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Seminars for Arts Professionals

## AUGUST SEMINAR SUMMARY

### VISION FOR THE ARTS – LEADING THE WAY.....

Speakers: Kathy Keele – CEO of the Australia Council for the Arts  
Dr Ruth Harley – CEO of Screen Australia

Chair Sandra Levy – CEO of AFTRS

There are few organisations within the arts, if any, for which funding and external support is not a constant challenge. In recent years SAMAG has hosted a number of different discussions around this topic and as these seminars revealed, there are many different ways for the creative organisation to keep crankin' out the culture. At the centre of these many different ways, however, is one source of cash and support that has remained constant and high on indispensable; government funding.

Following on from the previous SAMAG seminar featuring Clover Moore MP, Lord Mayor of the City of Sydney, the August panel presented two people representing the federal end of the spectrum. Along to tell us a little about who they are and how their organisations fit into the scheme of things was Dr Ruth Harley, CEO of Screen Australia, and CEO of the Australia Council for the Arts, Kathy Keele. While I'd say that most of us would be aware of what these organisations do I've often been told that when writing one should never assume prior knowledge, so here's a rundown on exactly that from the people who know them best.

The Australia Council is Australia's federal arts funding body. Keele says that the Australia Council's responsibility is to, among other things, help provide great art for Australian citizens and play a leadership role in the Australian arts sector; to define trends and enable conversations. The Australia Council does this by providing funding to the arts, and helping to shape arts policy at a federal level with guidance from the *Australia Council Act 1975*. Keele says that it aims to support and nurture artists and audiences alike; to allow every Australian to engage with the arts and to provide opportunities for Australian artists to practise their craft. Keele feels that the Australian Government should support and nurture individual artists, not just arts organisations, and that those artists should also be recognised and respected by the community for the contribution they make to Australian society.

Screen Australia is the new kid on the block in federal funding. Formed in 2008, it is an amalgamation of three organisations: the Film Finance Corporation Australia, Film Australia Limited and the Australian Film Commission. Like the Australia Council, its aim is to support its constituency which is, broadly speaking, the film and television industry in Australia. Being still what some may call embryonic, Harley feels that Screen Australia's long term vision is still developing. She says that the full development of this vision has been a challenge due to the complexity of looking after three separate constituencies with varying needs. Previously catered to by the three separate organisations that now exist as Screen Australia, each of these constituencies wants certainty, while the Australian Government desires change. Living up to their expectations has, and continues to be, a challenge for Screen Australia.

How the two organisations choose to distribute their money is something that every artist and organisation should know. Both Keele and Harley admit that choosing priorities can be difficult. Should large numbers of organisations receive small amounts of funding, or should fewer organisations get larger amounts? Both methods have advantages and disadvantages. Recently Screen Australia and the Australia Council have both erred on the side of the latter and started to target their funding more. Both Keele and Harley question the sustainability in trying to be everything to everybody through piecemeal funding to a large number of organisations, hence their increasing preference for funding fewer organisations. Keele, however, does acknowledge that it is a contentious and often debated issue.

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In terms of long term strategies, Keele tells us that ongoing research and sector analysis are needed to ensure relevance of funding to the arts. The strategic direction for the Australia Council is determined by looking at the arts sector as a whole, identifying the gaps and then trying to fill them. These gaps are known in the biz as 'strategic priorities' or, put another way, the areas that should be focused on now that will strengthen the arts in the long term. The challenge that faces both these organisations is to attempt to satisfy the needs of the smaller organisations that often exist grant to grant, while at the same time attempting to develop a bigger picture, sustainable and long term direction for the arts in Australia. As with all other funding bodies, the best place for artists and organisations to get information on the strategic aims of the Australia Council and Screen Australia is to look at each of their websites: [www.australiacouncil.gov.au](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au) and [www.screenaustralia.gov.au](http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au).

Often one of the most confusing issues for artists and organisations is deciphering exactly what each level of government is responsible for, and which one is going to help them best achieve what they want to do. Many organisations receive funding from all three levels of government. Keele and Harley realise that responding to the vastly differing priorities of three levels of government can be confusing and time consuming. Increasingly, however, the different levels are collaborating and communicating and Harley says that the current relationships are pretty functional compared to how they used to be. To reduce the complexity for doubly and triply funded organisations, Keele says that it is particularly important that federal and state key performance indicators (KPIs) are aligned and working toward the same goals.

Looking forward to the future, Harley predicts that one of the key changes in terms of revenue for film and television will be a movement of advertising dollars to the internet and free to air television. Calling it 'branded entertainment', she sees big shifts towards an increase in branded products inserted into programs, such as an animal based reality TV show exclusively using a particular brand of pet food etc.

Harley also envisions a stronger relationship between the Australian film industry and the United States. She feels that it is time to try to clarify what Australian film is capable of and what people should expect from it. Citing a recent movie convention that she attended where the Australian films screened received significantly more recognition than has been seen in recent years, Harley believes that our film industry is definitely on track to receive increased international recognition.

Both Harley and Keele say that they are very interested in how things are changing in relation to how people interact with the arts. The movement of content online and across the different screens now available is changing the infrastructure that delivers the arts to the people. Keele is particularly interested in how this new level of information and accessibility will affect copyright within the arts. The movement of art online presents new challenges for artists in respect to how they protect themselves and the work they produce. Some people don't care about copyright, Keele says, but those who do have to be prepared to learn the ropes. Harley also recognises the changes that are occurring within the digital arts realm. She says that filmmaking done with digital cameras and distributed through only digital means (online and digital cinema) is no longer simply an extension of the traditional film medium, but a new and discreet arm of it. It is important, she says, that content producers take into account where audiences want to view things and look for opportunities to innovate.

Both of August's guests hail from overseas, Keele from the US and Harley from New Zealand. How do they feel this has benefited or challenged them? According to Keele, her outside perspective has been invaluable in giving her an insight into where Australia sits in the scheme of things internationally and how the scale of the Australian arts compares to the rest of the world. Harley also sees her different perspective as a positive thing. Her energetic curiosity about Australia has been a key motivator in her role.

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Running government bodies in what is traditionally a fairly liberal sector, how do both Keele and Harley deal with controversy that arises in their specific areas? There have been a number of instances in the recent past when both Screen Australia and the Australia Council have had to confront controversy. Harley is firm in her statement that Screen Australia is not there to have any editorial control over the films and programs they support: this has been rule number 1 from the start. That said however, a film receiving government money cannot simply shoot whatever they like. Harley says that “it isn’t ethical for somebody to use government money to say things about others that simply aren’t true.”

The Bill Henson episode provided a good opportunity for the Australia Council to really see how much artists knew about their rights and responsibilities when it comes to children. Keele believes that the controversy exposed the fact that a lot of artists and galleries had a lack of knowledge around the issue and gave the Australia Council an opportunity to facilitate some clarification of the laws in this area. She believes that it was good to have the conversation and that it ended up producing something positive, which was the *Protocols for working with children* document.

by Hugh Nichols