrate First Nations arts and culture as well as the diverse stories of our multicultural nation.
- Take an industry transformation approach to supporting arts and cultural organisations including First Nations in pivoting to digital, given the importance that Australians, especially young middle Australians, are now placing on digital engagement with arts and culture.
- To support positive lifelong outcomes for young people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, arts and culture should be taught consistently at school. This could be supplemented by subsidy programs for arts and cultural activities and/or tuition to ensure cost is not a barrier to access for any Australian child.

# A New Approach (ANA)

## INSIGHTS IN DETAIL

### Valuing First Nations cultural and creative practice in Australia

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural and creative practices in this land stretch across tens of thousands of years and continue today. These practices are globally unique, have grown over time and have endured despite profound disruption over the last two and a half centuries.

In recent research conducted by ANA with both middle Australians and young middle Australians<sup>1</sup>, it was clear that both groups valued First Nations cultural and creative practices, had an interest in enhancing opportunities to access these practices in communities across Australia, and expected them to be prioritised by governments, investors, policy and business leaders.

The middle Australians interviewed viewed First Nations cultural and creative practices as a unique and enduring aspect of the Australian context, as highlighted in the Insight Report *A View from Middle Australia: Perceptions of Arts, Culture and Creativity*.

*I feel we don't show enough of our Aboriginal culture, we don't give it enough exposure. I would like to see more of that.* (FEMALE, NSW, 35–60)

*I had number one [in a list of cultural heritage icons] as Indigenous art centres. You learn about Australia's culture and where it started, and how creative some of the Aboriginal artwork is.* (MALE, NSW, 35–60)

*I think, for example, in SA, they just announced an Indigenous culture centre. Hundreds of millions of dollars, and I think that pretty much just reflects how a lot of people feel about preserving the Indigenous culture, so I think that's a pretty good effort by them.* (MALE, SA, 18–29, SELF-DESCRIBED AS GREEK/CYPRIOT, INFRASTRUCTURE WORKER)

The young middle Australians interviewed for the report *The Next Generation of Voters: Young middle Australians talk arts, culture and creativity* also viewed First Nations cultural and creative practices as unique, but went beyond this highlighting that the arts and culture you engage with shapes your identity as an individual, and the arts and culture plays a central role in shaping a nation's identity.

Young middle Australians believe First Nations arts and culture has a critical role in shaping Australia's national identity and setting Australia apart from other nations. They also expressed a desire for arts and culture to more accurately and honestly reflect Australia's past.

*[When asked what unique Australian voices and stories should be heard] I definitely think straight to Aboriginal history... I think there needs to be a lot more recognition of what happened back then and a lot more of their culture brought into ours. Not just the typical Aussie snag on the barbie, a lot more historical – about the culture that was based here before the colonisers came, because it was their land before it was ours.* (FEMALE, 18, VIC, SELF-DESCRIBED AS AUSTRALIAN, YEAR 12 STUDENT)

*If we're going to spend money to invest and preserve bits of history, we need to be honest about it. We need to explore both sides, including the sides that don't make us look good.* (MALE, 25, ACT, SELF-DESCRIBED AS ANGLO-SAXON, STUDENT)

---

<sup>1</sup> ANA defines middle Australians as: swing or undecided voters; from low to middle income households; living in regional or outer suburban locations. Young middle Australians are a part of this cohort aged 18 - 29.

# A New Approach (ANA)

Young middle Australians were also interested in arts and cultural activities that were not only seen as ways to invigorate places and local cultures now but also as opportunities to gift important or interesting aspects of a place's past or present to future generations.

*To preserve that culture, it allows us to – it just gives future generations a chance to experience as much culture as possible. Obviously, the culture keeps flowing, keeps growing, but being able to give future generations a chance to experience the past is pretty important. (MALE, 26, NT, SELF-DESCRIBED AS PAKISTANI, ENGINEER)*

*I was also going to say Uluru, because it's an Indigenous rock and now we're finally not allowed to climb on it again...It's an icon, especially for Australian Aboriginals. It's one thing that's, I guess, ours and always has been, I feel. Compared to everything else in Australia that got taken over and colonised, I feel like that sort of remained ours. (FEMALE, 23, NSW, SELF-DESCRIBED AS ABORIGINAL, SEEKING EMPLOYMENT)*

Importantly, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, arts and culture were intrinsically linked to their identity, being embedded in and inseparable from their daily lives.

*Well, I have 'life' [as a word associated with arts and culture] because basically, my life revolves around art and culture...I'm Aboriginal, so everything I basically do revolves around art and culture. (FEMALE, 22, NT, SELF-DESCRIBED AS ANGLO/ATSI, PROJECT OFFICER)*

Reflecting on the research with both middle Australians and young middle Australians it is evident that while there is a deep appreciation for First Nations cultural and creative practices, further work is needed to ensure they are prioritised in the way Australians expect them to be in our contemporary society.

## The impact of arts and culture on societal outcomes

The evidence is clear that strategic investment in arts and culture demonstrably delivers social benefits to communities and places, including to First Nations communities.

Leading Australian and international research<sup>2</sup> shows that when a considered effort is made to increase access and participation in arts and cultural activities the impacts are significant including building feelings of community, belonging and trust; helping combat loneliness and isolation; and helping recovery from disasters and trauma.

Internationally, strategies for improving societal outcomes through arts and culture have also generated positive social impacts. Investment in public arts and cultural events has been found to bring people together and bridge social barriers through shared experiences while also decreasing loneliness. Arts and cultural activities that reflect and explore diverse perspectives are proven opportunities to build social cohesion and inclusion. Further to this, investment in creative activities that address trauma has been found to successfully support individuals and communities to engage with arts and culture in a way that promotes recovery while also increasing community connection and civic participation.

While engaging with arts and culture is important for the health and wellbeing of all Australians, it is critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As Wongaibon epidemiologist Ray Lovet's research has highlighted<sup>3</sup>, the health and

---

<sup>2</sup> Fielding, Kate, Iva Glisic, and Jodie-Lee Trembath, 'Transformative: Impacts of Culture and Creativity.' Insight Series. Canberra: A New Approach and The Australian Academy of Humanities, 2019

<sup>3</sup> . Lovet, Ray, Phyll Dance, Jill Guthrie, Roxie Brown, and Julie Tongs. 2014. 'Walan Girri: Developing a Culturally Mediated Case Management Model for Problematic Alcohol Use among Urban Indigenous People.' Australian Health Review 38 (4): 440–46.

# A New Approach (ANA)

wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are inextricably intertwined with their specific culture and language. The relationship between arts and health has also been explored with First Nations peoples both in Australia and internationally, finding that culture must be a critical part of any effort to address situations of Indigenous disadvantage, and for healing and strengthening individuals and communities.

Further to this, multiple recent reports provide strong evidence for the positive role that arts and culture have and can play in raising the quality of life for First Nations peoples. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in or attended First Nations art festivals were more likely to be engaged in study, or intended to study in the future. These participants were also more likely to feel capable of voicing their opinions within their communities, and to report feelings of happiness<sup>4</sup>.

These findings indicate that engagement with First Nations arts and cultural expression is closely related to measures of subjective wellbeing associated with a sense of empowerment and community connectedness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## **The contributions of First Nations cultural and creative practice to economic development**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts are successful both within Australia and abroad, and the Indigenous arts sector is a significant contributor within the Australian creative economy<sup>5</sup>.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists live across the whole of Australia, and feature in both urban and regional arts contexts, including the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair and the National Indigenous Art Fair in Sydney.

The Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation found remote Indigenous art centres generated \$52.7 million in art sales from 2008–2012<sup>6</sup>. This represented a \$6 million increase in sales value, and 40,000 more art products than the 2003–07 period. Sales of artworks also generate critical sources of income in remote communities.

In addition, many Indigenous cultural festivals, performances and visual arts events are recognised internationally as a unique offering that generates economic benefits for Australia's tourism industry. Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has recognised this through its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program, which promotes Australia's Indigenous cultural exchange activities.

It is also noted that Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are proportionally more likely to be nominated for a major art award and participate in international arts events. For example, of Australian artists participating in international events in 2013, around 5% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people<sup>7</sup>. This is notably higher than the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the broader Australian population, which is 3%.

---

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Biddle and Heather Crawford, "Indigenous Participation in Arts and Cultural Expression, and the Relationship with Wellbeing: Results from the 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey." Australian National University, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, CAEPR Working Paper No. 117/2017, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Fielding, Kate, Iva Glisic, and Jodie-Lee Trembath, *Transformative: Impacts of Culture and Creativity*. Insight Series. Canberra: A New Approach and The Australian Academy of Humanities, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> The Indigenous art market peaked in 2007, with total sales estimated to have generated between \$400 and \$500 million. Annual revenue from Indigenous art has since dropped owing to a range of issues, including the global financial crisis. See Australian Government, Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, "At the Heart of Art, A Snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporations in the Visual Arts Sector." 2012, p. 2 and 6. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Australia Council for the Arts, "Arts Nation." 2017, pp. 4 and 26.

# A New Approach (ANA)

However, it is important to recognise that First Nations creators have been disproportionately affected by Covid–19, with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population more reliant than the general population on income from arts and culture. This is especially true in remote areas with arts centres, whose sales have decreased by more than 50% in some locations.<sup>8</sup> In light of this, there is an urgent need for coordinated efforts to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and the arts and cultural sector to recover from the challenges of Covid-19.

## Exploring First Nations cultural and creative practice in Australian policy settings

In ANA's recent Discussion Paper *21st Century Priorities for Australian arts and culture policy*, a number of foundations were identified that have endured in Australian policy settings, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and creative practices were at the heart of these foundations.

Australian arts and cultural policy documents in the late 20th and early 21st century have increasingly recognised and reflected the importance of First Nations cultural and creative practices. Australia has now endorsed the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, both of which include particular protections for First Nations' cultural expression.

The recently released report *Sculpting a National Cultural Plan* of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's Creative and Cultural Industries and Institutions by the Standing Committee on Communications builds on this. The report contains 22 recommendations, the key being the development of a National Cultural Plan.

The report also made several recommendations that are specifically focused on First Nations' arts and culture, namely:

- That the Office for the Arts investigate the establishment of a national centre of Indigenous culture and arts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork (recommendation 2.172) and as part of the co-design process, the Office for the Arts should consider the most culturally appropriate site on which to build a national centre; how to create a national network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander galleries in partnership with State/Territory art institutions; and examine how museums and galleries can further improve Indigenous representation and participation across all areas (2.173).
- That the Office for the Arts investigate the delivery of an 'Art Starter' portal containing information for artists and that the portal should include information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists on protecting their work, and accessing advice on moving forward in the global art world.

The report's recommendation of the development of a National Cultural Plan is a critical, positive step forward to ensuring that Australian arts and cultural policy settings reflect the needs of contemporary Australia, including those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists.

---

<sup>8</sup> Morris, Linda. 2020. "After Years of Growth, Indigenous Art Sales Have Been Hit Hard by COVID-19." The Sydney Morning Herald, September 1, 2020, sec. Indigenous Art. <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/after-years-of-growth-indigenous-art-sales-have-been-hit-hard-by-covid-19-20200820-p55nma.html>.

# A New Approach (ANA)

## A National Cultural Plan

The recommendation of the development of a National Cultural Plan in the report *Sculpting a National Cultural Plan* by the Standing Committee on Communications is designed to ensure the perspectives of all Australians are considered, including First Nations creators, participators and consumers.

Australia's key strength is its diversity: diversity of ideas, diversity of cultures, and the diversity of lived experiences of citizens and residents. Part of that diversity comes from Australia's geographic distribution and it is clear that what works for a rural community in South Australia may not work in an urban area of New South Wales, or a remote community in the Northern Territory. Australia's Federation makes it possible for all states and territories and local government areas to have greater autonomy to make decisions to best suit their communities. A National Cultural Plan would support all states and territories and local governments to work effectively together to determine the fundamental areas of importance for all Australians in the twenty-first century, as well as how Australians in all communities can benefit from equitable access to arts and cultural experiences that are both significant and relevant to them.

A National Cultural Plan would also ensure that the roles of different investors are articulated more clearly, including different levels of government, giving all stakeholders transparency and a common understanding of both their responsibilities and future opportunities. It would also support stakeholders to make meaningful contributions towards each others' objectives. For example, a National Plan could demonstrate how arts and culture, regional and urban development, health, law enforcement and education portfolios could work together to achieve happier, healthier, more socially cohesive towns and regions. A National Plan would also create greater security for private and corporate investors, who could have increased confidence that their investments in arts and culture would be both beneficial and lower in risk.

At a Policy Leaders roundtable held by ANA in 2021 all participants, including First Nations participants, acknowledged the need to ensure that arts and cultural opportunities are created and produced in all our communities, in every part of Australia and that a National Plan that supports this would allow both domestic and international audiences to experience the breadth of creativity that would come from people in regional, rural and remote areas having access to the same opportunities as those in urban areas. Policy Leaders also suggested that a National Plan would assist in better focusing efforts to assist the arts and cultural sector, including First Nations artists, to take advantage of the changes accelerated by Covid-19. At this time, rapid transformation is needed to not just benefit from the Covid-19 recovery but to be deliberate and ambitious. A National Plan would be an effective way to drive this transformation.

Finally, it was noted by Policy Leaders that it is critical that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — in particular young people who are at the forefront of changes being accelerated by Covid-19 — are engaged in the co-design of policy settings such as a National Plan in both an ongoing and meaningful way, ensuring their perspectives are heard and valued.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is evident from both Australian and international research that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and creative practices are a foundation of Australia's national identity and should be prioritised by governments, investors, policy and business leaders. A practical way for this to be achieved is for the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creators and consumers to inform the development of a National Cultural Plan designed to support industry recovery and growth, employment and innovation for the benefit of all First Nations people.



# A New Approach (ANA)

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information about the evidence base that forms the basis of this submission is available in the following publications:

Fielding, Kate, Iva Glisic, and Jodie-Lee Trembath, '*Transformative: Impacts of Culture and Creativity*.' Insight Series. Canberra: A New Approach and The Australian Academy of Humanities, 2019

Fielding, K., Trembath, J.L., 2020, '*A view from middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity*'. Produced by A New Approach think tank with lead delivery partner the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra.

Trembath, J.L., Fielding, K., August 2021. '*The next generation of voters: Young middle Australians talk arts, culture and creativity*'. Insight Series. Paper no. 2021-02. Produced by A New Approach (ANA). Canberra, Australia.

Trembath, J.L., Fielding, K., May 2021. "Imagining 2030: Preparing for a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan". Analysis paper no. 2021-01. Produced by A New Approach (ANA). Canberra, Australia

Fielding, K. & Trembath, J.L., October 2021. 'Twenty-first century priorities for Australian arts and culture policy: What's new, what's endured, what's next?'. Analysis Paper no. 2021-03. Produced by A New Approach (ANA). Canberra, Australia.

These publications, as well as further research, papers and submissions, are available on the ANA website: [newapproach.org.au](http://newapproach.org.au)

## ABOUT A NEW APPROACH (ANA)

Australians from every walk of life participate in and benefit from arts, culture and creativity. Australia's leading arts and culture think tank, A New Approach (ANA) makes this evident through independent research and analysis. ANA's work informs discussion, inspires public policy and brings together decision makers and industry leaders around evidence-led ideas and pathways for pragmatic action. ANA's staff, board, expert advisory and philanthropic partners are driven by a shared vision of a cultural life that emboldens Australia.

ANA is supported by 11 philanthropic partners: The Myer Foundation; Sidney Myer Fund; Tim Fairfax Family Foundation; The Ian Potter Foundation; Neilson Foundation; Minderoo Foundation; Besen Family Foundation; Spinifex Trust; The Keir Foundation; Aranday Foundation; and The Yulgilbar Foundation.