

FEBRUARY 2011 SEMINAR SUMMARY

STATE OF THE ARTS: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT IN NSW ARTS

Monday 28 February 2011

Opera Australia, 480 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills

Panel members:

Anthony Roberts, NSW Opposition Spokesperson on the Arts

Jan Barham, The Greens NSW Upper House Candidate and Mayor of the Byron Shire Council

Justin Macdonell, Anzarts Institute

Dr Gene Sherman, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation

Katharine Brisbane, Currency Press

Moderator: Patrick McIntyre, General Manager of Sydney Theatre Company

State Arts Minister Virginia Judge was unable to attend so in her absence **Helen Westwood MLC** responded to questions from the panel.

SAMAG's first 2011 seminar coinciding with the lead up to the state election in March was well attended with a range of views put forward, some in direct response to the topic and others which served to broaden the discussion.

Gene Sherman articulated her view that the arts in NSW need a combination of vision, facilitation and funding. She argued that without such a vision and the template to progress it, the arts were being held back. Equally, Sherman suggested that arts practitioners and professionals do what they can to support the regions by sharing their expertise. In a project with Northern River Arts, Sherman had mentored about 6 artists, one of whom was able to get a show at Robin Gibson Gallery as a direct consequence of the mentorship experience. The Powerhouse Museum has since acquired work by that artist whose opportunities for exposure had previously been limited by not having the tools to progress their career. Comparisons with Melbourne show Melbourne to be more advanced in both their vision for the arts in that city and the template with which to execute that vision.

For Anthony Roberts, arts and culture are seen by government as an industry, it is one which creates a lot of revenue for this state. However, no matter who is in government, it will always be hard to convince Treasury of the merits of arts funding, given the competing demands on Treasury funds across the government sector. In his view the arts need to be funded because they offer us more from life. He stated his passion is about people having employment in the arts and would like to see an industry led recovery. While Roberts declined the opportunity to detail the Opposition's policy on the arts as this will be released closer to the election, he indicated that the Opposition have formulated their policy in consultation with arts leaders and key stakeholders.

Speaking for the Greens and representing regional issues, Jan Barham proposed that there should be more funding for the arts. Governments, she suggests, need to acknowledge how important the arts can be for community wellbeing and therefore fund community arts, such as projects with mental health and aged communities for example. In the regions co- location issues are important so that audiences can access, sport, music and theatre by sharing facilities. The role of government in funding the arts requires a shift in

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understanding what the arts mean and how they are emerging as integral to communities such as the Byron Shire.

When asked if much had shifted in the last 30 years or so, Katharine Brisbane from Currency Press replied that the arts in her view are still as messy as ever. Government still seems confused about what the arts mean. One positive change to come out of the last 30 years is the Indigenous arts industry. One of the ongoing dilemmas of the arts industry is that governments are interested in product whereas the artist is interested in the journey. Art, Brisbane reminded us, is what develops the conscience; it is sometimes subversive and can question community standards.

Patrick McIntyre then asked the panel if there was more of a singular vision 40 years ago and if so, have those aspirations been achieved.

Justin Macdonell (Anzarts) put forward the view that there is an absence of advocacy and lobbying to government. His suggestion that audience development has reached capacity was refuted by Gene Sherman who pointed out that the new MONA gallery was attended by about 85,000 people in the six weeks post the opening. For Macdonell consuming the arts does not have to mean going to galleries or performances. There are also online options, film, television and books. Macdonell asserts that in the arts we have become averse to values. Hence government has a role in fostering the social objective to improve our lives, not only focusing on artistic objectives. It is his view that this is one of the greatest problems facing the arts today.

Patrick McIntyre then turned the panel's attention to new technologies.

Katherine Brisbane sees the internet as a huge opportunity to create an educated audience and suggests that we should not fear new technologies. Justin Macdonell points to technology in the arts as an innovation which has radically changed the way people view the arts. Elizabeth Anne Macgregor (Director Museum of Contemporary Art) expressed the view that new media and traditional art forms need not compete. Another audience member Chris Puplick expressed the view that creative industries are not the same as arts industries, one driven by product and financial outcome, the other may result in financial outcome but is not driven by it. In opposition to this, Justin Macdonell argued that governments must support both endeavours and elevate the remuneration.

Patrick McIntyre's next question asked "Where is NSW Arts policy at presently"

As the Arts Minister Virginia Judge had not been able to attend, her representative Helen Westwood responded. She provided the example of Bankstown which has opened a new centre with Federal, State and local funding in conjunction with local community arts groups.

Figures were then given of arts funding which highlighted that NSW has the lowest per capita arts funding. Jan Barham cautioned the interpretation placed on those figures, as did Justin Macdonell who suggested that standardized statistics which are available through the Cultural Ministers Council would be more useful.

A question from the audience on behalf of Accessible Arts asked the panel where do people with disabilities fit into the panel's vision for the arts.

Gene Sherman replied that they are part of the vision just as they are part of society and that people with disabilities should not feel excluded from the arts in NSW. Anthony Roberts followed this by saying that the arts allow all of us to contribute and also allow for diversity. On the other hand, Jan Barham proposed that

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governments should allocate funds for people with special needs, that there are accessibility issues to be overcome; particularly in old buildings that need to be refit. According to Helen Westwood MLC the NSW government has allocated \$200,000 for accessibility in the arts.

The seminar ran over time, and had to finish up without answering all questions from the floor. A broad range of topics had been raised; the role of government in funding the arts, the role of arts practitioners in marketing themselves and the key part that communities play when they advocate for the arts in their area. Also raised was the obligation of urban professionals to share knowledge and expertise with counterparts in the regions. Online technologies and other new media were acknowledged as having shifted perceptions of what the arts art can be and become. Arts access for audiences and practitioners with disabilities was also discussed.

Seminar Summary: Aviva Finberg