The Politics of Exclusion: Political Censorship and the Arts-as-Industry Paradigm

Hilary Glow Lecturer, Arts and Entertainment Management, Deakin University
Katya Johanson Lecturer, School of Communication and the Creative Arts, Deakin University

Keywords Cultural policy, arts industry Australia, political censorship, Arts Victoria 1992-1999, Kennett Government.

Abstract In Australia from 1992 to 1999 Jeff Kennett led the Liberal state government in Victoria. Under his leadership an important vision statement for the arts was produced, and ambitious redevelopments of Victoria’s major cultural institutions were undertaken. Kennett’s ‘vision’ included reforms to Arts Victoria (the state-based arts funding agency) and a radical revision of how the arts were to be subsidised. This represented a wholesale adoption of a new policy approach which saw the arts and culture as an industry which could benefit, in particular, the development of cultural tourism for the state of Victoria. This paper argues that while the arts could be seen to have benefited from the Kennett government’s largesse, some parts of the arts sector were excluded and subjected to censorship. Based on both primary and secondary sources, we argue that in this period, the work of artists which expressed a politically dissenting view was actively discouraged.

Biography Hilary Glow is Lecturer in Arts and Entertainment Management at Deakin University. She has many years experience in the arts having worked in both the theatre and film industries. She was Manager of the Women’s Program at the Australian Film Commission from 1989-1999. In theatre she has worked as a professional dramaturg and script editor for some of Australia’s best known playwrights. She has taught at the Victorian College of the Arts School of Drama, the University of South Australia, the University of Melbourne and at Swinburne University's National Institute of Circus Arts. She is currently completing her PhD which is an investigation of the role of contemporary Australian playwrights and screenwriters.

Katya Johanson is Lecturer in Professional Writing, in the School of Communication and the Creative Arts at Deakin University. She has completed her doctoral thesis in 2001 on ‘The Role of Australia’s Cultural Council 1945–95’ at Melbourne University. She has taught Arts and Entertainment Management, Australian Studies and Editing and Publishing at Melbourne and Deakin Universities. She is also an editor, and has worked for Cambridge University Press, Pearson Education and Deakin University. She lives in Melbourne with her partner and two daughters.

Acknowledgements The writers wish to thank Kelly Shirreff, Catherine Jones and Patricia Cornelius for their help with the research for this paper.

In the mid-1990s, the relationship between governments and the arts in Australia appeared to be particularly strained. Leonard Radic commented in the Age that while many members of the theatre community were ‘dismayed’ at the stronghold by governments over what was and was not produced in Australian theatre, ‘they dare not speak up … for fear of being blacklisted’. The pressure for the performing arts to demonstrate that they were central to the lives of all Australians had created a ‘Theatre of Comfort’, and few people were willing to object: ‘Who dares to say that mainstream theatre companies are increasingly allowing marketing and subscription pressures to dictate their program?’ asked Radic, ‘Where in their repertoire do you
find new work? Where is there provision for the right to fail – work that is genuinely experimental? Where in their repertoire do you find work which is overtly political?’(Radic 1996:14).

Victoria in the 1990s is a particularly interesting case study of this ‘stronghold’ of government and its effects, because Jeff Kennett’s Liberal state government – which was in power from 1992 to 1999 – had a much-publicised vision for the arts; a vision that was associated with largesse. Premier Kennett was also Minister for the Arts from 1996-1999, and under his leadership the newly named department for the arts, Arts Victoria, produced an important vision statement for the arts and undertook ambitious redevelopments of Victoria’s major cultural institutions. The arguments of the enthusiasts of Kennett’s reforms emphasise the inclusive nature of the new policy approach: the redefinition of culture included not just the traditional arts but also popular and mass culture; it incorporated new technologies and gave attention to multicultural and indigenous work which are acknowledged for their potential to encourage audience development and cultural tourism. The new cultural policy framework also took globalisation into its embrace, acknowledging its capacity to build Australia’s cosmopolitanism and its capacity for cultural exports. In other words, it was largely appraised as a value-adding exercise, as an inclusive process from which everyone is the beneficiary.

But this paper argues that it is also valuable to identify what was excluded from the embrace of this policy. We argue that artists themselves were excluded – particularly those artists who wished to work in politically controversial ways. The new paradigm was not designed to include innovative projects which had no market potential, nor experimental, small-scale work whose goal was not to capture the widest possible audience. How did the Kennett government’s policy framework accommodate the politically dissenting voice?

Methodology

The methodological approach taken here has been shaped by the nature of our research task. In our concern to uncover instances of political censorship we found, unsurprisingly, a dearth of hard evidentiary material. However, our interviews with artists suggested that there was significant anecdotal material which was worth exploring. Further, our interest in looking at the ways in which artists view their role and work in relationship to developments within arts policy, has necessitated an interview-based approach. This is consistent with the broad mission of oral history which seeks to ‘give a voice to those who do not leave accounts or have biographers’ (Roberts 2002:24). While the use of anecdotal evidence is not without controversy as a methodology, it has enabled us to generate material in an area that is otherwise under-explored.

The interview material used in this paper is one of three data sources which also include an examination of primary and secondary texts, thus providing a triangulated approach to data type (Miles & Huberman 1994:267). The anecdotal material has come from an interview conducted with the Melbourne writer Patricia Cornelius who was a participant in the protest that accompanied the launch of Kennett’s arts policy in 1994. This paper also examines a range of primary sources including parliamentary speeches, government documents and annual reports, and secondary material such as newspaper reports. This paper is intended as an exploratory study whose findings, and the questions these raise, are to be the subject of further investigation.

The arts as industry in Australia

The notion of the arts as an industry now has a significant history. In Australia, as elsewhere, it grew up in response to the increasing colonisation of public policy by economic rationalism in the 1980s. As economic rationalism encouraged the dependence of public spending on its economic benefits, the advocates of arts funding were forced to find a way to justify funding for activities that were previously seen as forming an intangible public good. They did so by identifying the arts’ tangible benefits –
in particular their service to tourism and entertainment industries – and began to characterise the arts as an industry in itself. Donald Horne, who chaired the Australia Council from 1985 to 1990, thus argued that the Council’s funding of new art could be seen as a program to assist ‘the whole arts and entertainment industry … and, for that matter, the whole information industry’ (Horne: n.d.).

A significant outcome of this movement was the initiation of the cultural policy document. Federal and state departments with responsibility for the arts produced policy documents as mission statements, declaring their adoption of the arts-as-industry approach and defining what this meant. The Keating Federal Government’s 1994 Creative Nation was the first example of such a document at the federal government level. Creative Nation largely envisaged and depicted the arts ‘industry’ as the provider of content for fast-developing communications technology: ‘Text, graphics, sound and image can now be deployed to provide not simply data but concepts and understanding, creative elements that can expand horizons’ (DOCA 1994:55). Creative Nation stated its policy priorities as being to promote flexibility ‘to the changing needs of the arts community’, private sponsorship, audience development, linkages with broadcasting technologies, and international marketing strategies (DOCA 1994:13).

In 1996 the Liberal Coalition led by John Howard won federal government. Howard did not have the profile within the arts community that had been enjoyed by his predecessor, but under Howard the emphases and priorities articulated through Creative Nation have intensified. Along with an on-going commitment to addressing the convergence of technologies, the central concern of the policy to place cultural practices within a wider commercial context, remains the principal rationale for arts funding under the federal Liberal–National government (Rentschler 2002:30). In particular, cultural tourism continues to be a priority and is seen as a strategy that benefits the arts organisations themselves, as well as providing promotional opportunities for Australia as a whole, and the individual states, to international and local tourism markets (Stevenson 2000:182).

The Australia Council’s role is increasingly oriented towards the development of new audiences and the marketing of the arts. Recent Australia Council publications testify to the Council’s intensified commitment to researching audience development and marketing, and promoting these priorities and strategies to the arts community (Australia Council 2000). Ruth Rentschler confirms that this shift in the Council’s priorities could be seen as a reflection of a continued movement away from the supply side of funding programs, that is, artistic and creative production and development. Instead, there has been an intensification of focus on audience development, consumption and demand (Rentschler 2002:49).

One happy consequence of the popularity of the arts-as-industry approach is that, since the mid-1990s, arts policy is emerging more strongly at all levels of government, partly because of the apparent service that the ‘arts industry’ represents to economies. In particular, local governments and shires are assuming key roles in community arts and local cultural development. State governments are taking an increasingly proactive and entrepreneurial role, especially in relation to festivals and large-scale special events (Arts Victoria 2003).

On the whole, the arts-as-industry approach has been well-received by cultural policy analysts and observers. For the more pragmatic, the approach represents a defence of arts funding, because ‘the idea that a discussion of cultural issues is somehow outside the economic framework is becoming less sustainable, but more importantly it is not an effective position from which to mount a defence, or a counter attack to the “economic rationalist” challenge’ (Molloy 1994:26). The arts-as-industry approach is also seen as undermining the unwanted tradition of elitism of the arts, as it favours arts that attract audiences over arts that are viewed by a few to have an inherent worth that popular audiences cannot see (Stanbridge 2004).

However, since the late 1990s there has been mounting academic criticism of the arts-
as-industry approach. Jo Caust challenges the apparent inclusivity of the approach. She points out that one of its effects has been to replace the use of the term 'arts' with that of 'culture' in policy, which in turn presents a conundrum: 'If government arguments for the support for the arts are wholly industry/economically constructed, what happens to arts practice that falls outside of this construct ... arts practice for instance that is 'experimental', community based or 'art for arts sake'? (Caust 2004:3) She also suggests that there is a somewhat coercive element to the approach, as there is an assumption within the discourse around it 'that the normalising of the arts sector into an 'industry' by policy makers, has made everyone recognise that artistic undertakings are an industry and that acceptance of this norm should be mandatory' (Caust 2004:1–2).

Deborah Stevenson is also critical of the influence of the arts-as-industry approach at a state level. She makes the case that throughout the 1990s the states supported and promoted those cultural practices that were seen to be part of the ‘broader state development agenda’. On the development ‘agenda’ for most states were programs such as cultural tourism, industry development, regional cultural development, touring programs, indigenous arts, multimedia and multiculturalism (Stevenson 2000:77). Stevenson goes on to suggest that one of the explanations for the sudden expansion in state-based arts policy and funding programs in this period was the increasing competition between the states to secure and host high-profile and lucrative cultural events. In this competitive environment, throughout the 1990s, the states underwrote the costs of building cultural precincts, and casino and festival marketplace developments (Stevenson 2000:85).

In order to deliver the new regime of cultural support tied to commercial development, the states enacted two key strategies. First, there was an emphasis on developing strategic partnerships between cultural industries and other industry sectors, for example trade and tourism. This approach enabled state governments increasingly to insist that their funding for specific arts projects be contingent on dollar-for-dollar funding from other sources (Stevenson 2000:79). The second strategy involved the repositioning of the arts as an industry sector which, like other industries, had to become primarily self-supporting. Stevenson notes that this was more than just rhetoric; the state governments developed practical strategies for the cultural sector to build their industry credibility by funding arts organisations to develop business and management skills, with the aim of realizing the critical importance of operating profitable and sustainable commercial enterprises (Stevenson 2000:80). This represented a significant ideological shift; governments no longer justified arts funding on the basis of a philosophical commitment to the public good, rather arts funding in the new industry paradigm was seen as an investment in cultural capital which would eventually become self-sustainable.

Stevenson comments that the arts-as-industry approach had ‘unavoidable implications for artistic expression – either limiting or expanding opportunities for experimentation – and political and social comment, determining which arts practices are endorsed as “legitimate” and which are not...’. She cautions that ‘the ideology that drives the push to greater economic liberalism conversely creates a climate for moral conservatism that can result in artistic censorship’ (Stevenson 2000:80).

There are two reasons for this progression. First, art that is appealing to a broad audience cannot risk alienating anyone; the least contentious art is funded because it has the broadest audience. Second, and more insidious, the arts-as-industry approach does not stand independently of broader governmental economic objectives. As we will illustrate, Victorian cultural policy under Kennett did not just attempt to broaden the audience for the arts but to broaden the economic attractiveness of the state of Victoria through the arts. In order to achieve this, the arts could not be seen to be critical of government because this would jeopardise the attractiveness of the state to commercial interests.

Stevenson’s note of caution here is important as it underlines a key issue about the
Kennett and Victoria on the Move

In Victoria from the mid-1990s onwards the nexus between arts and industry was forged with a fierce intensity. Kennett was a political conservative but his rhetoric around cultural development and his own role as its inspirational leader, had a radical ring to it: ‘Advances of civilization have taken place sometimes … by accident, but generally on the knife-edge of change. So we are indeed talking about revolution, and about meeting the challenge of breaking through the new frontiers of experience’ (Kennett 1999). Kennett’s master plan was to build the economic profile of Victoria through a massive program of business development, and in this he saw the tremendous contributive potential of culture. To this end his government embarked on a program of major civic projects whose function was to ‘revitalise Victoria’s capital city and restore its cultural and commercial dominance by the turn of the century’ (Office of the Premier of Victoria 1993). These civic projects included the development of a casino on the banks of the Yarra, and an Exhibition Centre at Southbank. As a project the casino, in particular, encapsulated Kennett’s ambition for the state by drawing together his commercial and cultural agendas; not only would the casino be a source of significant revenue generation for the state, but it was also to be ‘a local entertainment venue and a new and attractive focus for Victoria’s tourist industry’ (Office of the Premier of Victoria 1993). By 1999, in the last year of his premiership, Kennett clearly felt that he had achieved his mission announcing: ‘We have become known for the term that Victoria is “open for business”. And Victoria is also a 24 hour a day live entertainment centre of international renown’ (Kennett 1999).

However, it is important to understand how this appreciable profiling of culture in the 1990s came about and, more specifically, to ask the question, what role did the arts play in this process? In November 1994, two years after his election to government, Kennett, who was also Minister for the Arts, released his plan for the development of the arts in Victoria. Arts 21 was an ambitious strategy for the arts industry looking forward to the twenty-first century, and as a policy document it provides a good example of the way in which the new thinking about the arts (post Creative Nation) came to be realized in practice.

Arts 21 was part of the Kennett government’s broader agenda of developing an international profile for Victoria. Further, support for the arts was seen as a vital part of making Victoria the ‘cultural capital’ of Australia, and revitalizing the economic, social and cultural life of the state (Jacobs 1997:15). To this end, Arts 21 presented six key strategies:

- Into the information age
- Providing world class facilities
- Creating great programming
- Promoting leadership
- Customer-focused marketing
- Delivering to Australia and the world (Arts Victoria 1994)

As Stevenson points out, not one of these strategies includes the word ‘culture’ or ‘art’ (Stevenson 2000:82). But together these provided the framework by which all the cultural institutions of Victoria (no matter their size) were to be appraised in terms of their project delivery and future planning. The Kennett government’s strategies for the development of the cultural sector in Victoria went hand-in-hand with other changes that were being wrought throughout the public sector. From his election in 1992,
Kennett brought in reforms across the public sector which were determined by the principles of competition policy and which, in turn, forced the sector to be outsourced, corporatised or privatised wherever possible. All government departments, including the newly named Arts Victoria, were to ‘configure their activities as business units, and introduce corporate and business planning processes which focused on achieving agreed outcomes, on improving customer service and on reducing the cost of service delivery’ (Jacobs 1997). With this in mind, Kennett collapsed the two departments of Arts, Sports and Recreation and the Tourism Commission into the one entity; a move which delivered the required cost benefits since ‘the tourism portfolio was … a critical component in generating increased economic benefits to the state’ while at the same time ‘the arts, entertainment, sporting … assets offering a competitive advantage relative to the tourism positioning of other states’ (Jacobs 1997). The new organisation developed a corporate action plan, *Realities and Opportunities*, which was designed to maximise linkages with other departments, ‘particularly Tourism Victoria’ (Arts Victoria 1992/93).

Part of the motivation behind this amalgamation was that the Kennett government saw the arts as providing a service to the state of Victoria, effectively marketing the state by attracting tourism and business development. The major beneficiaries of Kennett’s policies were the institutional figureheads of culture in Victoria. The Museum of Victoria received a $250 million redevelopment and the State Library a $39 million redevelopment, while the National Gallery of Victoria, Old Customs House and the Regent Theatre – all in Melbourne – were also substantially redeveloped. An *Arts Institutions Amendment Bill* was introduced into Parliament in 1996 that corporatised the structure of the State Library, Museum and National Gallery. At the time, the Labor Opposition expressed concern that one of the effects of this corporatisation, which gave Kennett as Minister for the Arts no longer ‘general power of direction and control’ but simply ‘power of direction and control’, might be political censorship:

> All honourable members know that the arts community is renowned for free expression, creativity and artistic performance without censorship. We must ensure that freedom is maintained. …

> The removal of the word ‘general’ means the minister – in this case, the Premier – will have the power of direction and will be able to direct the institutions to sell off rare books or our very extensive art collection in Australia or overseas. The opposition and the arts community are concerned about the possibility of censorship and government interference in the arts (Legislative Council, Victoria 1996:1309–1310).

At the heart of Kennett’s change of thinking about arts policy is a radical revision of the notion of arts subsidy. From the formation of the Australia Council in the late 1960s, arts policy had always emphasized a humanistic rationale for arts funding. Governments funded the arts because the arts constituted a public benefit. Arts Victoria’s statutory charter, set in 1972, had this humanistic rationale very much at heart. It listed as its goals the improvement of Victorians’ knowledge and appreciation of the arts; increasing the availability of the arts; the provision of facilities that enable the arts to be performed; and the provision of advice to other government departments regarding cultural matters. Under the Kennett government’s predecessor, the Labor government led by Joan Kirner, the arts policy produced by the Ministry for the Arts and titled *Mapping Culture* listed its guiding principles as being: ‘initiative, diversity, participation and cooperation’. While its objectives for the arts were also tied to economic objectives – enhancing Melbourne as a ‘cultural capital’ and promoting a ‘productive culture’ by increasing employment in the arts – it also emphasised the importance of diversity and the aim of offering ‘every individual, small group or community an opportunity to contribute to a shared culture … It aims to promote a culturally productive society in which all the people have opportunities to participate’ (Ministry for the Arts, Victoria 1991).

Under Kennett and *Arts 21*, the notion of subsidy itself was subjected to review. In an
environment where anti-protectionist ideas were shaping international trade policy (through the GATT round of negotiations), the rationale for arts subsidy was harder to justify. Indeed, Tim Jacobs, then Director of Arts Victoria, describes the impossibility of continuing to 'sell' the idea of arts subsidy as a relevant policy model given its many and palpable flaws: ‘The reliance on picking winners, on providing selective advantage on the basis of the picking process (at times in spite of market realities), the inevitable tendency towards inequity that emerges as contenders for support increase but funds available for dispersal remain static – the list of the model’s limitations could go on’ (Jacobs 1997:22). Of note here is the unmistakable privileging of commercial values; on ‘picking winners’ and taking cognizance of ‘market realities’. And absent from this radical critique of subsidy are references to issues of access and equity, or a concern for what happens to artistic work which, in this new paradigm, is innovative but not marketable.

This rejection of the subsidy model for the arts was also manifested in changes to the way support was provided. Arts Victoria no longer gave grants to specific art forms – dance, drama, literature, visual arts and so forth – but rather emphasised the context within which the art is produced (Stevenson 2000:84). Now funding programs and types of grants were defined in terms of industry development – such as international touring, marketing and audience development. For Jacobs the old art-form specific funding process was a ‘straightjacket’ for policy thinking because it tended to privilege the production side of arts activity (Jacobs 1997:25).

Arts 21 on the other hand, and the concomitant restructure of Arts Victoria, delivered a new paradigm in which the market side of arts activity was given its priority at the top of the funding chain. Missing from Jacobs’ enthusiastic rationalising of the new arts funding programs, however, was any acknowledgment of the difficulties which faced artists who did not toe the line. In the world of Arts 21, artists were assumed to be predominantly concerned with producing marketable products and could, therefore, work within the new commercial framework. There was no place here for the dissenting voice, for the cultural work which expressed an oppositional view. In the brave new world of Arts 21, where the marketplace (rather than cultural or aesthetic priorities) increasingly set the agenda, many artists found themselves pushed to the margins, if not completely off the page. This was particularly so when artists appeared to criticise the government or the prevailing political climate. In the seven years of Kennett’s reign there were numerous instances in which there appeared to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the government to censor such artists and their works.

Melbourne Workers’ Theatre

One case of such political censorship emerged at the very point at which Arts 21 was officially launched. The launch took place in November 1994 at the Malthouse theatre complex in Melbourne. A fanfare by Monteverdi accompanied Kennett’s policy announcement along with performances of acrobatics, drums and dancers – a bill which, as one newspaper commentator suggested, lent the event ‘a mixture of showbusiness and old-time religion; hype and doctrine colliding with seismic force’ (Shmith 1994).

At the launch Kennett announced a new capital works programs totalling over $300 million to include the construction of the new Museum of Victoria and extensive refurbishment of the State Library (Jacobs 1997:18). In addition, the government promised a further $7.3 million to implement Arts 21’s six point strategy (listed above), and the audience composed of arts bureaucrats, politicians, board members, sponsors, and artists were mostly enthusiastic (Shmith 1994). However, in the background the Melbourne Workers’ Theatre (MWT) was staging a small but furious protest. Patricia Cornelius, one of the founding directors of MWT, remembers the event in the following way:

*There was a general suspicion that this huge injection of funds into the arts was actually [to pay] for infrastructure and more bureaucracy, rather than for the artists*
and their projects. At the time all the small-to-medium theatre companies, including Melbourne Workers’ Theatre, had had $20,000 lopped off their grants.

At the launch artists were invited but we were told that no questions from the floor would be accepted. As part of a protest, members of the MWT handed around paper bags with stickers on them that were intended to comment on Kennett’s slogan ‘Victoria on the Move’. The stickers said: ‘Motion Sickness Bag’.

When Kennett announced his plan to inject increased funding into the arts, I called out: ‘it’s all very well, but not if this money is at the expense of theatre companies!’

I called out that he had taken $20,000 away from the theatre companies without any consultation whatsoever (Cornelius 2002).

A newspaper report of the event noted that Kennett responded to Cornelius’ interjection, telling her to ‘read the policy first and ask questions after’ (Shmith 1994). However, according to Cornelius herself, Kennett’s actual response was more decisive:

I believe I was blacklisted after this. During his reign, I was knocked back for the project grants I applied for (Cornelius 2002).

MW T’s annual reports for 1993/94 and 1994/95 confirm that the company did indeed suffer a budget cut: Arts Victoria’s funding to the company fell from $50,000 in 1993–94 to $30,000 in 1994–95 (MWT 1995a). The company’s board meeting minutes note that Arts Victoria attributed this funding cut to low attendance figures for the company’s performances (MWT 1995b).

According to the Cornelius the Kennett government’s approach to the arts demonstrated a lack of willingness to consult with artists about cultural policy, and involved the withdrawal of funding from experimental and small companies to fund the government’s priority areas. Cornelius’ account is anecdotal and not disinterested, but it underlines her powerful sense of disenfranchisement during the Kennett era. Arguably, too, the Melbourne Workers’ Theatre, with its long-standing commitment to producing theatre works for and about the union movement, might perhaps have already found it difficult to secure funding under a regime which was not known for its tolerance of the union movement.

But most startling of all, this anecdote reveals that Cornelius believes her act of speaking out, her public expression of a dissenting view, damaged her chances of receiving funding. While the selection of artists and projects for funding is clearly a subjective process, and any number of variables can determine the outcome, this anecdote nonetheless suggests that the radical restructure of Arts Victoria under Tim Jacobs, which accompanied the launch of Arts 21, could not apparently justify the funding of artistic work from artists who positioned themselves as critical of the Premier. And thus an irony: the close association of the arts with the Premier himself (which seemed to promise a much enhanced political and social profile for the arts), also laid open the possibility for much greater levels of interference in the process of arts funding.

One of the previously unassailable features of cultural policy was the commitment of all governments (no matter the political hue) to peer assessment. Even with the new industry focus, this commitment had been unequivocally re-affirmed in Creative Nation (Commonwealth of Australia 1994). However, in the case of Victoria, and as a direct response to Arts 21, the role of peer assessment was substantially reviewed and found wanting. In its place, Arts Victoria instituted a management-focused approach to the allocation of funds as a more ‘strategic’ way of delivering ‘particular outcomes’: in this way ‘the grant provider philosophy has been replaced by a service purchaser orientation designed to facilitate the allocation of funding by Arts Victoria to areas with a
capability to achieve the goals of Arts 21 and bring about value added benefits to the arts industry’ (Victoria Auditor-General’s Office 1996). This account from the Auditor General’s Office exemplifies the new and highly functionalist understanding of the arts in general, and the funding process in particular. Arts funding was no longer to be guided by the assessments of experts and peers, but by a ‘service purchaser orientation’. The changes to Arts Victoria’s method of project selection not only contain an implied criticism of the earlier process of peer review; it was unreliable (not strategic) and not sufficiently concerned with ‘outcomes’. This has been replaced by an apparently more legitimate and ideologically ‘free’ system, which operates solely through the determination of market demand. This is not to suggest that peer assessment was or is beyond critique. In fact in recent years the process of peer review at the Australia Council has been subjected to attacks by both artists and members of the media who have claimed that this method allows personal bias to influence funding decisions (Johanson 2000). In particular, the poet Les Murray, perhaps the most well known campaigner against peer review, saw the Australia Council as being dominated by coteries of self-interested artists (Johanson 2000). However, in the case of Arts Victoria the rejection of peer assessment became a means by which artists were largely excluded from the decision making process, and instead bureaucrats and managers were largely determining what made it through the gate. And since, as the audit report makes clear, successful projects were those which could be seen to fulfil the vision of Arts 21, the space for contrary, difficult or oppositional art was arguably very limited indeed.

Another issue here is the way in which the new policy framework was accompanied by a distinctively hands-on approach from the minister responsible for the portfolio. In the period of the Kennett government, there were two ministers for the arts: Haddon Storey held the position from 1992 until his retirement from politics in 1996 when Premier Kennett stepped into the role until the change of government in 1999. Over this whole period the annual reports from Arts Victoria suggest a rhetorical – and possibly real – change to the relationship between artists and the Ministry. Arts Victoria (formerly the Victorian Council of the Arts), consisting of twelve members appointed by the Minister, was originally established to provide expert advice to the Minister on the allocation of funding. The nature of this relationship has been somewhat ambivalent. For example, in the Council’s 1987/88 Annual Report the Council restated the fact that it was to ‘act in an advisory capacity, to assist the Minister and Director on matters concerning the arts’ (VCA 1988:2). The final decisions about grant applications were made by the Minister. However, the same report mentions, four pages later, the Council’s concern that reforms to cultural funding policies should not jeopardise ‘the Ministry’s firm policy of dealing at arm’s length with its clients’ (VCA 1988:6). Arms-length funding is a cornerstone of Federal Government funding for the arts in Australia. It is an ethos informed by the belief that ‘most politicians are not artistically – or, indeed, morally, competent to make accurate and informed aesthetic judgements’ (Stevenson 2000:50), so funding decisions are made on the basis of advice from experts – usually artists. In Victoria, funding decisions are made by the Minister, but as the Council’s 1987/88 Annual Report points out there has been an expectation that these decisions are informed, and indeed informally made, by the expert members of the Council.

However, this was not the case in the decision to cut the Melbourne Workers Theatre’s funding in 1995. The Arts Victoria Drama Panel actually recommended a small increase in the theatre’s funds. Arts reporter Palz Vaughan described a comic situation in which:

When asked if the decision to cut funds to the MWT was made by the appointed peer assessment panel, Mr Storey… shook his head with a definite no. He and the arts bureaucrats had obviously not rehearsed their performance; the two bureaucrats flanking the minister nodded a big yes. However, Mr Storey, unaware of his minions’ response, went on to make it clear that the decision was not based on a recommendation from the panel. It would seem that, despite previous insistence on the importance of the peer assessment panel, the process had not
been applied in this case (Vaughan n.d).

Just as the role of peer assessment was undergoing change to reflect the changing political circumstances, so too were the official expectations of the Council itself which, as described in the 1987/88 Annual Report, appear to undergo a subtle rhetorical change in the Annual Reports from 1992 - 1999. In 1989, for example, the role of the Council is described as follows:

*The Victorian Council of the Arts comprises twelve members, bringing with them a wide range of skills and experience from the Victorian arts industry. Their role is to maintain, through their monthly meetings, a broad overview of the arts throughout the State, particularly the changing structures and needs of specific fields, and to convey advice of these changes to the Minister and his staff.* (VCA 1989:4)

Four years later, and during the period of Kennett’s stewardship, the role of the Council is described as follows:

*Appointed by the Minister, the Victorian Council of the Arts comprises up to twelve members, with a wide range of skills and perspectives. The role of the Council is to maintain, through its monthly meetings and other mechanisms, a broad overview of the arts development throughout Victoria – in particular the changing structures and needs of specific fields – and to be a source of advice on these changes to the Minister and Director* (VCA 1994:17).

The key rhetorical shift here entails an assertion of the primacy of the Minister’s role as decision maker, and a scaling down of the role of the council members and a devaluing of their expertise. Where once it was the members’ experiences which were considered valuable, they are later only asked to bring their perspectives to bear on the task at hand. Previously the Council’s role had been to ‘convey advice’ to the Minister, now it is deemed to be only one ‘source of advice’ – giving the Minister much greater latitude to make decisions according to other (un-named) criteria.

If the case of the Melbourne Workers’ Theatre suggests that the ethos of peer assessment was being renegotiated in Victoria, the next case study surely drives this point home.

“It is not art work…”

By 1996 the Kennett government had been in power for four years and during that period the state had focused considerable energy on the development of the City Link; a billion dollar project to link the three major road systems leading into and around Melbourne. The project’s builders, Transfield-Obayashi, had commissioned a series of artworks from painting students at the Victorian College of the Arts (Trioli 1996). At that time, visiting American artist Barbara Kruger had been working with the students of the VCA Arts School constructing billboards and installations which combined images and text (Lancashire 1996). The students’ billboards were erected along St Kilda Road at the City Link construction site. Mimicking Kruger’s public sloganistic style and direct address, one student artist, Karen Lindner, had painted slogans which read: ‘Why are you afraid of your vulnerability?’, ‘You know your superiority is an illusion’, and ‘Why do you control?’ (Freeman-Greene 1997). The hoardings went up as part of a planned weekend celebration of city projects, open to the public for the first time, and Premier Kennett and the Minister for Planning, Rob Maclellan, insisted that these works were to be censored. In taking the decision to cover up the hoardings, a spokesman for the government explained: ‘it is not art work – at this stage we are only seeing some questions’ (Trioli 1996).

The government’s decision to censor the work received some criticism. The Age ran an
interview with Kruger in its ‘Metro’ section ten days after the event. Here Kruger commented on the incident by saying: ‘The emperor – or whoever he is – doesn’t know the art world, he doesn’t know my work. It would have been nice for his arts commissar to have told him there has been a strain for the last twenty years of people doing this, and this arts student was just miming a certain practice…’ (Trioli 1996). The National Association for the Visual Arts wrote to the Premier to express its ‘considerable alarm’ at the censorship and at the ‘veiled financial threats’ by Kennett ‘to the students and institution protesting against the government’s interference’. The Association wrote to Kennett that ‘The Age at the weekend of 5 October reported you as commenting ‘... if you are going to bite the hand of sponsorship then you can’t complain if the sponsors say at some stage, We don’t want to be part of it’ (Lancashire 1996).

However, despite the media’s reportage of the event, and Kruger’s subsequent criticism, the incident did not cause a furore within the arts community. Some seven months later, Lindner’s teacher, the painter Vic Majzner, expressed the view that many artists felt they had been effectively silenced, concerned that speaking out against the government would jeopardise their own careers. Thus, despite the incident having ‘left a bitter taste’ in the mouth of the arts community, there was no public protest. ‘Where’, Majzner asks, ‘were the artists marching in the street to protect the principle of freedom of expression? Was the art world too scared to voice an opinion?’ (Freeman-Greene 1997). This notion of the Victorian arts community as one in which debate and dissent had been effectively stifled, is also borne out by the views of the arts editor of The Age, Raymond Gill, who described a ‘culture of caution’ amongst the people running the major arts organisations in the State; people who ‘don’t want to say anything critical of the Government’. Gill notes: ‘I applaud the amount of money that is going into the arts, but it’s amazing that in an arena that is supposed to be about passion and matters of life and death, there’s so little talk’ (Freeman-Greene 1997).

The behaviour of some arts organisations in this period also suggests that the political context around the cultural policy created a climate of fear. An example of such behaviour can be found in the case of the Melbourne University Student Union (MUSU) and a play by award-winning playwright Stephen Sewell in November 1996. On advice from the Union’s lawyers, MUSU refused to proceed with a production of a satirical play by Sewell who had been commissioned by the student union to write a play about student politics. The union applied for funding from Arts Victoria’s Commissions Program and secured $15,000 for the project. Sewell’s play, entitled Sodomy and Cigarettes: the burlesque of a ridiculous man, was described by Sewell as a satire about Premier Jeff Kennett. The union’s lawyers, however, felt the work was defamatory, and the production was cancelled. Sewell himself had no doubt that this was ‘an act of blatant censorship’ and that furthermore ‘Arts Victoria is operating under a form of self-censorship that results in it denying, or withdrawing, funding to anything politically sensitive’ (Burchall 1996).

Five months later, in April 1997, a similar incident occurred. A play entitled The Essentials was due to be produced at the Gasworks Theatre in Albert Park under the aegis of the City of Port Phillip. The play, based on research with the Ambulance Employees Association and Associated Domestic Violence Services, explored the issue of privatisation of essential services and its effect on domestic violence. The City of Port Phillip stopped the production of the play due to legal advice that said it was defamatory. In a newspaper interview, the play’s director and co-writer Stefo Nantsou said that while the characters were fictional ‘the drama was set against real life events in Victoria in the past five years … we wanted to show the human cost of the enormous changes in this state’. The theatre company’s own legal advice suggested that there was little risk of legal action, however the City of Port Phillip refused to proceed. The production was finally rescued by the Victorian Trades Hall Council which agreed to stage the play at the Trades Hall (Gill 1997).

In the above cases, there appears to be a connection between the overt political content of the creative work and the decision to censor it. This conclusion was also drawn by John Brumby, then leader of the opposition – the Victorian Labor Party, who
stated in a speech to parliament in December 1996 that a ‘disturbing culture’ had
developed in the state whereby: ‘if the [arts community] does not produce what the
government likes, it is black-listed and taken off the funding profile’ (Parliament of
Victoria 1996).

Conclusion

We have looked at a number of critical case studies which emerged in the arts funding
environment of the 1990s in Victoria. In all the instances cited, the work of artists who
chose to speak against prevailing political values was marginalised or censored.
Indeed, one could argue that while Cornelius’ account of her treatment at the hands of
the new regime was not a disinterested one, her analysis could be seen to be verified
by the subsequent instances of political interference and censorship.

These case studies provide a means of teasing out some of the implications of the new
cultural policy regimes. Clearly, Kennett could be regarded as an individual case; a
maverick whose particular brand of top-down management of the arts portfolio was of
his own creation and reflected nothing more than his individual drive and management
style. However, another reading of these incidents strongly affirm Stevenson’s critical
appraisal of the potential limitations of the arts industry policies. In particular the case
studies outlined above suggest that the new arts-as-industry policy created a climate in
which it was possible for artists’ work to be censored, or simply not endorsed as
‘legitimate’.

This is not to suggest that traditional policy frameworks were or are beyond reproach;
indeed the criticisms of the Australia Council’s peer review process have always
centered around the issue of bias and the problem of peers expressing their personal
priorities by endorsing one arts practice over another (Stevenson 2000). Furthermore,
the very notion of arm’s length funding, with its apparent commitment to disinterested
decision making, has been targeted by critics of the Australia Council who have argued
that political interference is, in fact, endemic. As Justin Macdonnell has pointed out, the
process of peer review and arm’s length arts funding only works for the artists who are
successful at getting the grants (Macdonnell 1992). However, despite these concerns
(which perhaps suggest that every system will have its detractors), the key point here is
that the philosophical principles of arm’s length funding and peer review went hand-in-
hand with the philosophical commitment to the social value of the arts. Once that
commitment had been renegotiated (as happened in Victoria in the 1990s), and the
new arts industry policy was given an unfettered opportunity to define the parameters,
the arts environment was subjected to suppression and censorship by the government.

References


Arts Victoria, 1994, Arts 21: Victoria the State for the Arts, Government of Victoria,
Melbourne

Arts Victoria, 2003, Creative Capacity +, Government of Victoria, Melbourne

Australia Council/ Saatchi & Saatchi, 2000, Australian and the Arts, Australia Council,
Sydney

Australia Council 2000, Selling the Performing Arts, Australia Council, Sydney

Burchall, G. 1996, ‘Sewell fury as uni delays play’, The Age, 8 November, Metro p.5

Art, Culture and the Meaning of Life’, ICCPR 3rd International Conference on Cultural
Policy Research Proceedings, Montreal, August.

Cornelius, P. 2002, Interview with Patricia Cornelius, Melbourne
Department of Communications and the Arts 1994, Creative Nation, Commonwealth of Australia

Free Expression in the Arts Project 2003, Free Expression in Arts Funding: A Public Policy Report, FEAP, New York,


Gill, R. 1997, ‘Play gets the kiss of life’, The Age, 23 April, Metro p.3


Melbourne Workers Theatre (MWT) 1995b, Minutes of Board Meetings 1995, held in the private collection of the MWT, North Melbourne.


Parliament of Victoria 1996, Legislative Assembly, 2 December, p.1525


Rentschler, R. 2002, The Entrepreneurial Arts Leader, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia

Roberts, B. 2002, Biographical Research, Open University Press, Buckingham

Shmith, M. 1994, ‘Kennett's cultural policy we had to have’, The Age, Melbourne, 24 November, p.4


Stevenson, D. 2000, Arts and Organisation: Making Australian Cultural Policy,
University of Queensland Press, St Lucia

Trioli, V. 1996, ‘Kennett draws the line at words of art’, The Age, 4 October, News p.1


Victorian Ministry for the Arts, 1991, Mapping our Culture, Government of Victoria, Melbourne