

# **Joint submission from representatives of the diversity arts sector to Creative State 2020+**

**August 2019**

This submission has been prepared by Multicultural Arts Victoria in partnership with the following organisations:

- Casa Cultura
- Cohealth Arts Generator
- Cultural Infusion
- Diversitat
- Diversity Arts Australia
- Footscray Community Arts Centre
- The Boite
- Outer Urban Projects

In responding to Creative State 2020+, we welcome the focus on diversity at all levels. To achieve diverse and equal representation across the creative industries for all Victorians, in particular for those Victorians for whom participation is prevented by structural and systemic barriers, much focused work is needed.

A firm commitment to diversity is central to the growth of the State's creative industries. The existing and developing ecosystem of diverse creative practitioners and their support organisations is the lifeblood that will nurture and generate the talent, creativity, knowledge and leadership that will grow and sustain the sector into the future.

## **Key Recommendations**

1. Creation of a diversity strategy that builds in self-determination by diverse practitioners and their support organisations;
2. Adoption of an equity framework that applies to government support for the cultural and creative industries;
3. Investment in a robust diversity arts sector with the capacity to develop diverse artists and arts practices;
4. Investment in diverse leaders in the sector;
5. Creation of an accountability framework that addresses output alongside processes;
6. Formation of an evidence base for interventions and investments that reflects best practice models.
7. Effective co-ordination across portfolio areas to strategically support the growing ecosystem of diverse practitioners and communities across Victoria; and
8. Direct resourcing and support for the organisations operating in this sector to lead, design, implement and evaluate programs aimed at addressing the root causes of discrimination and exclusion.

## Overview

We encourage the Victorian Government to adopt a strengths-based approach to diversity. By this we mean the understanding that diversity is not a problem to be solved; it is, in fact, the solution to many of our problems. In acknowledging diversity as a key asset for the creative industries, the Victorian Government will reflect international best practice models that identify diversity as central to the relevance, sustainability and capacity of the creative industries; and to the health, wellbeing and sustainability of society at large.

To this end, we are calling for a clear commitment to address the persistent inequalities experienced by a significant section of the Victorian community in relation to their cultural participation. *Creative State 1* has fallen short of addressing the attitudes and behaviours that exclude and marginalise some while privileging and elevating others. We would like to see diversity expressed as an overarching goal of the strategy, which in turn will send a strong signal to the sector that practices must change.

Achieving equality in the creative industries involves both the creation of new opportunities and the dismantling of out-dated structures, behaviours and beliefs. We call for a program of reform that adopts both approaches by investing in strategic interventions to:

- build opportunities for diverse practitioners and organisations to increase capacity; and
- address the prevailing and discriminatory practices and beliefs that maintain current systems of power and privilege across the creative industries.

### **A closer examination of 'culture' within Creative State 2020+**

Within this proposal, we urge caution in the use of *diversity* to represent artists, artforms and cultural practices from a range of populations such as culturally and linguistically diverse people, people with disability, LGBTIQ and other groups, without appropriate mechanisms to ensure respect for self-determination. It should not be assumed that there exists a commonality of experiences amongst groups who have traditionally been marginalised beyond the experience of marginalisation itself. The decision to adopt the overarching term of *diversity* to describe initiatives intended to support the participation of these individuals and communities should be only be undertaken through consultation and leadership of these communities.

We also urge a closer and more sophisticated examination of the definition of culture, which respects Victoria's obligations under the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and reflects a contemporary and expansive understanding of the role of culture in communities. We believe that current mainstream interpretations of cultural practice contain inherent biases against cultural practices that derive from diverse communities. Whilst 'classical' forms derived from western European tradition are seen as culturally relevant today and capable of contemporary interpretation, classical forms that derive from non-western canons are dismissed as community cultural heritage with no contemporary relevance as professional practices. These attitudes are inherently racist. We call on the Victorian Government to address these underlying biases and their manifestations in policy and practice.

In advocating for diversity, we are focusing on challenging the dominant culture's concentration of power. However, we acknowledge that many communities represented by

the term diversity may also be impermeable to diversity. We strive for diversity that is encouraged and prioritised at all levels, the high culture echelons (whose white predominance needs addressing) and the small to medium sector, who should look beyond the scope of a particular ethnicity or language group when developing their diversity strategy.

### **A focus on diversity towards cultural equity**

We also advocate for a stronger alignment between a diversity framework and an equity framework. We would hope that organisations across the creative industries would respond to a stated priority around diversity by more than just ticking the 'diversity box', and engage deeply with the causes of inequality. Exercises in box-ticking have the propensity to cause significant harm to communities and do nothing to address the structural and systemic causes of exclusion and marginalisation. We call for a genuine commitment to generate diversity initiatives that achieve cultural equity. To that end, we urge Creative Victoria to develop, in partnership with our sector, strategies to identify tokenism and exploitation and adopt best practice approaches. For example, it is critically important that peer assessment panels carefully scrutinise short-term, one-off diversity initiatives to ensure they are culturally and structurally safe and do not represent further exploitation of communities and artists.

### **Who's doing the heavy lifting towards diversity?**

Compared to the rest of the nation, Victoria is fortunate to have many nationally leading practice organisations in community arts and cultural development, producing work with, by and for diverse communities. We urge that the strategy builds upon and acknowledges the expert role of these organisations in deep engagement with communities. Support for these organisations is demonstrably inadequate to meet the demand by communities. We wish to emphasise that it is diverse practitioners and their support organisations who have done the bulk of the heavy lifting in relation to obligations by the sector to be inclusive and non-discriminatory. These organisations and communities have done this work with relatively little resourcing and support. Now is the time to recognise the leadership capabilities of these organisations and the clear efficiencies for government in utilising their assets.

### **Critically examining the role of the mainstream in addressing diversity**

We call upon the Victorian government to challenge the prevailing attitudes and approaches across the creative industries to diversity. We ask that they consider how organisations are meeting their obligations to cultural democracy and equity, and that this be reflected in funding contracts and agreements. In doing so, we reject practices that seek to sidestep, cannibalise and disempower our sector. The prevalent feature of the broader sector thus far, is that developmental work is being done by under-resourced community-based organisations.

Mainstream organisations, with no commitment to the development of artists, profit from this work by engaging these artists at the latter stages of development. While we acknowledge these market forces, they need to stem from partnership approaches, reflecting mutual respect and equal power, with adequate investment in the full cycle of artist and artform development. The current position of relatively low power of organisations continually fighting for cultural equity is a major inhibitor to the successful engagement with mainstream organisations. This situation contributes to poor outcomes

that perpetuate disadvantage. To that end, we call for a reform agenda that addresses at its core, the power and privilege differentials that currently act to maintain the status quo.

Without addressing power and privilege, the diversity arts sector, diverse artists and arts practices will be at the mercurial whims of an artificially bolstered sector with diminishing content. A sustainable, relevant and diverse creative industries ecology thrives on collaboration and exchange, but only if we tackle underlying structural inequality.

### **Investing in diverse leaders**

We also urge an investment in leaders and in the employment of diverse leaders in key roles in the arts. This is likely to require the establishing of quotas or targets for funded organisations. The last two decades have shown that despite significant calls for increased diversity, the employment profile of creative industry organisations, especially at senior levels, remains persistently monocultural. In part, this is due to the fact that unconscious bias is rife within the creative industries, with few mechanisms to enable individuals to identify the prevalence of negative attitudes within hiring practices (to say nothing of programming). Although quotas have their detractors, they are having a significant impact in other sectors (see gender representation in the boards of sporting organisations). Coupled with effective leadership development programs, quotas should be considered.

### **Identifying leading practice**

In order to accomplish this, we need better data, and we need to build an evidence base of best practice that enables a fairer and more effective resourcing of this work. To begin with, we are calling for a collaborative approach to defining what best practice looks like in a diversity space. This process should identify local, national and international examples of practice that upholds the tenets of the UNESCO Convention. We need effective partnerships that are community led with the academic and research community to evaluate existing programs, and design new approaches.

### **A whole of government approach**

As the grass-roots tier holding a large percentage of the country's cultural infrastructure, it is essential to recognise the role of local government as integral to the increase of creative capacity and improved diversity across the country. We see Councils as an enabler of effective community cultural initiatives, rather than corralling ideas in volumes of regulation which hinder the work that the community genuinely wants to do. Councils often struggle to apply enough resources to deeply engage with their diverse communities. An analysis of how our local performing arts centres, public galleries and council arts programs are structured, governed and staffed will give you an indication of how much further we need to go to realise content and participation that reflects our diversity. Council arts managers are preoccupied with a *bump-in-bump-out* approach to program delivery. They are under pressure to maintain a balanced bottom line for culture and therefore see risk in diverse programming.

In moving forward, we urge a whole of government focus, with policy and structural alignment with other parts of government working in the diversity space (Multicultural Affairs, Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, etc). This also necessitates a three-tiers of government (Local, State and Federal) conversation about leadership and capacity-building.

## **Conclusion**

We advocate a sense of urgency for this work. Without it, there is a real risk that the current frameworks for the production, distribution and consumption of cultural products will atrophy with so much talent underutilised. Further, without policy change, we will continue to perpetuate marginalisation and disadvantage across the creative industries.

Finally, we make this point. We are a diverse nation. That much is fact. We have to stop acting as though diversity is a marginal issue and start redirecting public support for the creative industries to the activities that underpin cultural equity and address systemic underrepresentation. If we do this, everyone will benefit.