



# Beyond access: cultural citizenship and transformation

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The question of cultural access is not a new one. Policymakers have been grappling with the issue for decades and still, conversations about access and inclusion in arts institutions have yet to embrace the complexity of ways in which people engage with the arts and culture. This paper draws from research into the Australian context, in which “community art” and “multicultural art” frameworks have shaped how diverse groups are perceived to participate in culture. It argues that the notion of access is still largely dependent on access to, or inclusion in, a privileged domain of national or legitimate culture. As such, there is a need to focus on how access is a dynamic and productive practice of citizenship, through which individuals and communities may adapt and transform culture.

## **The mainstage or the lobby? Addressing diverse public audiences**

Cultural institutions have largely addressed access as a response to the shifting makeup of populations. In Australia, the ideal of access has informed the funding strategies of the nation’s peak arts funding body, the Australia Council,

since the 1970s. As migrants, rural communities and working class people have different cultural interests, histories and priorities, an emphasis on access is one that reflects an understanding of these new and diverse areas. What is implicit in doing this is the idea of a shared culture, and the rights of diverse audiences to feel ownership or belonging within these shared spaces. As such, arts programmes and policies shaped by this objective of access have been marked by tension—they tread the line between recognising differences between groups and the need to drive towards a common culture.

It was in the early 1990s that Gay Hawkins first addressed the conflict posed by the “civilising imperative” that access brings (Hawkins 1993). Historically, a shared culture for diverse communities has been associated with high culture or culture with a capital “C”. We might also refer to this as the “Shakespeare in the park” model of cultural access that leaves little scope for new cultural influences or transformation. Such cultural programs imagine a linear, one-way access to a body of cultural work that has been largely unchanged for centuries, and

which reflect a narrow view of cultural value and legitimacy. In the policies of the Australia Council, this has led to tension in achieving the dual, conflicting objectives of providing access while still ensuring excellence.

But there are other approaches to access. My research into multicultural arts<sup>1</sup> has examined the various ways in which migrant-background artists are supported and positioned within the wider Australian arts landscape. The Arts Centre in Melbourne, a flagship arts venue in the centre of the city's cultural precinct has taken on different models for engaging with Melbourne's culturally diverse migrant communities over the last decade. One programme, *Mix It Up*, supported by the arts advocacy organisation, Multicultural Arts Victoria, invited major world music and other global performing artists with the aim of attracting audiences from specific migrant groups. These events involved deliberate and targeted approaches to culturally diverse programming. Local artists from migrant communities were also included on the bill; although they played in the lobby while the touring headliners played on the main stage.

Another example is the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts, Asia TOPA. This was a major international, contemporary arts festival held in 2017, that took an open-ended approach to attracting diverse audiences. Of the 900,000 attendees at Asia TOPA events, over half were reported to be from a culturally diverse background.<sup>2</sup> The festival's strategy was to prioritise networks with high-profile arts innovators and companies overseas, rather than build relationships with local community groups. Both approaches raise questions about where diverse art forms and audiences belong

in major cultural spaces: Should they be on the main stage or in a supporting role in the lobby? How does bringing diverse audiences into prestigious cultural venues shift the cultural hierarchies that have historically structured these spaces? To interrogate the idea of access means to examine these fraught questions.

## Cultural citizenship and transformation

The concept of cultural citizenship is helpful when considering the complexities of access. Here, citizenship is not understood solely as a legal, or political framework. Rather, it refers to the informal, cultural dimensions of citizenship and belonging. Cultural studies and cultural policy scholars have been concerned with the ways in which belonging to a nation state can be defined not just by formal criteria, but also by informal cultural capacities (Karim 2009; Murray 2009; Rosaldo 2003). The concept highlights the cultural rights of diverse groups to participate in and shape national culture. It allows for conversations about cultural capital, and the ways that particular kinds of cultural knowledge allow access to privileged cultural spaces. These are the sharper political questions that often remain obscured in more general discussions about access. Here, access is no longer imagined as a linear relationship, through which entry to an already-existing, legitimate culture is enabled. Instead, access can be multi-directional, in fact, it is a dynamic concept which captures how different stakeholders shape and value culture.

I have previously argued that cultural citizenship is achieved through a holistic and circular framework that connects capacity, participation and belonging (Khan et al. 2017).

This framework captures how diverse groups participate in culture, the capacities required for them to do so, and the forms of belonging this engenders. It is a circular framework because cultural participation produces belonging, but belonging is also necessary for people to participate in the first place. And while access and participation in culture first requires one to have specific capacities—such as language skills or arts literacy—these capacities can also be developed through participation in and exposure to the arts. Migrants, or those who bring different cultural histories and interests, may have unequal levels of access to these literacies. In this way, cultural citizenship also describes the capacity to speak a dominant cultural language and eventually contribute to or even change these cultural forms. In Australia, this dominant culture might be defined as White Australia, Anglo-Australian culture, or “mainstream Australia”. Being able to understand, engage with, and ultimately to redefine these dominant aesthetic forms requires cultural citizenship.

### **Khaled Sabsabi: cultural mediation and mobility**

Khaled Sabsabi is an Australian visual and sound artist who demonstrates this cultural citizenship through his significant cultural mobility. His work demonstrates an aptitude for negotiating different cultural forms, institutions, opportunities and modes of public engagement; and in the course of Sabsabi’s career he has moved between official and unofficial cultural spaces, becoming an advocate for new models of access and transformation in cultural institutions. Sabsabi’s family migrated to Australia from Lebanon in 1978, and in the

1980s and 1990s Sabsabi became one of the pioneers of Australian hip hop. He gradually became involved in community and activist arts, and worked in a range of social contexts including prisons, schools, youth centres, refugee camps, as well as with community arts organisations and migrant communities in suburban Sydney (Mar and Ang 2015).

In 2003, he shifted from sound into visual media. Much of his work revolves around the aesthetics and politics of migration, and offers perspectives from highly localised contexts. His best known work is the *Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement*, a tri-screen video installation, which presented the everyday religious practice of a Sufi Muslim community in Sydney. It won the prestigious Blake Prize for religious art in 2011 and has since been acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, where several of his other works have also been exhibited. Sabsabi has also participated in numerous international biennales and circulates successfully within national and transnational elite arts spaces. In this respect, he is not just an advocate for migrant communities and multicultural art, but also a mobile, cultural producer who demonstrates significant cultural citizenship. Through his art and community engagements, he has created access points for others to enter into and transform the arts mainstream.

Such examples have important implications for arts policymakers. They highlight the relationship between different spaces of cultural production and belonging—in this case, the community, elites, and institutions—and the need for cultural organisations to create connections between these groups. Many large cultural institutions, for example, overemphasise the national frame

while overlooking the local, transnational, popular, community and commercial arenas in which culture is made and consumed. These are the spaces in which everyday access to culture is already taking place, but which are still regularly excluded from policy conversations about cultural participation and production. If we are to move beyond a linear understanding

of access we need to think of it as more than a programming question. Rather, access that enables cultural transformation involves community-engagement, capacity-building and creating pathways for cultural exchange, all of which will inevitably challenge our assumptions about cultural value and legitimacy.

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<sup>2</sup> In Australia, "culturally diverse" is a widely used policy category which refers to people who were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas.