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Part of what I am writing about now, rethinking power, so that you don't just imagine the locus of all power as being at the top of a hierarchy where you as the President have control and the capacity to dominate or exploit or manipulate or influence other people to your bidding because you have an agenda and endgame, and the goal is just to win. There's another form of power...a generative power...creating an understanding or an illuminating moment that is larger than any of the individuals...it's about exciting the mind and exciting the soul and exciting people to become citizens in their own democracy.¹

In 1994 an illuminating moment in the process of participatory democracy took place in a packed theatre in Melbourne. It was a moment in which the Melbourne Workers Theatre threw into question the taken-for-granted nature of political power and its insistence on the absolute primacy of its own agenda. In November 1994 Jeff Kennett, then Premier of Victoria, launched his liberal government's new arts policy at the Malthouse Theatre complex in Melbourne, and MWT was at the forefront of protest against the new shape of Victorian cultural policy. The launch was a big event which filled out the Merlyn Theatre and was attended by members of the arts community, politicians, arts bureaucrats and the media, all of them anxious to hear Kennett’s plans for the arts sector. The unmistakable spectacularisation of this political event saw Kennett’s policy announcement being introduced by a Monteverdi fanfare, and followed by an impressive array of acrobats, drummers and dancers. It was a bill that, as one newspaper commentator suggested, lent the event 'a mixture of showbusiness and old-time religion; hype and doctrine colliding with seismic force'.²
At the launch Kennett announced a new capital works programs totalling over $300 million, and the response of the crowd was enthusiastic.³ Kennett went on to outline a plan to lift funding to the arts, and he spoke in glowing terms of the potential of the arts to contribute to the process by which Victoria would become the 'cultural capital' of Australia.⁴ Such boosterist rhetoric would certainly have been music to the ears of many in the audience. But not for all.

In the background of this display of political rhetoric and (apparently) arts-loving beneficence, the MWT was staging a small but furious protest. Susie Dee, then a member of the MWT Artistic Advisory Group, along with other MWT members, was handing out paper bags to the audience, and each bag was printed with the words 'Motion Sickness Bag'. This was a response to one of Kennett’s earlier decisions – to re-brand Victoria as ‘Victoria on the Move’, a slogan which was meant to encapsulate the new, enterprising and forward-looking energy of the state. Susie Dee encouraged audience members to make their protest audible by pretending to vomit into the bag when Kennett began to speak.⁵

That MWT chose this moment to satirise the Premier’s spin was in itself quite remarkable. But even more remarkable was a subsequent rupture in the smooth, triumphal roll-out of Kennett’s arts policy: just as he was building to his climax, he was heckled by a member of the audience. It was an extraordinary moment. Patricia Cornelius, one of the founding directors of MWT, called out loudly and stopped Premier Kennett mid-sentence. And it sent a frisson through the crowd. Cornelius demanded to know how these expensive capital works were to be funded, and at whose expense. Kennett’s reply was immediate and dismissive. In this environment it was clearly unwise to gainsay the gatekeeper. Cornelius’ was a voice of protest, of dissent; and it was a bold gesture that would later have repercussions for both her and the company. This chapter looks at the Kennett Government’s involvement in cultural policy-making – and how it affected the MWT – to find out how these events came to take place and to understand their significance.

**Kennett and Victoria on the Move**

In Victoria from the mid-1990s onwards the nexus between arts and industry was forged with a fierce intensity. Kennett was a political conservative but his rhetoric around cultural development and his own role as its inspirational leader had a radical ring to it: ‘Advances of civilization have taken place sometimes...by accident, but generally on the knife edge of change. So we are indeed talking about revolution, and about meeting the challenge of breaking through the new frontiers of experience.’⁶ Kennett’s master plan was to build
the economic profile of Victoria through a massive program of business development, and in this he saw the tremendous contributive potential of culture.

To this end, his government embarked on a program of major civic projects to ‘revitalise Victoria’s capital city and restore its cultural and commercial dominance by the turn of the century’. These civic projects included the development of a casino on the banks of the Yarra, and an Exhibition Centre at Southbank. As a project, the casino, in particular, encapsulated Kennett’s ambition for the state by drawing together his commercial and cultural agendas; not only would the casino be a source of significant revenue generation for the state, it was also to be ‘a local entertainment venue and a new and attractive focus for Victoria’s tourist industry’. By 1999, in the last year of his premiership, Kennett clearly felt that he had achieved his mission, announcing: ‘We have become known for the term that Victoria is “open for business”. And Victoria is also a 24 hour a day live entertainment centre of international renown.’

Kennett also had a much-publicised vision for the arts; a vision that was associated with largesse. Premier Kennett was also Minister for the Arts from 1996–1999, and under his leadership the newly-named department for the arts, Arts Victoria, produced an important vision statement for the arts and undertook ambitious redevelopments of Victoria’s major cultural institutions. The arguments for the enthusiasts of Kennett’s reforms emphasise the inclusive nature of the new policy approach: the redefinition of culture included not just the traditional arts, but also popular and mass culture. It incorporated new technologies and gave attention to multicultural and indigenous work, which are acknowledged for their potential to encourage audience development and cultural tourism. The new cultural-policy framework also took globalisation into its embrace, acknowledging its capacity to build Australia’s cosmopolitanism and its capacity for cultural exports. In other words, it was largely appraised as a value-adding exercise, as an inclusive process from which everyone is the beneficiary.

This new policy-approach to arts and culture was the product of new thinking about the arts in relation to government subsidy, new thinking which has been typified as the arts-as-industry (or cultural industries) framework. In Australia, as elsewhere, the notion of the arts as an industry grew up in response to the increasing colonisation of public policy by economic rationalism in the 1980s. As economic rationalism encouraged the dependence of public spending on its economic benefits, the advocates of arts funding began to justify such funding by identifying the arts’ tangible benefits — in particular their service to tourism and entertainment industries — and began to characterise...
the arts as an industry in itself. The Keating Federal Government’s Creative Nation, released in 1994, was effectively a statement of adoption of this approach. John Howard’s Government intensified this approach.

At a state government level, too, the cultural industries approach began to dominate in the 1990s. The states supported and promoted those cultural practices that were seen to be part of the ‘broader state development agenda’, which usually included programs such as cultural tourism, industry development, regional cultural development, touring programs, indigenous arts, multimedia and multiculturalism. Deborah Stevenson argues that the sudden expansion in state-based arts policy and funding programs in this period was due to increasing competition between states to secure and host high-profile and lucrative cultural events. In this competitive environment, throughout the 1990s, the states enthusiastically underwrote the costs of building cultural precincts, and casino and festival marketplace developments.

This strategy involved the repositioning of the arts as an industry sector which, like other industries, had to become primarily self-supporting. Stevenson notes that this was more than just rhetoric; the state governments developed practical strategies for the cultural sector to build their industry credibility by funding arts organisations to develop business and management skills, with the aim of realising the critical importance of operating profitable and sustainable commercial enterprises. This represented a significant ideological shift; governments no longer justified arts funding on the basis of a philosophical commitment to the public good. Rather, arts funding in the new industry paradigm was seen as an investment in cultural capital that would eventually become self-sustainable.

While this framework has been intimately concerned with a broadening definition of culture, it has also, arguably, seen a diminution in the types of cultural product facilitated by the new funding regimes. The new paradigm was not designed to include innovative projects which had no market potential, nor experimental, small-scale work whose goal was not to capture the widest possible audience. And, as this chapter goes on to show, there was also no room in the policy framework designed by Kennett to accommodate politically-dissenting voices like that of MWT.

Under Premier Jeff Kennett, the aggressive adoption of the arts-as-industry framework in Victoria had some serious implications for both arts policy and arts practice throughout the 1990s. Victorian cultural policy under Kennett did not just attempt to broaden the audience for the arts but to broaden the economic attractiveness of the state of Victoria through the arts. The policy launched at the Malthouse theatre that November – Arts 21 – represented the height of this fervour for the industry paradigm. Arts 21 was an ambitious

12 Stevenson, D. 2000. 80.
strategy for the arts industry which, on the eve of the twenty-first century, sought to develop an international profile for Victoria and to make Victoria the ‘cultural capital’ of Australia, thus revitalising the economic, social and cultural life of the state. Its six key strategies included ‘providing world class facilities’, ‘promoting leadership’ and ‘delivering to Australia and the world.’ Kennett revelled in the fact that the Disney Corporation was bringing its theatre performance of Beauty and the Beast to Melbourne: “The importance of Beauty and the Beast is that it is coming to Melbourne first – before any other city outside of America.”

As Stevenson points out, none of the Arts 21 strategies included the word ‘culture’ or ‘art’. But together these provided the framework by which all the cultural institutions of Victoria (no matter their size) were to be appraised in terms of their project delivery and future planning. The major beneficiaries of Kennett’s cultural policies were the institutional figureheads of culture in Victoria. The Museum of Victoria received a $250 million redevelopment and the State Library a $39 million redevelopment, while the National Gallery of Victoria, Old Customs House and the Regent Theatre – all in Melbourne – were also substantially redeveloped. In addition, the government promised a further $7.3 million to implement Arts 21’s six-point strategy. Hidden among the list of ‘winners’, however, were the ‘losers’, and the arts activities and companies which did not fit the new commercial paradigm lost ground.

According to the government, experimental theatre would be a winner as much as international events and institutional figureheads. Kennett introduced triennial funding for thirty nine arts performing arts organisations, including the Fringe Festival, Musica Viva, Circus Oz, and regional organisations like the Mildura Arts Centre and Warrnambool Performing Arts Centre. Kennett argued that those organisations ‘can now plan ahead and take risks with confidence. It is very important that these organisations know they do not risk losing everything, with no assurance of funding for the following year, if they engage in some experimental theatre, for instance, or put on some projects that in time to come may form part of an agenda for the whole community’.

But Kennett’s vision for the arts prevented the arts from being seen to be critical of government, because this would jeopardise the attractiveness of the state to commercial interests. This produced an atmosphere in which artists became fearful of speaking out or producing work which might be regarded as politically offensive to the government of the day. Leonard Radic commented in the Age that while many members of the theatre community were ‘dismayed’ at the stranglehold by governments over what was and was not produced in Australian theatre, ‘they dare not speak up... for fear of being
blacklisted’. The pressure for the performing arts to demonstrate that they were central to the lives of all Australians had created a ‘Theatre of Comfort’, and few people were willing to object: ‘Who dares to say that mainstream theatre companies are increasingly allowing marketing and subscription pressures to dictate their program?’ asked Radic, ‘Where in their repertoire do you find new work where there is provision for the right to fail – work that is genuinely experimental? Where in their repertoire do you find work which is overtly political?’  

Theatre director Susie Dee confirms that the climate of the day was one in which there was a ‘scare factor’, which meant that many artists ‘were so busy looking after their turf and were too scared to embrace the bigger picture about what was happening in the arts community’. For the Melbourne Workers Theatre, this would be neither desirable nor possible, as its very raison d’être was to represent a political stance opposed to the ideology of the Kennett Government and to put the ‘daily-life battles’ of ‘working class culture’ in ‘the foreground of theatrical concerns’. Dee underlines the courage shown by Cornelius in her protest against the government’s policy: ‘It was a brave moment … I don’t think anyone in the arts community was voicing their opinion and I don’t think anyone else was brave enough to speak against the Premier and the new policies’.

The Cornelius Heckle
Patricia Cornelius remembers the launch of Arts 21 in the following way:

There was a general suspicion that this huge injection of funds into the arts was actually (to pay) for infrastructure and more bureaucracy, rather than for the artists and their projects. At the time all the small-to-medium theatre companies, including Melbourne Workers’ Theatre, had had $20,000 lopped off their grants. At the launch, artists were invited but we were told that no questions from the floor would be accepted. As part of a protest, when Kennett announced his plan to inject increased funding into the arts, I called out: ‘it’s all very well, but not if this money is at the expense of theatre companies!’ I called out that he had taken $20,000 away from the theatre companies without any consultation whatsoever.

A newspaper report of the event noted that Kennett responded to Cornelius’ interjection, telling her to ‘read the policy first and ask questions after’. However, according to Cornelius herself, Kennett’s actual response was more decisive:

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22 Cornelius, P. Interview with Patricia Cornelius, Melbourne 2002.
I believe I was blacklisted after this. During his reign, I was knocked back for the project grants I applied for.  

MWT’s annual reports for 1993/94 and 1994/95 confirm that the company did indeed suffer a budget cut: Arts Victoria’s funding to the company fell from $50,000 in 1993–94 to $30,000 in 1994–95. The company’s board meeting minutes note that Arts Victoria attributed this funding cut to low attendance-figures for the company’s performances.

According to Cornelius, the Kennett Government’s approach to the arts demonstrated a lack of willingness to consult with artists about cultural policy, and involved the withdrawal of funding from experimental and small companies to fund the government’s priority areas. Cornelius’ anecdotal account underlines her powerful sense of disenfranchisement during the Kennett era. Arguably, too, the MWT, with its long-standing commitment to producing theatre works for and about the union movement, might perhaps have already found it difficult to secure funding under a regime which was not known for its tolerance of the union movement.

But most startling of all, this anecdote reveals that Cornelius believes her act of speaking out, her public expression of a dissenting view, damaged her chances of receiving funding. While the selection of artists and projects for funding is clearly a subjective process, and any number of variables can determine the outcome, this anecdote nonetheless suggests that the radical restructure of Arts Victoria under Tim Jacobs, which accompanied the launch of Arts 21, could not apparently justify the funding of artistic work from artists who positioned themselves as critical of the Premier. And thus an irony: the close association of the arts with the Premier himself (which seemed to promise a much-enhanced political and social profile for the arts), also laid open the possibility for much greater levels of interference in the process of arts funding.

Another issue here is the way in which the new policy framework was accompanied by a distinctively hands-on approach from the minister responsible for the portfolio. In the period of the Kennett government, there were two ministers for the arts: Haddon Storey held the position from 1992 until his retirement from politics in 1996 when Premier Kennett stepped into the role until the change of government in 1999. Over this whole period the annual reports from Arts Victoria suggest a rhetorical – and possibly real – change to the relationship between artists and the Ministry. Arts Victoria (formerly the Victorian Council of the Arts), consisting of twelve members appointed by the Minister, was originally established to provide expert advice to the Minister on the allocation of funding. The nature of this relationship has been somewhat ambivalent. For example, the Council’s 1987/88 Annual Report restated the...
fact that it was to 'act in an advisory capacity, to assist the Minister and Director on matters concerning the arts'. The final decisions about grant applications were made by the Minister. However, the same report mentions, four pages later, the Council's concern that reforms to cultural funding policies should not jeopardise 'the Ministry's firm policy of dealing at arm's length with its clients'. Arms-length funding is a cornerstone of Federal Government funding for the arts in Australia. It is an ethos informed by the belief that 'most politicians are not artistically – or, indeed, morally, competent to make accurate and informed aesthetic judgements', so funding decisions are made on the basis of advice from experts – usually artists. In Victoria, funding decisions are made by the Minister, but as the Council's 1987/88 Annual Report points out, there has been an expectation that these decisions are informed, and indeed informally made, by the expert members of the Council.

However, this was not the case in the decision to cut the MWT's funding in 1995. The Arts Victoria Drama Panel actually recommended a small increase in the theatre's funds. Arts reporter Palz Vaughan described a comic situation in which:

When asked if the decision to cut funds to the MWT was made by the appointed peer assessment panel, Mr Storey...shook his head with a definite no. He and the arts bureaucrats had obviously not rehearsed their performance; the two bureaucrats flanking the minister nodded a big yes. However, Mr Storey, unaware of his minions' response, went on to make it clear that the decision was not based on a recommendation from the panel. It would seem that, despite previous insistence on the importance of the peer assessment panel, the process had not been applied in this case.

Cornelius and the MWT were not the only parties to be artistically censored by the Kennett Government. So too were students of the Victorian College of Arts.

"You know your superiority is an illusion"

In 1996, the company responsible for developing City Link, a billion dollar project to link the three major road-systems leading into and around Melbourne, Transfield-Obayashi, commissioned a series of artworks from painting students at the Victorian College of the Arts. Visiting American artist Barbara Kruger had been working with the students of the VCA Arts School to construct billboards and installations which combined images and text, which were then were erected along St Kilda Road at the City Link con-

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29 Stevenson, D. 2000, 50.
construction site. Mimicking Kruger's public, sloganistic style and direct address, one student artist, Karen Lindner, had painted slogans which read: 'Why are you afraid of your vulnerability?'; 'You know your superiority is an illusion', and 'Why do you control?'. The hoardings went up as part of a planned weekend celebration of city projects, open to the public for the first time.

Premier Kennett and the Minister for Planning, Rob Maclellan, insisted that these works were to be censored. In taking the decision to cover up the hoardings, a spokesman for the government explained: 'it is not art work – at this stage we are only seeing some questions.' The decision was criticised by Kruger who declared that 'The emperor – or whoever he is – doesn’t know the art world, he doesn’t know my work. It would have been nice for his arts commissar to have told him there has been a strain for the last twenty years of people doing this, and this arts student was just miming a certain practice ...'. The National Association for the Visual Arts, too, wrote to the Premier to express its 'considerable alarm' at the censorship and at the 'veiled financial threats' by Kennett ‘to the students and institution protesting against the government’s interference’. The Association wrote to Kennett that ‘The Age at the weekend of 5 October reported you as commenting “if you are going to bite the hand of sponsorship then you can’t complain if the sponsors say at some stage, We don’t want to be part of it”.'

Remarkably, however, this incident of censorship received no widespread condemnation from the arts community. Some seven months later, Lindner’s teacher, the painter Vic Majzner, expressed the view that many artists felt they had been effectively silenced, and were concerned that speaking out against the government would jeopardise their own careers. 'Where,' Majzner asks, 'were the artists marching in the street to protect the principle of freedom of expression? Was the art world too scared to voice an opinion?' This notion of the Victorian arts community as one in which debate and dissent had been effectively stifled, is also borne out by the views of the arts editor of The Age, Raymond Gill, who described a ‘culture of caution’ amongst the people running the major arts organisations in the State; people who ‘don’t want to say anything critical of the Government’. Gill notes: ‘I applaud the amount of money that is going into the arts, but it’s amazing that in an arena that is supposed to be about passion and matters of life and death, there’s so little talk.'

The behaviour of some arts organisations in this period also suggests that the political context around the cultural policy created a climate of fear. An example of such behaviour can be found in the case of the Melbourne University Student Union (MUSU) and a play by award-winning playwright

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34 Trioli, V. 1996.1.
35 Trioli, V. 1996.1.
Stephen Sewell in November 1996. On advice from the Union’s lawyers, MUSU refused to proceed with a production of a satirical play by Sewell who had been commissioned by the student union to write a play about student politics. The union applied for funding from Arts Victoria’s Commissions Program and secured $15,000 for the project. Sewell’s play, entitled *Sodomy and Cigarettes: the burlesque of a ridiculous man*, was described by Sewell as a satire about Premier Jeff Kennett. The union’s lawyers, however, felt the work was defamatory, and the production was cancelled. Sewell himself had no doubt that this was ‘an act of blatant censorship’, and that furthermore, ‘Arts Victoria is operating under a form of self-censorship that results in it denying, or withdrawing, funding to anything politically sensitive’.39

Five months later, in April 1997, a similar incident occurred. A play entitled *The Essentials* was due to be produced at the Gasworks Theatre in Albert Park under the aegis of the City of Port Phillip. The play, based on research with the Ambulance Employees Association and Associated Domestic Violence Services, explored the issue of privatisation of essential services and its effect on domestic violence. The City of Port Phillip stopped the production of the play due to legal advice that said it was defamatory. In a newspaper interview, the play’s director and co-writer Stefo Nantsou said that while the characters were fictional ‘the drama was set against real life events in Victoria in the past five years... we wanted to show the human cost of the enormous changes in this state’. The theatre company’s own legal advice suggested that there was little risk of legal action. However, the City of Port Phillip refused to proceed. The production was finally rescued by the Victorian Trades Hall Council which agreed to stage the play at the Trades Hall.40

In the above cases, there appears to be a connection between the overt political content of the creative work and the decision to censor it. This conclusion was also drawn by John Brumby, then leader of the opposition – the Victorian Labor Party – who stated in a speech to parliament in December 1996 that a ‘disturbing culture’ had developed in the state whereby: ‘if the (arts community) does not produce what the government likes, it is black-listed and taken off the funding profile’.41

**Conclusion**

In the arts funding environment of the 1990s in Victoria, the work of artists who chose to speak against prevailing political values was marginalised or censored. Indeed, one could argue that while Cornelius’ account of her treatment at the hands of the new regime was not a disinterested one, her analysis could be seen to be verified by the subsequent instances of political interference and censorship. The story told in this chapter attests to Dee’s

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41 Parliament of Victoria Hansard, Legislative Assembly, 2 December 1996.1525.
comment about Cornelius’ extraordinary courage at the November policy launch.

There are other significant points to note too about *Arts 21*: Cornelius’ protest, the MWT’s decline in funds and the other cases of censorship in this period. The case studies prove a means of teasing out some of the implications of the new cultural policy regimes. Clearly, Kennett could be regarded as an individual case; a maverick whose particular brand of top-down management of the arts portfolio was of his own creation and reflected nothing more than his individual drive and management style. However, another reading of these case studies suggests that the new arts-as-industry policy created a climate in which it was possible for artists’ work to be censored, or simply not endorsed as ‘legitimate’.

Many aspects of the cultural-policy framework remain in place to this day. But it is a final note of poetic justice that one of MWT’s productions, *Who’s Afraid of the Working Class?*, first performed at the Victorian Trades Hall in Melbourne in 1998, was broadly acclaimed for its trenchant critique of the rise of the New Right. The production saw out the end of the Kennett regime.42

Finally, the instances described above are an important opportunity to remember the recent history of political protest by artists in Victoria; the dissenting voices of a few artists who insisted that their opposition to the status quo be heard. These artists remained convinced of their roles as producers of what Lani Guinier calls ‘a generative power’, and fought against-the-grain to produce those ‘illuminating moments’ which remind us of our collective responsibilities. Of the MWT protest in November 1994, Susie Dee comments: ‘I hope that that act had an impact on artists, to be prepared to speak out and to fight for the arts community’.43

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Tony Briggs,
Pauline Whyman,
Eugenia Fragos,
David Adamson,
Daniela Farinacci
and Rodney Affif
in Fever, Trades
Hall New
Ballroom, 2002

PHOTO:
Angela Bailey