

## Rapporteurs' Report

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## Preamble

Artstate 2019 was held in Tamworth, 1–2 November 2019. A speakers' program was closely integrated with the cultural and artistic festival beginning 31 October and ending 3 November. The event as a whole was supported by Create NSW in partnership with the Regional Arts Development Organisation, Arts North West, the University of New England, Tamworth Regional Council and several Tamworth organisations. The organisers and delegates of Artstate 2019 are to be congratulated for their respective contributions to the depth, vigour and wealth of experiences and ideas over the speakers' program and festival.

With the word "Yaama", Gomeroi Elder Aunty Yvonne Kent welcomed delegates to Country for the speakers' program of Artstate 2019. Aunty Yvonne's invitation to observe a moment of silence in respect of Elders past and present allowed delegates to reflect on the deep cultural heritage of the land on which they stood and contemplate the opportunities that lay ahead to share in this knowledge through the conference theme of "On Country – In Country", which was explored on the first day of presentations. Also not far from the minds of delegates were the effects of the drought on the regions. The observation of Regional Arts NSW CEO, Elizabeth Rogers, that "the arts should never be an afterthought" might also be taken as a maxim for the role that Arts play in sustaining regional communities, giving hope in times of uncertainty. Indeed, several sessions and presentations explored the second conference theme of "Arts in the Age of Uncertainty" on the second day of presentations.

## “Telling our stories our way”

On the first day of the speakers’ program, the first keynote speaker and proud Murri from the Gomeroi Nation, Brad Moggridge (University of Canberra), focussed delegates’ attention to the urgent need to place the voice of First Peoples at the centre of policy in the regions, both for arts and culture but also for broader issues of resource management and curation. Brad stressed that water was central to the cultural values of Indigenous Australians and that a long-held and deep traditional connection to land and water was a source often ignored by policy makers. When taken as a traditional science of water that has developed over millennia of experience and observation of the environment, this knowledge was too important even for scientists to ignore. Or, as Brad so succinctly put it: “Why does Australia not celebrate that [i.e. Indigenous] knowledge of water?” Instead, the notable lack of Indigenous voices in water policy at the national level, particularly in relation to the National Water Commission and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, has resulted in the systematic exclusion of this knowledge from policy formulation. Despite the strong role of water in Indigenous cultural identity, colonisation and exclusion of Australia’s First Peoples has resulted in a lack of diversity of views, culturally insensitive instruments of state, and a continual threat to Indigenous identity. Progress on Land Rights has not been matched by progress on Indigenous “water” rights. Insensitivity to sacred water courses, culturally significant water species and Indigenous language which imbues and connects these to culture needs to be redressed. The challenge, whether from a legal or from a cultural perspective, is to address the implicit doctrine of “aqua nullius”, in the same way that *Mabo vs. The Commonwealth* (1992) overturned the doctrine of “terra nullius.” Furthermore, Indigenous knowledge recognises the interconnection between water, identity, spirituality, place and well-being, or as Brad stated: “If water is not there, values are not there.” In this sense, water is not just a resource to be managed but is central to the common cultural fabric of this nation. Water’s misuse and mismanagement not only leads to physical hardship but to cultural impoverishment. These concerns are experienced most deeply by Indigenous Australian’s as keepers of a heritage in which water has always been seldom if ever far from their minds. They magnify the concerns of non-Indigenous Australians in the regions in this time of drought. Indigenous water culture is continuous, not simply magnified by extremes or lack, and therefore has important lessons for us all.

### **Recommendation 1**

*Give a voice to regional, rural and remote communities so that they may share knowledge and tell stories of connections to land, water, space, time and people through the Arts.*

## Coming Together

Speakers on the first day continued to explore connections to country and the roles of Indigenous arts in the regions. In the first panel of the morning entitled *Music on Country* and moderated by Peter White (Senior Manager, Aboriginal Strategy and Engagement, Create NSW), three well-known musicians, Roger Knox, David Leha and Kelsey Strasek-Barker discussed the importance of music in their artistic and cultural practices, lives, and livelihoods through the lens of “on country”. Being on Country can be described as being present on traditional lands of ancestors and kin and experiencing that Country through culture, traditional knowledge and story telling. Panelists acknowledged the role that connections to country played in their music, both when on Country and off Country. The theme of *On Country—off Country* was explored in the second panel of the day, featuring speakers Cathy Craigie, Marc Sutherland and Mitch Tambo, and moderated by Sharni Jones (Australian Museum). In response to a series of questions posed by the moderator, panelists narrated their experiences as artists of being both on Country and off Country, and how the negotiation of cultural space was instrumental to their personal and artistic identity. Acknowledgement of the instrumentality of elders in handing on knowledge and protocols of Country led to the audience’s greater understanding of how each of the respondents situated their artistic and cultural practices within an authentic frame of reference linked to country. Further afternoon sessions highlighted some of the strategies that regional arts organisations had developed for promoting Indigenous arts, although several speakers stress some of the difficulties with maintaining ongoing funding for such initiatives.

The first day of the Artstate 2019 proved to be particularly strong in its focus upon issues in Indigenous Arts and Indigenous Arts policy by virtue of its focus on the theme of “On Country”. There is merit to continuing focus on Indigenous themes but extending them over the entire program of the next Artstate to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and voices are present throughout the program.

### Recommendation 2

*Ensure the programming of Indigenous voices over the duration of Artstate and continue to promote those voices in respect to Arts policies.*

## Growing Diversity in Regional Arts

The second day of the speakers' program focused on the theme of "Arts in an Age of Uncertainty". Keynote speaker Adrian Collette (CEO, Australia Council for the Arts) set out a framework for considering arts today in terms derived from Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity", in which art, its meaning and relevance is individually voiced, often fragmented and tenuous in its frame of reference. Yet, whereas increased feelings of uncertainty and a privatisation of ambivalence are situated at the heart of Bauman's theory, in stressing the creative life as a human right, Collette also noted how creativity brings people together, encourages collaboration and focuses diverse ecologies of artistic practice. Those connections which inspire creativity are fostered through storytelling and artists walking with communities. In doing so, the definition of art must be shifted from the work itself to continually unfolding creative practice. The challenge of shifting the language of arts to reflect those in the regions, which is self-determined, community led and ethical in its responsibilities to First Nations, communities, and a changing society is necessary.

In the second keynote of the day, Emma Hogg (Wildworks, United Kingdom) spoke on her experience of developing community-embedded landscape theatre productions in diverse locations in the UK and Europe. Highly contingent upon the features of landscape (including unpredictable weather) and the talent of local communities, Wildworks' productions embrace diversity and contingencies to achieve effective outcomes. A notable outcome was the ability of productions to shift seemingly entrenched political agendas through community involvement that spanned rival cultures, for example a production on Cyprus that including both Greek and Turkish participants. Embracing diversity proved to be instrumental in addressing uncertainty.

Regional differences figured as a key point of the first panel on *Arts Addressing the Big Issues in Western NSW*. Moderated by Anna Moulder (ABC New England North West), panelists Pru Cullen (Coonamble), Cathy Farry (West Darling Arts) and Andrew Hull (Bourke) explored how individual communities presented different opportunities for arts engagement and development. Whether meeting the challenge of developing sparse artistic and cultural networks in remote Australia (which the Internet is greatly assisting in changing the scale of distances separating artists) or coping with different political viewpoints, speakers clearly identified the importance of the arts to the well-being of regional communities, particularly those experiencing adversity. Identifying and seizing opportunities for creating networks, holding workshops and developing extended communities of artists, who are often individually quite isolated, was essential within and across regional NSW.

# ARTSTATE

## TAMWORTH 2019

The second panel of the morning, *Weathering Change-the evolving landscape for independent artists*, featuring Adam Deusien (Bathurst), Sophie Jones (Bathurst), Vic McEwan (Narrandera), and moderator Sally Blackwood (Quirindi) discussed the various ecologies of creativity in which they operated as arts leaders. Building capacity within communities, including acting a champions for the arts, nurturing young talent and overcoming seemingly ingrained structural inequalities through involvement were identified as some of the strategies that participants pursued in their roles as arts leaders. At the same time, measures of success in the regions often differed (and need to differ) from those used in metropolitan centres: the growth of arts, its leadership, talent base and benefits to the well-being of communities often outweigh economic factors.

### **Recommendation 3**

*Increase the diversity of community representation in the regional arts, including Indigenous Australians, new Australians (immigrants), the disabled, the infirmed and the young.*

## Embracing our Digital Future

On the second day, Nang K'uulas (Patrick Shannon) spoke about the *Power of Media in a Systematically Racist Society* from his perspective as a member of the Haida Nation of Canada. He described how in Canada the legislative instruments of colonialism continue to be used to oppress First Nations Peoples. Nang spoke about how Haida filmmakers were addressing the plight of First Nations Peoples of Canadian, including Indigenous perspectives of place, social justice and reconciliation. In addition of the power of film for building respect through empathy, social media empowers Indigenous artistic voices, providing a platform especially for youth to maintain and build communities in modern society that often challenges traditional social structures. Social media also plays an important role allowing non-Indigenous Allies to champion Indigenous causes.

Social media has assumed a central position in the information revolution that typifies Bauman's "liquid modernity". Although liquid modernity is often characterised through the negative dialectic of the privatisation of ambivalence, digital technologies, both digital communication technologies like the internet and new digital tools being increasingly used in creative practice, offer significant opportunities for artistic engagement and participation by members of communities that are often dispersed over a large geographical area. Digital technologies, including social media, offer significant and proven strategies for overcoming the tyranny of distance and the sense of isolation that, as several speakers detailed, can sometimes afflict regional artists. Digital technologies also empower and engage youth whose artistic development is crucial for the survival of the Arts in the regions. In giving voice to those often systematically silenced, art through digital technologies has the potential to participate and contribute to key social debates and social wellbeing in the regions and beyond.

A parallel session on Saturday afternoon, *Post Disability Arts and Social Change* also illustrated the how digital technologies such as digital film editing, music composition and image postproduction were being adopted by artists of varying abilities to use creativity to engage with an often challenging world. Led by Zeb Shultz (RealArtworks), Carla Davey, Mathew Daymond, Mike Smith, and Sunita Bala demonstrated how their creative work uses technology to empower their creative rights and to give them a voice in current debates. Technology-driven workshops using digital technologies, which are now readily and inexpensively available on most people's personal devices, support creativity and empower artists of varying abilities more than ever.

### Recommendation 4

*Promote the role of new digital technologies in creativity (eg, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, Immersive technologies) to increase the impact of regional arts upon an increasingly mediated world. To this end, engage innovators and digital natives to grow the next generation of regional, rural and remote artists.*