Essay:
The river or the boat?
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Like tiny terrorists, a slew of toxic memories from the last twenty years swarm through my mind when considering Australian culture in the abstract. 2004: I attend a sponsors’ dinner at the Melbourne Theatre Company, a posh affair with a well-known investment bank. I talk to an executive, a keen theatregoer, about a show we have seen. We express our admiration for an actor in the production. ‘She did well,’ I say. ‘The problem,’ he replies, ‘is I have no idea what that means.’ 1997: Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett acquires a reputation for phoning Arts Ministry clients out of the blue, often the personal mobiles of artistic directors. People joke, but word is you had better take the call – and take it seriously. 1994: I read Framing Culture by Professor Stuart Cunningham, from Queensland University of Technology, a book that ‘brings together Australian cultural and policy studies in a lively and innovative way’. I digest sections on advertising, pay TV and media violence. On the arts, there is nothing. 1993: I read the House of Representatives McLeay report, Patronage, power and the muse. It declares: ‘The Committee does not accept that artists should have the final, or even the principal, say in grant or policy decisions. The purpose of arts support is to advance the public interest rather than the interest of artists … This requires more than an assessment of artistic merit.’ Dorothy Hewett calls the report ‘simplistic, patronising, uninformed and destructive … The suspicion of artists and reliance on control run deep in our over-governed and anti-cultural society.’ 1992: my company, kickhouse theatre, folds and I start a PhD at La Trobe University. My first six months are spent reading cultural policy documents. I note: ‘The arts go against the notion of productive work. Accusations of self-indulgence, waste and irrelevance increase during the 1980s when political life becomes synonymous with economic management. What they need now is not externally derived priorities, but intrinsic authority. They need time to establish their place in society and allow their inner life to become meaningful to those they serve. There are no short cuts in this process.’ 1987: I migrate to Australia from London to join my mother’s family. I date a young theatre designer and am introduced to her brother-in-law. Boasting an MBA, he is an entry-level recruit at IBM earning $70,000 a year. It is my first encounter with an educated, but uncultured, man.

The subtext of all this is that it is hard to recall a moment, as either practitioner or academic, when the arts were not being attacked, defended, repositioned, requisitioned or repackaged as something else. Their posture is one of permanent alarm, sometimes leavened by fury or self-pity, never confident, outward-going or easy. Fundamental questions about art’s purpose and value have been raised so often they ring around my skull like ricocheting bullets. My sense of being an artist, and of being an Australian, are confounded.
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Citizenship implies anxiety about art, and I subject myself and my peers to endless forensic examination. Where does this pressure come from? It comes from the past, unacknowledged and unresolved. It comes from the government, all powerful yet at a loss. But mostly it comes from within ourselves, in our rancorous conception of the artist’s role. Australia, I decided recently, is not a country of second-rate art. But it is certainly a country of second-rate ideas about it, as commentators like Patrick White and Donald Horne have argued in needle-sharp prose. It is second-rate ideas of art that hold back an understanding of Australian culture at a practical level, and prevent a rapprochement between different stakeholders – that hobble Australian cultural policy.

There is no simple summary of cultural policy over the last fifty years. Partly, it’s a problem of sources. There is no published history of the Australia Council, or state arts ministries, no overview of the performing arts, no detailed descriptions of policy formation. By detailed I mean research that explores the activities of the cultural sector itself and does not gloss these as ‘the field work’. This is what you chiefly get in the academic literature: analyses of policy that stress removed ideas about art rather than anything artists or institutions might actually be doing. The gap cannot be addressed by piling on chronologies and memoirs either: these suffer from the opposite problem, a preoccupation with detail at the expense of the bigger picture. Thus discussion of cultural policy and creative practice remain unlinked, wheels on the same car spinning independently, perhaps in opposite directions.

The Australia Council is at the centre of this dilemma. A statutory authority set up and funded by the federal government – yet supposedly operating at arm’s length from it – it makes its decisions by peer review. It is not possible to assess the Council’s record unless both its broader social thinking and its specific cultural actions are aligned. Yet doing this raises a crucial and obvious problem: policy-makers have very different ideas about culture than artists.

I take my title from a 1986 talk by Jerzy Grotowski, Tu es le fils de quelqu’un (You are someone’s son), in which the Polish director touches on the issue of revising stage material. The problems a performer faces here are practical, personal and decision-based: ‘Not only must you rebuild and rememorise the first form … you must also eliminate all unnecessary details. You must make cuts, and put the different fragments together … If at any moment there is a song, is the song cut or not? You must decide. What is the river, and what is the boat? … You must know what your choice is.’

This is a useful analogy for cultural policy. Are general benefits of the sort cited by governments intervening in the arts the point of such interventions, or is the purpose to add value to the art itself? Are artists the target of support, or a means of its transmission? Is society for the arts or the arts for society? Which is the river and which the boat? The temptation is to say ‘both’ or ‘sometimes
one, sometimes the other. But this is to dodge the hard questions. In fact, the
history of Australian cultural policy is explained by the unresolved tension
between these two concepts of culture, one focused on social benefit, on con-
sumer effect, the other on artistic quality, on producer skills and value. Which
view should prevail is the nipple-twisting problem facing any proposed pro-
gram of intervention in the cultural sector.

In modern capitalist economies, the arts are a widely dispersed good with
acknowledged, if hard to quantify, social benefits. ‘The arts’, on the other
hand, are a collocation of political provisions, centrally administered, centrally
defined. Getting money for art out of agencies set up for ‘the arts’ is a problem
for practitioners – a matter of guidelines, forms, meetings, agendas, perceived
needs. Getting art to behave like ‘the arts’ is a problem for governments and
what cultural policy is all about. There is no equivalence. On the one hand, the
artist – conniving, bloody-minded, single-minded, either broke or working for
an institution terrified of going broke. On the other, government – Byzantine,
opaque, saturated in policy-speak, cluttered with forms. For centuries, artists
have survived neglect, censorship, bowdlerising commercialism. But can they
survive the instruments set up to support them? Can artists survive ‘the arts’?

When did the arts stop being something governments want to repress and
start being something they want to be seen assisting? For Australia, the answer
is specific. While agitation for subsidy prior to 1945 had limited outcomes,
wholesale intervention in the cultural sector arrived as a result of post-World
War II reforms. Prime Minister John Curtin, then his successor and one-time
Treasurer Ben Chifley, pursued a Keynesian policy of national investment and
industry protection to ensure the dark days of the Great Depression were not
repeated. Government money became available to maintain high employment,
strong manufacturing, public education and so-called ‘quality of life’. This was
a Keynesian reaction against the narrow concerns of classical economics and
Keynes, the renovator of modern economics also chaired Britain’s Arts Council.
Those who followed in his intellectual footsteps in Australia were well aware
this was no coincidence, but stemmed from Keynes’ belief that art played a
vital role in a technologically challenging, rapidly developing environment.
Intervention in the cultural sector was justified if it could be shown to be a
case of market failure. Such failure was easy to demonstrate, especially in those
forms requiring a significant capital base, like the performing arts.

At the start, the identification of culture with high art was taken for granted.
If there were issues to do with democratising benefits, it lay in ensuring access
to high art. Few commentators squabbled over what Australian culture should
be. It was assumed to flow, unproblematically, from the activities of artists once
they were adequately supported. High art did not need to be defended, only
insisted upon.
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In 1949, Labor lost government and post-war policy activism was replaced by Menzies’ tortoise-like incrementalism. Nevertheless, the extraordinary H.C. ‘Nugget’ Coombs took a lead role in key quality of life areas, including the arts, establishing the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust in 1954 and with it a number of major performing arts institutions. But the Trust did not have enough money, a sufficiently robust relationship with Canberra or a board with adequate professional representation, and in 1968 it was replaced by the Australian Council of the Arts.

The trigger for real change, however, came four years later when the Whitlam Government was swept into office together with a prime minister who unabashedly championed the arts as a public good. It took two decades for federal arts subsidy to reach seven million dollars. Whitlam doubled it in just eight months. The sector expanded its public profile too. Whitlam, a keen theatre-goer and connoisseur of painting, became minister for the arts. He supported the National Gallery’s purchase of Jackson Pollock’s Blue Poles and revelled in the opposition’s invective when the price – a modest $1.35 million – was leaked to the press.

Newspapers carried ‘lifestyle’ sections, an amalgam of fashion, consumer and cultural items, and discussed ‘the leisure society’ and the perils of affluence and anomie. The arts were repositioned in a flow of activities that included pretty much anything Australians did not officially label as ‘work’. The Australia Council benefited from this wider understanding of culture, and artists were empowered and enriched by it. But the quid pro quo was that art lost an exclusive identification with its definition. If Menzies conceived the arts narrowly, as all boat – and a small one at that – then Whitlam saw a cultural river albeit with a substantial boat on top. To many artists, 1973 has come to represent a subsidy pinnacle from which it has sadly but steadily declined. But the decline was inevitable given the logic behind the ascent.

The last thirty years in cultural policy have been almost as fraught as the previous twenty were soporific. The Australia Council has been at the epicentre of regular political storms that have stretched its notional independence to breaking point. Like a row of gravestones, the trail is marked by a series of official reports: the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) Inquiry into the Performing Arts (1976); the Rotherwood Plan (1982); the McLeay Report (1986); Creative Nation (1992); and the Nugent Report (1999). Each purports to be different. Yet, taken together, the confluence of their preoccupations is the most striking thing about them. All developed an econometric conception of arts subsidy, and set foundations for an expanded notion of culture, a broad vision of creativity: the boat downsized in favour of the river.

The 1976 IAC Report set the tone: ‘The performing arts are analogous to any service that can be traded in the market; for example, to airlines which have to
choose an optimal combination of price, quality of service, combination of locations served, frequency of service and percentage of seats filled to maximise.’

As a service, rather than a public good, the arts bring a benefit that is substitutable. That is, if it can be shown that consumer satisfaction may be met via lower cost alternatives (the report suggested sport) then arts subsidy should be scaled back or withdrawn altogether. There is nothing privileged about culture and no evidence on any grounds – other than assertions of faith – that [the] performing arts are somehow “different” … from other activities seeking assistance.’

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of the IAC. Even though its findings were rejected, it rendered previous beliefs about cultural value obsolete, portraying artists’ claims for assistance as little better than privileged angling for preference. The reports that followed have sought either to clarify its logic or ameliorate its effects. And if the arts were nothing more than the policies governments construct to support them, they might count themselves successful. But they aren’t. And so the reports mark a failure: failure to understand how practice and policy intermesh to produce multiple, contradictory outcomes; failure to understand how far the arts and ‘the arts’ have drifted away from each other.

But this is just one disconnect in a ruinously bifurcated field. For the irony of cultural policy is that, despite the political and intellectual fireworks, no choice has been made between consumer-defined and producer-led models of culture – between river and boat – and no adequate bridge exists between them. Thus Australia presents two cultural faces to the world, one consumerist and extensive, the other more traditionally arts centred. Like a tired man trying to stand upright after a long jog, policy-makers hop from one foot to another, jerking the sector from one point of view to the other, trying to keep the blood flowing.

Athletes can be elite. We talk of ‘elite’ sportsmen or ‘the diplomatic elite’. Artists, however, are elitist. And in this abrupt and unexplained change of conjugation lies the fundamental expression of Australia’s bad ideas about art. Given its baggage, the charge ‘elitist’ obscures the activity under scrutiny. Does it apply to the distribution, production or social persona of culture? In the first instance, there is nothing wrong with art, only with the way it is disseminated. In the second, access to the means of production itself is the issue.

This difference in perspective was central to an Australia Council split in the 1970s between advocates for the ‘democratisation of culture’ and those who favoured ‘cultural democracy’. This was predicated on a ‘discussion’ (to grace it with a better name than it deserves) about the merits of high and popular culture in public life. Peter Goodall’s High culture, popular: The long debate (Allen & Unwin, 1995) describes an intellectual stoush virtually co-determinous with white settlement. ‘The discussion of the cultural identity of white Australia,’
he notes, ‘has polarised starkly between populist and elitist models … [Yet] an especially striking phenomenon is how often these antithetical models have collaborated. The bush myth was not the creation of shearers themselves but of an urban bohemia; the ocker was created as a popular icon by performers and writers like Barry Humphries, an antipodean aesthete if there ever was one.’ Goodall’s point is that the struggle between high and popular art is not one that can be won in a Darwinian sense because their genealogy is more complex than polarised attitudes allow. Not only are there too many cross-currents, mutual influences and shared practical expressions, but the conception of culture relies on a dialogue of contrasts.

It is not rocket science to see the values different models stand for. Popular art offers accessibility, immediacy, grassroots connection and fun. High art offers complexity, edge, density, intellectual challenge. During their working lives, many artists cross and re-cross this dividing line. Popular and high art may have different sensibilities, heritages and discourses but they do not exist in a zero-sum way.

Ultimately, the charge of elitism comes down to something more disingenuous: social persona. The arts feel snooty. They do not make enough concessions to the sensibility of ordinary folk, it seems; they comport themselves in an entitled way; their contribution, formally challenging and/or socially critical, is hard to fathom for time-poor contemporary Australia. And certainly this is a problem – it is even a problem for the arts. But is it a problem for the arts? And should it be met by abandoning terms like ‘art’ and ‘artist’ in order to conciliate a negative public view?

Historical descriptions do not explain current behaviour. Australia is different from what it was fifty or two hundred years ago. Attitudes persist, but discontinuously. If they resurface it is because conditions are right and there is something to be gained by it. Who is responsible for perpetuating bad ideas of art in Australia today? In part, it is the academy, whose attitude to culture over the last century has been extreme, eristic and subject to wild variation. Contemporary humanities scholarship, in its fecund yet toxic mix of Anglo-Saxon structuralist presumption and Continental philosophical speculation (what academics insist on calling ‘theory’), has not been kind to art. Whatever the proclivities of the chosen approach – insert favourite French thinker here – culture is construed as the object of thought, rarely its generative site. Academic theorising is the Queen Bee discourse, critiquing creative processes from a broader frame of social relations, reducing art to political symptom. There are many academic accounts that do not do this, of course, but everyone knows which rule the roost. The historian Robert Darnton warned of a pyramid model of social causation, whereby art is the presumed expression of ‘deeper’ economic forces. Postmodern theorising was supposed to be a death blow to the base/superstructure divide, but in practice it has replaced general ideas of society with general ideas of culture to achieve
much the same result: endless compendiums of endless academic opinions, tendentiously described as ‘wider debate’.

If the academy is guilty of cleaving to specious conceptions of culture that blind it to specific struggles and zones of contest – of failing to look – artists do themselves no favours by presuming their work exemplifies values that need no contextualising. They fail to speak, or if they do it is to promote their own art or attack others. In journalism and arts marketing, the skew to hyper-individualism – guff about ‘personal genius’, ‘unique talent’, and so on – traduces the social dimension of art and undermines the shared intellectual predicates that prop it up.

But because artists stand to selectively benefit from this paradigm, the temptation is to buy into it. One of my defining experiences was meeting a representative of the Performing Arts Board in 1991 to discuss an application kickhouse had pending. ‘What makes you different?’ he asked, looking over the top of a voluminous file. ‘Different from what?’ I parried. I was being invited to articulate my ‘key competitive advantage’, to aggressively argue the worth of my creative contribution against other artists in the same funding round.

It is not hard to understand why the arts present as a fractured lobby, one seemingly incapable of making a case for the sector’s collective worth. It takes exemplary moral fibre to stare down the barrel of professional eclipse and make a case for someone else’s art. Unmoored from general ideas of culture, however, the Australian artist is a beleaguered figure. Even when success is theirs, it is a temporary condition. Time and amnesia reduce to dust even the most sustained body of work.

As a historian, I have interviewed scores of older practitioners and many times felt a disillusion bordering on despair. ‘The horror of the twentieth century,’ said Norman Mailer, ‘lies not in the violence of its events, but in the paucity of their reverberation.’ These are not people who regret their careers, the inevitable ups and downs of the creative life – their sense of loss is professional, not personal. It stems from belated awareness that their artistic achievement – indeed, all artistic achievement – is little more than decoration and distraction in a country whose sense of art is profoundly ahistoric, and whose notion of cultural development is dementedly technological. This is ‘the upgrade model’ of culture, one predicated on the novelty of the ‘next big thing’, unmindful of the lines of continuity and dispute that make new art new, and not just old art with microprocessors. Poor thinking leads to bad understandings of culture, poor art and defensiveness. The boat sinks and the river dries up.

Is it any wonder artists beat a retreat, assuming a gulf between what they do and what gets understood? To arc up seems suicidal, to risk the short time when one’s personal creativity and its social reception do line up. After that, there is just holding on. After that, only letting go.
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The government, the academy, the media, the profession itself: regardless of how those on the receiving end of culture are conceived in the changing tides of policy speak – whether sovereign consumers, empowered communities or sectional interests – it is the public servant, the scholar, the journalist and the artist who mediate the relationship. At the 2020 Summit, just how far apart the corners of the cultural quadrangle had drifted became apparent. After all the talk, pain, despair, bad food and more talk, our efforts, for me, boiled down to a single sentence: culture is wider than the arts, but the arts are central to culture. Not much. Not a headline, or even a policy aphorism. Yet it yoked together two understandings that have tragically pulled apart. To see the bewildered look on summiteers’ faces after a hard day of talking was to appreciate how little awareness we had of each other’s worlds. It was more than just difficult. It was an assault on the notion that the meaning of culture could be prescribed by a single institutional point of view.

We need to fix this problem. In cultural policy the way things are done matters as much as what is done. Tone announces value. Few policies have no benefits and most strategic goals – excellence, equity, access, innovation – have partial application. At the pointy end, it is rarely a choice between the Good and the Bad, but rather between the Popular and the Quirky, or the Known Quantity and the Inspired Risk. Cultural policy must accommodate an alarming lack of instrumental logic. This was why Coombs proposed a cadre of ‘cultural enablers’, specialised administrators and community types who would represent the government to artists and artists to government – a little paternalistic perhaps, but recognition that the relationship between culture and society is rarely straightforward. The best results often come from differing, sometimes antithetical strategies.

The academy can help by ameliorating its low opinion of high art. It isn’t necessary to dust off copies of F.R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* (1948) or abandon whole-way-of-life definitions of culture. Indeed, that definition is now so broad that, as Goodall says, ‘the only thing left out is what most non-academics think of when they hear the world culture’. It is absurd to exclude high art from the list, especially in cultural studies – a discipline that has taken a close interest in policy formation. Weaning off the valorisation of popular culture will not be easy. It will re-complicate the relationship between art and social structure for a start. Aesthetic concerns will return, if not to centre stage then to the edge of it, and some sort of hierarchy of forms – the acknowledgement that not everything everybody does is of equal cultural value.

The fact that art is creative is not its only defining characteristic. Many things in life are creative, not all of them to a good end – the accounting practices of the financial meltdown, computerised weapons and identity theft to name just three. Art shapes creativity, it gives it social use. The point is not to taunt art with the fact that everything is creative, but to examine how, in particular instances, creativity is expressed in entertaining and/or truthful ways.
If you don’t like opera, fine: look for reasons why it is failing its aesthetic and social brief. But do not expect an argument based on the supposed class origins of the art form or, worse, its lack of adaptation to ‘technological advances’ to say much about its cultural value. For that, you will have to examine particular traditions and institutions, maybe even talk to a practitioner. Yet a more nuanced picture will result. It is unrealistic to expect the high art/popular culture debate to end any time soon, but to lead anywhere it must be more inclusive and self-aware.

For practitioners there is serious activism afoot. If the only time artists intersect with cultural policy is when they go for a grant, the relationship has failed. What matters is how the arts are conceived by government, through government, and the form of words chosen to express this. The advantages of peer review are overstated. Having artists make subsidy decisions about other artists is morally ungainly. It becomes little more than a cloak for the evasion of government’s fiduciary responsibility if artists are not involved in setting strategic goals and writing key reports. Say this to artists and you get a pained look, as if you were asking them to suck lemons. But the onus is on us to learn what other stakeholders are banging on about.

Arts practices achieve public value when they connect with broader ideas of culture. These take interrogative form, and the history of art is depends on them. How can a community be given aesthetic voice? How can music condition our perception of space? How can theatre reflect the wonder of life and not just its daily surfaces? Behind every work of art there is a question of this kind giving it capacity and force. Without it, art is non-relational, inert, just stuff. What are the broad ideas of culture we should be connecting with today?

Clearly, the faux pluralism of the last twenty years will not do. If it is not a question of agreeing on one idea of culture, there must at least be an opportunity to grapple with several likely contenders; a genuine struggle to achieve a truthful sense of the role of art in life.

For governments, the task is to frame this debate between cultural allotropes, to show sufficient knowledge to be able to do so. The experience and sensitivity of key political and administrative figures are crucial. It is fatuous to imagine personal preference can be subtracted from cultural policy. Personal preference lies at the heart of policy, just as the encounter with art lies at the heart of culture. The aesthetic event is always particular: this painting, this book, this song. It is countless artistic experiences that furnish our general notion of culture. Where there’s a river, there’s a boat, however humble.

The cardinal sin is bureaucratic abstraction. Of all the stupefying mistakes the IAC Report made – the shoddy economics, the circular logic, the undefined terms, the sneering tone – the most fundamental was its confusion of statements about art with art itself. It did not look at any actual examples. Instead, it
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focused on a higher goal: ‘rational’ justifications for subsidy. But the better a
government’s knowledge of art, the better the effects of its assistance programs.
This is all the justification needed. Beyond this, there is the stark imperative for
policies to be as creative as the culture they set out to support.

All roads lead to the Australia Council, an institution used and abused,
punished both for having had the temerity to stand up for artists and for
not doing enough. Time and politics have long worn away the effectiveness
of its advocacy. It must be found again. The elaborate arm’s length and peer
review structures touted as the Council’s most precious asset are less impor-
tant than the fact the agency is an expression of the country’s deepest under-
standing of creative practice. It deserves not derision, but militant support that
puts its values once again at the heart of cultural policy. It has its problems and
dysfunctions, but these need addressing not excoriating.

The money involved in all this is, if not insubstantial, less than gener-
ally believed. Because the funding debate is so often framed in redistributive
terms, the absolute amounts and what they represent get lost. Yet the economic
impact of the cultural sector shows a tsunami of contribution against a trickle
of direct subsidy. In 2005–06, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that
the recreational and cultural sector produced goods and services worth just
under $26 billion, or 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product, with a value-added
component of $10 billion. Expenses represented 1.6 per cent of government
expenditure, or $12 billion out of $335 billion (a small outlay for a big result).

But ‘culture’ is widely defined by the ABS, and includes everything from
dog-racing to opera. The Cultural Ministers Council exclude the dogs and put
cultural funding at $5.5 billion. This seems a lot until you realise that 61 per
cent of federal money goes to film and broadcasting and 39 per cent of state
support to parks and gardens. There is also a hefty heritage component dedi-
cated to the upkeep of museums, libraries, galleries, archives, aquaria, zoos
and the like.

When heritage and broadcasting are taken out, $264 million is left for the
arts proper – about 5 per cent of all government cultural expenditure. In 2005–
06, the Australia Council dispensed most of this ($157 million). The lion’s share
– more than a hundred million dollars – went to the performing arts organi-
sations. But most of this money goes to music and the upkeep of orchestras,
an area with a low rate of capital substitution (you can’t replace a horn sec-
tion with a moog synthesiser). The remaining organisations get what’s left. My
old employer, the Melbourne Theatre Company – one of the largest repertory
theatres in the country – received total government subsidy of just over $1.5
million that financial year, about 11 per cent of revenue, extremely modest by
international standards. For individual artists, the situation is even more dire.
Professor David Throsby has tracked the earnings of artists since the early
1980s. His report, *Don’t give up your day job* (2003), shows the reality for most practitioners – average annual earnings of less than $20,000.

Compare this with funding for sport. Although it represents a smaller proportion of recreational and cultural expenses (about $2 billion), money spent on elite sport through the Australian Sports Commission and the Australian Institute of Sport is justified in terms remarkably similar to cultural subsidy. By contrast with the arts, there is no coyness about the word ‘elite’. The AIS uses it three times in the first paragraph of its self-description. The investment during the run-up to the Beijing Olympics brought well publicised results: thirteen gold medals – estimated to cost Australian taxpayers $16.7 million each in direct support. When infrastructure and non-AIS elite sports programs are added the figure is much higher (perhaps $100 million each). After the ‘humiliation’ of Beijing, the ASC demanded more money in preparation for 2012 Olympics, arguing Australian sport ‘was on the verge of a crisis’.

I like sport. I enjoy watching and playing it. I do not begrudge the money elite athletes earn as they strike me as being under similar pressures to elite artists. But the differences in their social reception are profound. Australians understand sport. They have good, if inflated, ideas about its benefits. No matter how esoteric or occasional, there is a place in public life for any sporting activity worthy of the name. Knowledgeable commentators flock around it and professionals, enthusiastic amateurs and spectators combine to define its identity. Not so the arts which, despite their presence in our everyday lives, are regarded as at best a personal preference, at worst an expensive foreign or historical imposition.

To transform this situation requires time and leadership. The work of artists gathers and gathers, an immense, furious investigation into who we are, what we are. This is the job of art: to strike at the insensibility of quotidian life and open us to new thoughts, feelings, sensations. The outcome can not be mandated, but the process can be supported. That’s where leadership comes in. The academy, the government and practitioners themselves have a duty to work together to define a way forward. *Together*: the word cannot be stressed enough. ‘Australia is a lucky country,’ goes Donald Horne’s famous quote. ‘Run by second-rate men who share its luck’ it continues. We are a lucky country still – lucky in life, lucky in art. It is our second-rate ideas about them that need to change.