

## *Creating Our Future:* social cohesion

Our arts and creativity reflect who we are as a nation and are crucial in understanding and shaping our sense of national identity. Arts and creativity have a unique capacity to connect us all, irrespective of our life circumstances and experiences. The shared stories of millions of diverse peoples who now call Australia home promote mutual understanding, respect and empathy, and powerfully connect us to a global community – all Australians are enriched by the tapestry of our people. Now, more than ever, our artists have a significant role in helping Australians navigate rapid economic, social and cultural change and in building the health of our civil society.

### Our arts shape and communicate our cultural identity

The many and varied stories and perspectives brought to life through literature, music, performance and visual arts construct a sense of who we are as individuals, as a society, and as a nation. Australia's national identity springs from the stories we tell – to ourselves, to each other, to the wider world and to our future generations.

There is enormous potential to harness our arts and creativity to forge and promote a more inclusive cultural identity for Australia in these rapidly changing and divided times: a contemporary national identity that brings together the many strands that make up the Australian community.

The 2019 National Arts Participation Survey results show that an increasing proportion of Australians now agree that ***the arts shape and express Australian identity*** (52%, up seven percentage points from 45% in 2016).<sup>54</sup>

This includes middle-aged, middle income swing voters from suburban and regional Australia, who were the focus of a research report from independent think tank A New Approach. One of the four most common reasons this group gave for why arts matter is that ***Australian arts and culture give us a sense of identity and help us represent Australia to the world***. The most common reason given was that ***arts and cultural activities bring us together and help build community***.<sup>55</sup>

Footnote numbers correspond to those in the full *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey 2019 Report*.

54 For consistency with the 2019 methodology, 2016 figures are reported for the online sample only and may differ from those published in the previous National Arts Participation Survey report, *Connecting Australians*.

55 Fielding K, Trembath JL 2020, *A view from middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity*. Produced by A New Approach think tank with lead delivery partner the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra.

## First Nations arts are central to understanding who we are as Australians

Australia is home to the world's longest continuing living culture with a rich artistic context. This is a unique strength, unsurpassed globally, of which all Australians can be proud.

Understanding and respecting First Nations cultures is essential to Australia's social wellbeing and benefits both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Constructively addressing our past is vital for a coherent national identity and artistic expressions can be a vital bridge to mutual understanding.

*“I would say those moments where [First Nations] arts are showcased, where they have a platform to actually exist and be recognised is important and taking that away is erasure. It's really, really important we lift those communities.”*

Focus group participant

*“That's the only way that our community is going to get better. To get knowledge and inclusivity and looking out for each other.”*

Focus group participant

More Australians than ever are engaging with First Nations arts for their beauty, strength and power, and to understand who we are as a nation. The results of the National Arts Participation Survey show that an increasing proportion of Australians agree **First Nations arts are an important part of Australia's culture** (75%, up from 70% in 2016) and attendance at First Nations arts was increasing across art forms prior to COVID-19.

## Our diverse artistic expression can reshape our contemporary national identity

Australia has one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the world. We also have more than three million people living below the poverty line and there are diverse experiences among Australians living in regional, remote and peri-urban communities.

A diverse sweep of artists is interpreting this multiplicity of 'Australias' for us, providing unique opportunities that go beyond day-to-day encounters – for insights into the cultures and communities of others and deep connections with one's own cultural and community roots. Seeing, feeling and hearing one's own experience expressed and reflected in creative expression is inherently powerful. Equally, there is power in seeing, hearing and feeling this experience reflected and valued in our cultural landscape.

While we know there is still work to be done to ensure the arts fully reflect the diversity of Australia's people, an increasing proportion of Australians agree **the arts in Australia reflect our cultural diversity** (71%, up from 65% in 2016). In addition, more than one in three Australians connect with, and share, their cultural background through arts and creativity (36%) including more than half of CALD Australians (62%) and significant cross-cultural arts engagement. This is a positive indicator for social cohesion and intercultural empathy in Australia.<sup>56</sup> Australians value these opportunities to connect with family and friends and to get to know others, as creativity connects people and communities.

<sup>56</sup> Migliorino P 2017, 'The arts and cultural diversity – commentary by Pino Migliorino,' in Australia Council 2017, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, p.50.

The 2019 National Arts Participation Survey was expanded to ensure greater representation of CALD Australians, with the survey translated into six languages encompassing languages of both established and emerging communities in Australia: Arabic, Dinka, Mandarin, Spanish, Urdu and Vietnamese. The results show that these targeted communities are highly engaged with arts and creativity – they are more likely to engage with arts and creativity than Australians overall, whether it is attending arts events, participating in arts activities or engaging online. This includes engaging with arts of their own background, which provides valued opportunities to celebrate and share their culture with the wider Australian community.

## Our creative expressions can be an antidote to declining public trust and social divisions

Globally, and in Australia, there is growing evidence of pessimism about the future and cynicism about institutions of all kinds, private and public.<sup>57</sup> This coincides with rising concerns about inequality, job security and the cost of living – particularly in the wake of COVID-19 – and increasing divisions in society. The arts have a particularly powerful role to play at this moment in time: in generating empathy that can bridge social divides, and in creating a future where diversity is celebrated.

In an environment of increasing polarisation and heightened global attention on injustice, racism and inequality, the arts can provide vital space and opportunity to navigate multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and to engage with complexity and challenging ideas from a safe space. In this way our arts and artists provide invaluable conduits to helping rebuild trust in our institutions and in each other. They enable a plurality of voices to be heard, including those who feel they are being left behind by rapid social change.

The results of the National Arts Participation Survey show an increasing proportion of Australians feel that the arts enable us to **connect with others** (53%, up 15 percentage points from 38% in 2016), **understand perspectives that are different to our own**<sup>58</sup> (71%, up from 60% in 2016), and that the arts **impact our understanding of other people and cultures** (60%, up from 52% in 2016). Connection with others is one of the main drivers of arts attendance and one in three Australians are motivated to attend the arts **to understand other perspectives and cultures** (33%).

**“Art is a way to share... It's an experience with others' cultures that allows you to experience without talking. You bond.”**

Focus group participant

Through their ability to inspire our collective imagination, engage and connect us and challenge our assumptions, the arts help us understand and live with our fellow citizens, guarding against social divisions and threats and building the health of our civil society.

57 Cameron S and McAllister I 2016, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian election study 1987-2016*, Australian National University, Canberra. Ipsos 2020, *Global Trends: Understanding complexity*.

58 Reworded from 2016: *The arts are an important way to get different perspectives on a topic or issue*.

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