Chapter 5: How can cultural sub-sectors respond? Three indicative case studies

This chapter examines some sub-sectors that have challenged prevailing policy approaches to the management of culture. We have already explored the plight of performing arts in the contemporary policy context. It was suggested that the management of performing arts entities had been buffeted by the key debates and issues in the arena of arts and cultural policy including: access and equity; audience development; community cultural development; cultural diversity; indigenous cultural production; national versus local culture; globalisation and cultural export; elite versus popular culture; electronic transformations of culture; and youth arts.

In the following pages I briefly explore several micro-studies of specific cultural sub-sectors: museums; indigenous arts and culture; and circus. These have been chosen because of the extent to which they challenge orthodox characterisations of — as well as contemporary approaches to policy-making for — the arts and cultural sector. The first study, on museums, examines the ‘crisis’ in the new ‘museology’. The second, on indigenous arts and culture, explores an area that has evolved from a marginal ethnographic interest into a major plank in national cultural policy and, moreover, has succeeded in balancing government support with commercial success. The third case study examines circus, which, as an ‘outsider’ genre, challenges many of the assumptions underpinning policy governing the mainstream arts and cultural sectors by developing an innovative and vibrant new artform that has revolutionised ideas about performance, spectacle, physical training, cultural export and audience development.

Micro-study of museums

Museums are a vexed area of cultural policy. In the West, museums developed partly as a consequence of European exploration and the collection of artefacts, natural objects and material culture from ‘exotic’ lands, places and peoples (Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 1995; Bennett, Trotter & McAlear 1996; Horne 1984; National Museum of Australia 2006). This coincided with the development of modern science and theories of evolution where a classificatory and taxonomic mentality structured the curation of collections into so-called ‘cabinets of curiosity’.

Traditional museums presented their collections in regimented displays of similar and different things, carefully identified by scientific names and classificatory details. The importance of museums paralleled the emergence in the nineteenth
century of public institutions designed to support the development of modern notions of citizenship and democracy, education and enlightenment. Museums were ‘temples’ of auto-didacticism and pedagogy, rich resources of exotic objects and knowledge about ‘other-ness’ that fed into European notions of civility and the conquest of ‘primitive’ worlds.

But the fascination with displays of Egyptian mummies, dinosaur bones, taxonomies of butterflies, indigenous weapons, fishing equipment, fauna and flora, shrunken skulls and extinct and endangered animals and skeletons waned considerably during the twentieth century. By the 1960s, museums were regarded as dark, dusty, musty places filled with relics of the past. Museums were suddenly in crisis! The public was no longer enthralled and enchanted by such displays. A debate ensued about the purpose of museums, how they ought to be financed and who was their natural audience.

Why did museums exist? The earlier rationale of collection and curation was challenged by new approaches to knowledge and learning and a partial rejection of classificatory approaches to knowing about the world and the past. Critics demanded a modern political interpretation of objects and contextualisation of museum collections. The purpose of holding huge collections of objects was questioned and the cost of storage, curation and display became an issue. In particular, commentators and critics questioned why governments should pay to keep open expensive, unpopular cultural institutions that few wanted to visit and many found unsatisfying? Busloads of dragooned school children made up a good proportion of museum visitors but generally discretionary visitors were few and far between even when entry was free.

Critiques of museology in the 1970s generated a push for new approaches to museums that endorsed a reflexive approach to history and civilisation. Henceforward, museums would engage critical discourses addressing issues of race, class, colonisation, power relations and empowerment (van Oost 2006). Instead of simply looking at objects of history and presenting one (didactic) point of view to a passive audience, it was argued that museums should offer diverse perspectives and present material in ways that visitors could engage with in a hands-on interactive way. The new museums focused on national and cultural identities and difference as much as natural history and experimented with presenting ‘living history’ and aspects of everyday life and culture instead of the earlier focus on official and scientific perspectives. The result was a combination of new interpretive strategies and interactive exhibits, often using new technologies and active participation. The new museum became a place of entertainment where learning should take place through enjoyment not didacticism. ‘Thrills’ were built into experiential displays (such as real earthquake simulations, robotic dinosaurs, participatory re-creations of long-gone customs such as traditional classrooms and interactive digital ‘games’).
New museums were concerned with the environment, community, cultural diversity and the political shaping of culture. Inevitably, such museums were perceived as politicised, no longer just displaying things in a ‘neutral’ way but engaging with political debates and changing perspectives. Museums were expected to develop outreach programs (e.g. become part of visitor sightseeing schedules, appoint experts in residence, offer vacation programs for children, develop community projects with special interest groups, etc.) that engaged with their communities, digitalise collections and make them accessible to visitors (actual and virtual) and build new audiences. The emphasis was firmly on making museums entertaining spaces. The new museum was a kind of theme park.

These changes have had critical significance for the funding and management of museums. Rather than depending on recurrent funding by government and scientific bodies, museums have been pushed into finding new sponsors and develop corporate, research and commercial partnerships. Managers, administrators, marketing staff, educational staff and volunteer guides have replaced the traditional staffing profile of museums with curators and scientists at the fore. But like hospitals and schools, museums rarely have professional managers and the ‘scientific’ faction versus the ‘educational’ faction often dominates internal politics. Curators tend to be the least heard group in the contemporary museum and are often employed on a contract basis. The value of storing collections away, hiding things that no-one ever gets to see, remains a sore point in museum management. A few museums, such as the Museum of Civilisation in Canada, have an open access storage facility where visitors themselves can explore the collection. Most museums however have warehouses full of ‘stuff’ well out of the public’s reach.

Funding remains an issue. Recurrent funding and block grants have been replaced by project funding and case funding. Internally, the lion’s share of the budget now goes on administration with tiny amounts on curating and mounting new exhibitions. Research sections are under-funded and oriented towards in-house research rather than research through public engagement. Partnership arrangements can be successful but are often project-specific or unstable (annual or short-term arrangements) and they fluctuate depending on levels of popular interest and prevailing economic conditions.

It is also important to distinguish different kinds of museums and their financial needs and arrangements. Each has a specific profile that shapes performance and viability.

To name some, these include: national museums (National Museum of Australia, Te Papa, Museum of Civilisation); living history museums (Skansen in Stockholm, Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia); community museums (Jondaryan in Queensland — home of the famous shearer’s strike, Tambo Museum in Queensland — known for its teddy bears, Whitby Museum...
in Northeast Yorkshire — known for the mummified ‘hand of glory’); specialist museums (maritime museums; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; portrait galleries); art museums (the Guggenheim Museums in New York and Biboa; the Getty Museum in Los Angeles); industrial museums (Ironbridge in the Severn Gorge, England; the Ipswich Railway Museum in Queensland); cultural heritage museums (Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in Alberta); social history museums (Hanseatic Museum in Bergen; Viking Museum in York; Nederlands Openluchtmuseum in Arnhem); technological museums (Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, MAK in Vienna, Ars Electronica Center in Linz; Global Arts Link, Ipswich, Queensland); science museums (Questacon in Canberra); natural history museums (The Smithsonian; La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles); museums of antiquity (The Pergamon Museum in Berlin, the British Museum in London); and so on.

Museums pose significant problems for cultural policy since there is significant infrastructure to maintain, costly collections, political accountability as well as specific issues associated with management, display and visitation. Since the retreat from automatic state patronage of major cultural institutions, no simple solution has emerged to effectively manage the museum sector.

The poignant story of the ‘crisis’ of the National Museum of Australia highlights these dilemmas. Talked about since 1928, and reactivated by the Pigott Report in 1975 (Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections 1975), the NMA finally opened in 2001 on the banks of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra. Given its new-ness, the NMA was never conceived as a monument to the past and scientific collections, rather it was intended to reflect Australia’s ‘contemporary mood of nationalism’ by ‘capturing the plurality of knowledge and experience of its people’ (McCarthy 2004).

The building, designed in the shape of a rainbow serpent, was far smaller than originally envisaged and, although its collection was small, it could not accommodate more than a fraction of the objects in its collection. The establishment of the NMA as a national cultural institution was at odds with dominant government ideology in a number of respects, particularly in its rejection of ‘the Howard government’s celebratory position on Australian history and national identity … and modernist-linear … interpretation’ of Australian history (McCarthy 2004). What should a national collection consist of? Should it be housed in a single building? How should it display and make accessible its collection? How should it relate to national identity?

The NMA chose to organise its collection around three themes — land, nation and people — and use interactive and digital technology, where possible, to engage visitors. It also stressed the diversity of Australia’s population, in particular, emphasising indigenous culture and peoples (Casey 1999). This led to a government-led attack on the institution accusing it of presenting a ‘black
armband view of history’ resulting in the departure of the inaugural (indigenous) director, Dawn Casey, and prompting a re-evaluation of the role and form of the museum (Carroll report 2005; Review of the National Museum of Australia 2005). The review rejected the NMA’s pluralist version of Australian history and called for a ‘consensus’ account that emphasised the Australian characteristics of ‘inclusiveness, a ‘fair-go’ ethos, a distrust of extremisms and civic common sense’ (Review of the NMA 2003:4). This amounted to presenting a ‘celebratory narrative’ of Australia centred on the figure of Captain James Cook and downplaying the colonial struggles and conflict between indigenous Australians and European settlers (McCarthy 2004). McCarthy concludes that:

The NMA was to be a dialogue between nation and national identity. The political dilemma came when this dialogue became pluralist: wanting to include people’s history, being postmodernist in the architecture and post-colonial in its indigenous sensibilities. All three influences challenged the agenda of the Howard government. Pluralism was a threat because it was associated with diversity and multiculturalism. Postmodernism was a threat because it challenged the government’s claims of linear advancement under the neo-liberal agenda. Post-colonialism was a threat because it not only raised the whole character of settler history but also pointed to the on-going plight of the indigenous people as a result of their dispossession. For all these reasons, the attack on the NMA was sustained and successful in stifling dissent.

This episode demonstrates the inherent fragility of the new museology under current governance arrangements in which cultural institutions are subject to the government’s dominant political orthodoxy via appointed boards of management.

**Micro-study of indigenous arts and cultural policy**

As in many other advanced countries, the role of indigenous culture in mainstream cultural policy has increased significantly in recent years. Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand typify those countries with a colonial history, where a diverse indigenous culture has in recent years been re-discovered and its value revised. In Australia, the elements of traditional indigenous culture include music, dance, art and craft, Dreamtime stories and life survival stories (Queensland Cultural Tourism Framework 1996).

In addition, new forms of artistic and cultural expression of indigenous culture have emerged. While this trend has been closely associated with issues of indigenous identity, self-determination and economic independence, the recent renaissance of indigenous culture has also been important in revising notions of national identity and national culture. This revival has spawned a raft of inquiries into how best to manage and support the indigenous cultural industry (including

Indigenous culture has become an iconic flagship in the promotion of Australia’s cultural specificity and difference. Indigenous cultural themes are used extensively in tourism promotion, for example, and indigenous art has been exhibited and artists celebrated internationally. The ATSI arts industry is estimated to be worth over $200 million annually and growing by 10% per annum. For example, in 1998-99, sales of ATSI arts and crafts in the Northern Territory alone accounted for $48.7 million and in 1997 Australian households spent $70.8 million on ATSI arts and crafts. Half of expenditure on the arts by international tourists is spent on ATSI arts and crafts ($77.7m out of $147.5m) (Altman and Taylor 1990; ATSIC 1994; ATSIC 1995; ATSIC & Office of Tourism 1997; ABS 2004).

Indigenous culture has also been important in creating employment opportunities for indigenous people with dance, choreography and visual arts occupations having the highest ATSI employment among cultural occupations. In all, there are 5,000-6,000 practising ATSI artists and craftspeople.

The emergence of an ATSI arts and craft genre was driven, initially, by government supported programs and projects. Important milestones include Geoffrey Bardon’s introduction of acrylic paints to the community of Papunya in the 1970s (Bardon 1979; Helmrich 2003; Bardon and Bardon 2004); the Utopia movement with the introduction of screen printing and, later, works on canvas in the 1980s; and the emergence in the mid-1990s of the Lockhart River Art Gang with its vibrant mix of traditional and contemporary genres (Neales 2002; BAM 2003; QAG 2003). Numerous Western desert communities now also have thriving arts centres producing highly distinctive paintings, prints and crafts as shown in the skin to skin exhibition as part of NAIDOC 2007 (Tuggeranong Arts Centre 2007). As always, there was a mixture of motives with welfare, employment and training, community building and improved health outcomes to the fore rather than simply promoting culture for its own sake. Once established, the market tended to be driven by metropolitan galleries and collectors and the international art market as well as international visitors (Mundine 2005).

Indigenous art offers diverse artforms and cultural activities including: visual arts (works on canvas, printmaking, bark, ceramics); crafts (revived traditional crafts and new ones — wood objects and carving, basket weaving, beads and seeds, sculpture, jewellery, clothing, fabric screen printing, weaving and knitting); indigenous cultural performances; cultural centres and keeping places; indigenous cultural heritage displays and cultural tours; and indigenous cultural festivals. The latter include the Laura, Aboriginal Dance and Torres Strait Festival
in Townsville; the Croc (anti-drug) Festival on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait; the Stompem Ground in Broome, Western Australia; the Garma Festival in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory; Survival; and the Alice Springs Beanie Festival in the Northern Territory.

Indigenous cultural production, distribution and consumption have a number of distinctive features, including:

- debates over traditional styles and techniques versus new ones (e.g. the use of acrylic paints, non-traditional colours, contemporary images and genres, new and multi-media);
- the legitimacy of ‘urban’ indigenous artists addressing contemporary themes, versus ‘bush’ artists with their focus on traditional indigenous culture;
- distinctive website commerce — leading the arts community in selling via the internet;
- belated recognition by major auction houses that have massively inflated the price of indigenous artworks;
- the popularity of commissioned work;
- issues of intellectual property rights over cultural products; and
- partial integration with indigenous cultural tourism and cultural heritage activities.

At the same time that indigenous culture has expanded as a sector, a number of pressing issues have emerged specific to this form of culture. Five key issues for ATSI cultural development were identified at an ATSIS Vision Day (Australia Council Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Fund 2000):

1. The need to protect indigenous cultural and intellectual property (Johnson 1996, 1999). This includes the unauthorised use of Aboriginal motifs and designs in clothing or interior décor. A number of attempts have been made to produce a ‘Label of Authenticity’ and copyright arrangements for royalty payments and re-use of work. A particular issue is that of ‘authorship’. Unlike Western artistic traditions, much indigenous work is produced collectively often under the guidance or instruction of the key artist leading to claims that works have been sold and awards given inappropriately to single artists rather than a group.

2. The need to increase visibility of indigenous arts both in Australia and internationally. This concerns how best to market and promote indigenous culture — and by whom.

3. The need to increase economic and cultural sustainability — most money from indigenous cultural consumption goes to middlemen, not to indigenous producers. Where individuals are paid, an individual is expected to distribute the money through their family members, often leaving little for the individual producer. European gatekeepers are also significant in
deciding who and what should be supported and promoted (Rothwell 2006; Ryan 2006).

4. The need for Indigenous people to manage and determine their own arts practices — Indigenous cultural centres and companies have had mixed fortunes and still often reliant on go-betweens. Examples of best practice include the Fire-works Gallery in Brisbane and its Camp Fire group of artists that supports grass roots artistic production; the Art Gang Exhibition from the Lockhart River Art and Cultural Centre in Cape York put this locality on the map as a dynamic emerging new arts centre; and the fibre art practice of the women of Western Arnhem Land (BAM 2003; QAG 2003; Hamby 2005).

5. The need to increase indigenous participation in non-indigenous festivals and events — arguments concern the danger of tokenism and ghettoisation; the challenge of reaching wider mainstream Australian audiences; and increasing public awareness and acceptance of indigenous culture and issues. Theatrical performances such as Deborah Mailman’s play ‘The Seven Stages of Grieving’ (co-written by Enoch Wesley) have been important in getting such issues raised on a wider public issue agenda (McCallum 2002: 14).

Indigenous cultural success stories include the internationally acclaimed contemporary indigenous dance company, Bangarra Dance Theatre, the leading; Tjapukai Cultural Centre in Cairns which combines cultural performance with cultural heritage and indigenous cultural and language training; the popular music group Yothu Yindi; television star and role model Ernie Dingo; and internationally successful visual artists.

What are the consequences of the success of contemporary Indigenous artists for reconceptualising the arts and culture policy domain? Indigenous culture has challenged many of the scenarios of arts and cultural policy. Although initially subsumed within a suite of ‘welfare’ and redistribution policies, the sector has become entwined with issues of self-determination, political activism, rejection of mainstream governance, pan-indigeneity (linking Aboriginal culture with other indigenous groups), professionalisation and commercial potential.

Increasing concern about exploitation in the indigenous arts and crafts sector had been the subject of journalistic investigation by The Australian newspaper and had also been detailed in a report to the Australia Council (Janke and Quiggin 2006). Issues included payment of royalties, copyright, lack of appropriate remuneration to artists, and unethical practices (‘sweatshops’, paying in alcohol, non-indigenous reproductions, forgeries, fakes, unscrupulous ‘middle-men’) (see, for example, Rothwell 2006; Janke and Quiggin 2006; Australia Council 2007 Attachment 2). These revelations eventually led to the establishment of the Senate inquiry into Australia’s Indigenous visual arts and craft sector, chaired
by West Australian Liberal Senator Alan Eggleston, to investigate and identify ‘strategies and mechanisms to strengthen the sector’ and ‘build a more sustainable Indigenous arts industry’ (Kemp 2006). In particular, the committee was charged with investigating ‘unscrupulous and unethical conduct that occurs in the sector’ (Kemp 2006; Senate Standing Committee on the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2006; Arts Hub 2006). The report of the inquiry — Indigenous Art — Securing the Future; Australia’s Indigenous visual arts and craft sector — published in June 2007, recommended the establishment of an indigenous art industry code of conduct. The inquiry also recommended the indigenous arts industry be given two years to self-regulate or face having a code of conduct prescribed under the Trade Practices Act (Dow, 2007; Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2007).

Increasingly, too, indigenous culture — and international awareness of its importance — has driven national cultural agendas as expressed in national performances (such as the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony, cultural tourism programs, international expositions and exhibitions). Also, indigenous themes have infused all forms of cultural production, whether by indigenous or non-indigenous artists. For a sub-sector that was perceived to reply on patronage models of support, indigenous culture has confounded assumptions underpinning all aspects of Australian cultural policy. However, these recommendations are directed towards the output end of indigenous art rather than the fragile sustainability of the art centres and the cultural context of indigenous art production — especially in remote communities (Rothwell 2007: 16).

Micro-study of circus

We have noted a tension between funding for traditional performing arts and an emerging preference for cultural infrastructure and community-based events. Like youth art (also called slash art because of its propensity to mix art forms), events such as festivals and circuses can challenge existing funding categories, raising awkward questions for government about the basis for funding some artistic forms but not others. The recent rise of circus as an artform has especially challenged aesthetic hierarchies and cultural support models. It offers an exciting form of spectacle, has been hugely popular with audiences on a global scale, provides training in physical arts and cultural performance that appeals to children and adults alike, and — above all — is immensely profitable (Drinnan 2001). Perhaps not surprisingly, circus has been re-cast as ‘physical arts’.

Circuses are an age-old phenomenon that seemed to be dying out when, in 1984, Canadian Guy Laiberte established Cirque du Soleil. The company developed the idea of ‘new circus’ or ‘physical theatre’, combining the physical feats and danger of circus performances with a dramatic sense of spectacle and characterisation.
Cirque du Soleil enjoyed immediate success and spawned circus arts programs throughout North America, in many cases supplanting traditional physical education and sports programs because it was so popular.

The company now has up to six troupes touring constantly all over the world, employing 500 creative artists as well as engaging in extensive marketing, training and franchising activities. To avoid the problem of different quality venues in different places, Cirque du Soleil has developed its own demountable Grand Chapiteau (Big Top) that seats 2,500 people and provides all the necessary facilities (bar, restaurant, toilets, cloakroom, shop, etc.). Over 60 million people worldwide have seen a Cirque du Soleil performance, a figure beyond the wildest dreams of traditional performing arts organisations. In 2007 alone, 8 million people are expected to attend a show (http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/CirqueDuSoleil/en/Pressroom/cirquedusoleil/factsheets/cds.glance.htm).

Success has encouraged many practitioners and audiences back to the artform. In Australia, companies such as Circus Oz, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, Rock 'n' Roll Circus and Vulcana Women's Circus have experienced a resurgence in funding, audiences and performance (Strickland 1999). Along with active circus companies, many training programs keep alive the physical skills of the art. Though initially suspicious of circus culture, governments are now eager to fund companies and support dedicated training academies such as the National Institute of Circus Arts in Melbourne, established in 1995. It has also attracted generous private sponsorship: for example, the global management consultancy, the Empower Group, sponsored Circus Oz, in the process, winning a 2003 AbaF Award (Brown 2003).

In circus, governments see not just a popular artform but possibilities for touring and exports — though such support brings a danger of over-supply with audiences eventually tiring of the spectacle circus offers. Circus has been an unexpected winner amid overall gloom in the cultural sector. Indeed, Circus Oz was one of the few companies identified by the Nugent Report as being ‘successful’, in good financial health and having opportunities to win international audiences. Circus shows that some performing arts can flourish outside traditional institutional structures. That very success allows circus to challenge other artforms for access to government funding.

These case studies illustrate the complexities of dealing with the diverse sub-sectors of arts and culture under a single policy framework. As argued elsewhere (Craik, McAlister and Davis 2003) incoherence and contradiction in adjacent policy strategies may be an increasingly distinctive component of policies for this sector.
ENDNOTES

1 In 2002, just over a third of adult Australians had visited a museum in the past year (men 33.2%) and women (37.5%) with attendance peaking between the 1930s and early 1960s. Half of the attendees came only once, and a quarter twice. 60% of entries were free (ABS 2004a).

2 ATSIS — the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services — was the funding arm of the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). It was abolished on 1 July 2004 and its functions distributed to mainstream agencies.

3 Some have been taken up as court cases, including the first $1 dollar note designed by David Malangi for the Reserve Bank for which he was paid a $1,000 ex-gratia payment plus a fishing kit and a silver medallion; Flash T-shirts, which used reproductions of the designs of Johnny Bulun Bulun without permission (1989); and the Aboriginal carpet case (Banduk Marika V Indofurn 1994) (see Johnson 1996). Copyright cases are continuing, assisted by the website called the House of Aboriginality. It should be noted that even when cases are determined in favour of the plaintiff, often the terms of settlement are not fulfilled due to the difficulty of imposing determinations.

4 To demonstrate the widespread incorporation or Aboriginal imagery in Australian design, a group of indigenous artists built the House of Aboriginality, a mock house full of indigenous-derived objects (Johnson 1996).

5 For example, there was heated public debate when the ex-partner of the winner of the 1996 Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Art Award, Kathleen Petyarre, argued that he should share in the award as he had helped paint the winning work.

6 The 2001 acquisition by the National Gallery of Australia of the painting, ‘All that big country from the top’ by Rover Thomas for a record $800,000 raised a storm and a belief that the value of Aboriginal art had gone through the roof. The furore was quelled when similar figures were not obtained in 2005 for works of similar provenance by major auction houses (Maslen 2005). Between 2001 and 2006, the top selling Aboriginal artworks sold for between Aus$212,000 and AUS$778,000 (Australia Council 2006 Attachment 1). Nonetheless, the episode signalled a major shift in the way in which Aboriginal art was treated in the curatorial world and marketplace.

7 These include Tracey Moffatt, Lin Onus, Kathleen and Gloria Petyarre, Rosella Namok, Judy Watson, Rover Thomas, Ginger Riley, Gordon Bennett, Richard Bell, Queenie McKenzie, Dorothy Napangardi, and the Tjapaltjarri’s (Billy Stockman, Clifford Possum and Mick Namarari).

8 This case study draws on an earlier publication (Craik, McAllister and Davis 2003).