

Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
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Parliament House
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15 July 2015

Dear Committee,

Please accept this submission to your inquiry into the impact of Commonwealth 2014 and 2015 budget decisions on the arts and the establishment of the National Program for Excellence in the Arts.

I would welcome the opportunity to appear at a public hearing you may conduct.

Emma Webb, Creative Producer
On behalf of the Board of Management and staff of Vitalstatistix

CC. Senator George Brandis QC, Bill Shorten MP, Mark Butler MP and Senator Richard Di Natale

INTRODUCTION TO VITALSTATISTIX

Vitalstatistix (Vitals) is a small contemporary arts organisation based in Port Adelaide, South Australia, with a focus on the development of multidisciplinary, live, new works.

Each year Vitals offers performance seasons, residencies, projects, events, exhibitions, festival experiences, collaborations with like-minded makers and presenters, and initiatives for South Australian artists. Vitals develops partnerships with independent artists and creative teams who desire to work with us over several years in a stimulating, supportive producing environment.

Vitals is deeply connected to the South Australian and national independent arts sector. Our primary work is commissioning, supporting, curating and programming new works that independent/individual artists bring to us and develop with us. We engage with approximately 100 artists each year.

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Government of South Australia
Arts SA



Our residency program, Incubator, supports the creative development and premiere of new performance works by independent artists. Similarly, our annual hothouse for artists and audiences, Adhocracy, supports the early creative development of new experimental artworks. As part of Adhocracy each year we host a residency-based project where guest, non-South Australian artists work with South Australian artists on the creative development of a new work.

We participate in a range of national initiatives; for instance Vitals is the South Australian member of the Mobile States consortium which commissions and tours contemporary performance made within the independent arts sector which would otherwise not be seen in many Australian states. Each year Vitals partners with the St. Jerome Laneway Festival to commission South Australian artists to make live art works for presentation at the Adelaide-leg of this international music festival.

We have a strong focus on the participation of non-artists and communities; our Contemporary Communities program develops multi-year projects that partner artists with non-artists to make new art and performance. Currently, and as example, we are commencing work with local environmentalists in a project that explores climate change in the river and coastal environment of our home Port Adelaide.

We are a place for contemporary and for community, for big ideas and intimate experiences, for long-term development and hothouse intensity.

Vitals is currently in receipt of triennial Program Presenter funding from the Australia Council (Theatre section), which ends at the completion of 2016, and we have regularly received project funding from the Theatre, Emerging and Experimental Arts, and Community Partnerships sections of the Council. We receive triennial operational funding from Arts SA.

OUR CONCERNS

We have described our organisation and its work in detail to give a sense to the Committee of our deep engagement and interconnection with independent artists and with audience-participants in Australian art making.

We are extremely concerned by the cuts to the Australia Council's budget and the Federal Government's decision to divert these funds to the formation of the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA). These cuts will have significant and long lasting affects on the ecology of artistic development and production in Australia that will in no way be offset by the formation of the NPEA.

A. Cuts to the Australia Council budget and their impact

It is indisputable that the only way that the Australia Council can manage the \$104.7 million reduction to their budget on top of previous cuts (given the quarantining of the Australian Major Performing Arts Group companies) is through cuts to grants that are offered to small-to-medium arts organisations and to individual artists and groups of artists. Already we have seen the suspension of the Six Year Funding for Arts Organisations program, the cancellation of the June round of project funding for individuals and organisations, and the end of other important programs such as ArtStart.

It is concerning that:

- At this point in time there is no framework for the operational funding of small-to-medium arts organisations beyond 2016; this situation jeopardises the viability of many organisations, a situation enhanced by the fact that many State funding arrangements, are predicated on Federal funding partnerships;
- Small-to-mediums and individual artists will be further placed in competition with each other for a dwindling pool of funds, when in fact their fates (and successes) are inextricably linked.

It is hard to see how the Australia Council can deliver on its Strategic Plan (2014-2019), or adequately fund *both* small-to-medium organisations and individual artists, within their new funding allocation. Either way the impact will be felt by individual Australian artists, whether through decreased opportunities to be presented, employed or supported by small-to-medium organisations, and/or through direct cuts to individual funding.

The Committee might consider the complete waste of resources that this process has resulted in, within and beyond the Australia Council. A significant process of developing the new Australia Council Strategic Plan (2014-2019) and the subsequent wholesale change to and rollout of new funding programs offered by the Australia Council from 2015, has been trashed.

In March this year Vitals submitted an Expression-of-Interest to the Six Year Arts Organisations funding program through the Multi-Arts assessment panel. While we always knew this process would be competitive, if we had been successful this operational funding would have secured a bright future for our vibrant organisation and its multidisciplinary vision, and would have provided a stability and capacity to engage with many new artists and audiences.

When a small organisation like ours applies for this type of funding, a large amount of hours goes into the strategic planning and application process. At Vitalstatistix we invested a minimum of one hundred hours of board and staff time in preparing our Expression of Interest. Post the fallout of cuts to the Australia Council we have once again put many hours into recalibrating our plans, for the organisation and with artists we work with (including those who were preparing applications for the June funding round). We are unable to adequately plan towards 2017 because of the uncertainty.

This will have been repeated across the over four hundred organisations around the country who submitted an EOI; organisations which were developing many exciting, diverse visions for the future cultural landscape of Australia - plans this nation might now never see.

The Federal Government has itself recognised the value of stable funding in enabling an arts organisation to pursue ambition, by ensuring that AMPAG are protected from budget cuts to the arts in the past two years. At least 60% of the depleted Australia Council funding is guaranteed to just 28 organisations.

The Federal Government has ensured, through these cuts and then through this protection, that the smallest and most poorly resourced sections of the arts, who in fact produce the most new Australian work for a large audience, bear the brunt of the decision to shift funding from

the Australia Council's rigorously peer assessed grants programs to the new National Program for Excellence in the Arts.

B. Establishment of the National Program for Excellence in the Arts

The establishment of the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) offers no reassurance to a small, contemporary arts organisation like Vitalstatistix or the artists we work with. Firstly, the most benign critique of this new program is that the NPEA duplicates administrative structures, reducing the funds available for actual art making.

The draft guidelines for the NPEA serve to reinforce the perception that this program will more likely benefit larger, better-resourced organisations undertaking "appropriate major initiatives", working internationally, or with resourced sponsorship and development arms; rather than small organisations and artist projects which are just as much an important part of the arts ecology in Australia and in fact lay the fertile ground for larger initiatives.

Currently within the draft guidelines there is no operational funding for organisations on offer and individual artists are unable to apply. The Ministry's assessment process is extremely vague and there is no guarantee that all successful applications will be publicly reported. There is a lack of clarity around whether a commercial enterprise could be eligible. Moreover, as figures released by the Ministry to ArtsHub show, around one quarter of the funds stripped from the Australia Council to establish the NPEA will not go to NPEA grant funding at all but towards existing touring and festival programs.

Much has been made of the tone of announcements regarding the establishment of the NPEA by the Federal Government; the implication that the Australia Council hasn't been funding excellence, the insinuation that excellence should be judged by a spurious notion of audience demand. Perhaps tone does not matter if funds are still being distributed to artists for excellence (putting aside the duplicated administration as noted above).

However, Minister Brandis' binding of excellence to notions of popular taste and what the "great audiences" supposedly desire, alongside his disdain for "subsidising individual artists responsible only to themselves" (as if they exist in a unaccountable vacuum), is extremely concerning, especially for small organisations fostering new or independent or experimental or contemporary or solo or small-scale or community or radical art. It belies a sophisticated view of the category of 'excellence' and ignores the full breadth of what Australian audiences actually want to see (and *do* see). When these views are coupled with a shift to the Ministry directly approving arts funding, no wonder artists are concerned.

Ultimately, this is the point. Whatever shape it may take, this new program comes directly under the Minister's approval. It is a significant undermining of the long-held bipartisan principle of arms-length funding, where artists are rigorously and competitively assessed by sector peers without fear that politics, personal art-form preferences, so called popular taste alone, or who may or may not be on your Board of Management, will prevent the funding of artistic excellence in its *many* forms.

Small-to-medium organisations and the independent practice of individual artists are absolutely critical to the production of new Australian art works which are seen from Bankstown to Alice Springs from Roxby to Port Adelaide, from our capital cities to the world's

stages, galleries and festivals. These sectors are essential to broad citizen engagement and participation in arts and culture, to leadership development and employment in the arts, and very importantly to the development of diverse, contemporary and risk-taking art. These sectors of the arts are home to many of Australia's leading artists, and are the birthplace of the new and the emerging. These sectors do this important work with relatively little public subsidy. They should be grown rather than reduced.

RECOMMENDATIONS/KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER

We ask that the Committee consider and make recommendations that address:

1. The essential value of supporting individual artists to: experiment with form and ideas beyond simply the 'popular'; develop new work independently; work outside and inside of major institutions; and develop their individual careers (in all stages, emerging to established).
2. The critical role that small-to-medium arts organisations play in commissioning, supporting, curating and programming new works by Australian artists that are experienced by diverse audiences.
3. The overall funding available to the arts in Australia as well as its equitable distribution across individual artists, independent groups, small-to-mediums and major organisations.
4. The capacity for the Australia Council to deliver its Strategic Plan and manage its funding allocations when it is given such little room to move internally; and more broadly the Federal Government's approach towards its own statutory authority.
5. The waste of resources and instability that the cuts to the Australia Council have resulted in; and how this wastage and instability can be prevented in the future.
6. The appropriateness of removing funds from the Australia Council's small-to-medium and individual grant programs in order to setup a new program that is primarily focused on large projects and initiatives, as opposed to funding this program with new monies.
7. The streams, criteria, assessment process, transparency, decision-making and administration of the NPEA within the Ministry for the Arts; and the long-term affect that removing arms-length arts funding in Australia could have in perception and in reality.