



## Governing Art and Identity

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In 1854, at the laying of the first stone of the State Library of Victoria (which housed the National Gallery of Victoria from 1859 to 1968), Sir Redmond Barry said:

Seventeen years have scarcely elapsed since the foundation of the colony which was then inhabited by savages. Probably in the world's history no country has attempted to found both a university and a Public Library within a score of years of its first settlement. (in Westbrook 1973, p. 8)

A century and a half later in 1996, Javier Pérez de Cuellar, President of the World Commission on Culture and Development, stated:

When our Commission began its work, it had long been clear that development was a far more complex undertaking than had been originally thought. It could no longer be seen as a single, uniform, linear path, for this would inevitably eliminate cultural diversity and experimentation, and dangerously limit humankind's creative capacities ... This evolution in thinking was largely the result of global political emancipation, as nationhood had led to a keen awareness of each people's own way of life as a value, as a right, as a responsibility and as an opportunity. It had led each people to challenge the frame of reference in which the West's system of values alone generated rules assumed to be universal and to demand the right to forge different versions of modernisation. It had led peoples to assert the value of their own cultural wealth, of their manifold assets that could not be reduced to measurement in dollars and cents, while simultaneously to seek the universal values of a global ethics. (de Cuellar 1996, p. 7)

These statements on the relations between culture, identity and 'civilisation' tell us much about the ways in which our understanding of these has changed. Sir Redmond Barry's proud announcement concerned the establishment of a cultural infrastructure of 'Marvellous Melbourne'. In this context, it was Europe's 'Great Cultural Tradition' which was considered most 'useful' by Victoria's colonial settlers. It is precisely this mono-cultural construction of the 'Great Cultural Tradition' and its benefits that de Cuellar challenges when he argues that cultural development can no longer take 'a single, uniform, linear path' (1996, p. 7). For de Cuellar, the development of culture should facilitate the *diversity* of 'cultural wealth', while at the same time guarding against the excesses of cultural nationalism (1996, p. 7). While these statements are opposite in their sentiments, What is most surprising about these statements – with their diametrically opposed sentiments – is how much they have in common. Although set in different countries, in different economic, social and political contexts, and 150 years apart, both emphasise the uses of culture for the governance of populations. De Cuellar's statement is global and defined on the basis of the assertion of cultural *diversity*; Barry's is colonial and *mono-cultural*. Nevertheless, both define culture as useful to the

governance of populations through its role in the construction of identity.

The governance of culture has been the subject of considerable international discussion over the past few years, as evidenced by the plethora of conferences discussing what has been termed a 'paradigm shift' in contemporary cultural policy.<sup>1</sup> Even in those countries where public support has not had a strong tradition, increased competition for the arts dollar has meant that arts organisations have been self-searching about what they see as their role and about ways of accessing funding to facilitate this role. This has been particularly so in relation to the convergence of cultural practices and tastes, where distinctions between what is fundable and what is not are increasingly open to question. This convergence has been due partly to the culturally plural nature of national communities as global populations have become increasingly mobile, cultural diversity has emerged as an important policy objective and frameworks for the assessment of cultural value have been pluralised. Despite this pluralisation, however, cultural policy infrastructures continue to be dominated by nineteenth century western definitions of 'excellence' and 'quality'.

The late twentieth century witnessed various attempts to deal with the popular conception of cultural policy as 'elitist'. In the 1990s, the American National Endowment for the Arts was defunded, and in the late 1990s the British government (following the lead of Australia's first Commonwealth cultural policy, *Creative Nation* (1994)) articulated cultural policy as being about the development of 'creative industries'. 'Creative industries' is the policy 'buzz term' of the moment: it have been envisaged (or visioned) in relation to a whole raft of other buzz words: self-sustaining, cross-art form, cross-media distribution, cross-partnership funding and cross-audience marketing. However, despite the rhetoric, it seems that governments are still struggling with the discursive shifts that an industry-based and entrepreneurial conception of cultural policy entails. The essential problem is with the complexities involved in marrying together enterprise processes for cultural support while retaining the centrality of public-interest rationales for cultural policy. In practice, this has meant that, in the midst of local, state and federal governments stating their policy support for the development of the 'cultural industries', the largest cultural grants are still to those cultural forms which are the least self-sustaining. It is no surprise to learn that these cultural forms are the ones which have traditionally been the beneficiary of public monies: ballet, opera and theatre.<sup>2</sup> However, according to recent research, it is precisely these cultural forms which are the least accessible to the general public.

In *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures*, Tony Bennett, Mike Emmison and John Frow describe ballet, opera and theatre as belonging to the realm of 'restricted culture' (1999). Art galleries, museums and libraries, on the other hand, are found to have participation rates less closely defined by economic and cultural capital (1999). The central importance of this finding is in Bennett et al.'s argument that the tastes 'evident in the cultural choices and preferences of contemporary Australians are pre-eminently social in their organisation and character' (1999, p. 1). Their analysis of Australian cultural consumption is underpinned by attention to the policy contexts of that consumption. In particular, this leads them to argue that some forms of cultural capital are associated with enduring distinctions of class. However, they also point out that 'education increases rates of participation across pretty well the *whole* field of culture' (Bennett et al. 1999, p. 246). Bennett et al. warn us that this 'reminder is a pertinent one in a political and policy context in which ... those associations may well be strengthened as a result of the increased stress on privatisation and user-pays principles that now characterises both cultural and education policies' (1999, p. 246). The key reason for this discussion of *Accounting for Tastes* is that Bennett et al. are effective in their empirical and theoretical reminder that, as a result of the choices we

make, there are cultural, social, economic and political power effects on which cultural forms are funded and why. It seems that the question is no longer (if it ever has been) one of *how* to fund the arts; rather, and even more centrally, the concern is with the *kinds* of arts to be funded and *why*.

*The Uses of Art: Constructing Australian Identities* argues that above all culture is about, and has been used to shape and to govern, identity. However, this is not to suggest a relationship where the governance of identity has always been about fashioning the subjects that governments desire. Far from it – what is notable in the history traced here is the amenity of art programs to the construction of various and sometimes competing forms of identity. *The Uses of Art* argues that the relations between culture and government can be understood by an analysis of the programmatic and institutional contexts for the use of culture as an interface in the relations between identity and government. The primary objective is to provide a history of those Australian art programs which have been targeted at populations who are understood as having no or limited access to art but are thought to be capable of deriving a benefit from the provision of such access. These populations have been conceptualised variously: in the mid-nineteenth century, mechanics were to be 'improved' by access to the civilising influences of Culture; in the early twenty-first century, 'youth' are to be trained as active cultural 'consumers'.

The main focus of this book is an analysis of the history of the strategic uses of art by institutions concerned with governing the social – institutions connected with the distribution and utilisation of cultural resources to shape populations in various ways. Discussion will focus on a range of institutions, including Mechanics' Institutes, art galleries, adult education programs and popular music festivals, as well as government art support agencies. Previous studies of art and government have tended to focus only on state-sponsored art programs (see, for instance, Rowse 1985). These studies have missed the important relations of influence between state and non-state art programs. Art programs organised by non-state organisations have been (and continue to be) a key site of influence for the development of the rationales which inform government art programs. *The Uses of Art* provides a history of the emergence and development of these key rationales. The aim is to provide a historically informed base from which to think about the governance of culture in contemporary Australia.

The need for a history of the major influences on cultural policy in Australia is clear. As Jennifer Craik (1996) has commented, analyses of arts or cultural funding in Australia 'have been sporadic' and the studies that have been published 'have been more concerned with particular policies, cultural sectors or personalities than ... the machinations that produce certain policy strategies rather than others' (1996, p. 177). *The Uses of Art* provides a survey of Australian art programs from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. It provides an analysis of the logics which have shaped the organisation of art programs as they have been developed as 'useful' in relation to the governance of populations. The central Australian art history text is Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting* (1995). However, this is primarily a history of art movements rather than policy.

Other publications have focused on various moments in the institutional history of arts administration in Australia – for example, Philip Candy and John Laurent's *Pioneering Culture: Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts in Australia* (1994), Gay Hawkins' *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras: Constructing Community Arts* (1993) and Tim Rowse's *Arguing the Arts: The Funding of the Arts in Australia* (1985). These texts discuss specific institutions or programs, or sections of institutions or programs. More recently, Deborah Stevenson's *Art and Organisation: Making Australian Cultural Policy* (2000)

has provided an analysis of aspects of Australian cultural policy from 1983 to the mid-1990s. These studies are important because they provide detail regarding the operation of particular programs. The historical survey provided here situates these more specific studies within the longer discursive history of Australian art programs.

### **Governing Art and Identity**

This book investigates the key rationales informing Australian art programs aimed at populations which are understood as having no or limited access to art. It is possible to provide a distinctive perspective on this history by arguing that the relations between art and government are best defined by the ways in which different strategies for the management of populations have been organised and deployed. This approach to the history of Australian art programs is informed by a body of work which, developing from the French theorist Michel Foucault's 'Governmentality' (1991), applies a distinctive perspective to the history of the relations between government and culture – see, for instance, Frow (1995) and Hunter (1988). Foucault argues that government is not limited to organisations or mechanisms attached to the state; rather, government refers to the activities of all institutions concerned with the regulation and management of populations. This history of the Australian relations between culture and government discusses a range of state and non-state organisations which have sponsored and organised art programs. This approach to governance as taking place via non-state organisations as well as through 'government' organisations allows the identification and analysis of the relations of influence between non-state and state-sponsored art programs.

Bennett (1995, 1998) has applied a reading of Foucault to the history of the museum and has understood the relations between culture and government as being defined above all by the ways in which government has strategically used culture to act on the social. In this way, he draws on Foucault's understanding of government as essentially involved with the moulding both of public and private behaviour – or, to put it another way, as concerned with the 'conduct of conduct'. According to Bennett's history of museums (1995), the increase in the perception that culture might be useful to the training of 'good' citizens can be seen in relation to a general shift towards a multiplication of strategies for the management of the social, which can be traced from the early nineteenth century. In addition to the development of the museum complex in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century, art programs also began to be developed during this period; these too aimed to equip their participants with 'civic' capacities (Koven 1994). The mid-nineteenth century, then, is a key moment in the development of the formation which continues to inform contemporary arts policy – that is, that art is useful to the governance of populations, particularly where these populations are defined above all by their freedom. In Australia too, as we will see in Chapter 2, the mid-nineteenth century saw the establishment of art programs targeted at a general population (in contrast to a population of 'experts').

Nikolas Rose has also developed Foucault's conception of governmentality as a way of exploring the connections between self-formation and the government of populations (Rose 1996, 1999). What Bennett's and Rose's methodological approaches have in common is their point that populations are managed not only through the provision of state services but also, and more importantly, through governmental techniques aimed at the formation of personalities which have desirable attributes and characteristics. For Bennett and Rose, however, this relation is not understandable through the concept of coercion; rather, liberal techniques of government are productive in the sense that they provide, via the construction of new social norms, new ways of being and knowing. As Rose (1992) puts it, the 'importance of liberalism is not that it first recognised, defined

or defended freedom as a right of all citizens. Rather, its significance is that for the first time the arts of government were systematically linked to the practice of freedom.' From this perspective, art programs have been part of a complex of institutions and knowledges which manage populations by equipping individuals with the capacity to be self-regulating in various ways.

The variety of the sources and the competing nature of the logics which form the basis of the culture/government formation are apparent in an analysis of the history of art programs. Many of the major historical studies argue that culture/government relations are best understood in terms of the construction of a bourgeois hegemony (see, for instance, Borzello 1987; Pearson 1982) or as state coercion (Harris 1995). Such analyses have traditionally understood the relations between culture and government as negatively defined in terms of 'dominant' and 'oppressed' cultural forms. In this book, by drawing on art, labour, political and government history, and cultural and cultural policy studies, I emphasise the complex and contradictory nature of the different rationales for art's governmentalisation.

### **Constructing Australian Identity**

Australian art programs targeted at general rather than 'expert' constituencies were first established in the mid-nineteenth century. In the late eighteenth century, the 'mechanick classes' were thought to be constitutively incapable of deriving any benefit from art. However, in the nineteenth century, it was precisely these classes that were understood to have the most to gain from exposure to the 'civilising' influences of the arts.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 2 will investigate how, in mid-nineteenth century Australia as in Britain, the utility of art programs was articulated in relation to their 'civilising' effect on the mechanic and later the gold digger. Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts were the key site for these early programs; later in the nineteenth century, the first state art galleries were established. The history of the establishment of the National Gallery of Victoria in the 1860s is particularly illustrative of nineteenth century conceptions of the uses of art. The gallery was to exercise a 'civilising' influence and to be representative of the achievements of 'Marvellous Melbourne' in fully emerging from the 'barbarism' of its pre-colonial days. This 'civilising' effect was strongly emphasised in Victoria due to the less than 'cultured' effects of the gold strikes (although the Gallery, in common with many of the Mechanics' Institutes and much of the rest of the early Victorian cultural infrastructure, was established with gold-generated money).

In Chapter 3, attention will turn to the period from the late-nineteenth century to the late 1920s. During this era, art and art programs were increasingly articulated to the construction of a national identity. It was in the early part of the twentieth century that Australian art came to be accepted as representing Australian subject matter in a distinctly 'Australian' style. The Heidelberg School<sup>4</sup> challenged the supremacy of British Victorian ideas and values in the Australian art scene and dominated popular taste into the 1930s. Discussion of the establishment of the National Gallery of New South Wales (as the Art Gallery of New South Wales was then called) in the 1880s is instructive to understanding the changing conceptions of Australian art and the function of the gallery in relation to the people. The articulation of the relations between art and the people developed in the 1880s will be contrasted to the 1920s articulation of cultural nationalism. This chapter will also discuss the period from the 1880s to the 1920s in terms of the emergence of an industrial infrastructure for art in Australia.

Chapter 4 examines a variety of art programs in order to illustrate the vocabularies framing the articulation of art, citizenship and government during postwar reconstruction in Australia. A variety of 1930s and 1940s cultural programs are

examined, including the Australian Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts and the travelling exhibitions organised by the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. These are programs in which it is possible to identify the emergence and development of certain sets of discourses which, in various manifestations, have continued to frame the administration of art to the present day. At this stage in the history of Australian cultural policy, government arts funding (and thereby increased access to art) began to be seen in terms of what would later be framed as a 'right' of citizenship, although at this stage it tended to be positioned as an 'expectation' of government.

Chapter 5 traces the development of the notion of 'the arts industry'. Of particular interest here is how the competing discourses of 'cultural rights' versus 'the arts industry' have been constructed in contemporary arts policy. This allows reflection on some of the ways in which it might be possible to negotiate a path through the seemingly irreconcilable stand-off posed by dichotomising the relations between industrial and humanistic rationales for arts funding. In order to trace the development of the polarity in policy discourse, a number of case studies and policy moments are highlighted. In particular, this chapter examines the Industries Assistance Commission Report of 1976 and the logics underpinning the Australia's Council's development and use of cultural statistics in the 1980s.

Chapter 6 consists of an analysis of the development of the concept of 'cultural rights' in Commonwealth government arts policy as that is represented by a history of the Australia Council from its establishment in 1968 to the launch of the Commonwealth government's first cultural policy, *Creative Nation*, in 1994. These articulations are best illustrated in the instance of the Australia Council by the increasing importance of economically based arguments in favour of government support for the arts and an increasingly pluralist understanding of the arts audience as comprising different communities with distinct needs and interests. In the mid- to late 1980s, access to and participation in a plurality of cultural forms came to be constructed as a 'right' of citizenship. At the same time, the arts began to be discussed in terms of their constitution as an 'industry'. These discourses – 'cultural rights' and 'art as industry' – became established as polarities in terms of policy discourse and public debate.

*The Uses of Art* concludes with a discussion of the terms which frame contemporary policy debate. Through a discussion of the dimensions of youth cultural consumption, popular music festivals and Australian youth cultural policy, I will examine the most recent articulation of the culture/economy dichotomy by asking how we negotiate between the (seemingly) competing logics of the cultural industries and cultural development policy discourses. The key issue is to how is establish a rationale with which it is possible to justify the principle that to fund some forms of culture is not to fund others. On what basis can this rationale rest? One of the primary problems in addressing the pluralised construction of culture and cultural relations advocated by the cultural development agenda is that cultural policy languages are still those of the post-World War II welfare state. Debate still seeks to organise and articulate cultural policy in terms of a division between 'public interest' on the one hand, and economic interests on the other. In order to facilitate and manage culture in a way which is both sustainable and plural, it will be important to argue for the continuation of a mix in the construction of the relations between art, populations and government. This mix will be clear-eyed in its assessment of the ways in which economically based rationales might combine with social rationales for arts support in ways which recognise the *actual* natures of cultural tastes and the political and social effects of supporting and not supporting cultural forms and practices.

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*The uses of art: constructing Australian identities* by Lisanne Gibson was published by the *University of Queensland Press* in 2001. This excerpt is reproduced here with the permission of the author.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Colbert (1998); *National Association of the Visual Arts* (1998); *Privatisation of Culture Project* (1998).

<sup>2</sup> In Australia, as a result of the *Final Report of the Major Performing Arts Inquiry* (1999), the federal government gave 31 performing arts organisations a one-off financial package amounting to \$43 million; the state governments topped up this figure.

<sup>3</sup> See Gibson (1999) for discussion of this shift in late-eighteenth century France and nineteenth century Britain.

<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1880s, a loose association of painters, including Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin, began experimenting with a style of painting which could represent the specificity of Australian light, colour and atmosphere. This group of artists came to be known as the Heidelberg School, after the town in Victoria in which they did much of their early experimentation.

Also on *Australian Humanities Review* see :

- [Tim Rowse's review](#) of Lisanne Gibson's *The uses of art: constructing Australian identities*

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