

ANATOLITIS, Ms Esther, Chief Executive Officer, Regional Arts Victoria

[10:21]

CHAIR: We will get straight back into it. I now welcome Ms Esther Anatolitis—sorry if I mispronounce that!—from Regional Arts Victoria.

Thank you for talking to us today. The committee has received a submission from you, submission 171. Before I invite you to make an opening statement do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Ms Anatolitis: No, I do not.

CHAIR: Would you like to make a brief opening statement of no longer than two minutes before we go to questions?

Ms Anatolitis: Yes, thank you. My name is Esther Anatolitis. I am the director of Regional Arts Victoria; I am a board member of Regional Arts Australia; I am a trustee of the Australian Children's Theatre Foundation; I am a board member of Contemporary Arts Precincts Ltd; I am on the programming committee of the Melbourne Writers Festival; I am on the international programming advisory of Musica Viva; and I am a current or former expert assessor peer of the Australia Council and Arts Victoria—now Creative Victoria—the City of Melbourne and numerous other regional councils.

CHAIR: We only have two minutes!

Unidentified speaker: That was just her introduction!

Ms Anatolitis: That bit doesn't count!

Regional Arts Victoria inspires art across the state. Let me give you some numbers—these are just for last year: 18,334 young people in our Education & Families Program in schools; 355,291 audiences or participants at all of our supported shows; 4,638 artists supported through all our programs; 564 works or performances delivered; 1,266 regional events or activities; 102,929 tickets that we have sold for touring shows last year; and the road kilometres travelled by all our staff last year were 256,911.

I just want to tell you one story before we begin. One of the impacts of the NPEA is that individual artists will not be eligible. I want to talk to you about one particular artist, Dave Jones, who would be horrified if he knew I were talking about him. He is a really great guy and a very humble one in Natimuk, which is about five and a bit hours' drive from here.

Dave has developed at a very high level quite an adventurous and maverick arts practice. He is a mountain climber, but he also works with old and new technologies to create objects and interactive games that bring high and low technology together. He was the very lucky recipient of an Australia Council \$100,000 fellowship a few years back. That initiative is jeopardised and probably will not continue. Can you imagine the impact on a small town that that kind of money for one passionate, creative leader has? He has developed projects such as *The Thing*, which is, if you can imagine, a great big rusted old boiler that you jump on and cycle and then it projects images into the sky. There is another work, which is like a bike that you jump on and ride, that is for kids—although I should say it is for adults too; I have had a great go and it is wonderful. You put a virtual reality helmet on and you play a game as though you are herding sheep. Natimuk, thanks to Dave's and other's leadership, also won one of the Small Town Transformations grants that my organisation runs. He has helped to contribute to the re-imagining of what is possible for the future of the entirety of Natimuk, based on the support that he as an individual has received through the Australia Council and through other means to propel that work further.

The work of the individual artists in developing games is not just for the sit-behind-your-keyboard kind of thing. Games are much, much broader. There is a literary aspect. There is a narrative aspect. There is a whole range of opportunities that Dave, through his passion and expertise and through competitive means, has been able to win which would not be possible in the future under the new scenario. That is just one story.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Anatolitis—

Ms Anatolitis: Please, call me Esther.

CHAIR: for your very impressive opening statement.

Senator BILYK: And CV.

CHAIR: Yes, and CV.

Senator BILYK: In the submission from Regional Arts Victoria you mention—and we have heard this already, but I want to make it very clear and ensure it gets noticed—that the NPEA does not provide multiyear operational funding for organisations. Can you tell us, from your perspective, what that means for small to

medium organisations and accessibility to funding, and also what impact that will have on high-quality and diverse cultural experiences?

Ms Anatolitis: Sure. I should note that at the time of writing the submission the statement from the Australia Council had been that the multiyear program was discontinued. It has since been announced that there will be a four-year and not a six-year program. However, the funds available for that will be greatly diminished and every one of the more than 400 organisations that applied will have to reapply.

Organisational funding is one of the most important public investments in the arts that a government can make. It supports the long-term strategic planning of individual organisations. It allows them to be agile, responsive and strategic, but also to make plans with support that cannot otherwise be gained. Previous speakers have told us that philanthropic organisations, and also corporate sponsors, do not fund recurrent costs that organisations face. They fund one-off projects. Because of the passion that exists in the industry, there is also a great concern, which we often talk about, with self-exploitation. There are low wages. There are situations in which people work at the very edge. There is a remarkably efficient leanness, so the money that is invested in organisational funding goes forward a great, great distance—particularly in regional and small towns where there are very few arts organisations. Those that exist and are lucky enough to have received, through competitive means, public funding do a great deal for those communities beyond the creation of works of art.

Senator BILYK: Regarding funding, can you clarify something for me. I read somewhere that people will apply for funding and then every quarter there will be a funding announcement. Is that correct?

It appears as a first-come, first-served basis. To me, as a fairly practical person, what would the effect be if all the money gets spent early on? Are there concerns about that?

Ms Anatolitis: There are huge concerns about that.

Senator BILYK: Obviously there is!

Ms Anatolitis: I did make that point in the submission. When arts funding programs have clear deadlines and clear criteria, that is the most equitable way for organisations and individuals to be able to apply. You know and understand the criteria against which they are being assessed, and you know how timely that is going to be. In the absence of that, it is very possible that the funds get exhausted early. This disadvantages organisations with an artistic program—for example, a regional festival based later in the year—because they simply will not be in a position to yet make that application. It disadvantages those organisations that do not have the level of skill and articulation yet, or the staff or the resources to put applications together kind of off the mark—

Senator BILYK: Constantly.

Ms Anatolitis: in a race, as opposed to working towards a deadline where you are able to get on the phone with expert staff, be they in the ministry or at the Australian Council, to receive some advice and feedback. That is particularly important for regional organisations. With many hundreds of individual and group members across the state, our organisation does a lot of that work, as well, in providing help and support for making those grant applications. It is one of the marks of success of the Australia Council that, having reached this level of sophistication, it is hard to apply for funding. That is because there is a great rigour expected of the investment of public funds—as you, Senators, in your overseeing roles, would expect.

Senator BILYK: You have mentioned here today about the regional and remote areas losing out. Can you explain that to us? Senator Singh and I are from Tasmania. Having talked with a number of people in the arts area in Tasmania, my understanding is that the TSO—as much as I love the TSO—is probably the only organisation that will get funding.

Ms Anatolitis: It is a only major performing arts organisation in Tasmania.

Senator BILYK: I am sure that will happen in other areas—other smaller areas will not get funding. What does that actually mean for individuals and, as Senator Lazarus asked earlier, for communities?

Ms Anatolitis: Sorry. I just missed the specific aspect of your question. The impact of—

Senator BILYK: The fact that small to medium organisations will miss out on funding, and the effect that will have on the whole of the community, specifically in regard to remote and regional areas.

Ms Anatolitis: Some of the earlier speakers have mentioned just how lacking we are in stats, which is very frustrating. Back in 2007, the then Arts Victoria commissioned a study by Deloitte to map the small to medium sector across the state. I was on the steering committee for that project. We were astounded to discover at that time—eight years ago—there were about 10,000 small to medium arts organisations across the state of Victoria alone. As Senator Ludwig mentioned earlier, there is the great danger that when we lose people they do not come back. In regional and remote areas, that single arts organisation can be the lifeblood of the community. It is about

community health and education. And this is a great focus of my organisation at the moment. With disaster recovery, in times following bushfires, the power of artistic projects to bring people together and express what cannot be expressed is the difference—and the chair of my board, Bruce Esplin, the former Emergency Services Commissioner will tell you—between life and death.

Senator BILYK: That is a powerful comment to make. We have heard from other submitters and in written submissions about issues of concern in regard to how the NPEA will actually work with assessors and things like that. Do you have any comments to make there?

Ms Anatolitis: We definitely need to hear a lot more about how that assessment will work. There is a lot of talk about the way that the Australian Council peer system works. Earlier, we heard the comparison with robots, which was very interesting. By far the best way to ensure that public funds are distributed well is to make sure that there are industry experts—whether we are talking about the CSIRO, the ARC, or the NHMRC. Any industry-responsive or industry-focused way of investing public money needs to have that rigour to it.

We have also noted, of course, that with the National Program for Excellence in the Arts others have mentioned that 'excellence' is not defined, but, not only that, there are actually no artistic criteria for selection in the program at all, if we look at the guidelines. We do not even have one about excellence. The closest one is about quality and, if we drill down to what is mentioned there, even that relates to capacity to deliver financial managerial track records and so on. The presence of expert industry peer assessors is to provide that insight and that rigour. It also ultimately results in greater, more-interesting artwork being produced.

Senator SINGH: You said a minute ago that this is a matter of life and death. Will the minister's actions bring down the curtain on your organisation?

Mr Shipstone: My organisation in particular receives a range of different financial investments, including through the Regional Arts Fund, which is administered through the Ministry for the Arts. Regional Arts Victoria has many individual and group members about whose future I am very concerned. When I talk about the difference between life and death I did not mean it at all flippantly. I meant it specifically in relation to artistic projects and disaster recovery. There are two aspects there—

Senator SINGH: It is meant literally—

Ms Anatolitis: I literally meant life and death. The preparedness in a community to respond to disaster is best handled when people have already come together to talk, to share their experiences, to collaborate and to make something together. Art is very powerful in that regard. Following the Black Saturday fires and other disasters around the country, there is now a national network that has come together to be a standing resource to come in in situations like that. After natural disasters—and this is difficult to talk about—the rates of suicide increase, as do the rates of self-harm and the ways in which parents, children and family members respond in situations that have affected, and in some cases destroyed, entire towns. There is really nothing quite like the way that art brings people together and allows individuals to express themselves. That can very much be the difference between life and death.

Senator SINGH: And it is the particular small organisations that do that work that are under threat from the changes the minister has put in place?

Ms Anatolitis: They are among the groups, yes.

Senator SINGH: I am aware that in a health sense, as well, the clown doctors do a fabulous job in hospitals with children who are sick. What do you think should be the way forward here? Should the minister go back to a blank canvas and start with consultation? If he wants to, should he do it separately from stealing off the Australia Council funding? I do not want to put words in your mouth. I am just trying to ask you what you think should be the way forward.

Ms Anatolitis: The great thing about this moment now is that there is no need to start from a blank canvas. The Australia Council, who have been around for 40 years, have responded to significant industry criticism. I should say: I have been one of the loudest critics. I have had pieces published in *The Age* and *The Australian* criticising the Australia Council over recent years. With great respect to the Australia Council, they have responded to industry criticisms about the way that art form boards work and about the way that funding programs work. They have undertaken extensive consultation across the country and they have put together a new strategic plan. That has been done in a way that has greatly restored industry respect and admiration for the Australia Council. This year was the first year of the implementation of that new program, which, as we have heard already, has been greatly disrupted.

We are in a very lucky position. I have had some fantastic conversations with Senator Brandis about the arts. He is passionate about the arts and he is keenly interested in the arts. We have a situation of an interested minister

who chose the portfolio and is keen to develop the arts across the country and make an impact. It is just about bringing those things together now: the rigour and the expertise of the Australia Council, the expertise of the ministry staff and a well grounded way forward.

Senator SINGH: Are you saying, then, that there is no need for this NPEA?

Ms Anatolitis: It would be important if we were going to look at endowments which are genuine dollar-match endowments, which is beyond what has been proposed. I would like to see that. If we were going to look at cultural diplomacy and international tourism, I would love to see that. If we were going to look at major initiatives, which are not articulated as well in the guidelines, I would love to see that, but only with additional funding. The Australia Council has lost \$105 million this year. They lost \$100 million last year. I am deeply concerned that we are now at a tipping point where, if they lose any more money at all, the entire Australia Council model will be under threat. They are just that close to not even being able to offer rigorous, contestable funding. That would be disastrous, not just for individual artists and for organisations around the country but for the future of Australian cultural expression and the way in which we champion Australian culture all over the world.

Senator SINGH: There are individual artists like Dave, who you mentioned earlier. Because of the reduction in Australia Council funding—\$105 million, as you said, currently for this financial year—and because of the draft guidelines of the NPEA cutting out individual artists from applying for funding out of that stream, where does it leave artists like Dave?

Ms Anatolitis: It is hard to imagine how Dave would develop work beyond what he could personally fund in a very small town working with the people who are there with him. Arts funding for individual artists is about the money that supports them to do work. It is also about money to develop your practice, to develop that depth of practice where you get to meet other artists and travel, particularly if you are in a regional or remote place. The impacts of this are stark. Dave would be horrified that we are talking about him so much, because he is such a humble guy, but I would not be talking about him today if I had not met him.

Senator LUDLAM: We are on the public record; he is going to find out.

Ms Anatolitis: Sorry, Dave! Can we just not tell him?

Senator LUDLAM: It is all right, you are protected; you can say what you like. That is what the *Hansard* is for. Can we just talk about the concept of excellence, please? We have this new entity which has been set up so that some of Senator Brandis's departmental staff can assess excellence. Do you think independent or individual artists or small to medium arts organisations are capable of excellence? They appear to have been locked out.

Ms Anatolitis: Every artist is capable of excellence and it is artists who tell us what excellence is. This has been the strength of the model that the Australia Council have developed. In fact, they even have a whole other category which is called unfunded excellence. The premise of the Australian Council's model is that there is an ongoing conversation among artists about what constitutes excellence: it is about the responsiveness of your industry peers in recognising your work, it is about the contribution that the artwork makes and it is about the way that it extends what is possible in creative expression. It is also about impact on audiences and all of those things, but it is an ongoing project of articulating what art is and means and can be.

The Australia Council have wished to work on a model where there is a certain amount of funding and every project that is worthy of funding is funded from that the pool of money. There is only a 15 per cent success rate. That is remarkably low already. The Australia Council, because of that high demand, have been developing a whole approach to those who just missed out. How can they develop other funding programs and support them? So this notion of excellence is quite complex and interesting.

Senator LUDLAM: But it is all the way through the arts community. What do you make of this decision to set aside or carve out this quite substantial sum of money to deal with excellence and exclude the smaller companies and individuals from it? What are we meant to make of that?

Ms Anatolitis: It does not quite make sense for two reasons: firstly, the exclusion that you have mentioned and, secondly, the draft NPEA guidelines do not articulate excellence—excellence is not one of the criteria for funding.

Senator LUDLAM: How would you establish that as a criterion anyway?

Ms Anatolitis: Through the means that I just tried to describe. The way that the Australia Council have been working, this notion of artistic excellence is something that is contested and discussed and recorded at every assessment meeting. It is not purported to be defined for all time but is a complex concept of all of those things I

was just talking about—contributing to art form, the impact of the work, recognition of peers, reviews and all of that kind of thing.

Senator LUDLAM: I put to you the question that I put to the Footscray folk before: is it possible to quantify how many volunteer hours you rely on?

Ms Anatolitis: I will definitely take that on notice and send it back to you. We do do it. I do not have the figure handy. It would be well over 100,000 hours a year, but I do not have the figure handy, I am sorry.

Senator LUDLAM: For the sake of clarity, do you think—if you are able to quantify it and it is not too much work—we will be able to work out what that would be worth in dollar terms on an average basis if we had to pay all those people who are there for love rather than money? Do you think that kind of in-kind support should be taken into account when we are talking about leveraging in the same way as we do about matched funding?

Ms Anatolitis: I absolutely do. We collect those figures from all of our member organisations as well, so I will be able to give you a volunteer hours figure for Regional Arts Victoria and for our hundreds of members combined.

Senator LUDLAM: That is really valuable. Thank you.

CHAIR: Can I go back to a previous question: will funding cuts to individuals and smaller companies remove a pathway for artists to excel, and will we lose talent to other countries?

Ms Anatolitis: Sadly, yes. That is probably the greatest concern. A few of us have mentioned already this is an ecology; it is an ecosystem; it is essentially interconnected. The pathways that would be lost are almost impossible to imagine right now. All of us here know of many examples where an individual has volunteered with an organisation, perhaps in a front-of-house or an administrative role, and they have then developed an artistic project and presented that at a festival. They are probably on a main stage now or they are touring work around the world. There are a great many organisations who—well, all of us—rely on exactly those kinds of complex pathways. That is very much what is under threat.

CHAIR: Is there such a thing in the arts industry as a late bloomer?

Ms Anatolitis: That is a very good question. There are!

CHAIR: The reason I ask is obviously the comment about the mediocre being the only ones that are affected by this. You can be at a standard today but you can excel in a short period of time—

Ms Anatolitis: That is exactly right.

CHAIR: and I am just wondering what effect it will have on those people.

Ms Anatolitis: We have in this room Richard Watts, who was the founder of the Emerging Writers' Festival. That is doubly important because we are talking about emergence as a writer at any age, not just as a young writer. It is also important because at the moment literary practitioners, writers and organisations have been excluded from the NPEA and there is a notion that the book council will be set up and that that might provide opportunities. Again, we look forward to those guidelines with interest, but it is difficult to imagine that an organisation called the book council is going to make opportunities available for individual writers, particularly those working with new technologies and interactive means. In the NPEA guidelines there is one catch-all criterion around access and that does not include young writers or young artists and it does not include emerging artists; it does include regional artists, artists with disabilities, Indigenous artists and so on. So I am concerned it will be very difficult for assessors to look at any aspects of equity or emergence or youth, or any age group, under those circumstances.

CHAIR: Sadly, we are out of time, but I would like to thank you very much for your time.

Proceedings suspended from 10:51 to 11:04