

# Introduction

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On 8 December, 2004 the Australia Council announced an internal restructure in the terms proposed by its Future Planning Task Force. Given that the restructure was internal no consultation with clients, stakeholders or the public was offered. Recognising that the proposed internal changes, including the dissolution of the New Media Arts and Community Cultural Development Boards, would have serious external ramifications, artists and arts organisations met across Australia. Protests ensued and new lobby groups formed. Council conceded to consult, but only about how to best effect the restructure. Selected representatives from the new media and community arts fields were invited to meet the Task Force in what were titled ‘workshops’. Council formally accepted the proposal to restructure on 8 April 2005.

The formation of the New Media Arts Board in 1996, although not without controversy, was seen as enlightened. Here at last was an Australia Council Board that could formally address experimentation and innovation in the form of the hybrid and new media practices that had been steadily developing over two decades, work that had been difficult to categorise and, consequently, was often neglected or under-funded.

In 2005 the board has been dissolved, its ‘clients’ dispersed to the traditional artform category boards. The subject of this essay is what the demise of the New Media Arts Board tells us about the broader relationship between the Australia Council and the arts.

At a time of great cultural diversity and burgeoning new arts practices which connect unprecedentedly with our everyday lives, it is astonishing that the Australia Council has reversed its own evolution. The authoritarian manner in which it effected this change, the further diminution of the role of artists as peers within Council and the silencing of new media arts—it is no longer represented on Council—sadly parallel the de-liberalising of democracies the world over. While there might be enormous diversity on the ground, the ideological push to centralise and to control threatens to yield a monoculture, a condition to which the Australian arts has institutionally been too long inclined.

## The arts, ecologically

In contributions to the growing debate about the state of the arts in Australia, I’ve described the arts as an ecosystem: a self-organising, intricate, dynamic network of numerous agents looped together, competing for but primarily sharing resources, mutually evolving and responding to emerging organisms and innovations, and without a governing consciousness.

What I first thought was a helpful metaphor to wield against the fragmentary and utilitarian view of

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the arts inherent in the pervasive managerial model of the moment turned out to be more than an analogy. Human systems, whether linguistic, economic or cultural, operate not just *like* natural systems, but in the same way, as self-organising systems, albeit with varying degrees of conscious agency. But we're increasingly aware that theories of economics, for example, don't fit with the actuality of economic systems—economies operate like natural systems, but not like neo-liberal economic theory.<sup>1</sup> Art too is part of our nature. Complex patterns of art production and reception evolve, and mechanisms to manage them. But the manager and the system, like gardener and garden, can slip out of kilter and what was once creative co-operation at the edge of chaos (as one systems theory would have it) becomes dysfunctional, yielding uncreative disequilibrium.

A significant manager in the arts system (if now one among many), the Australia Council is not only attempting to wind back the clock of artistic evolution but also to usurp its partners, leaving 'clients' and 'stakeholders' out in the cold. Declaring itself 'leader' of and 'catalyst' for the arts, the danger is that the manager will lock into autocatalysis and use up available resources to keep itself alive. I exaggerate, but you get the picture.

The restructured Australia Council positions itself above the arts ecosystem of which it has long been a part, albeit in an increasingly difficult relationship, its funding levels essentially frozen, its roles and functions multiplying, its structure rigidly top-down, and less and less responsive to the bottom-up emergence of new ideas and forms that regenerate the arts.