Refereed Paper

Suiting the Action to the Word: The Changing Rhetoric of Australian Cultural Policy

Author
Julian Meyrick
Flinders University

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Abstract
This paper discusses the rhetoric of five peak Australian arts and cultural policy documents that have been handed down at a federal level since the establishment of an independent arts agency, the Australia Council, in 1973. It describes the historical and political context in which they first appeared, presenting a table of their significant traits and examples of their verbal styles. It deploys J. L. Austin’s concept of ‘the performative’ to explore the rhetorical register of each document, identifying their locutionary effects and devices in speech. The illocutionary force of the five policies is briefly examined to suggest which performatives are associated with which documents and to draw from this some tentative conclusions. Underpinning the paper is an argument concerning the limits of functional logic for the provision of cultural goods and services in modern democratic states.

Biography
Julian Meyrick is Strategic Professor of Creative Arts at Flinders University, Artistic Counsel for the State Theatre Company South Australia, an Honorary Associate at La Trobe University, and an Honorary Fellow at Deakin University. He was Associate Director and Literary Advisor at Melbourne Theatre Company 2002-07, and artistic director of kickhouse theatre 1989-98. He was a founder member and Deputy Chair of PlayWriting Australia 2004-09 and a member of the federal government’s Creative Australia Advisory Group 2008-10. He has directed many award-winning theatre productions, most recently Angela’s Kitchen, which attracted the 2012 Helpmann for Best Australian Work. He has published books on the Nimrod Theatre and the MTC, a Currency House Platform Paper, and numerous articles on Australian theatre history and Australian cultural policy. Corresponding author: julian.meyrick@flinders.edu.au
Introduction

This paper focuses on language use in five peak cultural policy documents that appeared in Australia between 1973 and 2013. Over this forty-year period, a range of reports in the arts and cultural area were handed down at a federal level, setting the agenda for ongoing strategic intervention by the government in the cultural sector. The five documents considered here are:

i. The Industries Assistance Commission, *Inquiry into the Performing Arts*, 1976 (IAC)


iii. *Creative Nation*, 1994


v. *Creative Australia*, 2013

Two of these documents were narrowly focused, three more broadly. Regardless of their stated scope and terms of reference, however, each presented as nationally significant in their recommendations and implications. Each embodied what Roland Barthes would call a ‘period rhetoric’ (Barthes 1981:11), a way of talking about art and culture that points beyond proclaimed goals to a linguistic frame of reference that renders creative practice visible to the policy process in particular ways. The paper does not adopt a cultural studies approach, consistent with one or other of the intellectual factions identified by Jim McGuigan (1992, 2010). It does not advance from an abstract definition of culture to condone or criticise particular policies viewed in relation to it. Rather, it takes a historical overview with a micro-sociological inflexion. A source of orientation is J. L. Austin’s notion of ‘the performative’ as described in his classic book *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), especially his interest in how agents create meaning in situations where ‘the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action’ (p. 6). Agency and intention play important roles here. Institutional structures underdetermine people’s beliefs and behaviours and must be augmented via collectively binding speech acts (Seuren, 2009: 147). Such speech acts may be muted or charged, authoritative or outlier, explicit or implicit; what matters is less their overt subject matter than the contextually informed way they frame the given situation as the given situation. This is not entirely a matter of language. But clearly the power of words is crucial, a sky of possibility wherein some things are done and seen to be done, some things are done but not acknowledged as done, and some things neither done nor acknowledged as undone. The rhetorics of Australia’s peak cultural policy documents are therefore empirical referents in their own right and should be examined with a view to elucidating the kinds of understandings and involvements they gave rise to, a lexical space that extends far beyond their ostensible propositional content.

Accordingly, Table one (p. 4) breaks down the documents by seven readily identifiable traits, beginning with date, title and authorship stated scope (column 1). Cultural policy analysts often deploy an invariant notion of government or, at best, one subdivided into three basic domains (federal, state and local). Table one, however, shows that it is possible to identify authorship more specifically, depending on whether a document is produced by a ministry, a parliamentary committee, an independent advisory body, or a
combination of all three. A number of aspects relating to the evolution of these documents might usefully be listed. Here, I note the scope of the review and the length of time spent consulting with the field (column 2). Since each document deploys a synthetic conception of art or culture, it is interesting to note the time taken to derive its definitions – and who did the deriving. Only in two cases, Creative Nation and Creative Australia, were creative practitioners involved in the policy-making process, and then in an advisory capacity. This in turn leads to different registers of rhetorical address, here labelled according to their most conspicuous characteristic (column 3). The outcomes of each document were multiple and do not lend themselves to easy summary. But Table one notes whether they were accepted or not, and what major changes they prompted (column 4).

As even this brief comparison shows, the concerns of Australian cultural policy documents are wide-ranging and their registers of address conspicuously different. Table two (p. 5) gives quotations from each by way of sampling their individual verbal styles. Elsewhere I have argued that the circulation of key terms through different segments of the cultural sector creates a ‘rhetorical economy’, and noted these can function quite differently within the practice sphere compared with the policy one (for example), even when the words themselves are identical (Meyrick, 2013). I have observed that the rhetorical economy is not a stable entity, but that its four major stakeholders – the government, the academy, the media and creative practitioners – jostle and interact to establish something like a shared understanding, though the broader political situation determines which stakeholders are dominant at any one moment in time.

In this paper I focus on one stakeholder, the government, to explore how language is utilised to frame an activity that in its singularity and heterogeneity often defies aggregate categories of order (Craik, 2007; White & Hede, 2008). I take this to be the sine qua non of intervention in the cultural sector by Western governments: a functional conception of art and culture. Such functionalisation goes beyond issues of strategic value (excellence vs. access vs. innovation vs. Australian content) or mode of provision (Ministry vs. statutory authority vs. market priming) and reflects the dissociated attitude modern states adopt towards creative practices of all kinds, one that is inherently instrumental. That is, even when modern states consider the intrinsic value of culture and other qualitative ‘art world’ concerns (Danto, 1964; Becker 1982, 2008), the bureaucratic expression of their engagement vitiates the personal response necessary to meaningfully activate such a vista. Input/output modelling is more than a means of distributing scarce resources, it is an ontological condition, ensuring governments are focused less on the value of art and culture than on the demonstration of that value.

This not-so-subtle concern irradiates all government pronouncements in the cultural area and can be seen in an acute form in peak policy documents. Austin coined the phrase ‘illocutionary force’ to refer to those aspects of language which freight a performative charge in addition to or despite their descriptive substance (for example, a warning, a threat, a promise, some friendly advice). The need to demonstrate the utility of intervention in the cultural sector sets the wider illocutionary coordinates of government cultural policy making, and this impacts on choice of register of address. The texts of peak documents thus reflect not only a preference for certain key themes and phrases, but a complex psychological stance towards the field of intervention. By analysing their rhetoric much is revealed about the deeper movements of Australian governments’ changing understanding of culture.

The History

Before looking more closely at these policy documents, it is important to sketch the historical and political context in which they made their appearance. It cannot be said too often that Australian government intervention in culture is, by comparison with the defence, education and agricultural sectors, of very recent origin. The Guthrie Report (1949), the Vincent Report (1963) and the terms of reference of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (established 1954), provide early examples of government rhetoric in respect of arts and culture (Andrews, 1988). But it was only with Gough
Table one:

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<th>Authorship name and date</th>
<th>Scope and length of consultation</th>
<th>Rhetorical Style</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Industries Assistance Commission, <em>Report on Assistance to the Performing Arts</em> (1996)</td>
<td>‘The terms of this inquiry ask whether assistance should be accorded the performing arts and, if so, its nature and extent.’ (p. 9, original emphasis)</td>
<td>Econometric</td>
<td>Officially rejected, but ‘its approach to cultural democracy has largely been accepted ... Perhaps [its] greatest achievement was to provoke … a debate on arts assistance which still continues’ (McLeay report, 1986: 27)</td>
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<td>The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Expenditure, <em>Patronage, Power and the Muse: Inquiry into C’wealth Assistance to the Arts</em> (1986)</td>
<td>‘The Committee’s intention was to review the broad effectiveness and efficiency of the procedures for delivery of Commonwealth assistance to the arts… to review … the administration of arts support.’ (p. 16)</td>
<td>Legislative</td>
<td>Officially accepted but ‘it was either not read or read selectively’ (Macdonnell, 1992: 384). Major Organisation Board set up. Triennial funding initiated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Department of Communications and the Arts and a ‘panel of eminent Australians’, <em>Creative Nation. Commonwealth Cultural Policy</em> (1994)</td>
<td>‘With a cultural policy we recognise our responsibility to foster and preserve an environment [in which art and ideas can flourish]. We recognise that the ownership of a heritage and identity, and the means of self-expression and creativity, are essential human needs and essential to the health of society.’ (p. 5)</td>
<td>Grand Vision</td>
<td>Officially accepted but displaced by a change of government. ‘If Creative Nation can be said to have a particular focus, it was to integrate cultural activities and communications technology in order to facilitate the independence of [culture] from public assistance.’ (Johanson, 2000: 232)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A ministerial appointed committee (business oriented), <em>Securing the Future: Final Report of the Major Performing Arts Inquiry</em> (1999)</td>
<td>‘The Inquiry has been charged with identifying options and making recommendations on actions that can be taken both by governments and the sector to ensure that Australia has a financially healthy, artistically vibrant and broadly accessible major performing arts sector.’ (Discussion Paper, p. 26)</td>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>Officially accepted and thereafter set off a so-called ‘review cycle’ into different arts and culture subsectors. Classification of Major Performing Arts Organisations into different strategic categories. Adoption of a mandatory reserves policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The federal government, <em>Creative Australia: National Cultural Policy</em> (2013)</td>
<td>‘Creative Australia aims to ensure that the cultural sector – incorporating all aspects of arts, cultural heritage and the creative industries – has the skills, resources and the resilience to play an active role in Australia’s future’ (p. 6).</td>
<td>Grand Vision + Strategic</td>
<td>Officially accepted, but both the Minister and Prime Minister associated with its delivery departed federal politics shortly thereafter. Legislation relating to the reform of the Australia Council passed June 2013.</td>
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Table two:

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<th>Examples of Rhetorical Style</th>
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<td><strong>IAC 1976</strong></td>
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‘Any rational and consistent framework or even handed philosophy aimed at optimising community benefit from assistance to the performing arts must be based on a clear assessment of the value of performing arts to the community. Firm and where feasible quantitative evidence must be the basis for any publicly justifiable assessment of that value.’ (p. 10)

‘Virtualiy all performing arts activities provide a service (or product) that is sold to consumers at a price that reflects both the costs of production and the level of demand … The companies producing performances sell them for a price (admission fees) that can be compared with the price of other products … The performing arts are thus 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 profits.’ (p. 44)

| **McLean 1986** |

‘The committee acknowledges considerable achievements of the Council in its 13 years of operation. We argue, however, that it has failed to adapt to important changes in the arts and society and has become, in part, a captive of its clients.’ (p. 5)

‘In the Committee’s view there are three components to the question of how assistance to the large organisations should be managed. The first is administrative efficiency. There seems no doubt that there would be administrative advantages in concentrating the particular skills required for managing assistance to large clients on one area of the Council’s operations. The second issue is the question of what share of scare grant funds should go to the major clients … Thirdly, there is the issue of accountability … In balancing these considerations, the definitions of ‘arm’s length’ and ‘peer review’ again arise. Which decision are appropriately the Government’s and which the Council’s. Who are the peers responsible for reviewing the affairs of the Councils large clients?’ (pp. 95–6).

| **Creative Nation 1994** |

‘To speak of Australian culture is to recognise our common heritage. It is to say that we share ideas, values, sentiments and traditions, and that we see in all the various manifestations of these, what it means to be Australian. Culture, then, concerns identity – the identity of the nation, communities and individuals. We seek to preserve our culture because it is fundamental to our understanding of who we are.’ (p. 5)

‘Information technology, and all that it now offers, has crossed the technical rubicon into the realm of consciousness, to the realm of culture. Multi-media today gives us instruments which allow us to shape information in so many forms that they can become an integral part of our life’s experience. This is why the imperatives of the information age and some of its opportunities are addressed here in the context of creative and cultural policy … [They] will change the way we communicate, the way we learn, the way we do business, the way we create, the way we live our daily lives.’ (p. 55)

| **Nugent 1999** |

‘The fundamental principles on which the inquiry’s recommendations are based are that Australia should have a vibrant major performing arts sector that enriches Australian life and builds its image as an innovative and sophisticated nation; that Australia should cost-effectively deliver broad access to the major performing arts … and that Australia should have a financially viable major performing arts sector that supports artistic vibrancy.’ (p. ix)

‘Companies which can demonstrate a quantifiable improvement in their private sector income should be able to benefit from a special “reserves incentives program”. This program should be capped over a three year term and be linked to measurable improvements in private sector support. State Governments should also be invited to match the Commonwealth contribution or set up a similar program of their own. The funds generated from such a program could only be used to build reserves and should be held in escrow for three years.” (p. 72)

| **Creative Australia 2013** |

‘A creative Australia will celebrate its artists and recognise the excellence of our cultural wealth. A creative Australia is a crucial aspect of closing the gap so the richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures can be preserved and shared. A creative Australia will make a difference to the diversity and competitiveness of our economy. A creative Australia will promote entrepreneurship, ensure strong links between engineering and design and launch new creative services based on artistic talent.’ (p. 3)

‘A significant proportion of the Australian Government’s investment in arts and culture is made through national cultural agencies and institutions. Steps have been taken to better understand and demonstrate how the objectives and activities of these institutions align with the cultural and broader policy strategy through reforms to agency reporting arrangements and development of a new government reporting framework. Once fully implemented, the new governance framework will provide consistent baseline data to measure the institutions’ aggregated economic, social and regional impacts and the impact of the Government’s investment.”’ (p. 120)
Whitlam’s decision to establish an independent arts council in 1973 and to double cultural subsidy overnight that the government’s sectoral presence became significant and new pressure was placed on the means by which stakeholders expressed their different interests.

The Australia Council’s first years are described by Macdonnell (1992), Radbourne (1995) and Johanson (2000). They were fraught ones, with vociferous public debate about the operation of art form boards and overall Council leadership. H. C. ‘Nugget’ Coombs, the man behind the establishment of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and later the Australian Council for the Arts (1968–1972), became Chair of the new body but soon stepped aside for his nominated successor, Dr Jean Battersby. This appointment proved contentious, as did the methods of the Council itself, whose inflated role impacted on the sector in unforseen ways. Commercial theatre, represented by a crumbling J. C. Williamson theatre empire, was in dire financial straits, angry that subsidised competitors were eroding its market share. This posed a challenge for Whitlam’s new policy direction. Following J. M. Keynes, intervention in the cultural sector had been predicated on ‘market failure’ arguments (Baumol & Bowen, 1966). Its differential impact on different subsectors had not been considered beyond delineating, in a decidedly hurried way, art form board domains. Nor was a definition of culture written into the Council’s authorising legislation. It was presumed to be represented by the arts institutions that formed its client base. This presumption was now in question, and Whitlam asked the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) to examine the issue. He did not limit its scope to commercial theatre, however, so when the report was handed down to the succeeding Liberal government, it recommended the abolition of producer subsidy to the sector in toto. This had not been Whitlam’s aim, nor was it part of Malcolm Fraser’s agenda, so the report was officially rejected. However, while its narrow, instrumentalist thinking found no positive take-up, its call for reasoned explanation of individual grant receipt was influential and marks the beginning of what might be called ‘the justification imperative’ within the cultural policy process as a whole (Meyrick, 1997, 2002). This was acknowledged by the McLeay Report ten years later, another Labor inquiry, this time instituted by Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

By the mid-1980s, J. C. Williamson had disappeared along with most of Australia’s commercial theatre, save in the area of major musicals production. By contrast, the Council’s client base had entrenched itself, with the majority of its annual allocation (over 80% in the case of the performing arts) regularly going to the same, small number of organisations. To ameliorate this skewed distribution, and to free up money for other artists, a ceiling of $330,000 on any one annual grant was introduced. This sparked the so-called ‘Great Redistribution Debate’ whereby large and small companies battled politically for an increased share of subsidy. Brushing aside the Council’s erstwhile independence, Hawke personally intervened to authorise grants in excess of $330,000 to a number of institutions, and another crisis ensued. This had two aspects to it: the issue of the relationship between larger and smaller companies; and the issue of the government’s relationship to the Council. The McLeay Committee examined both and recommended setting up a major organisations unit to deal with the needs of larger organisations and a switch to a triennial grant award system. At the same time, it put limits on the Council’s autonomy by insisting on the government’s right to ‘to provide for the issue of ministerial directions’ (Recommendation 4) and gave much consideration to deficiencies of existing provision arrangements. In many ways, the Committee’s concern with the justification of cultural subsidy was similar to the IAC report’s, though its focus was a political rather than an economic one. And while it fared no better in the public arena (Parsons, 1996), again like the IAC its influence went beyond this immediate reception and a number of topics it raised – regarding the desirability of a national cultural policy, for example, or new legislation for the Australia Council – became part of the long-term policy memory. This is a significant feature of Australian cultural policy documents: that they outlast the specific government that generated them. Either because they are resource intensive to write or because culture does not mobilise in the same way as other political issues, they persist, rhetorically and substantively, until subsumed by later documents that often make use of the their logic and values.
The appearance of *Creative Nation* in 1994 marks a shift in government focus from an ‘arts policy’ to a ‘cultural policy’, and a corresponding widening of philosophical and political aperture (Gardiner-Garden 1994, 2009). In contrast to the IAC and McLeay, it was not an official report, with limited circulation and compendious appendices. It was a widely available, tastefully art-worked, brochure-like statement that contained, for the first time, a preamble on the value of culture for Australian democracy. *Accounts of Creative Nation* are given by Radbourne (1995, 1997), Johanson (2000) and most particularly Don Watson (2003), who observes the document yoked together what until then were separate areas of policy concern: the traditional high arts and contemporary media. This was signalled by a change in title of the relevant Minister, Michael Lee, who absorbed both into a new, expanded ‘Arts and Communication’ portfolio. In the event, the conceptual marriage between the areas proved as difficult to wrangle as the institutional coordination of the ABC, Film Australia and the Australia Council. But *Creative Nation* is not a nuts and bolts operational plan. It is a fugal expression of a presumed national cultural identity. Its sweep, at once refined and wide ranging, owns to a long list of strategic concerns (sixteen content areas including heritage, film, television, information technology, cultural diplomacy, tourism, education and industry development), even as it asserts these need government cultivation for culture to play its important role in Australian life. *Creative Nation* thus takes its place alongside *Working Nation* and Paul Keating’s Redfern speech as one of ‘an array of policy initiatives and reviews that established the hallmark of a government seen to be addressing the “big” issues and shaping a reform agenda’ (Jose & Burgess, 2005). It was met with acclamation by the sector and was thought by some to be Keating’s reward to artists for their support in the 1992 election (Radbourne, 1996).

Perhaps the most important contribution of *Creative Nation* to government understanding of culture was its acknowledgement that the sector was only getting bigger and more complex. This resulted in a shift in emphasis within the subvention system. Until 1994, the Australia Council was the main public face of cultural provision. Post-1994, it is one among a number of agencies, and in allocation terms, a lesser one than broadcast television or film. Why, then, did it (does it) remain a target of persistent political scrutiny? The answer lies in what it represents: a statutory authority defined by, on the one hand, an ‘arm’s length’ relationship to the government and on the other by the utilisation of peer review. Both mechanisms are mitigations of the modern state’s functional approach to culture. They are where the justification imperative ends, giving way to a zone of judgement that is not subject to further administrative review. This sets up a conceptual tension with which government policy must deal. As official definitions of culture expand and levels of subsidy decrease in real terms in comparison with the Whitlam years, the Council stands out as a discretionary body operating outside standard regulation. The rhetorical pressure on the agency to *demonstrate* accountability thus increases, even as its practical role declines.

By the time the Nugent report appeared in 1999, John Howard’s Liberal government had been in power for four years. The report represents both a return to the IAC’s narrow focus and a correction to *Creative Nation*’s lack of an operational plan. Indeed, in its elaborate institutional classifications, its concern with geographical access, ‘vibrancy’ and long-term financial viability, it is nothing but an operational plan, devoid of big-picture sentiment or statements. Cultural value is allied to adoption of a business-sustainability model and a base level of funding (between 13% and 50%, depending on art form). A considerable portion of both the Discussion Paper and the Final Report is spent examining the workings of the sector, and the detail of this is noteworthy in comparison with Nugent’s predecessors. Yet philosophically it relies on a pre-Whitlam ‘presumed’ definition of culture, one freighted by the major companies and their supposed ‘international standards’. For Nugent, culture is a niche market, and the required levels of financial reserves (Recommendation 6.4), performance agreements (Recommendation 8.1) and access monitoring (Recommendation 9) are part of a strategy to stabilise a sector that ‘has been adversely affected by demographic and technological change [and] the forces of globalisation’ (p. 17) by clarifying the industrial operation of its commanding heights and identifying a politically acceptable level of ongoing public support. It is an arts policy in a time of cultural policies.
An account of the Nugent report can be found in Craik (2007), who points out that its restricted focus was not entirely successful. ‘Because of the perceived bias towards protecting the major artform companies, other sectors lobbied for similar reviews and funding increases. The Report became the first of the so-called “Review Cycle” with inquiries into the small-to-medium performing arts sector, visual arts and crafts, symphony orchestras, new media and dance to follow’ (Craik: Appendix G.6). Having broadened its conception of culture to take in diverse creative practices, the government could not undo its inclusive move. Nor was Nugent’s business-management approach especially positive in its financial results. Although all of its ninety-five recommendations were implemented, these led neither to a substantial improvement in the position of the major companies nor stabilisation of the sector as a whole (Craik, 2007, who cites a 2004 Australia Council review in respect of this). By the time a Labor government was elected in 2007, new difficulties and opportunities had appeared that demanded a broader policy response.

Creative Australia, launched in March 2013, crafts a conscious link with Creative Nation, whose title it echoes, and with the McLeay report’s call for a national cultural policy. Its Executive Summary paints a big-picture view of culture (‘The Australian Story – A Vision for Australia’s Cultural Sector’), while subsequent sections deal with globalisation, digital technology, the role of the artist, the centrality of indigenous culture and the need for improved arts education. Each is accompanied by a ‘What Happens Next’ rider such that value statements are allied with strategic goals, operational plans and financial pledges. Punctuating Creative Australia are ‘case studies’, thumbnail sketches drawn from the field showing how subsidy assists actual creative practices. Towards the end, a ‘Tracking and Targeting’ section states that, ‘as initiatives are introduced and the policy framework implemented, various qualitative and quantitative measures will be used to ensure the policy remains relevant and focused’ (p. 119). Unsurprisingly, the Australia Council is again marked out for reform in both the body of the document (‘Modernise Funding and Support’) and an appendix (‘Review of the Australia Council Australian Government Response’). Given its combination of reach and detail, Creative Nation appears to have overcome the aporias of previous policy documents, driving home its instrumental mantra that ‘a creative nation is a productive nation’ (p. 6).

While not untrue, this impression can be overdrawn. Creative Australia is not only informed but substantially shaped by a range of reports in contiguous areas. These include: the National Arts and Disability Strategy (2009), Review of the Australian Independent Screen Production Sector (2010), Review of Private Sector Support for the Arts (2011), the James and Trainor Australia Council Review (2012), Australia in the Asian Century White Paper (2012) and Industry and Innovation Statement: A Plan for Australian Jobs (2013). Another, not published at the time of Creative Australia’s release, gets mentioned in a speculative way, Australian Curriculum: The Arts. The impact of these reports is different in different sections, not only because of their content, but because they were generated at different points in time. Thus Creative Nation varies in substance and tone from section to section depending on whether incorporated reports are some time ago and have been fully implemented (such as the Review of the Australian Independent Screen Production Sector) or are still being processed (such as the Australia Council Review). Perhaps Creative Nation should properly be called ‘a social, cultural and arts policy’, since it straddles so many zones of action and scales of value.

Both the Prime Minister and Minister responsible for Creative Australia have since retired from federal politics, while Labor lost government at the 2013 election. History suggests that this is unlikely to be the end of the document’s influence, however. Legislation relating to the reform of the Australia Council has already passed into law with bi-partisan support and it is probable other Creative Australia concerns will persist in the policy memory. The central problems remain the same regardless of which party is in power. There is, for modern governments, no turning back. Having stepped into the fog of culture they must construe a functional rationale for their interventions with whatever rhetorical means make themselves available.
The Language
When we contrast the performative with the [descriptive] utterance we [say] that: 1. the performative [is about] doing something as opposed to saying something; and 2. the performative is happy or unhappy as opposed to true or false. (Austin, 1962: 131)

It seems obvious to say it: these types of policy documents do not consider culture directly; they do not deploy a preference structure in relation to arts and cultural activities; they do not examine creative practices or practitioners; they do cite the vast body of critical, historical and aesthetic scholarship that exists in the world about these things. Instead, they rely on a synthetic notion of culture that arises indirectly from the language with which they discuss its social appearance and effects. It is worth asking whether this is possible; whether culture can be subtracted from its subjectively meaningful context in pursuit of an aggregate essence managed for optimal collective benefit. Are their some things functional logic cannot encompass? If there are, culture may present a limit case, an activity that defies the thinking modern states utilise to justify their interventions (or absence of them), regardless of ideology, field or aim. Even if our response to the question is positive, we may nevertheless have reservations that policy's abstract operators of capture can do full justice to the unformulaic reality of actual cultural experience. More importantly, there may be reservations in the minds of policy makers, who are in a position to inflect their document writing with subcutaneous feeling. This makes the language of policy of interest not only for what gets said directly, but for what is implied or suggested. Each document casts a linguistic shadow that tells us both what governments think they understand about culture and what they know they don’t.

J. L. Austin’s How To Do Things With Words is a deceptively slight book that puts forward an analysis of language that has been highly influential within modern analytical philosophy. It is especially critical of ‘the descriptive fallacy’, the belief the primary job of language is to describe reality as opposed to contribute to it. Instead, Austin demonstrates that certain kinds of statements comprise a form of action in their own right such that ‘we must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued – the total speech act … The speech act in the total speech situation [emerges] from logic piecemeal as important in special cases’ (p. 52). The ‘speech act in the total speech situation’ is the object of Austin’s penetrating study and though a number of his distinctions were almost immediately challenged, particularly by John Searle (1968, 1975), they are generally recognised as presenting a framework whereby the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of action and moral philosophy come together in a new conception of linguistic pragmatics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: 1).

Austin’s analysis is detailed. He uses numerous neologisms and confounding examples to elucidate the precise operations of language when the context of its total use is considered. He does not put forward a theory that can be applied but rather an array of what Howard Becker (following Martin Bulmer), calls ‘sensitizing concepts’ (Becker, 2008: ix). Foremost among these is the notion of the performative, which Austin unpacks at length as he explores the myriad ways in which words and their social accompaniments create binding understandings in a given situation. ‘One thing … that is dangerous to do … is to take it that we somehow know the primary use of a sentence because it ought to be … in the philosophers’ preferred sense … true or false and which is not liable to criticism in any other dimension … Precision in language makes clearer what is being said – its meaning: explicitness in our sense [of the total speech situation] makes clearer the force of the utterance, or how it is to be taken’ (p.73, original emphasis). In this insight lies the beginning of Austin’s ‘doctrine of illocutionary forces’, and while the critical reading of cultural policy documents is not (yet) a branch of analytical philosophy, such an approach raises to view a background of understanding that is usually subsumed by macro political analysis or ignored altogether.

In the middle of his book Austin considers six ‘devices in speech’ that augment statements and help determine their real-world impact, that is, para-linguistic figures whereby actions and words are suited in a given situation. Three of these, I suggest,
are apt for policy document analysis: ‘mood’, ‘tone of voice’ and ‘circumstances of utterance’. The first is partly a matter of grammatical rule. Some policy documents recommend certain courses of action while others announce the country will follow them. Tone of voice is harder to reproduce in writing, but when adverbs and connecting particles are taken into account, it is clear that particular policy documents employ different verbal emphases and circumlocutions to create certain tonal effects – that they are ‘rigorous’ in approach, for example (IAC), or democratically minded (Creative Nation) or empirically knowledgeable about the field under review (Nugent). Finally, circumstances of utterance sweeps in all gesture-like actions that attend policy documents in their worldly existence – for example, the fact that Paul Keating launched Creative Nation with full media pomp at the National Gallery in Canberra, or that Creative Australia is hard to obtain in print but easily available as a digital download. Taken together, these devices inform performatives such that a speaker’s ‘locution’ (use of language) has two separate and not always aligned functions: the perlocutionary and the illocutionary, ‘the performance of an act in saying something as opposed to the performance of an act of saying something’ (p. 99). Meaning and force: the distinction is hard to maintain in practice (all statements display both functions), but it is conceptually powerful. Documents may be taken in a way that their devisers did not intend; or in contrast to their chosen register of address; or be seen to imply more than they say directly.

Performatives typically take the form of ‘to do’ verbs. While Austin’s proposed classification is now generally considered redundant (Searle, 1968), listing them provides a place to start a total speech act analysis. Accordingly, Table three identifies the performatives used by our five cultural documents in their opening sections. I highlight the overlaps and embolden one possible key performative for each document.

### Table three

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<thead>
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<th>IAC (from ‘Overview’)</th>
<th>To demonstrate, to quantify, to assess, to seek assessments, to eschew, to take it to mean, to formulate, to question, to recognise, to accept, to recommend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McLeay (from ‘Summary’ and ‘Scope’)</td>
<td>To argue, to state, to define, to distinguish, to believe, to acknowledge, to suggest, to undertake, to review, to avoid consideration of, to collect [evidence], to recommend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Nation (from ‘Introduction’)</td>
<td>To declare, to speak, to preserve, to cultivate, to recognise, to foster, to create, to enrich, to remember, to encourage, to meet challenges, to address, to embrace, to engage, to heighten, to increase, to adapt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nugent (from ‘Overview’ and ‘Introduction’)</td>
<td>To stabilise, to outline, to conclude, to reposition, to support, to endorse, to establish, to suggest, to identify, to report on, to canvass (in relation to the Discussion paper), to meet with (parties affected by the Inquiry), to recommend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Australia (from ‘Executive Summary’)</td>
<td>To frame, to reflect, to outline, to support, to strengthen, to modernise, to connect, to build on (past government policies and commitments), to recognise, to invest, to link with (other government policies and commitments), to position, to ensure, to encourage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What can be said about these groups of words? First, that they are quite obviously different from each other. In their chosen registers of address they imbue their explicit pronouncements with a particular affect and indicate a certain psychological stance towards the field of intervention. If nothing else, this should explode the idea there is one ‘language of government’ that creative practitioners must internalise if they are to communicate effectively with the policy realm. Rather there is a range of values and intentions discernible in cultural policy documents that freight complex, sometimes contradictory moods and views. These inform a government’s policy direction as much as anything a peak document might directly say.
Second, the groups of words soften in their semantic purchase as time goes on. The performatives of the IAC are almost quasi-scientific in their denotational associations (to quantify, to eschew, to formulate). By contrast those of Creative Australia nearly forty years later are more capacious (to support, to connect, to encourage). This classic sociological shift from words trying to explain something, to words trying to understand it (Von Wright, 1971), is coterminous with the government's broadening idea of culture such that either its view is improving and its language is reforming as a result, or else its language is improving so its view can cope with more complexity. Either way, it suggests progress of a kind. When allied to the fact that the five documents make use of each other's perceptions and problems, it is possible to argue Australian governments are developing a better grasp of culture, even if they remain unresolved about how to action this in strategic terms.

What to make of the distinction between those documents that are reports and those that are government statements? Here, total speech act analysis has to shift focus from perlocutionary to illocutionary functions. Policy documents arising from independent inquiries or parliamentary committees (IAC, McLeay, Nugent) display significant 'world to word fit' (Searle, 1975). They use language to propose an idea of culture that is, in theory, drawn from what they have learnt about the field. In contrast, government statements (Creative Nation, Creative Australia) display 'word to world' fit, declaring a state of affairs they thereafter intend to bring into being. Of course, the distinction is not absolute. Governments spend time examining their fields of intervention (though increasingly this is relegated to a ‘discussion phase’) and reports propose normative courses of action. But 'direction of fit' is obviously vital to a policy’s political valency and, again, is not often a matter of attention for analysts, who will run the two types of documents together as if they were the same species of pronouncement. But there are significant differences. The illocutionary force of cultural policy documents is carried in two areas especially: the introduction and the recommendations. Which is more dominant depends on who is doing the talking. If the government is the author, the preamble shows the deepest concentration of illocutionary force; if it is an independent inquiry, it will lie in the recommendations.

What about the use and display of quantitative data? All five policy documents deploy figures at some point in their texts and one, Nugent, uses them heavily throughout. How does this form of unitised (nomothetic) expression sit with a language-focused (ideographic) approach to meaning generation? From the perspective of total speech act analysis, numbers do not present in contradistinction to words but as an adjunctive type of performative utterance. Their distinctive function is the truncation of real-world experience such that it is stripped of contextual feature and 'counted' according to an interpretive schema. Numbers are a descriptive contraction, one with an inherent drive to commensurability. Thus emptied of real-world content they present in a way that promotes comparative assessment. Numbers do not have to be used in this way, of course, but their ability to produce both cardinal and ordinal series makes them well suited to this task. Thus they intersect, extend and illustrate the rhetoric of a policy document whenever they appear, and draw from it their own illocutionary force. Quantitative data only makes sense within a frame of persuasion, that is, a way of speaking, and the five documents provide different examples of this: numbers as rebuke (IAC), as largesse (Creative Nation), as management tool (Nugent) and as national strategic vision (Creative Australia).

Finally, however, it is in what is not said in these documents that is of special interest, the view of culture they subtextually promote, lending this the weight of an accreted psychological state or presumed set of experiences or something less defined; a political unconscious, perhaps. Even when a document's use of performatives is sincere, non-contradictory, feasible and recognised as such, they can nevertheless carry an unstated charge that overdetermines the explicit language structures in which they are embedded.
What might these five documents be saying/doing in addition to the words they actually use? Provisionally, I will suggest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Illocutionary Force</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IAC</td>
<td>to censure, to punish, to find fault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McLeay</td>
<td>to admonish, to hold forth, to instruct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Nation</td>
<td>to legitimate, to celebrate, to include</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nugent</td>
<td>to organise, to sort out, to reward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Australia</td>
<td>to bring together, to unify, to encompass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If this list is accurate, it could be asserted that these five policy documents get ‘happier’ in Austin’s sense of that term, since it is the disparity between the cultural sector as it stands and as the government would like to be that is basis for the dyspepsia of earlier reports, a disparity which is perceived to lessen in later reports. But I would argue that whatever words we use to characterise the illocutionary forces of these policy documents, they all have the same illocutionary point: to demonstrate the utility of government intervention in the cultural sector or, alternatively, to demonstrate its disutility. Put another way, peak documents must make sense of culture as an aggregate category of policy intervention before they can do anything with it. Since, more than most other aspects of human existence, cultural experience is multiformal, complex, context reliant, individually felt and constantly changing, this demonstration is a somewhat anxious affair, invariably reliant on the subjective feelings of those involved in the policy-making process in a way that functional logic in theory rules out. This is the lie in the soul of the cultural policy process for modern democratic states, one that policy documents must get away with if their proposed courses of action are to stick. It gives rise to a rhetorical excess, whatever the register of address or what Austin calls ‘a certain type of nonsense’, before noting in his dry way ‘[that] “false” is not necessarily used of statements only’ (p. 11).

Total speech act analysis as an analytical philosopher might conceive it would be a more thoroughgoing affair than is sketched here. The performative as a sensitising concept has long since detached from Austin’s understanding of it and assumed an independent trajectory of its own, most notably in the work of Judith Butler (1987). Nevertheless, returning to this classic book and reflecting afresh on its distinctions and examples indicates how a rhetorical analysis of cultural policy can be grounded in the careful observation of the operations of language and paralinguistic devices. For the fact is that cultural policies not only use different registers of address, they are in large part comprised of them. The collision between culture and cultural provision is such that a rhetorical response is often the most meaningful one, allowing governments to capture the contrasting feelings and values the sector provokes at a policy level. The words government use to announce their intentions are a form of action in their own right. Awareness of this fosters better understanding not only of the much-commented on ‘ideas-thick’ nature of the cultural policy process (Cunningham, 1992) but its polyvocality, the central feature of its real-world existence.

Endnotes:

i. At the time of the release of Creative Australia the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was developing a national arts curriculum. This remains in draft form (ACARA 2013).

ii. This is similar, but not quite the same as Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey’s distinction between ‘reactive’ and ‘prescriptive’ policy dynamics, put forward in their classic monograph on cultural provision models, ‘The Arm’s Length Principle and the Arts: An International Perspective’. These dynamics refer to the degree to which cultural policies follow or lead the cultural field in strategic agenda setting. ‘Direction of fit’ by contrast, is a broader energising principle that refers to a general disposition to shape the real world according to a given plan of action or, alternatively, to produce a plan of action from a given understanding of the real world.
References


Creative Australia. (2013). National Cultural Policy, Australian Government

Creative Nation. (1994). Canberra, Department of Communications and the Arts


