**TRANSCRIPT**

**Imagining a new policy agenda for Australian arts and culture***Thursday 6 November 2022, State Library of Western Australia*

 (Please note this transcript is an approximation of the discussion that unfolded. Owing to the difficult nature of transcribing with unclear audio, it is likely some phrases may have been misheard or mistyped.)

SHAMIT SAGGAR:
Thank you very much for coming this evening, it's a beautiful evening here in Perth. We are here to look at, and I'll give you the title, Imagining A New Policy Agenda for Australian Arts and Culture More about that in a moment. My name is Shamit Saggar, I'm the director of the UWA Public Policy Institute and I'm also a professor of public policy and political science at the University. I'm very pleased that many people have accepted the invitation to join us this evening, particularly coming from arts organizations, cultural institutions, government business and nonprofits. So you're very welcome in joining us this evening. This is a discussion aided by our panel and their insights, but also your observations about Australia and its culture and its arts, both as a sector but also as part of our identity. This is not something necessarily just up our flagpole, of course, as you're aware, it's very timely at the point at which there's a national discussion taking place about a national culture policy in 2023, led by new Federal Minister Tony Burke and submissions which just closed last month.

And please keep an eye on that in the context of our discussion. UWA Public Policy Institute does many things. One of the things we have produced earlier on this year is this publication, which I think you've been given a copy of as you came through. It sheds light on the kind of work we're doing. And if I can just say a little bit about the Institute, you may be aware of the fact that research-intensive universities all over the world have come under criticism in the last five or 10 years. The criticism is along the lines that they tend to keep themselves to themselves, they tend to be introspective and they are interested in research outcomes as an end in themselves. I think that's largely true, and for that reason, the university that I'm a member of took the decision a few years ago to establish this institute in conjunction with others, if I may say so. The newly formed Defence and Security Institute, the Data Institute, just to name two examples in order to make sure that our research is translated in a timely way, its place not just in the hands of decision makers in government, business and non-profit, but also it enters the public realm and we are there, as it were, to foster public discussion.

This report is jampacked with a, if I recall, roughly 40 or 42 short 800-word pieces looking at what the state's prospects might be in the middle part of this century. It covers prosperity, speaks for itself, it also covers issues to do with place and environment and fundamentally deals with people who we are, where we are, who we might become. And that is, as it were, an evolving story. So I commend that report to you. And I also point out that one of the panellists that joining us this evening has made an important contribution, Jeremy, to that report. And the last thing by way of introducing just the institute is to point out that this is not something just that affects UWA itself. It is, as I said, something that is about research intensive universities all over. Just two days ago, Peter Shergold, who you may be aware was the former head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and our Federal Government until quite recently. He's, when speaking at a very similar event, said and if I can just quote, 'the point about university research is it's highly relevant to the economic and social and cultural decisions the government has made and yet has limited impact on the decision makers that are involved in government'.

In other words, he's deeply regretting the irony of that, and we are part and parcel of the effort to push back, as it were, to put right what for some, what's for so long has been a problem in the way in which universities communicate. Well, the policy agenda we can talk about, but just a few nuggets just to get ourselves going, some facts to do with arts and culture. People often make the point that, you know, it's probably quite a small sector and that probably is exacerbated by the fact that we are in a resource and mineral state. For what it's worth, recent research produced by our colleagues at Curtin University estimated that it probably is the sector here accounts for at most about $7.3 billion. Put that in context, in a $362 billion economy, that's puts this sector at about 2% of the whole. So that's probably an unfair comparison 'cause of course, it's dwarfed by the importance of energy, minerals and resources. But it's important nonetheless to get a sense of the fact that that's the scale.

In terms of jobs the same study revealed that in the decade between 2006 and 2016, the growth in jobs in Australia and the creative industries was nothing less than just short of 28% in comparison with overall jobs growth in that, in this country in that decade and 17% cent, so a good 10 to 11% larger. Here in Perth where 1.5, 1.6 times more likely to have workers in the creative industries as compared with Australia as a whole. We're looking at actually participating and being patrons of these industries. Something like four in five West Australians reported that they attended a cultural event or venue in the last year, according to Curtin study, and the value to West Australians and their willingness to pay appears to have increased in the course of the last decade. And then lastly, on the subject of money, about to come up at some stage of the other here in WA, we live in a comparative warm spot whereby this government funding for arts and culture has been higher than the national average.

But on a per capita basis, remember we live in a state with very, very few people as compared with other states. Meanwhile, the per capita expenditure on arts and culture across the country as a whole has been declining in the course of the last 50 years. So there's some kind of good news and bad news that's just by way of just getting us to focus on the real numbers. But really to shed light on all this, we need people who are close to the creative sector and the creative industries. And for that reason, we've been able to and I'm delighted to recruit four individuals as follows. First of all, we have Oron Catts cats who's an artist and director, and he's part and parcel of the Centre for Excellence in Biological Arts. That's based here at UWA. more about him in terms of introduction at the moment. Secondly, we're very lucky to have Shelagh Magadza, she's executive director for Culture and Arts in the Department of Local Government in the Western Australian Government. We previously knew her at the Institute as part of the Chamber of Arts and Commerce.

Thirdly, on the home team at UWA we have Dr Catherine Noske is part of the School of Humanities, UWA, but also edits the Westerly magazine. And last but not least, we've already mentioned as part of the report we have Jeremy Smith sat closest to me here, who's a senior producer, and he's part and parcel of performing lives here in WA. So in order to have this discussion less about me, I'm just here to sort of prop up the first part of the discussion. And let me just point out that you're in the very capable hands of Dr Chris Lin. Chris himself holds a relatively recent PhD in English in cultural studies from UWA, but more importantly, he's part and parcel of the staff of the Public Policy Institute. Chris has sat farthest away from me and, we'll, I now hand in, hand it over to him as part of his duties as being the Chair hot seat this evening. Chris, over to you.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thank you very much, Shamit, can everyone hear me OK? Just wanted to start by welcoming everyone to our conversation, with Shamit, my colleague Bec, and the UWA Public Policy Institute. It’s a pleasure to bring a conversation like this to the public at large. I also want to say a warm welcome to our online audience as well, who are joining us online and will be engaging with us throughout. Just to take you through some housekeeping, we have emergency exits over that way and to my left. Also, during this session we’d like to keep the conversation as informal as possible, to hear from our panellists to riff of each other, to share ideas, to have a little bit of fun, but we’ll also throw the conversation to you in the last half hour. If you have any burning questions, you’ll be able to ask them.

So without further ado, we do have a stellar cast tonight, and we’re really pleased that amongst our panel, we have artists, art producers, public and policy advocates, as well as researchers. So we have a great spread of, I suppose, artists/artworkers who work with but are also affected by the creative industries and environment.

[Introduces panel: Jeremy Smith; Oron Catts; Shelagh Magadza, Dr Catherine Noske].

Please give a warm welcome to our panel.

This is a timely moment for us to be discussing the arts with our National Cultural Policy in train. Submissions closed in August, and I believe there were 1200 submissions being digested. On the other hand, we’re coming out of the ravages of COVID as well, just starting to see festivals and events starting to pick up again, and audiences wanting to re-engage with us as well. This is a moment of hope and also trepidation as well.

The question I’d like to start with for the panel is, with the National Cultural Policy in mind, what do you believe are the most pressing challenges facing the arts, and what is the one thing you’d like to see in the National Cultural Policy?

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
I will step in there. Well, as you say, it's a fantastic time and whilst you’ve phrased the challenges, I'm going to do that thing to say, I think also there are opportunities as well. I think, you know, the first thing that Australia is facing and has faced for some time is the issue of resolving at a very fundamental level its relationship with our Aboriginal peoples, First Nations cultures of this country, and how that frames our national conversation on identity and the values that we ascribe to the culture that we are creating collectively. I always think about arts and culture we run it together, but culture in itself is something to be thought about separately I think to arts and artistic expression. And so the overriding, defining culture of our identity, the conversations that we want to have fundamentally important. And I guess the other challenge kind of flow from that, which is the impact of this rapid social change, COVID has just accelerating a whole lot of trends that we've seen. And a lot of that is the expectation of our citizenship for approaching their life and how they wish to access arts and culture within their own lives, but also the kind of global impact that is very closely related to technologies and such.

So we've kind of been at a printing press moment, I guess, for the last 20 years, which is the fundamental impact of technology on people's access to different knowledges, different cultures and different connections, but of course, there are different ways of creating some quite astonishing stuff that now sits way outside of the current models that we have for describing and grappling with our arts and culture sector. I think the other thing that's quite evident through a lot of the research is the unevenness of access across Australia from early childhood through to very late in life. And unfortunately, it's very stark and research that shows that people who have low opportunities, access, arts and culture attribute value with that surveyed on that question. So it's really important to look at who those communities are and with a big dispersed regional population, that's quite a big challenge as well as the unevenness of socioeconomic factors that things that, but also I think in that unevenness of access that we're possibly not looking at other areas where we could be based on lots of cultural experiences for people to include in their lives.

And the last thing I guess is this really big issue, I think that related to all the things that I just mentioned was the investment in our artists and our arts workers to address these challenges at a very profound level, not just a superficial level, and as any of you who are practicing artists know, and you become a writer or a director by doing lots of directing and a lot of writing, it's something that you have to do over and over again to become the best at. And we're not really creating those pathways in the creative side of things. And now we are facing also on the other side of the balance sheet and looming skills crisis in all of our technical production support services for various reasons, that which is shrinking, departing, in crisis, and so our actual ability to achieve some of these objectives at risk.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thank you Shelagh, I’m sure we’ll also see these ideas reflected in the submissions.

CATHERINE NOSKE:
Can I jump in? My answer picks up on quite a few of those things, in a sense that that first point you started with is the values of art, we’re pretty familiar with arguing for the value of art in social and cultural terms, otherwise we wouldn’t be here tonight. And so what it achieves is it cultural work, it offers the space for confessing ideas and a space for representation and diversity. I think the seeing that and coming away from that notes that importance in the sense of needing to recognize the generosity of that practice from First Nations activists and ensuring the policy we develop is very respectful of that space and engaging with it in positive ways and in some way ensuring this work of nation really is not exclusively deferred to the arts. I think it connects what we say about unevenness of access as well, the sense that the arts in conversations can at times be siloed off as this social and cultural domain. So the intervention I’d be really interested to see is ensuring that there are whole of government solutions to arts policy and to this question of what the art achieves and the value of the arts, which ensures the values of the arts and the impact of what the arts offers is enacted in generative and productive ways, with connections through education and broad areas of public policy.

We didn’t see the arts as a vehicle for achieving real world change in the last election, it just wasn’t talked about. The inequities of social opportunities, how Australian arts can contribute to helping inequities of access.

ORON CATTS:
Thank you. Just riffing on your point. So Australia is an, really interesting place that we have the oldest knowledge in the world that is in risk of disappearing and we are one of the earliest adopters of coding, as you mentioned. And I think what we are facing and were we can contribute a lot, it's not just the digital technologies that we need to engage with. There's so much technologies that are accelerating to such an extent that we as a culture and society can't come to terms with. And the role of art is making sense of it and bring meaning to those changes and try to point the finger at places that we have no language to describe, is really important. And if we don't pick up on this, we will left behind. Things will just wash over us in such a way that we would wish that we would have the artists to actually kind of show us where we might go and what we can do.

JEREMY SMITH:
Look, I think one thing I was gonna offer on this response that encapsulates a lot of the comments that have been said so far is that we just can’t go back. I think there's an opportunity to reset and I think there's been so much that's been wronged in our past, be it to our Indigenous peoples, be it to inclusion, be it to the haves and the have nots, and the cutting up the pie. I think is really important and timely moment to reset. I think as a sector, we need to be a lot more comfortable with embracing disruption and I guess discomfort because I think we need to crunch the numbers and change the way that we do things and the way that we relate, and act, make and create and play and do all sorts of things. And I think there's been a big rise in more recent times, I think as a result of the pandemic of activists and this harnessing of energy and how we can sort of build that into a better, more sustainable future for artists, organisations and audiences as a whole. I’ll pick up on something that Shelagh said point out one big thing that is happening at the moment is I think everyone, be that artists, be that organisations, be that venues, be that our nation and be that our punters are so inward focused and inward gazing that we're starting to see that outward gaze, which people are looking to explore bringing on new partnerships and attendance has been lower. When there’s free events, people just stop showing.

And that's been a really significant big thing we've found that resonated throughout the whole programme. So I guess it's gonna take time for people – maybe it’s a confidence issue or whatever but it's a really big shift that we've noticed a lot of our free programmes that there's just been a really big no-show rate, which is a big thing for our sector, which reliance on attendance, is really quite significant.

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
Just add to that as well, that a large part of arts and culture is at a community level. And that's driven by volunteering so it's not even about paid jobs. And a lot of those volunteers are people who were affected by COVID. So there's a real danger of loss of some of those opportunities as well.

DR. CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thank you very much. Shows that there is plenty of room for both the new Cultural Policy and more broadly as well. Something that came out of that is access. The value of arts is often framed by economic benchmarks, what it adds to the economy and how this validates its worth. This economic value notwithstanding, how might we bring in other ways of framing the value of arts, especially the arts as a public good, to exist independently in their own right, for their own purpose, for everyone?

JEREMY SMITH:
One thing that came up during Kolyang, which if you don’t know, it's been a three year initiative, which Performing Lines instigated by listening to independent artists at the height of the pandemic in 2020, to make space, time and freedom to connect and play, and I guess reconnecting with the sector and organisations and venues and life beyond lockdown. And one of the things that when we ran a session at this year’s event about the National Cultural Policy consultation process was that there’s an opportunity for a realignment of focus in the portfolio that Minister Burke has, which I don't think has really been nailed before, so that really speaks to the economic prospects of the arts, but then also identifying and recognising those people that make up that are workers and not just hobbyists or doing things on the side. Yeah, and I think the other part of that too, which is something in the portfolios in the Australia Council, is the recognition of cultural practice, be that First Nations people, Pacifika people, and other communities that just get together and make their cultural practice together. And that's really something that falls through the cracks in terms of recognition of the impact of what our sector delivers as well.

DR. CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Shelagh, would you like to jump in? Oron?

ORON CATTS:
So maybe I'll use an example, it's obviously this idea of trying to monetise everything that comes around as is an issue. And by getting involved in this conversation, you already lost the debates, if you are dealing with something that cannot be easily monetised. So you think about this kind of thing in the conservation movement where they start talking about the ecosystem services that you can monetise. You actually lost a bit of conservation, because you put a value, dollar value on natural assets, and by that you can make more money out of them in another way that can help them. You already opened up this conversation. And I think it's human culture. Human culture always existed before money and before we monetised things, and there's no way you can start to think about it in those terms without losing the essence of what culture is, which is much bigger than just being to add to quantify it in such a way. And there's a really interesting aspect: one of the roles that art plays is to shine a mirror on society. You have to keep your distance in order to be able to have the reflection. If you play the game, you're already part of the reflection, you're not the mirror.

DR. CATHERINE NOSKE:
I think it's true what you've mentioned in terms of discrepancy between the use of economic and the use of art. To suggest economic value versus public good and the dichotomy – I don't think it's that simple. There’s a sense when, realistically, they're not mutually inclusive or exclusive. And that goes to those systems and the ways in which we've shifted to say, art, and then in terms of developing with such complex histories. Untangling them now is impossible. And I think we see that a little bit in the immediate public good that appealed to me is the possibilities for a community to exist around art, and that exists, both increasingly to the sector and community building internally and community building externally to the sector, which means bringing in people and getting bums on seats, on a different scale. Investments in all these things are really quite deeply entangled.

So I don't know that those dichotomies between public good and the kind of structure are that simple or that useful, really, when we're thinking about and arts and how we articulate its worth.

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
Some of the issue is about a lack of language and tools to describe and measure arts and culture. People think about it as intangible. And I'm looking at Tabitha here because she's very familiar with the work of John Smithies over at the cultural development network, who tried to make that more tangible by creating five cultural measures so that they were cultural outcomes that were important in their own right. Because we do have, I mean, other tangential things that we measure, like mental health and well-being is obviously an area of great impact, impact on education, etc. But he had these five measures that our creativity has been stimulated – well these outcomes, sorry, that you can measure. Aesthetic enrichment has been experienced; knowledge, ideas, or insight has been gained; diversity of cultural expression has been appreciated; and a sense of belonging to a cultural heritage has been deepened. And he argues that if you build those in as your expected outcomes from the investment or the work that you're doing, you can measure that as outcomes and report against it.

And this was picked up in a conversation that we were having yesterday with someone who deals with a lot of across local government and kind of how to embed appreciation or the importance of cultural planning within local government. He said, "Well, of course, the key thing is that local governments are not required to report against any of their cultural activity. They have to report against their rubbish and their climate action and then… there is nothing reportable for them to put forward, so of course, it slips down their priorities. So if you could somehow give people tools and measures against which they possibly you could demonstrate that value.

JEREMY SMITH:
The dirty ‘quotas’ word.

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
The dirty ‘quotas’ word, yes.

DR. CHRISTOPHER LIN:
That’s so much for your input. Just a quick update, can I get the panel to keep the mics closer to their mouths, thank you. I'm going to move the conversation a little bit to something that came out Shelagh’s response and something that Jeremy mentioned as well, which is the importance of play. Shelagh you mentioned that to be a writer, or any form of artist, you need to do the practice and you need an environment where experimentation will be encouraged and sort of leverage it. So I want to quote something from Jeremy. You’ve previously stated: “I’d love a policy environment for our arts and cultural sectors that backs bravery, encourages boldness and really shakes up the concepts and scales we consider when making, creating and playing.”

JEREMY SMITH:
Yeah I think so much of what we do in the sector is informed by caps, and informed by criteria and informed by other forms of guidelines, and events, and so forth. As a sector, we sometimes don't know how to think big, and be bold and ambitious and play and do all these sorts of things because we always go for the smaller pieces of the pie. It's funny, like when I was in Australia Council, the first time I went through my portfolio was the most the longest station I had, the Arts Practice Director for Community Arts and Culture Development and Emerging and Experiments Arts. I used to call it the ‘socks and jocks drawer’ because it’s all parts of the arts sector that no one else did.

And so I remember the first time we went through an annual reporting process, so I saw the pie the pie cut up in the organisation. And there was one little sliver of the pie called ‘cross arts’ and I sort of say, "What's that?" And they said, "That's your portfolio." And I said, “Does this mean I’m fucking angry because we get so little?” And I think that's because a lot of work in that space around healing practices, around experimental practice is really rich and really cutting edge and really exciting around these sorts of things.

Oron is a rockstar overseas, I mean he works at SymbioticA and there are many others in Australia and the United States who have been bold and dreamt big and just gone out and really broken and shaken up what we consider to be the norm in arts practice here. I think that pursuing those opportunities through collaborations and through bringing together other forms of support, is, rather than a piecemeal approach that is prescribed by individual funding programmes. But then, having said that, I know there have been programmes, for instance in Victoria which have encouraged boldness and bravery who have failed because artists weren’t ready for it, and they haven't been able to sort of put together the sort of applications and then deliver them because that was really significant, substantial sums of money. So I guess it's that fine balance about being able to have experiment arts is so important.

ORON CATTS:
Did they really fail? Did the Victorian programme really fail? Or you learned a lot from it?

JEREMY SMITH:
Exactly, that’s right. I mean the other thing which I think we don't have nearly enough is scholarships.

DR. CHRISTOPHER LIN:
We’ll riff on that idea of play and experimentation. Oron, we’ll move on to you. Let’s talk about the work you do as an artist and also the work you do at SymbioticA, which is really a practicing example of the example that art can do in cross-disciplinary environments.

ORON CATTS:
Thank you so much. So I suppose in general, my interest was life and how our relationship to life is changing and shifting, and how new knowledge about life. And you can insert anything else to do with new knowledge that we gain to achieve humanity, it's kind of progressing with a quest to understand the world around us. But in my case, it's like life is a very fundamental question that I think its very connected to the arts. And so I decided to park myself a Biological Sciences department in a research university or in a research setting in order to see how life is now being conformed into raw material to the engineers and issues that are stemming from there. But one really interesting thing coming out of it is the fact that by life becoming kind of this subject or human manipulation, it also opens up in extremely problematic new palette for artistic exploration. And this is what we've done. We basically invited artists to come and spend time with us, to understand what's going on with life in the context of scientific and engineering research, and be playful about it and see where it might take us in order to raise questions.

DR. CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Can you unpack that concept of life a little bit more. When you say you work in ‘life’?

ORON CATTS:
So the main interest when we started working with the tissue culture and arts project back in 1996, actually came from a particular image that hit the media in 1995 with the mouse that had a human ear growing on its back. I don't know if you remember seeing it. It was an amazing image because human culture, almost all human cultures, all of them have images of this human-animal hybrid. And suddenly 1995 we see a naked mouse, a mouse with no hair, with a human ear growing from its neck. Basically, it's the surrealists dreams come alive, it's everything that you can imagine, that are what nightmares and dreams were made of. And it's on the TV screen made by scientists in Harvard University and Austin and I said, ‘Scientists did it, I think it's the work of artists to figure it out’. Because when what they’ve done is to sculpt with living biological material; again, for better or for worse, and I think we all can share the idea that a lot of work of artists is to engage in things that they find uncomfortable. So you want to grow, it's like you have itch, you want to figure out where it's going, how it's being done.

So the technology of choice that I chose myself it's the very same technology it was done to create the human ear on the mouse, which is called tissue engineering. And that's technology that was basically very crafty. If it's about sculpting a living tissue using almost like a wax, like jewellery system of wax, where you basically start with degradable polymer that is shaped whatever organ you're trying to replace, and then you seal it with the tissue and cells of that organ and supposedly you have a new organ. It's not working, biology is way more complicated, but it gives a new palette for artistic sculpture with living biological tissues. We knocked on the door, the scientists at UWA and rather than kicking us out, she invited us in. And we learned the techniques ourselves. This is another thing, a lot of what's happening in science and technology is actually not rocket science, artists are way more adapted to engage in and have the craft to be able to do those things because of our training.

So we spent time in UWA, we spent a year in Harvard Medical School with the very same scientists who did the mouse and the ear. You want to go to the source, you want understand, and there we found ourselves doing things like growing meat in the lab as a statement in regard to what kind of relationship we're going to have. You can't get more intimate with another living beings that by incorporating it and making it part of your body by eating it. So that was our interest. And then a decade later, a scientist adopted performative techniques as well as a performance in London. So we've done that we grew wings out of a pig tissue, and but that created the first pig wings, because some of the promises of those new technologies make us wonder if pigs could fly one day. We wanted to see what shape those wings would take. But SymbioticA itself I must say was much broader than just working with living tissue because our interest was what’s happening to life from the molecular level to the ecological level. And the idea was to place artists to work with scientists and that was something was extremely important.

That was something that was really important to us and really important when we think of the role of culture and the arts, to always treat the artist as equals. So when we started, we were guests and we had to ask favours. We managed to set up SymbioticA as a place where the artists are equal to all of the other researchers around them. Where they can ask the question, they can probe and do the research, without feeling that they are uninvited guests.

DR. CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Does that the value of the arts play out in those environments?

ORON CATTS:
So the value is really opening it up. I tend not to celebrate what I refer to as the secondary outcomes. I think the interesting thing is the type of articulation and development of at least pointing our fingers at the things that we need more cultural scrutiny of, because we shouldn't leave those decisions just in the hands of scientists and engineers, and government and business people. We really need to open this debate. And I think artists are really well poised in doing so. But the secondary outcome is opening up the minds of the scientists to realise that their research can go to places that they never even imagined. To realise that there's ways in which solving the problems that they're facing… there's other ways to do it artists are always kind of improvisers and they try to find ways to solve problems without a solution-based approach because the problem is trying to solve them are about how we create more awareness, how we identify things that we need to investigate further, in a sense, from a cultural perspective.

DR. CHRISTOPHER LIN:
I like that idea of technologies and sectors that artists can inform those environments. We’re going to segue from pig wings and tissue art to writing. Catherine, you’re the editor of Westerly: what value and benefits does literary storytelling bring to the writers and communities you work with? And what levers are needed from government to support small arts organisations like Westerly?

DR. CATHERINE NOSKE:
Good question, for those who don’t know, Westerly is a literary magazine and we publish creative writing, fiction and short stories, creative nonfiction and research alongside. So, hoping to engage in those complex conversations about what (INAUDIBLE) does. We publish Australia and internationally, we’re open to submissions worldwide, and a fair scope about writing. And to me, what... the biggest benefit, the the most immediate impact that Westerly has is representation. We need diverse stories. Diverse stories empower writers to be heard, they help readers be reflected back to themselves in the mirror, they help us feel seen. That idea that we need diverse stories, from WA, is really an important point. “We need diverse books because a lack of diversity is a failure of our humanity. Literature without diversity presents a false image of what it is to be human. It masks and therefore contributes to the continuation of existing inequities and it widens the gulf of understanding that are already between each other.”

For us at Westerly, I think that's a really deep mission statement, suggesting what it is to be human and exploring that through representations, not just diversity of perspectives but also the voices, the emotions, the experiences, diversity of forms, and recognising that literature is this space for complex thinking... way of thinking. It’s a space that needs to be safe to protect, there’s an onus on us to protect it as equal representation.

But there’s also an incumbent responsibility in that space for ideas to form and for multiple voices to be heard. So that’s really what this is, that’s the benefit that Westerly offers.

In terms of challenges, to me the big challenge is really the precarity of small organisations. There’s an inability for a small organisation to work with a long-term strategy. And that precarity is recognising from our perspective, Westerly’s perspective, that we’re hugely privileged in our funding. We’ve been supported not just by the University of Western Australia, our host, but also by the Department, the DLGSC, at the Federal level as well. We really enjoy a wonderful range of supporting bodies recognising what we're doing and liking it. But that really demonstrates the burden that comes with our funding. That multiple a minimum of four, but usually around six applications a year. Approximately 110 hours of labour minimum. And we’re a team of less than one full-time person, we’re currently a combined 0.7 FTE in capacity, that’s editorial, admin staff, the whole kit and kaboodle. Alongside we have external staff that contribute a whole body of work, but that’s volunteer labour. So this burden of funding also creates a huge amount of stress, there isn’t guaranteed stress, they’re highly competitive. It's also recognising that it's difficult to stand out constantly in articulating applications again and again across the year. There’s a pressure to have a big new shiny thing. So, when you're submitting an application or looking to support an application for this big new shiny thing, you also have the pressure of continuing the constantly expanding and acceleration production and treadmill process of funding, and that really isn’t sustainable. And then there’s managing those grants as well. And recognising having said that at the start that we’re privileged, so if we’re feeling under pressure, I really hate to think what it’s like for other organisations not being so well supported.

And particularly for individual artists who are facing that same slog on the treadmill process constantly trying to attract year-round. You also have the load of managing and feeding those grants.

So, on top of those six applications, very successful applications have outcomes. So, the workload for a small arts organisation is huge. I'm sure you guys can speak to that as well. And the precarity that comes with that workload is enormous. Because each of these applications are for usually, 12 months at most. So, the ability to plan long-term and work long-term between applications is really relatively difficult. So, what I'm really interested in, that is really important, is seeing some conversations between state and federal level around a cohesive funding structure, not necessarily combining funding but some recognition of how some facets and elements in funding work together and the ways in which that can facilitate it and reduce precarity for small organisations. And recognising that I’d love to see a funding body supporting basic business. Not requiring that new shiny thing, but recognising the non-sexy balance of what it takes to produce art, funding base staffing, funding admin, funding that basic organisation that's really necessary to be able to create that art.

(INAUDIBLE)

JEREMY SMITH:
That's a great podcast title. Unsexy realities.

DR CATHERINE NOSKE:
Those are things I’m seeing needing to change.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thanks very much, Cate. I'm sure there are a lot of people can relate to precarity. So, when you're talking about what state and federal funding can do, over to you Shelagh, as well as the government representative on the panel. Will you talk a little bit about what you and the Department have been doing to support the arts organisations and the core message.

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
Yeah. And I just want to just acknowledge what you said because it is the Holy Grail. We could align not only federal, state, but also local government. And there's terrifying stories, especially in smaller organisations, about a number of different parts of government they engage with to do what they do. It is one of the key challenges, I think, for all of us. So, in terms of talking about what the government is doing at the moment, obviously, we're coming out of a difficult period. But you know, some of the key priorities that can... for government to do and now coming back on to the table. And in terms of where we are with the arts and culture policy, the, I guess one of the big-picture items is this question about diversifying the WA economy over the next decade. It's not the new conundrum. As the former Premier here will be very familiar with. But you know, the question of the boom-bust cycle around dependency on the resource sector. It's a difficult thing to... a difficult conversation to have at a time of boom when resources in terms of labour are being sucked into what is clearly a very wealthy time at the moment.

But I guess the recognition that the 2% is tiny and that Curtin research is really interesting because yes, it’s 2% but it’s a very important 2% because it’s a catalyst into a lot of other parts of the economy that it may not directly be measured as creative and cultural industries, but it does kind of leapfrog those skills into other areas. So, that's, you know, an area of key interest. And within that are abundant cultural industries that have been identified as potential for development. Perth particularly. It's being recognised that we are the highest in terms of Western Australia, in terms of what we have an infrastructure here, but also the mechanisms we have to attract to the state. And, you know, there's been a lot of free metal flying around over years. A lot of it is going into investments in film but there's obviously a lot of platforms it can go to. So, the state is still in discussion about the development of the studio and launched a programs that will hopefully bring external investment as well as stimulate the local production companies.

And I don't know if you saw that last night, the first Disney Plus commissioning of the 'Shipwreck Hunters,’ premiere, which was a really big thing for us. Documentary is actually one of the strongest areas of film production in the state. So, that's been a big learning curve for me, I have to say, coming from the background I have and moving into government. The other thing is the investment in childhood and young people. So, there's creative learning learning, to try and investigate a kind of long-term proposition on how we might bring back access to creative opportunities in schools. Not only to expose kids to arts and culture experiences, but also to develop tools in terms of creative thinking that they can carry as life-long skills. Whether they choose to go into a creative pathway in their careers or just, you know, apply those in their lives in terms of resilience, mental health, and other professional options that may come through. The regions is also still a very strong area of focus. And that is supported by the regional... royalties for regions funding, which is an incredible asset that we have to invest in regional communities.

And I think, you know, that is becoming more and more sophisticated in terms of acknowledging that regional communities need in terms of quality of life issue that needs to be accessible across the state as much as possible. Also, the inter-relationship with tourism and the growth of cultural events across the state. Diversity and inclusion has been a key policy area for some time now. And I think we see great results there, both in the development of audiences and people on stage and there's lots to celebrate in the Black Swan and the Perth Festival's production. Julia Hales has just had standing ovations all the way through the UK and Sydney with that incredible production. And then of course, what you've alluded to, sustainability of the sector longer term, how it can be addressed. But one of the things that I would also say that COVID has kind of illuminated for us is that state is heavily engaged with the sector through funding. So, the funding partner sector has also become visible.

But what we didn't really understand and didn’t have such a grip on was the commercial sector, which were impacted sometimes far worse than any by COVID, and what that brought up was one of the conditions we need to put in place for the security of that commercial sector who don't receive funding but still need an operating environment that will support them. One of the interesting things there about the Curtin research is that we're a net importer of cultural products. But pre-COVID, in 2018, we had the highest per capita spend of performing arts in the whole country. So, we clearly are very engaged. And so, one of the things that interests me is, yes, we need to focus on our own arts and creative production here, but we can also facilitate through investments in infrastructure and, you know, bringing stuff into the state, the maintenance of good destinations for external stuff, because the reality is we are still small. We're not going to be able to compete with some of the bigger players, but we can reach out and make connections nationally and globally still through our institutions if we equip them to do that well.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thanks so much for that comprehensive answer, Shelagh. Think it’s good to know the priorities for the state government. Jeremy, you mentioned to temper our expectations of the National Cultural Policy, that government can only be playing a certain role, that other key players must step up. I want to bring something in from the edges of our conversation, a little bit: the mining and resources sector. within that problem for the arts community. How much money is too much, is there a risk of soft self-censorship?

JEREMY SMITH:
This is inherently Western Australian in the sense of the way our sector and ecology and financial model has grown. What is it to be, you know, ethical around giving, around partnering, around accepting money from individual organisations and, you know, a lot of things ppi collective, through that role, we developed a really comprehensive, ethical partnering framework, which is available, which they generously offered to the sector and is on their website, particularly independent artists to use. But then I respect personally on the level those organisations with the individuals that choose to still, you know, accept funding and use that to create and make their work as well. I think I need to, I’m a former employee of Rio Tinto, and I did a lot of work in the community in that background. Had I not worked in that conversation, which is very different now. I would not be the person that I am now doing the things I do in the not for profit sector.

So, that there are really good people in organisations that are doing really good stuff and they are giving it a red hot go with mining money. Yes, they've don’t do good things in terms of environmental impact, First Nations communities, and other parts of our society, but I think we're a long way away from being able to cut the cord completely.

ORON CATTS:
Maybe I should tell you about the talk about ethical investment in the arts, if you’re interested in those questions, that will be exposed later. Mining interests… this is a policy we made at SymbioticA that we would refuse funding from pressure groups. So, anyone that is trying to influence the way we do things, that try to harm our integrity and autonomy, even the perceived one, would be an issue for us to receive funding. So, we refuse funding from the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, as well as from biotech companies. Yeah. So, it's not one side of the game or the other. It's how you maintain your integrity and your autonomy as an artist to be able to do things. And it is very perceptual as well. So, what's the optics of getting that? So, I think we need to find a mechanism where art can still benefit from those people who have too much money and they want to, you know, put it, park it somewhere. But it's hard to be in such a way that the artist would maintain their autonomy.

DR CATHERINE NOSKE:
Yeah. Just to pick up on what you're saying, Oron. I think it's a complicated question in the Western Australian context, and particularly because we are a small close-knit sector with complex relationships between organisations and institutions. Like, I could say, Westerly is not technically funded from the resources sector, but we sit within UWA, which is taking funding from the resources sector. So, the complicity and the levels of complicity in those questions is difficult to navigate and very complicated. That said, I think... and this might be part of the distinction that you’re drawing upon, there needs to be some recognition of... recognising that, working through that, and trying to build a future for the sector that is sustainable. And participating in arts-washing, which is really ironic when we're talking about the arts and culture sector, that is often being washed and also the destruction of culture in other ways. So, there's this really deep paradox in that question for the arts sector. Particularly in WA’s communities, where there are no real answers.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thanks Cate, any thoughts Shelagh?

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
Just a small observation on social dividends and how that’s bolted onto so many business models, particularly international businesses. It's interesting. But that social dividends are sometimes explicit in local businesses. And so, you know, it's interesting to see how the different business models work.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thanks very much. I think, as Cate says, it's important to recognise the complex relationships. But we’d like to leave some time to hear from you, the audience. Just a clarification – Oron, you mentioned an all-day session on ethical arts funding, hosted by the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA. So, if anyone is interested.

ORON CATTS:
(INAUDIBLE)

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
We want to answer as many questions as possible so briefly state it.

VICKY:
Hello. Thank you for the conversation. I've been reporting on the arts in Western Australia for 30 years, and I find this conversation rather disappointing. I mean, I have received emails from organizations including the one that you led, Shelagh. And just earlier this year they talked about the fact that in a survey they ran, it highlighted 63% of participants had immediate issues with their operating costs totalling 30 million. The survey also recorded that 50%, half, of small to medium arts bodies will be operating on reserves or in some cases will cease operations within the next twelve months. These are real figures from the Chamber itself. When I first came to WA, I would argue there was more coverage of the arts than there is now. Art practice is not seen, it's not heard, it's not analyzed, it's not critiqued in the way it was even when I came here. The media has, media outlets have diminished and I commend Seesaw, for example as small, but really valiant attempt to cover arts issues. After 30 years, we are at a point where giant, corporate giants in mining and resources are the major sources of funding, and I take your point, Kate, about people having funding applications.

I would argue that 4 to 6 a year is incontestable compared to the kind of funding applications people are having to make, and very often it’s to corporate giants. So, to your point Oron, about functional scrutiny, we'll try that when your sponsor comes through a certain section that doesn’t want annual analysis of some of the issues. Community building, it requires artistes who could actually make a living, and also have venue. Spare Parts Puppet Theatre has just lost that venue. Yet one decade ago, it went to one of the most respected architectural firms, in fact I think it was the one that designed for our state this company, and came up with a plan for building. A decade on, nothing, nothing's happened. We have no Indigenous cultural centre yet and yet, all of the 30 years that I've been here, there has been a growing network Indigenous art centres that is unrivalled for the rest of the nation. But we have not capitalized or taken in terms of execution here. At Warburton, the biggest community-owned collection in the nation, because it's there.

They have toured to China almost exclusively off their own back, one of the biggest tours to China that has ever been held of Indigenous art. So, my plea I think is for all that this is a difficult period, I've taken points in some ways Shelagh, we have a massive surplus in this State, and the diversifying the economy, I agree, is essential. That could we please look at the governments, and the commitments of this government in encouraging this community of West Australians, to look at our arts sector and fund it properly, and encourage it properly, and to not just have this way to improve in generation for a new museum, which we did. And wait still, for decent and major investment in a decent art gallery. We still haven’t had it. So, my plea is for all the artists out there, I truly feel for them, and I think it deserves a lot more funding.

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
I will just say one thing, which I did leave off my list, the Aboriginal Cultural Centre, is in train.

ORON CATTS:
And if I may Vicky, thanks so much for raising those key things. The first point that I had here was the visibility of the arts of media, which we don't have. Can you help us with that? So, how can we do it? Because it's obvious. I know with my own experience, I got international TV crews shooting my shows here in Perth. It wasn't even mentioned. The only mention I got in West Australia was the caricature on page two of me growing Kevin Rudd on the back of the mouse.

VICKY:
What about the Department of Culture and the Arts to put a subsidy in for coverage of arts events? Blanket. You've got a bicentennial coming up in which the government is planning to spend money on such activities, but you need money now.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Can we have a question up there please?

SPEAKER:
Thank you so much for this session this evening. I wanted to talk about influence why government policy to support work-life balance, that can then facilitate more people being, having the time and money to engage with the arts by volunteering or attending. A lot of people feel so run off their feet that they can’t engage with this sector. So, can we influence policies so people can have the time to engage with the sector.

DR CATHERINE NOSKE:
I can pick that one up, and thank you for that question. And I thank you Vicky for your point. And so, it's part of what is really being called for is that investment. It's the two-fold relationship between the work-life balance for art workers and that short fall in that precarity. And the burden of that volunteer work being passed on to participants. I think part of the reason when I’m speaking publicly about these questions of wanting policy that I don't want to shout and scream is this sense of a little bit preaching to the choir. That the conversations I'm having, and the audiences I'm having that with are very much already feeling that too. And these questions of looking for greater investment, and wanting greater investment to meet that greater value, and comes back to things that everyone wants to see.

And I think that idea of work-life balance really does fall into that sense of an underfunded sector. That luxury of being sustainable, and sustainability.

SPEAKER:
Now we move to question from our audience online. Shelagh, you mentioned five expected outcomes, like creativity, etc., what can researchers and stakeholders do so that these outcomes of value and then systematically in schooling, dominant discourses prioritize you know, ideas like competition, individuals learning, and so forth. How do you prioritize, how do you try and shift things and prioritise creativity and not just competition?

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
I guess by demonstrating the big body of research available about the benefits of childhood access to arts and culture experience, particularly kids before 8, although a lot of that research shows that it’s more impactful if it’s done in the home and social environment. So that quite changes about what’s education in school or the education in the home. But I guess by better demonstrating, in our own terms and our context, what those benefits would be to having it more embedded in our education system.

DENNIS:
I certainly believe in the name of the artist for social cohesion, local tourism, or educating kids, but what I see missing in the discussion most of the time is the value of the arts in and of itself. These social values of the arts come into play in the short term, but we don’t value Shakespeare for particular insights, but what it did for theatre and for writing in itself. Art for art’s sake can sound precious and rarified, but in the end that’s where the value of the arts lies. So much discussion in our time tends to turn it into social work.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
So, the question there is art for art’s sake, is that's something you like to talk about, Oron? Would you like to jump on that?

ORON CATTS:
OK. Yeah, so, I talked a lot about an artist, and he invented this idea that art was a function but not a utility. And the function, but not the utility. The minute you start to talk about secondary outcomes of you know, you lose the sense of knowledge. By being useless, you distill the issues and the essence of what you're trying to deal with. The minute you start to think about those secondary outcomes with utilitarian outputs, and that's why I have a problem with monetizing it. You start to lose what the essence of art is, and how we can come to terms, how we can convince politicians and bureaucrats that this is, you know, because there's no making the measurements, and the impact can be... it can take 300 years to realize the impact. But how do you actually allow that to happen and give the space for obviously gauging those useless acts because they actually have a very important function in society?

This is, I suppose, the question we all look at.

DR CATHERINE NOSKE:
I'll absolutely take your point, Dennis. And I think that's an important conversation to have when we're thinking about arts policy in terms of what our policy allows for and what not. But I also want to recognize art for art’s sake is an incredible position of privilege, and that as you were saying, Shelagh, not everybody has access to that privilege, and that part of the work of policy is to create equal opportunity and access, thinking about our communities and our nation as whole. So I think part of the tendency to talk about value and social impact when we having discussions of policy is about ways of leveraging what we understand the value art to ensure that policy can support that.

SPEAKER:
Whenever it comes to funding, I think governments, what they value is budget and figures, but I'm really interested in was what Jeremy said about fellowships. A number of artists are walking away from arts practice because there comes a certain points in their career where they are no longer supported, they are no longer fit into strategies or engagement, but they move either into administration or they just don't get another job completely. So in supporting people who are in the middle of their careers who are looking forward to sustain that practice is essential.

JEREMY SMITH:
Absolutely, and I think I also have friends (INAUDIBLE). I was received a $10,000 fellowship, which in those days was like millions. That allowed me to go and spend time in Canada and learn how to be a producer. I was graduating from WAAPA (INAUDIBLE). I think this week we’ve just seen the Sidney Myer Creative Fellowship open, which is eight, I think, $40,000 across two years, that’s the one Oron received.

ORON CATTS:
Yeah and I think you know, also there's some other countries that have different models with the artists. Once they declare they are an artist, you know, they get like instead of the dole, they get the artist support, which is a great idea. But going back to Jeremy's point, the very first grant that I received was tiny. I think it was like $3,000 to pick up from R&D. But just the trust that was given to me as a young artist, just coming out of university to allow me to start my project, and they believed, you know, they were more than willing to fail. The question was can we use the living tissue as a medium of expression. 20 odd years ago, the question, the answer would be like a resounding No, but they gave us the money. So this, those small gestures of trust, it's not just about money, it's about the recognition. And then I think we have also opened the door for artists, as you said, that they are pulling those kind of initiatives and we need to somehow find a way to support them.

Very similar I suppose, that's why so many artists have gone for PhDs as a way to sustain themselves.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thanks very much Oron. But before we leave you, one last question. A quick thirty-second take from each of you. What’s a good story to tell about our existing arts practices, industry and landscape? What gives you hope?

DR CATHERINE NOSKE:
I can start if you like. For me, what gives me hope in my work at Westerly in particular is just the enthusiasm and passion of seeing artists engage with and the willingness of my wonderful super team to be able to contribute that. The number and growth of submissions we receive up to 900, up to 1000, submissions per each issue, which is you know, work. But it's also really exciting to see a really dynamic, creative state, and this is in context of a sector that is underfunded and unsupported. So, the hope is in what could happen, what explosion could happen with more funding.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Shelagh.

SHELAGH MAGADZA:
I guess I am optimistic that we're at such a different place in terms of the cultural values, and how they are expressed within our institutions, but also within our society. The journey that we're on together and separately in this place that we are going, can only be expressed in terms of myth, and poetry, because it doesn't make sense any other way. And to create a space for us to create that mythology of our own, and to express ourselves to each other in the language of empathy and... it's the only way to get past a lot of damage, and hurt and healing. But to keep that optimism going that you know, we’re just small human beings on a big, long journey that is beyond our comprehension, really. Traveling around in space. Before we get swallowed by the sun. You have to lift up the space with that creative thinking.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Oron.

ORON CATTS:
I suppose, you know, being here for more than 30 years and seeing how badly Australia recognised the wrongdoing in the past, the hope is to see much of past to have foresight not to continue like this. And I think ultimately there's a huge role to play.

JEREMY SMITH:
Seeing new people telling stories, new people being a part of that story, new people in leadership positions, and I think it's good because it's generating a lot more conversation, awareness, in this space.

DR CHRISTOPHER LIN:
Thank you so much. So, can you please give a round of applause. I just wanted to say a quick round of thanks to Shamit Saggar at UWA PPI, who’s a champion and supporter of arts issues. Our comms and engagement coordinator Bec, and our interns John and Jet for pretty much making it possible tonight. Thank you very much, and thanks very much for being here with us.

JEREMY SMITH:
Thank you, Chris.

ORON CATTS:
Thank you so much, Chris.