Introduction

The arts in Australia are funded through a three-tiered system involving federal, state and local government organisations. The role of local government is well-defined and has been consistent over time. It involves supporting those urban cultural and heritage services and amenities that are valued within the community – libraries, cultural or arts services, performing arts, art galleries and museums. Generally, each local government area (LGA) supports its own cultural program and develops its own strategy without reference to neighbouring entities. However, an exception has
been Western Sydney, which has instead opted for a degree of collective cultural action among 14 cooperating LGAs.

Over 1.7 million people live in the Greater Western Sydney region, representing 42% of the population of Sydney, and 27% of the population of the state. It has the fastest growing population in the state and it is projected to increase to 2.18 million by 2020. It also has the third largest economy in Australia. Culturally it is an extremely diverse region. One third of Western Sydney residents were born overseas and 78% of this group come from origins other than British Commonwealth countries.

Until 2000, these communities lacked adequate cultural infrastructure. As the first stage in their joint cultural strategy, the 14 LGAs persuaded the state government to partner with them to implement a $55 million cultural infrastructure package supporting the development throughout the region of multidisciplinary arts centres, performing arts facilities, public art galleries and museums. The second stage of the strategy proposed to link Western Sydney’s diverse cultural communities to this new infrastructure in order to empower them to ‘tell [their] own stories’ and ‘communicate the region’s diverse values, achievements and ambitions to the rest of the world’. More ambitiously, the strategy asserted that since the cultural diversity of the area foreshadowed Australia’s future character, Western Sydney should be regarded as ‘the author of contemporary Australian life’.

Twelve years have now passed since the strategy was inaugurated, but it is apparent that, beyond the building of infrastructure, many of the original strategic goals have not been achieved. When surveyed in 2008, only 19% of Western Sydney respondents could name a cultural venue in the Council area where they lived and only 14% could name one in another Council area. In Western Sydney, attendances at the main art forms occur at less than half the rate for metropolitan Sydney.

Creative participation in these same art forms occurs at very low levels or not at all.

Despite this, survey data confirm that there are 221,000 paid and unpaid cultural workers in the area. They also suggest a high level of interest in the arts throughout the region. Overall, 78% of Western Sydney residents ‘like or really like the arts; 74% of respondents believe ‘the arts should be as much about creating/doing things yourself as being part of an audience’; and 56% of Western Sydney residents maintain that ‘the arts are an important part of my lifestyle’. However, the commitment to these values do not translate into behaviours that can be documented through quantitative surveys of conventional performing and visual arts attractions and the relationship between artists and their audiences is difficult to discern.

How are these inconsistencies to be explained? This article examines other data drawn from Western Sydney and searches for parallels in other territories to try and illuminate how cultural employment and the relationships between cultural production and consumption have undergone fundamental change. In view of the new relationships produced by this change, it is proposed that a new cultural economy has developed in Western Sydney and it is suggested that a fresh policy model may now be required.

1. Local Government in Australia

A recent review of the ‘pursuit of happiness’ in 10 major cities produced some interesting results1. While respondents endorsed the abiding significance of some primary factors (income, employment,
health, social capital, personal safety) (Leyden et al., 2010: 869) they also placed a high value on cultural and heritage institutions and services. There was a ‘significant relationship between happiness and access to cultural amenities, such as movie theatres, museums, and concert halls, along with libraries’ (op cit, 2010: 883). Access to cultural amenities was rated more highly than the availability of job opportunities or public transport. Libraries were assigned greater importance than ‘shops, supermarkets and department stores’ as assets assuring happiness. Indeed,

... happier people are ... more likely to agree that the built environment of their cities and city neighborhoods provide convenient or easy access to cultural and mixed-use amenities ...[There were] clear bivariate relationships between reported happiness and the accessibility to a variety of cultural, leisure, and experiential amenities (op cit 2010: 877).

In Australia, responsibility for the provision and maintenance of such sources of happiness has been assumed principally by local or city government. Local government areas (LGAs) occupy the bottom of a three tiered system of government in which federal or Commonwealth government represents the apex with state or territorial governments intervening between national and local spheres of influence.

Each of these tiers of government has cultural funding responsibilities with the federal government assuming responsibility for national institutions and state governments supporting state-significant institutions which are characteristically located in the CBDs (Central Business Districts) of the state capitals. In 2009-10, local government funding for cultural activities was $1,197.7m, which was 18% of total cultural funding provided by all levels of government. This proportion has remained steady with local government funding for cultural activities in 2008-09 being 18% ($1,148.6m) and in 2007-08 being 17% ($1,038.7m) of total government cultural funding.

In 2009-10, the majority of local government cultural funding (63%) was allocated to libraries ($759.3m). The balance was devoted to cultural or arts services ($247.5m), performing arts ($91.1m), art museums ($52.4m) and other museums ($47.4m). Generally, these expenditures are confined to institutions within the boundaries of each local government area since these also determine the extent of the rating base from which the LGAs’ revenues are derived. In large conurbations such as Greater Metropolitan Sydney (which has a total population in excess of 4.4 million) this makes for an extremely fragmented system of cultural administration.

The legal entity which is the City of Sydney in fact covers an area only slightly larger than the CBD. The Sydney Statistical Division, as classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, extends 12,428.4km² and is made up of 42 other LGAs, collectively containing more than 300 suburbs many of which have their own distinctive historic, cultural or ethnic identity.

While most Sydney LGAs have chosen to grapple with these cultural complexities individually, an exception has been Western Sydney, which has instead opted for a degree of collective cultural action among cooperating LGAs. These collective approaches arose from a recognition that the dispersed communities within Western Sydney, while individually relatively small, when considered as an intra-city region could be represented as demographically and economically significant and demonstrated to be under–resourced culturally compared with the rest of the Sydney Statistical Division.

As already mentioned Greater Western Sydney is a dynamic and growing region that is also culturally extremely diverse. It can claim the largest urban Aboriginal population in Australia. It also has the
largest migrant and refugee populations in the country. One third of Western Sydney residents were born overseas and 78% of this group come from origins other than British Commonwealth countries. After English, Arabic is the language most commonly used in Western Sydney. In addition, there are cultural communities where Vietnamese, Mandarin and Cantonese were also used extensively, as were 47 other languages. The population of Greater Western Sydney is also younger than its neighbours. Seventy-two percent of permanent immigrants are under 35, and one-third are between 25 and 34 years old. Only 48% of the general Australian population is under 35, and 14% between 25 and 34 years (ABS, 2007b).

Between 2002 and 2009 the New South Wales (NSW) government, through its cultural ministry Arts NSW, contributed $14.9 million towards the cost of a major capital infrastructure package to support the development of new cultural facilities in Western Sydney. These funds were matched and exceeded by contributions from the 14 LGAs in Greater Western Sydney. The combined total of capital funding committed by the state government and local government between 2002 and 2009 exceeded $55 million. The range of initiatives included arts centres, performing arts facilities, public art galleries and museums.

To some extent, these developments were informed by a cultural strategy developed by an LGA umbrella group, the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC), which has a non-statutory policy coordination function among the region’s 14 LGAs. WSROC’s cultural strategy, which was released in 2005, acknowledged the cultural diversity of the area, and concluded that it foreshadowed Australia’s future character. The strategy therefore determined that Western Sydney should be regarded as ‘the author of contemporary Australian life’ (WSROC, 2005: ix). The convergence of ‘diverse socio-cultural, economic and environmental complexities’, it was hoped, would forge ‘new ways of thinking and add to a bank of creative skills and knowledges’ (WSROC, 2005: v). The strategy proposed that the infrastructure development should generate an enhanced ‘sense of place … offer people a range of social and recreational opportunities … [and] …contribute to community wellbeing and our region’s vitality’. In this way, people in Western Sydney would be empowered to ‘tell [their] own stories’ and ‘communicate the region’s diverse values, achievements and ambitions to the rest of the world’ (WSROC, 2005: vi).

2. Arts and Culture in Western Sydney

At the time, these goals were embraced enthusiastically by the State government. Their 2004 review of the Western Sydney Arts Strategy asserts that

… the Strategy, as a multi-disciplinary, place-based approach to capacity building, continues to be central to addressing the legacy of under-development and managing the rapidity of new urban development in Western Sydney, while continuing to nurture and celebrate Western Sydney’s distinctive arts and cultural activity (Lally, 2004: ii).

In retrospect, this appears less like objective observation and analysis and more like the rhetoric of hope, for the primary goals of the strategy have never been realized. The intention that the “cultural institutions” should “offer people a range of … opportunities to tell [their] own stories” (WSROC, 2005: vi) has not occurred to any great extent. As indicated above the general knowledge of cultural venues in the area was not very impressive.

Further, most of the ‘main art forms’ (theatre, dance, opera, orchestral music) (OZCO, 2010) attracted audiences constituting less than 15% of the population and attendances occurred at less
than half the rate for metropolitan Sydney. Active participation in these same art forms (as opposed to being an audience member) attracted rates of either 0% or 1% (Instinct and Reason, 2010).

It is difficult to reconcile these findings with research which demonstrates that communities in Western Sydney value the arts positively. In the abovementioned polls the Western Sydney residents showed a great interest in and enthusiasm for cultural participation, maintaining that this is “an important part” of their lifestyles.

A significant proportion of the population is also engaged in cultural work. There are apparently 221,000 paid and unpaid cultural workers in the area (ABS, 2007). This includes some 19,000 earning in excess of $40,000. This remuneration is some 30% higher than the average earnings for ‘professional practising artists’ in Australia (Throsby and Hollister, 2003). How can these contradictions be explained?

When Western Sydney LGAs embarked on their cultural infrastructure development, they sought to emulate the visual and performing arts facilities programs that had been characteristic of past patterns of local government cultural provision. However, it seems apparent that over the past decade a new and different cultural economy has developed which requires different forms of support.

This new cultural economy has been extensively theorised and researched (Shorthose and Strange, 2004; McRobbie, 2002; du Gay and Pryke, 2002). It is differently organised from the model of subsidised cultural production that developed in post-war Europe. A distinctive feature of the operation of this new economy is that some 20-30% of its workforce comprises independent artists working within radically new relatively self-determined informal networks and mutual support systems. These independent artistic networks are composed of freelancers, the temporarily employed, sole traders and micro-businesses and those who occupy a fluid position in relation to formal cultural economy organisations and jobs (Shorthose and Strange, 2004: 47).

No comprehensive research has yet been done to establish how the artists in Western Sydney organize their working lives. However, there is anecdotal evidence which suggests that they conform to this model. The base for cultural employment appears to be moving away from full-time jobs to more casualised forms of work. These artists have been identified as ‘slashies’:

...that wave of young people who straddle industries and disciplines, defining themselves by several professions. Their identity (and income) is built around the fact they lead multidimensional lives. First there was the actor/model/singer. Now, a graphic designer will also own a small bar. A businessman will play in a band on weekends. A maths teacher will blog at night. Television presenters have their own fashion lines. Lawyers are now filmmakers too (Olding, 2011).

These artists appear to be strongly represented within a specific demographic cohort whose involvement in the cultural sector has shifted from cultural consumption to cultural production – from objectified to embodied cultural capital. For those aged 15-18 years in 1999, 25.1% attended theatre; 15.8% attended opera and musicals and 17.9% attended dance. By 2010, attendance rates among this cohort (by then aged 25-28 years) had decreased to 14.3% for theatre; 11.2% for musicals and
opera and 7.9% for dance. Concurrently, this cohort took up paid or unpaid involvement in cultural activities. In 2007, 696,000 individuals aged 15-24 had joined the cultural workforce and 664,200 individuals aged 25-34 were involved in similar occupations (ABS, 2007).

Many theoretical frameworks are available to explain these changes. These include theories of the pro-am revolution (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004); the attractions offered by the ‘industrialisation of Bohemia’ in the creative industries (Ross, 2005; Neff et al, 2011); and the preferences of the post-industrial workforce (Bottero and Crossley, 2011). However, a more convincing explanation is offered by patterns of intergenerational change in personal values in the twenty-first century (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Gibbins and Reimer, 1995). Of particular interest is the generation described by Gibbins and Reimer as ‘humanist postmodern’. These are individuals whose primary commitment is to ‘self-expression’, who see ‘the self as an unfinished project’, who are motivated by ‘intrinsic satisfactions’ and preoccupied with ‘image and representation’ (Gibbins and Reimer, 1995): a perfect profile for practitioners in the new cultural economy.

For these artists, creativity does not depend on access to the products and services of arts centres and art museums. ‘Inspirational sources’ are accessible which encompass the entirety of recorded human experience. Plugging into computers, for example, accesses data that are both local and universal, earthbound and cosmic, historic and futurist. Information stockpiles have also been swelled because journalists, manufacturers and financiers operate in global markets, because archaeologists and geologists and astronomers expand knowledge of the past and because forecasters, pollsters and marketers lengthen projections of the future. All contribute to the vast inventory of external sources of arts production (Weintraub, 2003: 122).

In such circumstances, the new cultural infrastructure produced by the Western Sydney Arts Strategy seems largely irrelevant.

3. Understanding the New Cultural Economy

Various factors make it difficult to offer a precise definition of Western Sydney’s new cultural economy. This economy does not register in census-based studies since much of its activity takes place under the statistical radar. Musicians provide a case in point. A 2009 study revealed that few of the 15,000 practitioners surveyed earned a full-time living as performers. They therefore would not register on the ABS census data. While venue-based performance accounted for approximately 69% of live performance income, up to 30% of this was derived from merchandise and recorded music sales. In some cases, in-kind compensation (meals, accommodation) was also provided, so these artists are not conventionally employed, rewarded or measured (Arts Victoria 2009:34). This situation can be generalised beyond the music industry.

These fluid work portfolios appear to be further changing arts practice. Younger artists are now ‘mixing up original creative work’, undertaking ‘collaborative ventures, study, travel and research’ (SMH, 2010b). Again, these activities are not necessarily susceptible to statistical capture.

In addition, new technologies have transformed arts practice. Between 2004 and 2007 those involved in ‘creating artworks with a computer’ increased by 98% to constitute almost 52% (552,500) of the
total paid cultural workforce. Interestingly, the frequency and range of digital production in Western Sydney are both considerably higher than for the rest of the state (See Table 1).

Table 1: On-line creation in Western Sydney

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On-line creation</th>
<th>NSW total</th>
<th>Western Sydney</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average occasions per year</td>
<td>Average occasions per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted your own work of visual art/film/video online</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learned to create music, graphics or stories online</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted your own stories/poetry/articles online</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked with others through the internet to create visual art/film/video</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked with others through the internet to create a story article or poem</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted your own music online</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked with others through the internet to create music</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in an online community or social network concerned with art in some way</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrote own blog</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted your own book/music/theatre reviews online</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>145</td>
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Artists in the new cultural economy tend to be networked, not institutionalized, rendering them less visible to statisticians. They operate through networks because

… of their particular set of circumstances: (1) the collective nature of creative practice; (2) the lack of an institutionally organized work environment; (3) the intersection of private and professional networks due to the nature of creative and cultural work; and (4) the uncertainty of employment (Stern and Seifert, 2004 :9).

Further complicating the picture, the market for cultural goods and services in Western Sydney is difficult to define. The ‘main art forms’ which are presented in established venues are marketed through highly visible channels (newspapers, magazines, television, radio). However, younger arts consumers pursuing novel experiences seem instead to rely on social network markets.

... complex social networks play at least as significant a coordination role as price signals. ...The very act of consumer choice ... is governed not just by the set of incentives described by conventional consumer theory but by choices of others … Other peoples’ preferences have...
commodity status over a social network because novelty, by definition, carries uncertainty and other peoples’ choices therefore carry information. (Cunningham et al, 2009: 4-5)

The views of friends regarding consumer choice as conveyed through Facebook and other social networks ‘peaks at 88% for those aged 15-17 [in Western Sydney] and it drops relatively slowly as participants age’ (M&M, 2011: no page number).

Digital art products are also created in a networked, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge. ‘Produsage’ is a term coined to describe this collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement (Bruns, 2008).

The preference for informal work practices seems to be matched by the choice of informal distribution channels among some communities. This is reflected in the abnormally high attendance rates at festivals in Western Sydney. A total of 66.8% of Western Sydney respondents indicate that they are likely or very likely to attend a festival during the next 12 months (M&M, 2011: npn). This represents a huge difference from national data which indicate that only 1.6% of the population attend multi-category festivals and 6.0% attend single-category festivals (LPA, 2010).

The popularity of these festivals appears to be based in part on the absence of the most commonly cited barriers to cultural attendance in Western Sydney - cost, safety, transportation, access and distance. More positively however, they also appear to address other social and cultural needs. The first of these, cited by the older residents of Western Sydney, concerns cultural continuity: they

...build bridges between older generations who have a greater cultural understanding of their native cultures, and younger generations who have grown up primarily in Australia and are therefore removed from the culture of their parents and grandparents (M&M, 2011: npn).

Yet festivals are also capable of answering a reciprocal need among young people for cultural communication within their immediate communities.

Young adults are also interested in participating in events to showcase their own talents. These events allow them to build their confidence and exhibit their unique cultural identity to their native communities (M&M, 2011: npn).

Significantly, perhaps, the media cited which are preferred by young people for these purposes – ‘films, photography, art, designing type things’ – are all digital. This is a new cultural landscape which demands a fresh approach to funding and support.

4. A New Policy Model

Commonwealth and state government approaches to cultural policy in Australia today are predicated largely on the assumptions of postwar welfare economics. The evidence cited in this article demonstrates that activity within the cultural sector has changed to such an extent that new policy and evaluation frameworks are now required. Our proposed policy framework employs the organizing concept of Strategic Added Value (SAV), which has been discussed extensively in regional development literature (SQW Ltd, 2006). SAV is the added value that is realized by coordinating arts and cultural strategies and influencing others to help achieve common objectives...
and outcomes. The impact of this coordination results in key agencies addressing shared objectives cost-effectively.

The policy model is based on four groups of programs – Partners, Place, Projects and People. Within a diverse range of communities and working with an expanded range of cultural expression, the policy model will address two fundamental goals:

- to contribute to the development of cultural activity at the level the community can sustain; and
- to add strategic value to the community’s existing (and evolving) cultural assets in the new economy.

**Table 2** (below) summarizes schematically the broad approach that might be pursued to realize these goals at a community level. In this table

- **Foundations** represent the basic building blocks for cultural development which are present in every community
- The ranked **Strategic Interventions** are envisaged as community initiatives, supported where appropriate by a specialist arts agency.
- The **Programs** are labels for that agency’s policy tools
Table 2: Schematic Cultural Development Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundations</th>
<th>Strategic Interventions (in Rank Order)</th>
<th>Programs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partners</strong></td>
<td>Leverage through networking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Consolidate network for organising and advocacy</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ensure civic engagement in the arts including policies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong organizational and advocacy infrastructure including information distribution, outside resources/ funding</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leverage monetary and organizational support from business community</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintain substantial investment in time and money by local individuals</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Place</strong></td>
<td>Valuing of history, sense of place etc by a significant number of local people</td>
<td>Celebrate Places</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditions (including indigenous and ethnic) of artistic activity</td>
<td>Document traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing of information</td>
<td>Research and publication re context/participation etc</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One or more purpose built facilities for artists – access workshops, residencies, multipurpose arts spaces-</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>People</strong></td>
<td>People doing art</td>
<td>Training / mentoring opportunities identified and supported</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A critical mass of artists identified</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Artists serve as a magnet for other artists</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Professionalization of the artistic community</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Artists can live and work comfortably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Projects</strong></td>
<td>Community groups/places which include arts activity (e.g. schools)</td>
<td>Support for artists’ projects</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Catalytic events e.g. A special performance or exhibit</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A planned intervention e.g festival</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure places where art-making is done are central to the community: school, park, main street, shopping centres</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A physical locus for arts activities e.g. vacant shopfronts, repurposed buildings</td>
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This framework recognizes that not all communities will complete each of the ranked interventions.

It also indicates that the new arts agency will require policy tools which extend beyond the expenditure of public money.

Beyond the intrinsic cultural impact of these programs, strategic and economic measures of value can also be applied to prove its effectiveness. Qualitative surveys of those affected by the strategy can be administered which record ratings of its catalytic, coordination and capacity development.
value. In economic terms, the strategy’s Net Added Value (NAV) can be calculated according to the productivity gains associated with coordination of strategic effort; the leverage outcomes of partnership activities; and the value of new jobs created and trained personnel entering the workforce.

The merit of this model is that it can both account for cultural development processes on a community scale while also accommodating high-level statements of purpose. And, unlike present policy approaches, it can comprehend and embrace the new forms of cultural production and consumption that have redefined today’s cultural sector and now constitute its fluid and evolving base. If it were to be implemented, it might prove a more effective tool than the current cultural infrastructure for providing support for those in Western Sydney’s new cultural economy who collectively aspire to be the ‘author of contemporary Australian life’.

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