

# Access to Excellence: Overview Report

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**by Stephen Castles and Mary Kalantzis, with the support of Bill Cope**

## **Arts in a Multicultural Society and the Concept of Artistic Excellence**

### **The Concept of Excellence**

Excellence guides government activity in the arts, particularly what is funded and what is not funded. In the arts marketplace, excellence is also an important criterion for exhibiting, performing and publishing.

These are the practical ways to find out what excellence is - to look at what is funded, and to look at what circulates in the public arena. These are indicators of excellence-in-action.

The evidence gathered about excellence-in-action in the three artform reports that make up this project clearly shows that the concept of excellence that guides practical decisions in the arts can work in three ways:

#### *A Discriminating Excellence*

Excellence is a criterion for discriminating art from not-art, the worthy from the unworthy, the good from the bad. This is what the notion of excellence is supposed to do and indeed has to do, in a positive way.

#### *Excellence as Discrimination*

This same notion of excellence, however, can involve subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination in the negative sense - mechanisms for exclusion, for keeping the benefits and resources of the arts within a limited, often ethnically defined network, and thus for narrowing the scope and market of culture and art.

#### *Discriminating Excellence Without Discrimination*

A reconstituted notion of excellence, however, can discriminate in the positive sense without discrimination in the negative sense. It is the purpose of this report to work towards a reformulation of excellence in the arts for a multicultural society.

#### **A Discriminating Excellence**

Excellence in the arts is commonly distinguished in the following ways. Each way, when taken seriously and applied rigorously, contradicts some of the others, but this doesn't seem to matter, because discriminating what is excellent seems to be, much of the time, a matter of social, political and moral contingency.

- Excellence is the universal canon and is measured according to the standards of the 'greats'. Universal excellence reaches the heights of world culture, the international and the classical. Excellent art touches upon a timeless, transcendent aesthetic.
- Excellence is epitomised in the avant garde, the original, the innovatory. This contradicts the notion that excellence is linked to the canon - here, excellence is a process of

constantly transgressing the boundaries of the canon. Great art's originality is in its bold denial of the canonical. Working within canonical genres is merely to be conventional and derivative.

- Excellence is artform specific. It can only be judged relative to the craft practices of the artform, by peers and practitioners. This contradicts the pretences to universality and originality that are also used to discriminate excellence.
- Excellence is an expression of the national best, a representation of the essence of national identity and culture. This contradicts the ideal that great art is universal; here great art captures the essence of national peculiarity.
- Excellence cannot be articulated in explicit terms. It is based on originality, creativity and the individual; excellence can only be perceived practically and intuitively. It manifests itself in a brilliance that dazzles connoisseurs. This rather contradicts the universal standards otherwise posited by the concept.
- Excellence occurs in the realm of high culture. The aesthetic tempers the political and elevates our spirits above the mundane realities of work and the economy. Art is above culture.
- Excellence is reflected in markets and sales and the size of audiences. As the market is the arbiter of taste, what sells well has to be good. This contradicts other versions of excellence - the market does not necessarily value high culture, or the avant garde or the traditional canon.
- Excellence is so complex, contradictory and ill-defined a thing that its application is a matter of contingency. Perhaps it is no more than an accidental relation to patrons. This contradicts all the idealism about standards and quality that underlie the other readings of excellence.

## Excellence as Discrimination

An actively discriminating concept of excellence employing some of the elements just outlined can involve the following forms of discrimination in the negative sense:

- The canon against which excellence is measured is not universal - it is a political and moral construction of the West, or more specifically in Australia, of Anglo-dominant culture. Thus, judging art by the standards of the canon involves an inherent cultural bias and discrimination in the negative sense. The debate about excellence is framed within the terms of Western high cultural tradition. The less-than-excellent, by contrast, includes the traditional, the folkloric, the ethnic, the particular; ironically, excellence-as-classical canon misses the full richness of world culture and the genuinely internationalist potential of much of what it excludes.
- Excellence as the avant garde eschews the popular and the commercial. 'Community' art, on this basis, doesn't even make it into the realm of excellence - it is repetitive, derivative, and by definition unoriginal. Merely calling it community art, in fact, virtually precludes it from being excellent.
- Peer assessment and assessment of patrons in the name of excellence keeps art within the cultural norms of those peers and the patrons. It positions gatekeepers in strategic positions and allows them to reproduce a vision which invariably embodies cultural contents as well as craft form.
- The notion of excellence as a singular national best recreates the nationalist fiction that there can be such a thing, that an homogeneous and distinctive national identity and culture is possible. By default, this involves elevating the dominant culture and devaluing minority cultures as corrosive of the putative inner resilience of the national.
- Conceived as individual creativity, excellence

devalues cultural traditions of artistic production that put more emphasis on the group and the communal. Too often, the implicitly less-than-excellent is funded as a form of community development or welfare and thus is hardly art. From the point of view of excellence-as-individual creativity, these types of art are produced by groups of people, not artists. The notion of excellent art-as-individual creativity, moreover, turns a convenient blind eye to the social networks, the material resources and the cultural resources needed even to be the most determinedly individualist artist.

- A notion of truly excellent art as the realm of high culture excludes certain cultural activities as not-art - on the basis of class and ethnicity, for example. It also limits art so that it is not a part of work, so that it is not the realm of popular culture and experience. Differences are aggregated into the homogeneous 'other' that at best expresses itself through lesser-art - immigrant art or ethnic art, for example. This sometimes leads to a self-perception on the part of marginalised cultural groups that their work is not excellent; or a perception that art as they have come to understand it is not valued or appreciated in Australia.
- When excellence is reflected in markets, the market for art is viewed passively, as existing audiences or readerships. This view of audience then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, misreading demography, and thereby spreading commonsense misinformation about audiences and potential audiences.
- Excellence is an unclear and contradictory concept almost by design; the intangibility of the conventional notion of artistic excellence is often a matter of strategic opportunism, using whatever understanding of the term that will give the desired or expected results. It is a way of maintaining networks of privilege and exclusion. This leads to restrictions in access to training and resources. On the other hand, the people who get the resources they need to do their work well, and

who are thus granted both practical support and the institutional kudos, are by this bestowal alone virtually predestined to be excellent.

There is, however, a third way, a way of discriminating excellence in the positive sense, without discrimination in the negative sense. We will discuss this after introducing some instances of excellence in action in the arts.

## **Excellence in Action**

The three artform reports that, together, make up this project, show us ample evidence of the way in which excellence is a matter of discrimination in the negative sense.

### **Writers**

Crucial entry points into the realm of excellent writing include funding, publishing and reviewing. Ding Xiaoqi speaks of the cultural barriers that arise from the fact that the canon of excellence is Western, or more specifically, Anglo in its orientation. Optimistically, however, Ding argues that multiculturalism is elevating the self-image of ethnic communities so that they have a chance to participate in the canon.

There have been two sorts (of cultural barriers). Firstly, the typical Anglo racism of superiority, where people have low expectations of your work because they assume that it could not be on the same level as Western standards and therefore they are either suspicious of you or they take pity on you. And secondly, the underside of this is in the way in which the Chinese Australians tend to look down on themselves; this is an unconscious form of racism. This form of internalising racism could help explain the low levels of cultural production in the community. Multiculturalism is helping to change all that.  
Writers Report, p. 87.

Aina Vavere, on the other hand, comments on the marginalisation that comes with being typecast out of the mainstream, as the generic other that writes 'stories of immigrant

experience'. In Latvia, Vavere's work is mainstream. This leads Vavere to conclude, rightly or wrongly, that the Australian cultural mainstream is somewhat lacking.

I don't feel particularly happy about the distinction (of being categorised as a writer of 'stories of immigrant experiences'). There is nothing wrong with it; in a way it is accurate because most of my stories are about migrants; it is my world. But in the general context it has a stereotype of moaning. I am sick and tired of colleagues using the migrant category as a gripe. It is a groundless form of moaning; it assumes that we have a case for special privileges, but this is a way of cutting our own throat... My recent print run in Latvia was 40,000 in comparison to the 3,000 that Penguin ran. So why should I write in English?... Literature has a much higher status in Latvia.

Writers Report, p. 116.

The fact of marginalisation, including the stereotyping imposed by reviewers, has been, in Vavere's view, to the detriment of Australian culture generally.

The reading public in Australia is dedicated but it is always very small, and migrants have had little contact with these circles, to meet, converse and work with them. There was no connection to patronage networks. If European intellectuals were in contact with Australian patrons of art both would have benefited. However, the stereotype prevailed that culture was English and migrants were dumb... Reviews are all very much alike. In Australia reviewers concentrate on the fact that the stories are about immigration and that I am bilingual.

Writers Report, pp. 116-18.

Irina Grigorescu-Pana also comments on the way a wilfully narrow understanding of multiculturalism marginalises the writing of ethnic communities, thereby missing some of the landmarks of excellence in the global canon.

Multiculturalism is misunderstood because it is linked only to the literary production of the ethnic communities in Australia.... If multiculturalism is restricted to an empiricist representation of ethnic presences, then it is too narrow. It will become too

introspective and lead to distorted cultural production; people will miss the cultural landmarks of the global canon.

Writers Report, pp. 97-8.

She goes on to argue that, on reexamination, elements of 'migrant writing' are central to a specifically Australian national canon.

The theme of exile is integral to the Australian canon. The intense emotional experience of coping with foreignness, loss, displacement, despair, suffering and punishment is central to Australian identity. The inferiority complex is dominant here despite the attempts to hide it, but beneath it radiates an identity where the theme of displacement is central, and once I realised this I felt very much at home.... Permanent exile is a part of identity, and each writer lives within three spaces their ethnic past, the living culture of the present and the larger community of letters - and it is crucial that we remain fluent with each of these parts.

Writers Report, p. 98.

### The Performing Artists

Excellence can be judged, consciously or unconsciously, on the style of operation of the artists. Here, Anna Messariti describes Diablo, a major theatre production:

Diablo involved a cast of sixty performers drawn from the Filipino, Torres Strait Islander and East Timorese Communities of Darwin who were unwaged. Diablo was artistically coordinated by three NESB artists who worked for actor's award minimum pay rates. A designer of NESB was also paid a fee. The Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council paid for the principal artists' salaries and the state theatre company made a contribution of four thousand dollars towards production expenses. A number of artists expressed the belief that the state theatre company enjoyed the major credit for the work. They perceived that as far as the funding bodies and media were concerned, Diablo was made by its state theatre company in association with the communities.

Performing Artists Report, p. 20.

## Community Arts

Community arts, at best, is classified as being on the margins of excellence, potentially excellent but not yet excellent. At worst, being a community artist involves a pronouncement that the work is of such a kind that it can never be truly excellent in the terms of the canonical artforms.

Reentering the arts world in Australia after migration, many people who were established artists in their country of origin find themselves reclassified as 'community' artists. Here, Marily Oppermann speaks of the positive opportunity this has offered her, yet she has not yet managed to regain the status and stature she had as an artist before migrating.

(Before migrating) I had many exhibitions and managed to live through my art. I also exhibited in Europe and received an honorary degree through an exhibition in Zagreb. I was later invited as a Brazilian artist to exhibit as part of the 1988 National Ceramics Conference in Sydney and as a speaker to 'Pots, Politics and Culture'. I immigrated because I married an Australian. I had had the experience of being twice a foreigner, once in Norway and once in the States. These experiences helped me to some extent. It is hard to be a woman and a migrant in Australia. And for me, the fear was that my work would not be understood. It was not 'well behaved' work, dealing with feminist issues in my cultural context.... I have become really involved in the Arts Council, the only organisation in the ACT that gives one a chance.  
Community Arts Report, p. 90.

Yet, even in the realm of the community arts, commonsense notions of excellence at the community level often end up discriminatory.

### Discriminating Excellence Without Discrimination

Even though these quotations show some of the ways in which excellence can be a category of discrimination, they also give us glimpses of the potential opened up by multiculturalism in the arts - the effects of a positive policy, the effects

of funding and the spaces for debate created even by openings which might be considered merely tokenistic. Here are some ways in which it might be possible to have a positively discriminating excellence without discrimination. It is Australian society's great virtue, almost without rival in the world, to have opened up this aesthetic possibility:

- The canon is constantly evolving, involving critical self-reflection, dialogue with those on the cultural margins and a determined openness to difference. This is an open notion of excellence that thrives on variety, in differences, on interaction.
- Insofar as innovation is a value in the search for excellence, the notion of the avant garde needs to be broadened; simply by transposition into the contemporary Australian context, for example, the traditional becomes avant garde, the folkloric is revived; and this even before the next step, the mutually transforming dialogue between the established and the newly-immigrant. There is no such thing as unmediated originality - innovation is a dialogue of tradition and possibility.
- The fraternity of peers which determines excellence needs to be consciously kept open to diversity, a diversity of personnel on funding bodies, in galleries and in theatres and in publishing houses. At the same time, the established peers need to be trained to the aesthetics and politics of diversity-as-excellence.
- The concept of excellence has a critical role to play in defining who we are and who we can be as Australians. But at the end of the twentieth century, the idea of a singular national culture, of an arts which constitutes an homogeneous or linear heritage, is now redundant. Rather than the singular and the national, art now represents the locally diverse and the globally intertwined. It represents border crossings, transgressions, cross-culture and dialogue and a shunting backward and forward between the multiple layers of our

identities. And it involves the margins reconstituting the mainstream, as, for example, the 'immigrant' becomes integral to an Australian canon.

- Excellent art can be produced in a variety of ways from the individualistic, to the collaborative and communal. But even ostensibly individual art is only excellent with the input of social and cultural resources.
- Excellence is a dialogue of high culture and popular culture, where the high can transform the low and the low the high, where art can cast its spell on work and work on art, where the ethnic is in the mainstream and the mainstream is known to be ethnic.
- Markets are there to be made - untapped ethnic niche markets, markets founded in Australia's local diversity which open up potential new international markets, the esoteric transformed and sold as the popular, the avant garde disseminated as educative and culturally transformative - these are all examples of excellence reflected in successful arts marketing.
- Excellence is the focus of strategic arts planning. The criteria for excellence are explicit and publicly accessible. Excellence is a principle that ensures openness in access to resources and to networks.

## ***Multiculturalism as Excellence***

In this country, the rhetorical commitment to multiculturalism in the arts is laudable and important advances have been made. We are at a breakthrough point now, both in policy terms and in artistic terms.

Here are five brief arguments why multiculturalism is now a matter of excellence in the arts. These are simultaneously outrageous overgeneralisations, setting multiculturalism in the arts in a broader social context, yet completely true of the way the world is shifting. They are the stuff of a new, multicultural vision for arts and culture in Australia. We wish to

develop an argument here that excellence is not just a matter of form, but a matter of cultural contents - of social relevance, of being at the cultural cutting edge, of asking the aesthetic questions of our time in new and invigorating ways.

### **1. Diversity is where the cultural action is.**

In popular culture, in literature, in film-making, in academic work, in the arts, the most exciting work at the moment is work that crosses cultural boundaries. Conventional monocultural views of nation and identity are, by and large, staid, anachronistic and unhelpfully nostalgic for a lost world.

### **2. Diversity is the global issue of the moment.**

In political and economic terms, cultural diversity is one of the central issues of our time: the ethnic conflagrations that have marked the end of the Cold War, the logistics of regionalising and globalising economies and markets, global migration the pace and diversity of which grows daily, the increasing heterogeneity of even the most WASPy neighbourhoods, the globalisation of the culture/media industry.

### **3. Australia has an edge: nowhere in the world has cultural diversity been negotiated and managed so successfully.**

In our multicultural policies, in our diverse cultural practices, Australia leads the world. This is something we should be selling to the world and selling hard. The tourist industry has abandoned the 'shrimp on the barbie' image and is on the verge of selling Australia's diversity as sophisticated cosmopolitanism. Strictly Ballroom warmly projects Australia in a very different light to Crocodile Dundee. Things are changing. We can sell our

image of productive diversity, and the practical ways we have pulled it off, to a world fraught by cultural conflicts.

#### 4. Selling ourselves in our region.

People in Asia remember the White Australia Policy, perhaps even more strongly than Australians do. As we form ever more significant trading and cultural relationships in the region, these will have to be packaged in the openness of multiculturalism. If we manage this in the first instance, we might then also be able to sell this multiculturalism to Asian countries as a cultural technology, a technology for making productive cross-cultural global links and for dealing with increasing domestic diversity.

#### 5. Aligning with the lives of people in Australia.

Domestic Australian markets and audiences are changing. Which parts of the population are growing most rapidly? Which have the greater spending power, the most rapid rates of mobility, and so on? It is simply self-defeating to say that people of non-English speaking backgrounds are a minority and thus not worth catering for. And, despite the preconceptions about the WASPiness of the Australian population, why are Australians so eager to travel or to take permanent or semi-permanent jobs in the buoyant labour markets of Asia? The global and the local visions of multiculturalism are proving themselves to be increasingly attractive to a growing majority of Australians.

### **The Economic Potential of Multicultural Arts: Visions of Excellence in the Market**

How do we understand excellence in the abstract, in the - at first - contentless terms of

the market?

Much of the time, excellence remains ill-defined in market terms. One thing that seems to come out of most of the discussions, however, is that there can only be one excellence. Different artforms and different agendas in representation, to be sure, but only one excellence.

Contrary to the notion that there is just one excellence out there to be found, excellence is always a construction, a fiat of cultural intent. This was one of the central arguments of the preceding section of this report. You have to go looking for excellence and what you find will depend on the idea of excellence you have.

To illustrate this by way of example, here are two hypothetical standards of excellence as measured in market terms, a low-risk approach to excellence and a high-risk approach:

#### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Excellence is one of those indefinable things, so let's just do it. But there is one excellence, an excellence that peers, aficionados, seem to know when they see it.

#### *A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Excellence is a culturally relative concept. To be inclusive, to allow multiple forms and sources of excellence, you have to take risks - against the grain and against conventional wisdom.

#### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

In pursuing excellence, we are more or less assured of guaranteed small returns or small losses that require subsidy - but, either way, there's security in excellence.

#### *A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

In seeking out excellence, there will be some investments that bear no return. Other investments, perhaps unexpectedly, will produce high returns.

### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Make your emphasis on artists with proven track records in the marketplace: proven performers, known to be able to deliver goods that will be in demand.

### *A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Make your emphasis on artists and art practices with potential but not proven track records or mainstream recognition.

### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Put money in artists' pockets; short-term investment with immediate returns.

### *A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Take a long-term, venture capital approach to the arts and cultural development.

### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Take a passive, 'let excellence stand for itself' approach.

### *A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Be active, seeking out the new, the marginal, the innovative.

### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Support individuals who have already proven themselves to be inspired.

### *A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Create a cultural climate which allows that - even unlikely - individuals might be inspired.

### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Set your cultural sights low, to what is predictable, to what is conventional to what it is known will sell and what will certainly find an audience.

### *A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Set your cultural sights high. Allow that new cultural markets might open and that new audiences might be created.

Of course, arts patrons and arts marketers and distributors must have a low-risk core to their activities. A notion of flexible funding, however, allows different conceptions of excellence-as-market to operate at the same time: high-risk excellence and low-risk excellence.

And, more than this. Much of what is now low-risk has become just that as a result of investment based on a high-risk notion of excellence. Herein lies the unique leadership role of national policy makers and funding bodies.

More than anything else, the distinctive role of multicultural arts funding must be to invest venture capital, to support cultural enterprises which, if they succeed, might become part of the low-risk cultural mainstream. But that core will wither and die without the surprise, the challenge, the invigoration of those high-risk cultural enterprises that succeed by creating new markets and creating new cultural expectations.

This is the procedural/market bit of the excellence symbiosis. Now to work towards a vision of cultural contents:

### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Conventional 'high' culture, bought by a small, relatively affluent market.

### *A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Opening new and broader markets; allowing that the 'popular' and marginal might invigorate 'high' culture.

### *A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Old style, confined versions of nation; singular, official, handed down, determined by a canon of acceptability and an actively homogenising 'national interest'.



*A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Nation as open diversity; multiple and diffuse sources of representation interacting to open new possibilities and many layered identities.

*A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

An idea of the Australian 'nation' based on a restricted club of 'great' or already recognised artists.

*A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

A democratic notion that allows the possibility of artistic and cultural excellence in the broadest possible range of domains.

*A Low-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Culture as singular 'heritage' and 'tradition'.

*A High-Risk Approach to Excellence*

Culture as dialogue, open possibility.