

New South Wales Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy

Consultation report

Arts NSW with RPR Consulting
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Communities
arts nsw

Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy

Consultation Workshops in Blacktown, Lake Macquarie, Lismore and Wollongong

February and March 2010

Report

Introduction

Overview of the workshops

During February and March 2010, Arts NSW held four consultation meetings in Blacktown, Lake Macquarie, Lismore and Wollongong. The meetings were conducted in order to hear opinions on the development of the Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy in NSW. The sessions were attended by various Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural organisations and individual artists, with particular emphasis placed on hearing the Aboriginal perspective on the strategy. The broad aims of the meetings were to work towards a cultural strategy that would increase Aboriginal involvement in the arts, promote greater appreciation of this contribution, improve cultural engagement with Aboriginal communities and create more jobs and business development for Aboriginal people in creative industries.

The four meetings followed a similar structure. The first presentation in the meetings was given by Peter White, Indigenous Cultural Development Officer for Arts NSW, who gave a brief history to the Strategy and outlined the key elements which it needs to include. All participants were then asked to identify what the key successes to date have been and what can be learnt from these.

Next, participants looked at each of the four proposed key result areas, suggesting actions that are needed in each area over the next five years. Specifically the meetings canvassed: how training and professional development for Aboriginal people in NSW in the arts and culture sector could be enhanced, how the profile of NSW Aboriginal arts and culture could be increased, how to ensure arts is integral to programs designed to improve Aboriginal well-being and how employment and income generation possibilities for Aboriginal arts could be increased.

The last session of the day involved participants specifying their key priorities for inclusion in the Strategy. Peter White then told participants what the next steps in the development of the Strategy were expected to be, thanked people for their participation and closed the day.

This report

The workshops were facilitated by Ann Porcino of RPR Consulting, who wrote this report. The report summarises the main themes arising from the combined feedback of the four workshops, in relation to each of the four results areas proposed by Arts NSW in the *Key Issues for Discussion* document circulated to all participants prior to the workshops. The workshops indicated that there was support for these four results.

The report also shows themes, highlighted in red, that were strongly endorsed by many workshop participants and/or were named as key priorities at the end of each workshop by participants in at least two, and in many cases all four, workshops.

Result 1: Increased participation of NSW Aboriginal people in arts and cultural activity

Building a solid partnership with NSW DET to ensure engagement of Aboriginal school children in Aboriginal arts and culture

There was a very strong agreement across all the meetings about the importance of engaging children and young people at school – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – in learning about Aboriginal arts and culture across a wide range of subjects, with specific attention given in the arts curriculum for students of all ages.

Work in schools, participants said, was critical for:

- Nurturing Aboriginal children and young people by connecting them to their cultural heritage, and contemporary expressions of this heritage, and encouraging them to use a variety of art forms to tell their stories.
- Teaching all students, about NSW Aboriginal cultural practice and the connection to country.

It was suggested that teaching about Aboriginal arts and culture should involve students having direct links to NSW Aboriginal artists (rather than non-Aboriginal teachers or Aboriginal people without an arts background), so that they are able to learn about the arts and culture of local Aboriginal people from local Aboriginal artists using local stories. There was concern that too often school children are learning only about the traditional and stereotypical art and culture (e.g. dots paintings, dreamtime stories) and that it is difficult for young people to see these as related to their own lives and experiences. In one workshop the notion of “re-connect to connect” was described – re-connecting kids to their own cultural roots in order to connect them with meaning and purpose in their lives.

Practical strategies that were suggested include the following:

- Building partnerships between Arts NSW and DET, particularly with Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) and Aboriginal Education Committees (where these exist), who could advise on the best mechanisms for implementing programs in schools.
- Ensuring AEOs are trained in the relevant elements of the National Arts Curriculum, when it is finalised
- Investing in the development of resources, produced with the input of NSW Aboriginal artists, that schools can use to implement the National curriculum
- Funding NSW Aboriginal artists in residence in schools in some communities to work over a period of time with students.

One workshop specifically identified the importance of focusing particular attention on Aboriginal young people, from years 10 – 12, interested in the arts. There was a view that these young people often get lost in the system and, where with some assistance they might excel in arts, drop out altogether and give up. Participants felt that it was important to raise consciousness of the importance of artistic and arts-related jobs as valid careers for Indigenous young people and to provide a vehicle into these careers for young people in these later years. Practical strategies suggested were:

- Establishing creative industry apprenticeships and school based placements that connect Aboriginal young people to jobs in the arts field, including for example

curatorial apprenticeships in galleries and museums or dance apprenticeships with NAISDA

- Developing a designated Aboriginal arts placement for year 10 students, a work placement which is expanded to say 6 weeks and incorporates a module to help these students in year 11 and 12
- Providing specific support for Aboriginal students doing art in the HSC so that they can have success in this subject and see it as valid
- Establishing clear pathways to link Aboriginal young people to TAFE and University-based arts degrees.

Facilitating formal mentorships, internships and apprenticeships for emerging Aboriginal arts and arts workers

Every workshop described the importance of mentoring programs (or the like) to connect emerging Aboriginal artists and Aboriginal people working in the arts (eg curators, crew, administrators) to other more senior and successful people in their field. People talked about the need for formal mechanisms, built on other successful Aboriginal mentorship models, which would enable emerging artists to have contact with role models and professional consultancies with artists and arts organisations.

Improving adult education options for Aboriginal people wanting to study arts and culture

Participants wanted to see more TAFE and University courses which are suitable for Aboriginal people wanting to work in the arts and cultural areas. This would require:

- More Aboriginal artists becoming TAFE teachers (one example given was the Hunter institute model)
- Recognition of prior learning for Aboriginal people who have already worked for a considerable time in the arts – so that their knowledge and experience is acknowledged and they are not discouraged from gaining the qualifications they need to teach or otherwise pursue their career
- Development of contemporary Indigenous arts degree courses at some universities (Southern Cross and Wollongong Universities were mentioned), perhaps in partnership with TAFE and potentially offered to Aboriginal students at satellite campuses to ensure access
- Maintenance of low or no-cost tuition for Aboriginal students attending TAFE and University courses
- Access to funding to assist Aboriginal people to meet the cost of materials and equipment needed to study (lack of funding for these items was seen as a substantial barrier to the pursuit of careers in areas such as music, visual arts and new media).

Result 2: Greater appreciation of NSW Aboriginal arts and cultural practice and greater recognition for NSW Aboriginal artists and arts organisations

Developing the identity and brand for NSW Aboriginal arts, in all its forms

A major theme from the workshops is that effort needs to be given to building recognition of and appreciation for the contemporary face of Aboriginal arts and culture and for NSW as the premier place in Australia for Aboriginal arts.

People saw value, opportunity and the need for the promotion of NSW as the gateway to genuine Aboriginal art, showcasing a diversity of contemporary Aboriginal artistic expression arising from this state having the largest mix and number of Aboriginal people, and from there being the longest continuous contact with Aboriginal people in NSW than in any state in Australia. *'The gateway to first nations in Australia'; 'Our artists are knowledge keepers'; 'Aboriginal art is much more than 'dot' paintings'; 'NSW is the place to be if you are looking to find genuine Aboriginal arts and culture'*: these are the types of messages people thought needed to be developed and promoted, within Australia and internationally.

There was also strong support for the concept of local branding; building a sense of identity for artists in particular geographic areas, connected to the NSW identity, but growing from within Aboriginal communities. The concept is that people would know that this state is **the** place to see Aboriginal art, in all its many forms, with identifiable regional styles and strengths, linked to local stories, language, customs and communities.

A branding strategy, well implemented, would serve two broad functions:

- To broaden audiences and the marketplace for NSW Aboriginal artists
- To connect Aboriginal young people and adults to their cultural heritage – so they can learn more about themselves, their families, their communities through the expression of NSW artistic practise rather than feeling alienated from the traditional Aboriginal arts and stories which have little connection to their experience of Aboriginality.

Ensuring mainstream arts and cultural institutions celebrate and showcase NSW Aboriginal artists

Another extremely important theme arising from all workshops was the need for mainstream cultural institutions – state and regional – to showcase Aboriginal artists. Participants want the Strategy to expect and nurture improvements in the willingness and capacity of mainstream arts organisations (galleries, museums, music venues, performing arts companies, etc) to showcase NSW Aboriginal artists in Indigenous specific shows as well as in non-Indigenous shows.

The strong message is that segregation of Aboriginal artists in the “back corners” or in a minimal roles should stop and that it is time for Aboriginal artistic expression to be accessible to everyone, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. As one participant said: it is not acceptable for these agencies to say “‘take your blackness over there’ . . . if we only have those black pockets we will always be black-pocketed”.

Again participants wanted to see a greater focus on NSW and contemporary Aboriginal arts, not the exclusive focus that some galleries give to traditional Aboriginal arts and artists. So for example, people suggested that the Art Gallery of NSW should instigate a major program to investigate NSW Aboriginal artists with a view to exhibiting the best artists in major exhibitions.

It should be noted that people did not expect arts organisations to advantage Aboriginal artists who are not producing quality work; but that they recognise and 'foreground' the best NSW Aboriginal artists.

Practical actions to achieve the above aims were suggested:

- Strong and enforced Aboriginal arts content requirements/indicators in funding agreements
- 'Carrots' (possibly in the form of increased funding) for agencies demonstrating best practise in this area
- A concentrated, practical development program to demonstrate to mainstream agencies how they might better integrate Aboriginal artists, and the benefits of doing so.

Supporting Aboriginal arts and cultural infrastructure

There were many participants who spoke to the need for greater development of and infrastructure which supports Aboriginal artists in NSW. This had a number of important facets described below.

Expansion of Aboriginal arts and cultural centres

A major piece of infrastructure that was advocated was Aboriginal arts and cultural centres, or "blackfella spaces", which many participants wanted to located around NSW. Whilst people described different types of centres, with varying ideas of what they should contain and how they should work, a common view is that emerging Aboriginal artists need a place where they can exhibit/ perform their work to test ideas, build confidence and provide a stepping stone to exhibiting/performing in larger venues and non- Aboriginal venues. These centres provide opportunities not only for Aboriginal artists but for arts workers, for example Aboriginal curators, to learn and hewn their skills. Participants suggested that new and less well-known Aboriginal artists often do not get access to venues that non-Aboriginal artists would use to get their start, and that this was an important justification for Aboriginal arts and cultural centres.

Another potential purpose participants gave for Aboriginal arts and cultural centres is to provide the facilities and equipment (kilns, presses, etc) for Aboriginal artists to do their work. This is particularly important given the high cost of people equipping themselves, which acts as a deterrent for people to continue in the arts.

Other justifications given were that arts centres:

- Act like agents for the people who use them, connecting potential markets to these artists, and hopefully opening doors for them
- Can be linked to tourism, giving tourists ready and easy access to NSW Aboriginal arts
- Connect artists to one another, creating networks of practise and the opportunity for people to assist one another
- Provide a focal point and meeting place for the local Aboriginal community to learn about Aboriginal culture in a safe and nurturing environment.

Agency to promote NSW Aboriginal artists

Some participants felt that an organisation needs to be created for the express purpose of supporting and nurturing NSW Aboriginal artists. Other people felt that this should occur at a national level (eg, a National Aboriginal Cultural Authority) or that existing peak

organisations should be expected to do a better job of providing this support. In either case emphasis was on any agency that promotes and connects Aboriginal people to opportunities and skilled professionals and helps them to navigate existing structures already there to support artists to sell themselves and their art, such as Desert in Central Australia.

Aboriginal arts and cultural officers

Many examples of success in improving Aboriginal arts and cultural practise were given at the beginning of each workshop demonstrating the significant impact that Aboriginal arts and cultural officers have had in the communities where they have worked. Participants were supportive, therefore, of the maintenance of existing positions and the creation of new positions to ensure that there are officers in all regions of NSW as well as in mainstream cultural institutions (eg Art Gallery of NSW, Opera House).

NSW Aboriginal artists' website

Participants from one workshop felt that there was the need for a website to be formed which helped non-Aboriginal people to identify artists, and assist Aboriginal artists to identify resources and opportunities that would assist their development and sales.

Funding for archival records to research artefacts

It was pointed out at some meetings that many Aboriginal communities have lost contact with their traditional art forms. For this reason participants to one workshop emphasised the importance of funding being provided for projects which research and document traditional artistic practises and which brings art from a community back to that community.

Audience development around Aboriginal arts and culture

A number of participants to the workshops were of the view that there should be effort given to audience development to educate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people about what NSW art and culture is all about. This might take the form, for example, of Aboriginal touring shows being supported by a robust advertising campaign and/or by the promise of follow-up tours, which support the growth of audiences over time. There was also a view that tourists wanting an 'Aboriginal experience' need to be more skilfully linked to Aboriginal artists and cultural centres.

Result 3: Improved Aboriginal community cultural engagement

Of the four result areas, workshop participants were least clear about specific strategies that could be advanced in relation to this result area. There was however strong conceptual agreement with the notions that:

- Aboriginal arts and culture is critical to creating stronger communities
- Aboriginal artists should be supported to work in communities to facilitate people expressing their culture, validating the current lived experience and passing it on
- Arts NSW should be seeking to create partnerships with other agencies to bring arts and cultural activities to the forefront of work with Aboriginal communities. This requires a holistic view of Aboriginal art and culture and what it can do for Aboriginal people and communities.

Concretely there was strong support for there to be a focus on work with school children, in partnership with DET (as described in result 1) as well as for youth Arts programming both in and out of schools. For example, it was suggested that there is real opportunity for Aboriginal dancers to connect to youth through programs in schools, Juvenile Justice Centres etc and to learn about culture through contemporary dance.

There was also the suggestion that case studies should be collected to document the successful models of using arts and culture in community development to inform other work.

Result 4: More jobs and business development within cultural and creative industries for Aboriginal people

Showcasing NSW Aboriginal artists at Aboriginal events and non-Aboriginal arts events

There was strong support for Aboriginal people to have access to markets or festivals to sell their work. There were different suggestions about how this was best achieved, including:

- Up-scaling of efforts to ensure that Aboriginal people are well represented in existing mainstream arts festivals and events (e.g. the Sydney Festival)
- Providing funding to assist Aboriginal people to travel to arts markets, fairs and exhibitions within Australia and internationally (it was pointed out that there would need to be capacity for people to obtain 'quick response grants' in order to ensure Aboriginal people can take up opportunities when they present)
- Providing support for Aboriginal people to attend and be successful in arts markets and fairs (eg skills development in 'working the room' at export shows and fairs)
- Developing festivals such as 'The Deadlies' in other disciplines to raise the profile of Aboriginal artists
- Showcasing emerging and experienced Aboriginal artists at Indigenous events to create a market for these artists within Aboriginal communities
- The creation of a NSW Aboriginal arts fair which, it was suggested, might be done in partnership with Austrade and/or Tourism NSW
- The creation of a major NSW Aboriginal arts festival – with high visibility. One suggestion was a 'Black Out' which showcases Aboriginal artists in all cultural venues in Sydney and some regional centres, across art forms.

Creating employment and job creation pathways

Every workshop identified the need for employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in the arts to be thought about broadly as encompassing a wide variety of professions including:

- Work as an artist in visual, performing arts and new media
- A whole range of arts related careers, including curators, choreographers, producers, crew, etc
- Careers in fields such as accounting, catering and marketing that Aboriginal people could undertake in the arts area.

Arts and cultural activities should be seen as a critical strand of employment generation work for Aboriginal people, and should attract funding from employment programs. In addition effort needs to be given to raising awareness in Aboriginal communities that work in the creative industries is legitimate work; indeed that work in this field is critical to Aboriginal people as it celebrates people's lives and communities as they are.

Specific suggestions were made as to how Aboriginal people could be better connected to jobs in the cultural industries:

- Arts NSW should continue to sponsor Indigenous art fellowship as well as creating longer term internships and advocating for the creation of permanent positions for Aboriginal people in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sectors
- Arts NSW should advocate for the up scaling of opportunities for intensive professional development for emerging Aboriginal artists, linking them through planned and concentrated programs with experts in their field to assist them to hone their skills, eg incubators and labs such as Screen NSW's Aurora program and playwright conferences, drama teams
- In the field of dance, NAISDA and other appropriate organisations should be charged with working with students beyond initial training, with a view to further developing people's dance skills and connecting them to career opportunities. In this area, as with others, participants warned of the dangers of "boxing" Aboriginal dancers' into the Aboriginal dance world or into too-narrow definitions of what it means to be a 'real' Aboriginal dancer. The goal should be for Aboriginal dancers to be enabled to work in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal dance sectors, in both dance and choreography and sometimes to mix styles ("here is an Aboriginal twist on your art form")
- In the field of theatre, there should be funding for Aboriginal based projects, spaces, individuals and groups (one suggestion made was that there should be an Aboriginal theatre touring company in NSW is the only state without one)
- In the field of music, development of an Aboriginal record label or a record label dedicated to promoting Aboriginal talent as part of its suite of program.

Develop professional practice – the 'creative art of business'

There was a common view, across all four workshops, that the strategy should include activities which support Aboriginal artists and art workers to create sustainable employment in their field of endeavour. The areas for development which people repeatedly mentioned were:

- Business skills development and information about a range of topics including obtaining an ABN, dealing with copyright, etc.
- Grant writing skills and information about accessing philanthropic and other sources of funding in and outside of Australia
- Marketing and promotional skills, including for example the development of self marketing kits and export-ready kits so an artist can approach a gallery with the right tools
- How to use new media, for example setting up a web site, using social media sites for promotion.

Mark of Aboriginal authenticity

At one workshop there was considerable discussion about the need to build a coalition of agencies to directly address the harm to Aboriginal artists of their Intellectual Property rights being breached. In this meeting people supported the return of an Aboriginal mark of authenticity, administered through a reputable agency. They also wanted work to be done in NSW to document the extent and nature of the problem and for NSW to be engaged with and contribute to national work being carried out around protecting the IP of Aboriginal artists.

Next Steps

Workshop participants were appreciative of being invited to contribute to the development of the Strategy and to have a real say in what it might include. They indicated that they would like to see Arts NSW continue to engage with the Aboriginal community in:

- The development of the Strategy
- Monitoring performance against the Strategy, once it has been developed
- Setting funding criteria for funding programs to support Aboriginal people and artists as a result of the Strategy.