

## **Artstate Rapporteurs' Report – Wagga Wagga 2020**

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Artstate 2020 was held on Wiradjuri Country in Wagga Wagga, November 5-8. A themed speakers' program ran for two days alongside a cultural and artistic festival. The event was supported by Create NSW in partnership with Regional Arts NSW, Eastern Riverina Arts, and the City of Wagga Wagga. As one of the first major in-person events held in the region during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisers and delegates are commended for their diligence and commitment to a sustained creative, critical, and inspiring speakers' program and festival. The themes for the respective days were 'Walking Together' and 'Shaping Tomorrow' suggesting the former is connected to the realisation of the latter. How these two themes can relate to one another informed the identification of the foci below.

The opening of Artstate focused in on the story of one man, Uncle Dr Stan Grant, a Wiradjuri elder, telling of his struggles from the time as a young boy at school to more recent years of trying to get people to listen to what the true meaning of Wagga Wagga is: that of a place of dance and great celebration and not a place of many crows.

### **Access and inclusion**

This and preceding Artstate events have been held in a climate of uncertainty owing to environmental impacts on the region such as the drought, bushfires, and the current pandemic as well as sectoral constraints related to funding and the sustainability of regional arts. Staging an inclusive and accessible showcase of regional arts has therefore been explicit in the capacity for Artstate to run in each of its four years. Wongaiibon artist Gayle Kennedy took up the theme of capacity in her brilliant keynote on day one. As a differently abled artist, Kennedy highlighted how artistic venues and practices frequently justify their exclusions of artists like her by pointing to the difficulties

of accommodating changes and transformations to business-as-usual art. The rapid shift to online communication and work during the pandemic indicates how ableist these previous exclusions were. When needed for privileged groups, industry and sectoral alteration can take place. Kennedy urged differently abled artists and activists to hold their profession accountable for past and continuing exclusions. She also spoke powerfully of the ableist assumptions that frame artistic practice and reception noting how artists who are living with disability frequently have this element of their identities obscured and negated. As the next section discusses, the competitive framework for arts funding exacerbates these issues with services supporting different arts communities vying for the same share of resources. In the subsequent panel, 'Working Together', Kerry Comerford, CEO of Accessible Arts, whose remit is to be make art accessible, mentioned how demand for the service has increased while funding has decreased.

The ableism in the art world identified by Kennedy intersects with a powerful whiteness in the arts in Australia. Here Kennedy is not just referring to the dominance of white artists but the role of whiteness in shaping aesthetic practice and what constitutes art. Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson has also outlined how Australia is founded on white possession which negates First Nations sovereignties. Previous rapporteurs' reports have highlighted the importance of First Nations sovereignties to the Artstate events. Exploring whiteness and its influence on regional arts more explicitly would be one way of addressing Kennedy's point about not just who is present but whose presence is rendered important in the sector. This was an insightful and critical keynote that highlighted how art and its cultural, institutional, and policy practices work to capacitate some and not others. Indeed, art has a powerful capacity to imagine ways of communicating and relating to one another. The theme of day one was 'walking together' and this keynote asked us to consider who is 'walking' and who can 'walk'.

### **Systems, structures and resources that exist to enable artistic flourishing**

In answer to the question of who can walk, and who with, a critical component of the program focused on the systems, structures, and resources that enable artistic flourishing. There were several different approaches to this question over the two days. The State and Federal Arts Ministers outlined policies that 'empowered' cultural and creative organisations to make decisions about their funding capacities. The panel on 'Creative Journeys', moderated by Marcus Hughes, from the Yugambeh Nation, Director

of Regional Arts NSW, and Director, Indigenous Engagement, National Library of Australia, provided a historical context to the capacitation of creativity and resilience for First Nations peoples. Wiradjuri dancer Joel Brady pointed out that the current funding of the cultural sector necessitates a significant amount of grant application writing, administration, and management for creative workers. In this way, artists have to match the level of art bureaucracy formerly provided by government institutions. Such activity constitutes what French philosopher Michel Foucault describes as 'governmentality', where citizens take on the governing mentality of policy-makers and institutions. Does the governmentality of the sector reduce the capacity for art (even though its ostensible purpose is to activate it)?

Wiradjuri scholar Associate Professor Faye McMillan highlighted in her keynote (also from day one) the important connections between mental health and creative and cultural flourishing. Given the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter protests taking place across the globe, Associate Professor McMillan's key insights emphasise how the culture around us, including monuments and place names, promote the cultural flourishing of particular groups and historical narratives. An investment in people, as McMillan observes, is how systems change and can be remade to centre First Nations flourishing. It was interesting to compare this talk to the discussion from Wiradjuri YortaYorta Gangulu fashion designer Lillardia Briggs-Houston during the 'Creative Journeys' panel where she recounted her family history and labour in domestic servitude. The role of First Nations peoples in the textile industry and their creativity has been taken for granted in the history of fashion in Australia. It's fantastic to see Briggs-Houston and other First Nation's fashion designers receiving due respect and prominence in the cultural sector. The moderator, Hughes, concluded that the continuation of First Nation's art is what makes the future safe for culture.

### **Technology and regional arts**

As noted in previous rapporteurs' reports, digital technologies have increased their influence and importance to regional arts. The speakers program and festival evidenced the variety of ways technology can be used to create and communicate art. On day two, Dr Erica Seccombe presented a fascinating keynote on the capacity for 3D and 4D Micro-computed X-ray tomography to visualise the interior of living and other matter. The 'Disability Sparking' panel featured the work of artist Eugenie Lee who also uses

technology to bring science into creative arts to facilitate public understanding of the former. In Lee's case, she uses interactive virtual reality to translate what pain feels like for people living with chronic pain. Day two also featured a panel of Charles Sturt University visual artists and animators discussing how technology is becoming more accessible and less expensive for the general public. Considering these presentations in light of the previous theme, I wondered how technology's capacity to show us how systems work could be harnessed to map the networking and resourcing that underpins artist endeavours in the region? Could this be mobilised to strengthen evidence-based accounts of the impact of regional arts?

While technology's role in facilitating art, connection, and accessibility was emphasised, other presentations and festival events also identified the importance of work existing and persisting outside of the ever-present Zoom. Wiradjuri artist Bernard Higgins' explained how his work in visual animation functions both to tell stories about Country through technology in order to simultaneously bring people back to Country. This interdependence of technology and the live presence of performance and audience illustrate how relationships, rather than format, drive creative work.

### **Centring Wiradjuri and First Nations creativity to art**

This latter point was emphasised in the keynote from Rafael Bonachela, the Artistic Director of the Sydney Dance Company. The day two speaker described how COVID-19 social distancing exigencies produced a crisis for the dance company and their reliance on live and in-person artistic practice. Quickly self-learning how to use and produce online audio-visual technology opened up further possibilities for promoting their practice. In particular, the company has pivoted to producing a number of videos featuring dancers in public places. These kinesthetics activate public spaces through art where the movement to be in space is painfully constrained during the pandemic. A video shot in Wagga Wagga was previewed for the audience and was a beautiful invocation of the city's original Wiradjuri meaning, 'place of dancing'. Bonachela also reminded the audience that the role of artists is to kick up dust and be grounded in place, a timely reminder for the second day's 'Shaping tomorrow' theme.

The space provided for First Nations cultures and creativity in Artstate has been significant. However, further work is needed to fully realise First Nations' flourishing

within regional arts. Many panels and speakers highlighted how artists who 'settle' in particular regional places enhance the liveability of that place by increasing cultural and creative activity. While this is crucial to identifying how the impact of arts goes beyond simply fiscal measures, and contributes to the cultural and social value to towns, there was sometimes a lack of acknowledgement or reflection on whose Country this activity was taking place and the historical and uncompensated role of First Nations' labour to creative industries in the region, as outlined in Briggs-Houston's talk mentioned earlier. Gamilaray scientist Geoff Simpson, Senior Scientist, Fire and Cultural Science, NSW Department of Planning, Industry, and Environment, reminded delegates of the importance of connecting to and caring for Country and the uniqueness of the Australian landscape which contains the songlines that tell us how to live on this continent. Simpson's work connected to the discussion in the 'The Role of Art in Colonisation and Decolonisation' panel, which not only examined the manner in which art has played a role in colonisation and silencing First Nations voices but also the role that art can, and indeed does, play in disrupting the silences and in decolonising our minds, hearts and hands.

There is a lot to be learned from the resilience and persistence of First Nations peoples and their custodianship of Country. The Lagoon Project, showcased during Artstate, exemplifies how creativity, innovation, and ingenuity are central to First Nations flourishing. The Project is an initiative of Eastern Riverina Arts delivered in collaboration with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service Aboriginal Discovery Team and involved local men making Wiradjuri canoes for display on the lagoon. I watched these canoes drift securely on the lagoon in the light of the festival events on the final evening. Depositing all that they symbolise into the water, they kept sentry on the organisers and delegates preparing to leave the place. How strong yet light these canoes are, their design capable of carrying great freight without burdening the water for futures that await. I was reminded of the meaning of yindyamarra and how crucial the sustainability of First Nations sovereignties are to capacitating creative flourishing.

