

Asia pushed into wings by cultural policy

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Australia's first national cultural policy in 16 years shows little promise of engaging Asian arts, despite the region's culturally rich treasure chest on our doorstep, arts curators warn.

The federal government's national cultural policy discussion paper is "horrible" and "leaden" and has failed to inspire discussion, a former Sydney Festival director, Lindy Hume, believes. "I don't think it's been a big success," she says.

The founder of Asialink, Alison Carroll, and a former cultural attache at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, Carrillo Gantner, argue that the Minister for the Arts, Simon Crean, must rectify the paper's failure to mention Asian arts, when he releases the policy next month.

Many Australians and Australian arts leaders are "ignorant" of Asian arts, culture and languages, Carroll and Gantner argue in an essay in *Platform Papers*, "Finding a Place on the Asian Stage".

The essay, to be launched in Melbourne today by the Mandarin-speaking former prime minister, Kevin Rudd, charts a fall in the Australia Council's share of Asian arts spending from more than 50 per cent of international funding under the Keating government years to between 10 per cent and 20 per cent today.

The *Herald* understands Rudd agreed to launch the essay after he resigned as foreign minister. The paper praises the former Liberal foreign minister, Alexander Downer, as having been the "strongest supporter" of Australia's arts engagement with Asia while criticising successive Labor and Liberal arts ministers for their lack of interest in forging art links with Asia.

Carroll and Gantner argue that arts programmers are "timid" and that the Rudd and Gillard governments have only "modestly rebalanced" Asian arts funding.

"All of us in the sector have failed in allowing the programs and policies that Keating supported to be seriously diminished and ignored," they write. They quote the former director of the National Institute of Dramatic Art, Aubrey Mellor, as being "depressed" at seeing "no sign" of Asian performing arts in Sydney when he visited recently from Singapore, where he is a dean of performing arts at LaSalle College of the Arts.

While the authors praise Hume for bringing some Asian shows to the Sydney Festival, such as the crowd-pleasing *The Manganiyar Seduction*, they criticise most festival directors for being "more comfortable in the better-known corridors and green rooms of Europe and North America".

Hume says Australian audiences have a "potential hunger" for Asia-Pacific performances that needs nurturing, adding that "we should have a big aspiration, as a national culture, to be of our time and place, and this is the Asian century".

Curators say that exchanges in the visual arts are far more advanced than those between the performing arts.

The Sydney arts space Carriageworks, for example, is organising an exchange between a Mumbai artist, Nikhil Chopra, and a Sydney artist, Justene Williams, who will exhibit their work in both cities.

Younger audiences particularly crave the kind of international performances that are in short supply on Australian stages, says Carriageworks' chief executive, Lisa Havalah, who argues that national cultural policy must reflect a greater diversity and stop subjecting international arts funding to the "whim" of political cycles.

Lieven Bertels, the new director of the Sydney Festival, who will bring traditional and contemporary acts from China for next year's festival, says "ninety-five per cent of the white population of Sydney, to put it very bluntly, looks at Asia as still the yellow fellow from the corner shop".

Australians in general "love it when everybody tries to speak English, and they are very lenient and accepting of other people not speaking English very well", Bertels says, "but that also defines Australia to a point where everything has to be English.

"In the performing arts, we still find it difficult to present work with surtitles, for instance," he says.

Bertels disagrees with Carroll and Gantner's suggestion that the Sydney Festival should join the Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals, of which the Melbourne Festival became a full member this year.

"I'm not overly enthusiastic about these gentleman's clubs [in which you have] friendly meetings over lovely dinners," Bertels says. "There is a tendency to think that's going to solve anything."

An Australia Council spokesman, Cameron Woods, confirmed that the council's share of international funding that was spent in Asia had fallen since the mid-1990s, but the "dollar value" had been higher in 2010, when the council spent \$1.1 million, than in the 1990s.

Arts organisations had made "strong inroads" into Asia, Woods says, but a "greater investment" for Australia's cultural engagement in Asia was required.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/asia-pushed-into-wings-by-cultural-policy-20120415-1x1bl.html>