

Submission
No 51

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Organisation: National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA)
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The Director,
Standing Committee 4: Inquiry into Museums and Galleries
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/lodge-a-submission.aspx?pk=2403>

12 July 2016

Re: NSW Government Upper House Inquiry into Museums and Galleries

The National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission in response to the NSW Government Upper House Inquiry into the performance and effectiveness of the NSW Government agencies responsible for the organisation, structure and funding of museums and galleries in New South Wales.

NAVA is the peak national body representing the professional interests of the visual and media arts, craft and design sector. It provides advocacy, leadership and services for this sector. Since its establishment in 1983, NAVA has been very influential in bringing about policy and legislative change to encourage the growth and development of the visual arts sector. With a constituency of over 25,000 visual artists and other art professionals and an estimated 500 organisations we have a developed interest in art museums and galleries. With our national office located in Sydney, we are most familiar with and supportive of the well-being of NSW cultural institutions.

Role of the cultural institution

The role and expectation of 21st Century museums and galleries is very substantial and continually evolving in response to the cultural, social and economic zeitgeist. These institutions are expected to be custodians and interpreters of the heritage and contemporary expression of many communities of interest and geography, and sites for scholarship, education and entertainment. They also act as meeting places and hubs not only for community engagement but also for active creative community cultural activity. They are expected to cater for people with a great diversity of age, ethnicity and race, gender and sexual preference, level of education, geographic location and life circumstances. There would also be a deal of evidence which demonstrates the impact of museums and galleries on the local economy, both in terms of generating other related businesses and especially through cultural tourism.

Cultural ecology

As has been much discussed over the last 15 months since the decision by the federal government to make a series of cuts and changes to the management of its art funding, the cultural sector is a complex and interconnected ecology. Changes to one part of it flow right across all its parts. The role played by the small to medium arts organisations (S2Ms) feeds into the major institutions and vice versa.

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Patrons: Pat Corrigan AM, Mrs Janet Homes à Court AC, Professor David Throsby AO. ACN 003 229 285 / ABN 16 003 229 285

Increasingly we are seeing the major cultural institutions drawing on the inspiration provided by the S2Ms, capitalising on the work they do in building the capacity of Australian creators and curators and expanding the interest of audiences in more experimental work. Beyond imported and locally curated block buster populist exhibitions, the appetite of audiences is growing for contemporary Australian cultural work and its counterparts internationally. The concept of excellence is in a sense in the eye of the beholder. While it is very important for the major cultural institutions to be well supported to achieve their purpose, in holding a leadership positions in the field, they themselves should be actively supporting and partnering with the rest of the cultural sector to assist its growth and development. This should be encouraged, perhaps even mandated through the Government's policies and funding.

Cultural policy and investment

To understand the role of the cultural institutions, the interplay across the whole infrastructural ecology needs to be given attention. This Inquiry could be used as the opportunity to consider who plays what role and what are the outcomes of their work. NAVA's research into the S2Ms is already showing that the reach and impact of the S2Ms is of at least equal value to that of the major cultural institutions¹. Government policy and funding should reflect this.

The growth of the population and its increasing demand for cultural experience should be matched by an increase in investment by the state in providing for their needs. The role of the culture in adding value to the life and economy of the city is becoming increasingly understood as evidenced in the change being implemented by the City of Sydney through the practical application of its excellent cultural policy. At the very least, as has been rightly observed by the Inquiry Committee Chair, Robert Borsak, "Museums and galleries play a vital part in attracting cultural tourism and strengthening the economy and cultural landscape of NSW."

¹ NAVA has commissioned 'Economists At Large' to undertake research into the S2M visual arts and craft organisations. This work will be completed in October. However, the preliminary results reveal that for the 46 organisations which have completed the survey to date, in the last five years, these organisations have:

- produced 17,097 new works
- each year commissioned work from 2,272 artists on average
- employed on average 108 full time staff, 81 part time staff and 358 casual staff
- been supported by an average of 1,392 volunteers each year who gave 752,679 hours of their time, worth \$13,322,418 at the minimum wage rate.
- put on 10,096 exhibitions, that ran for 59,274 exhibition days
- attracted 7,419,606 visitors, an average of 1.57 million visitors per year
- hosted 771 residencies

All this was achieved with the following funding:

- \$2.7 million per year from Australia Council and \$1.4m per year from other Federal sources
- \$164,000 per year from state and territory governments
- \$6.8 million per year from local governments
- \$2 million per year from sales
- \$2.4 million per year from workshops, sponsorships and philanthropy

In relation to museum expansion, as Nicholas Serota, director of Tate Modern said, 'it's not about size it's about quality'. Government investment in Australian culture needs not only to provide appropriate space for the major cultural institutions but also be concerned at the lack of affordability of space for creators to make and show their work. This is one of the top issues identified by artists as impacting on the sustainability of their careers. Artist run spaces are arguably the breeding ground for the next generation of cultural super stars but they too are being squeezed out of the city because of the cost of accessing space. Artists are provided with greater authority and expanded national, international and touring opportunities by the contemporary art, craft and design spaces like Artspace, Australian Design Centre, Australian Centre for Photography, Casula Powerhouse and the Cambelltown and Blacktown Art Centres. Any consideration of infrastructure restructuring and funding must take all their roles into account.

Any policy and funding changes need to be judicious. The recent decision by the NSW Government to skew its funding in favour of Western Sydney and the regions should have been based on an increase in funding rather than at the expense of Central Sydney support.

Interdisciplinarity

Another of the challenges for cultural institutions is the increasing cross over between the disciplines of arts and sciences. This interdisciplinarity challenges the boundaries of interest of institutions specialising in arts or science and technology and within the arts, between performing, visual and literary artforms and media. Going to the Art Gallery of NSW on any Wednesday night, one can hear a lecture, listen to music or see a dance performance or watch a film; all of which are loosely related to the curatorial thrust of the current exhibition/s. In a more integrated way, almost all museums now can employ any or every artform in presenting their material.

Virtual and real experience

Technological changes of the last twenty years are not only capitalised on by the major cultural institutions but also offer a challenge to what form a 21st Century cultural entity should take. In digitising their collections, museums and galleries are already going some way towards creating the the virtual museum. The hand held O-device - a gallery guide pioneered by MONA in Hobart - has taken the virtual experience a step further allowing visitors to save their gallery experience digitally for later reference. During public discussion about the best model for a national museum, Paul Keating was an early speculator about the possibility of a virtual museum – very cheap at the price. We are now much further down the road of virtual reality but the jury is still out about whether this can be any substitute for a real life encounter with cultural artefacts. Gallery goers assert that the immersive collective experience is part of the charm that is still offered by museums and galleries, which can't be replicated virtually.

Funding

In relation to government funding, any investment in museum or gallery real estate carries with it the added responsibility to make sure the operations of the organisation are supported to be sustainable. Most cultural institutions invest a lot of effort in raising financial and in kind support (including voluntary labour). However,

this is contingent on basic operational funding being provided by government. This is used to leverage other income very much greater than the government's investment. However, it is contingent on this base level of government money and thus the tacit affirmation of government approval which gives the institution much greater authority and standing in the community. It is arguable that government investment in cultural real estate needs to be measured against the value that arises from the museum or gallery stimulating cultural activity and experience for the community.

Efficiency dividend

While we don't have figures on the impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of NSW museums and galleries over the last 10 years, and funding levels compared to other states, what is clear is that it represents a funding cut. While initially these cuts may lead to greater efficiencies, at a certain point they start to incrementally damage the capacity of any entity to sustain the quality of its output. As was recently demonstrated in the desperate response of the Canberra national cultural institutions to the 3% MYEFO funding cuts in 2015, it became clearly evident that finally this was resulting in job losses and a serious compromising of their offering to the public. This diminished people's access to collections purchased at least in part with tax payers' funds and held in trust for generations of Australian people. For the integrity of the institutions in all states and territories to be sustained, these cuts have to stop.

Powerhouse Museum

As the Government would be aware, the proposed sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and the move of the Museum to Parramatta has generated an enormous amount of resistance and criticism. It is seen as a cynical profit motivated decision which would ride roughshod over the state's responsibility to demonstrate respect and support for the city's cultural heritage and its cultural and educational responsibility to the local and interstate citizenry and the cultural diplomacy gains made from international visitors.

NAVA is supportive of the alternative strategy being proposed which would see the Powerhouse Museum remain where it is but have the Government support new museum development in Parramatta which would be appropriate to its specific needs. The requirements of these two communities are different and both deserve to be culturally well served. There are some excellent options for Parramatta being canvassed including: a specialist museum and keeping place for Indigenous culture; a migration museum which valorises the experience of the many diverse cultural groups who now call Parramatta home; a multi-site Heritage Centre in celebration of local NSW heritage; a multipurpose exhibition space to create locally distinctive exhibitions and provide opportunities for curators and artists to develop exhibitions and projects for audiences across the whole of Western Sydney, not only Parramatta.

Evidence based policy

To be alert and responsive to the changes in expectation and capability of cultural institutions, the NSW government seems to be contemplating making decisions on its role in policy, funding and support for museums and galleries, their buildings and heritage collections based on the outcomes of this Inquiry process. NAVA acknowledges the value of the Government seeking public and expert response to this question. However, in relation to the transparency of advice to the government

on priorities for NSW museums and galleries, this Inquiry needs to also collect and commission analysis of factual data about the institutions and the evolution of their roles and responsibilities, not just anecdotal evidence, even if it is coming from experts.

NAVA would be willing to provide further evidence at any public hearings associated with this Inquiry.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

Tamara Winikoff OAM
Executive Director