

Introduction

Every few years, a new word works its way into the debate about the future of the publicly funded arts sector in Australia, words like ‘industry’, ‘investment’ and ‘partnership’. These linguistic imports are rarely superficial or coincidental. More often than not they reflect changes in the way governments and their funding agencies perceive the arts sector. Sometimes they signal a fundamental shift in the sector’s perception of itself.

‘Sustainability’ is one of the more recent words to insinuate itself. It is a term used by governments worldwide, initially in relation to the environment and the economy but, increasingly, in connection with other public policy interventions. Is what we are doing here, or there, sustainable?

In 2005, Brisbane-based Metro Arts launched a series of public seminars in partnership with the Brisbane Institute. One of the issues raised at the first of these, in a paper by the British academic and writer on cultural policy John Holden was that of the language employed. In particular, he said,

the language currently adopted in the cultural sector, by the funding system, and in the media is defective not just because it fails to provide an adequate means of talking about culture, but because

it is a language of supplication and dependency that fosters relations of inequality.¹

Reaching a shared understanding, it was felt, was central to improving the quality of the dialogue between government and the arts organisations and artists they fund.

Keen to take the debate between the arts sector and funding agencies forward, Metro Arts arranged a second seminar, entitled *Sustainability—Fantasy or Reality?*, to ask what the concept of sustainability might mean in the context of the arts. It went beyond the day-to-day challenges of keeping an arts business afloat, to consider new possibilities for creating a clearer and more productive dialogue between arts organisations and the arts funding agencies. So large did this concern loom in the debate that the participants concluded that the entire cultural relationship between creator and supporter needed to be re-examined.

Sustainability in the arts is about much more than money. Questions concerning the quality of artistic work and services, the efficiency of an organisation's operating systems, and the breadth and depth of its audience are as important as the more familiar ones about how to achieve a diverse and healthy funding base. This essay, to which a number of those who spoke at the seminar have contributed, was commissioned by Currency House to explore the subject further and establish a basis for argument. What exactly do we mean by 'sustainability' in the arts? What appear to be the characteristics of sustainable arts organisations and of a sustainable sector? Would we know them, if we saw them?

As a starting point, for this essay, we consider the origin of the term and the way in which the multi-faceted nature of sustainability is reflected in the practice of arts organisations and the sector of which they are a part. We look at some of the measures that have been taken in Australia and the United Kingdom to strengthen individual arts organisations and the sector as a whole, including the evocatively-titled British ‘sustainability’ programs Advancement, Stabilisation and most recently, Thrive! We have considered some of the Australian reactions to these measures, including the various inquiries and reviews of the past few years, in particular those relating to the performing arts; approaches and initiatives of state governments and the sector itself. In the context of creating stronger cultural enterprises and a more sustainable sector, what approaches appear to be working and what problems or issues still remain to be addressed? The essay concludes with an examination of the role played by governments and the arts sector in sustaining the arts ecology. What will it really take to create a healthy environment for a sector in which organisations will not just survive, but thrive?

Governments at all levels, both here and in the UK, not only acknowledge the cultural, social and economic benefits of the arts, but also have the public goodwill to continue supporting them. There is no evidence to suggest that there has been a significant shift in thinking or that ‘art’ has ceased to be a legitimate recipient of government funding. But there is plenty to suggest that our politicians and funding bodies are looking for value for money in all areas of