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Beggars' Banquet

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Great Infrastructure in the State of NSW, Or, A Call to Alms

In the United States it's private money that keeps the major cultural institutions afloat. In Boston recently I was told how the Museum of Fine Arts, founded in 1870, with half a million works in its permanent collection, has never received government support. This represents a wondrous fantasy for Australian governments which would love to hand over the funding of all cultural institutions to the private sector. Alas, it can't be done without causing untold damage. In Australia, wealthy individuals and corporations are not in the habit of parting with a dollar unless there is some immediate benefit to themselves.

This doesn't mean governments won't keep trying to force institutions to raise their own funds by continually nibbling away at grants and allocations. But for a museum such as the Art Gallery of NSW to become free of its dependence on government would require a complete revolution in

the way people think about culture in Australia. It would require an even larger investment of public money to get things moving in that direction and a media that could distinguish between culture and the most facile forms of entertainment. (I note the *Sydney Morning Herald's* "Culture" section is running no fewer than three stories on Sabrina Carpenter on the same day. Don't ask me what she sings).

Instead, we appear to be moving in the opposite direction, with NSW government cuts to the state arts agency, Create NSW, requiring the retrenchment of a quarter of its 91 staff. This works out at 22.75 employees, so presumably one unfortunate bureaucrat will have to lose an arm or a leg. What'll it be, your leg or your job?

In an [article](#) in the SMH last week, that Lois Lane of Sydney journalism, Linda Morris, quotes NSW Arts Minister, John Graham, singing the praises of his predecessors:

"The former government made some great investments in infrastructure. Our focus is now filling those great buildings - that is why our investment focuses on people - the artists and audiences - to make the most of the great infrastructure. Any money saved in the restructure will be put directly back into the sector."

Presumably the "great investments" and "great infrastructure" refer to that utterly inappropriate piece of architecture, Sydney Modern - or as it's now known by at least three people, Naada Balu; and the most expensive three-headed white elephant in captivity - the terrible mutation we call Powerhouse.

Great investments! In John Graham's parlance, everything is "great", rather like Dr. Nick in Canberra who finds everything "extraordinary". Unlike the up-keep of public buildings, hyperbole is cheap.

What Mr. Graham is not telling us is that the Treasurer is trying to rein in government expenditure and it has been decided - as usual - that the easiest things to shred are arts and culture. After all, as most of our politicians will tell you, nobody goes to art galleries and museums apart from a bunch of arty wankers. If they want to see these things they can pay for it themselves. Valuable public funds need to be devoted to more important projects, such as sports venues and subsidising major sporting events.

It's all very well to say: "We're slashing budgets so as to concentrate on people – on artists and audiences," but there's little indication as to how this new focus will play out.

Mr. Graham gives a depressing hint about his motivations when he cites: "enormously increased costs, pressures from shifting audience trends and changing media market".

To translate: We don't want to spend any more money on cultural institutions, even though they are subject to the same inflationary pressures as every other area of government funding.

Audiences, particularly young people, appear to be staying home and looking at stuff online nowadays. The media aren't much interested in art exhibitions anymore – they prefer reporting on pop culture and celebrities.

Some boring elitists might argue that if Mr. Graham can accurately diagnose these problems, why doesn't he set about finding solutions, rather than accepting we're all doomed? He's like the captain of a sinking ship that makes no effort to launch the lifeboats because we're probably going to die anyway. If anything, he's eager to bore a few more holes in the hull and hasten the end.

At present the AGNSW is hosting [Yolngu Power](#), an outstanding show by one of Australia's great art communities. Unusually for an Indigenous exhibition, it's also a pay show, which risks testing the limits of the public's commitment to Aboriginal art. In surveys everybody says how much they love Aboriginal art and can't get enough of it, but when museums hold those longed-for exhibitions, these enthusiasts don't turn up. If they don't turn up for the Yolngu show, one may as well assume that no Indigenous show will ever gather a sizable attendance.

The AGNSW is right to do such an exhibition which is justified by the quality of the art, not by any ideological imperative. Under current financial circumstances, they had little choice but to make it a pay show, even though this will almost certainly reduce audience numbers, and prevent many from being introduced to this work.

For the past decade, under the stagnant direction of Michael Brand, the AGNSW failed to host enough shows to attract visitors. Projects were routinely knocked back for having no commercial potential; allegedly not being of interest to local audiences; being too costly or too difficult. The result was a ruinous loss of momentum when the gallery should have been pushing hard to make use of its much-vaunted new building.

This problem will not correct itself overnight. Having tolerated a decade of failed leadership, the NSW government should be making an effort to support the incoming director, Maud Page, and new Head of Trustees, Michael Rose. Instead, we find them cutting back on arts budgets in every area apart from the black hole of funding that is the Powerhouse. Presumably, if the AGNSW doesn't get roaring numbers for this financial year, they'll be penalised by the pernicious mechanism of the efficiency dividend and lose further funding.

This miserly, vicious attitude has the potential to force museums into penny-pinching, conservative ways (which is largely what happened during the Brand era in every department apart from the director's salary and expense account), when they need to be investing in themselves. It also puts pressure on curators to do cheaper, inadequate exhibitions, or come up with harebrained schemes for more popular fare. Does Sabrina Carpenter do a bit of painting? Is Nathan Cleary artistically inclined?

I won't get started on the Museum of Contemporary Art, which is on starvation rations compared to other cultural institutions.

The funding squeeze coincides with a downturn in private willingness to spend on art and philanthropy. Dealers will tell you this is a hard time to make sales, while organisations such as the Biennale of Sydney have been reduced to begging from former employees.

One of them passed on this letter from Louise Villar, who has the unenviable job of trying to raise money for the show.

We've been thinking a lot about the incredible people who've shaped the Biennale of Sydney over the past 50+ years. Their care and dedication lives on in the files, templates and reports, but also in the stories of freezing days on the island, unpredicted artist airport pickups, and late nights finalising some of the most defining art projects of our time. Those moments have shaped where the Biennale is today.

As a small way to say thank you, we're inviting you to support. Not only to back the future of ambitious artist projects, but as a way to stay connected. I would like to offer you a \$250/year membership to our [ArtSeen program](#) (half the usual donation and a way to make sure we keep you in the loop for special events, news and more). Importantly, an ArtSeen donation is fully tax-deductible.

As a small way to say thank you for all your hard work we're giving you the unprecedented, not-to-be-missed opportunity to slip us \$250. In return, you'll be invited to "four seasonal events this year, thoughtfully curated by our 2025 Ambassador Bhenji Ra. Then in 2026, we'll celebrate together for the 25th Biennale of Sydney, led by Hoor Al Qasimi."

One imagines those ex-employees queuing to hand over the necessary. What a deal! No fewer than four opportunities to drink cheap plonk with the Biennale crowd!

If you think that things must be better in other states, even in Victoria, where the NGV is a long way ahead of the pack, keeping onside with the government is a full-time activity. I don't see a lot of action in Queensland under the new Liberal National Party government. We know the Northern Territory government is planning to put the purpose-built art gallery out to commercial tender. No good news from WA or Tasmania. As for South Australia, that's always been a hard place to get a buck from the politicians, no matter who's in charge. In fact, the Art Gallery of South Australia is probably the closest equivalent to the MFA in Boston, because it would have to close its doors if it weren't for constant, generous donations from Adelaide's old money.

The problem for incoming director, Jason Smith, is that the two previous administrations appear to have alienated some major donors. For its current exhibition, [Dangerously Modern](#), the AGSA called for public contributions.

"With a donation of \$5,000 or more," we read, "you can support this major exhibition and honour yourself or someone who inspires you. Each donor will be matched with one of the fifty remarkable featured artists."

Yes, why not celebrate yourself, just like Walt Whitman, by giving \$5,000 or more to the AGSA, so they can do a show drawn almost exclusively from local collections? The gallery is holding out the begging bowl and can't afford to be embarrassed.

One final indignity, which has just arrived in my mailbox, is the Australian Design Centre's [announcement](#) that, in CEO, Lisa Cahill's words: "ADC has been defunded by both state and federal governments losing a combined \$500K per annum in operational funding. Pretty devastating for this 61 year old tiny organisation. It will leave NSW as the only state/territory without a government funded organisation."

Australia has some of the world's outstanding artists in the fields of ceramics, glass, textiles and other applied arts. In previous years it has been a priority for organisations such as the Australia

Council to help support and develop these areas. Today it seems that Labor governments in NSW and Canberra are prepared to abandon a well-established, well-run group that has played a vital role in the local industry. As Cahill points out, every other state/territory supports a similar body, so NSW will be a trailblazer in neglect.

Does John Graham honestly expect us to believe that the ADC, in operation since 1964, is expendable, while the Powerhouse – once known as Sydney’s leading museum of art and design – should absorb about \$150 million in taxpayers’ hard-earned, to pay huge salaries to mates for ‘creative’ ideas; to bankroll overseas residencies for people who don’t even live in NSW; to hold a range of Mickey Mouse competitions, such as writing stories about the Parramatta River; to get Kylie Kwong to do tours of Indian restaurants in the burbs, and on, and on? Not to mention three end-of-year parties where the Minister and staff whooped it up, at a combined cost of slightly less than \$100,000?

There is no fat in the way the ADC spends its government stipends. The Save the Powerhouse group would argue there is nothing *but* fat, waste, extravagance, croneyism and crass populism in the way the Powerhouse – with no exhibiting spaces currently open - spends money. With this government, waste is rewarded, while responsible management is penalised. Perhaps the ADC should have sponsored more rave parties.

Newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* may dutifully record these things, but they are apparently unable to add 2 + 2, and see a debacle and a scandal. So long as a press release says it’s all good, the media fall in line, and the problems get steadily worse. To defund the ADC is a shameful, ignorant act for a minister who likes to boast about “great investments” and “great infrastructure”. As for Tony Burke in the Federal job, it might be good if money were spent constructively on bodies such as the ADC and the regional galleries, rather than poured into PR projects such as the NGA’s [fluffy scheme](#) of sending works around the country on extended loan. By the way, Tony, when are you going to release that report on the APY Aboriginal Artists Collective, which they claim exonerates them of all wrongdoing? If there’s nothing to hide, surely the public has a right to this information?

Once I start down this rabbit hole, there’s no end to it. The bottom line is that in Australia, and most especially in NSW, culture is not valued. The Minister and the Minns government do not accept that museums and other cultural institutions require adequate funding if they are to be successful in attracting audiences and private sponsors. It’s clear that wealthy donors and corporations respond positively to an organisation’s success and popularity, and want to be

associated with an up-curve. It's just as obvious that turning our institutions into beggars and crowdfunders is the best way to discourage donors.

A responsible government needs to be proactive in cultivating the private sector, not simply play Pontius Pilate with our cultural heritage. It should not be hard to understand that cultural initiatives are for the long term, not the usual pork-barrelling exercise intended to buy votes for the next election. Culture plays a huge role in determining who we are, and the quality of our lives. It encourages critical thinking, and the healthiest form of local pride. It has grass-roots importance, being vitally connected with all forms of education. The country, state or city that neglects and disparages its own cultural institutions is destined to be nothing but a depot for the commercial trash peddled by vested interests, usually from overseas.

I would argue that culture is no less important for any society than health, welfare and education. It can't be reduced to dollars and cents, or viewed as a commodity to be acquired on the cheap. In the United States, currently subsiding into social chaos, museums are still being funded by wealthy, Trump-voting Americans. In Australia, one of the world's most prosperous and stable countries, the wealthiest citizens feel there's no point in supporting cultural institutions. It's the government's responsibility to fund these places adequately and help foster a greater sense of philanthropy in the community. Instead, John Graham has chosen the contrary route. Rather than promoting long-term growth, he is celebrating short-term waste. In place of strategic initiatives, he is giving us empty spin. But no amount of hyperbole can replace the millions that have been withdrawn or withheld from every organisation that is not called Powerhouse. Those institutions which should be the foundation of local cultural progress – the AGNSW, the MCA, the ADC – are being treated with contempt, when they badly need a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

The art column this week looks at [French Impressionism from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#), at the NGV. Can we ever get enough of the Impressionists? Apparently not, and this impressive exhibition shows why that is so.

As for the movies, the topic is Celine Song's [Materialists](#), a romcom that for once made me feel like sitting quietly to the very end. The message is that although everything in today's world has a monetary value there are some things that escape the calculation, perhaps the most important things. Hopefully John Graham will hasten to the cinema and check it before he makes any more announcements.

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