

## The ABC TV Arts Unit

The ABC TV Arts Unit is a group of specialists who deliver long and short form internal arts programming across a range of platforms.

These programs include the half-hour, weekly magazine show *Art Nation* hosted by Fenella Kernebone; half hour documentaries for *Artscape*; the interview series *In Conversation with Virginia Trioli* and a huge amount of online content via the Arts Gateway, the ABC's main arts portal.

Over the years the composition of the Arts Unit has changed, but it has always consisted of a dedicated group of producers, presenters, researchers and production support staff, and more recently, a valuable online team.

On 2 August 2011 the Arts Unit was made redundant. Three editorial employees are still employed on the *Arts Gateway*. In an email to all ABC staff on August 10, when explaining the changes and cuts to programs, ABC Managing Director Mark Scott said: "As always on these matters, I welcome your feedback and response."

We outline the following in the hope that he means what he says:

### Immediate effects of the loss of internal arts programming

ABC Managing Director Mark Scott and Director of Television Kim Dalton have publicly discussed the axing of the TV Arts Unit in terms of a single program, *Art Nation*, as though that is all that will be lost.

However, the Arts Unit, whose core staff is based in Melbourne, provide a voice for thousands of practicing artists every year via the weekly magazine arts show *Art Nation*, the *Arts Gateway* and through its many internally produced documentaries and interview series under the *Artscape* banner.

The *Art Nation* program alone produces hundreds of stories per year – coverage of exhibitions and productions, artist profiles, issue-based features and music performances. These stories are current and inform the audience about what's happening in the Australian arts world. There is a strong focus on getting things to air in a timely fashion so that the audience can engage with these performances, exhibitions and events.

The program covers all manner of arts forms and artists from new and emerging to mid-career and established across a range of disciplines. Importantly the Unit identifies and examines trends that lie at the heart of our culture and offers them to the audience as they happen.

*Art Nation* also distributes other internal ABC Arts content from regional Australia via initiatives including ABC Open, ABC Local and using technology such as Skype, and has contributed its content to other parts of the ABC, including News 24, Big Ideas and Radio National.

One of the vital roles of a weekly arts program is to provide coverage in centres outside of Sydney and Melbourne, beyond where the Unit's staff is based. An audit of internally made content

demonstrates that virtually every episode of *Art Nation* since 2010 has featured regional content from right across Australia – from WA, QLD, SA, Tasmania, the NT and the ACT.

In addition, a more generous budget in its first year 2010 enabled *Art Nation* to provide 30-minute specials on all the major festivals including Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, as well as content from the Perth Festival, not to mention internationally from the region including the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, China. *Art Nation* has provided in-depth coverage about a range of specialist areas including fashion and design and the visual arts.

Without this ongoing coverage the continuous national conversation between artists and the audience across Australia will be lost.

Over the years the Arts Unit has also produced dozens of well crafted and well received *Artscape* documentaries include the *IOU* series about famous Australians such as Mary Hardy, Robyn Boyd and Sir Robert Helpmann, films about Bill Henson, Howard Arkley and Archibald Prize winner Ben Quilty, and the critically-acclaimed Virginia Trioli interview series with cultural icons including Annie Leibovitz, Bryan Ferry and Gilbert and George, just to name a few. Internally produced *Artscape* documentaries have enjoyed comparable ratings and acclaim with externally produced ones, without the same amount of publicity.

In addition, the Unit has strived to ensure the rights for all their content is cleared in perpetuity to ensure these important programs, which record Australia's cultural and artistic heritage, are forever enshrined in the ABC's archives. In contrast, the ABC has extremely limited rights to any externally-produced content, sometimes as little as two weeks, and no right to archive this material for future use.

ABC Managing Director Mark Scott told the Press Club on August 31 that in the absence of *Art Nation* and internally made *Artsapes*, the *Arts Gateway* will "continue to show a wide range of arts programming on ABC television, but we do the same on radio, and on our rich and layered arts portal online."

***The question is, how will the ABC do this when the ABC relies mainly on its internal programs (Art Nation and Artscape) to provide around 80 per cent of the Arts portal's unique content? This content amounts to many hundreds of items, including previews, blogs, video stories, news stories, photo galleries, interviews and performances.***

***In the absence of independent reportage on, and critique of the arts, the Arts Gateway will feature more content contributed by arts organisations about their own exhibitions, performances and events. With the closure of the Arts Unit, the online Gateway runs the risk of becoming a vehicle for promotional material.***

## **The correlation between ratings and promotion**

Both ABC Managing Director Mark Scott and the Director of Television Kim Dalton have stated publicly that the weekly arts program *Art Nation* was axed because of declining ratings and the need to focus on prime time. That would be fair enough if the ABC had done all it could to support its own product. However, the opposite is true. The lack of on-air promotion effectively killed off the general public's awareness of *Art Nation* and its presenter Fenella Kernebone and naturally diminished its ratings. Add to this the poor timeslot on ABC1 and the continually changing timeslot on ABC2 and management have the perfect opportunity to announce that the show is no longer relevant.

In 2011 *Art Nation* has received no more than 3 separate promos which were shown no more than 5 times each. The last on-air promo screened in April although *Art Nation* is still on every week until November 27. An internal program like *At The Movies* receives more than 40 promos per year.

In 2011 it was clearly communicated to staff that *Art Nation* would not receive on-air promotions or publicity support from within the ABC. The Unit was told to exploit online avenues for promotion as there would be no promotion on the main channel. The Unit was even told to make its own promos to the correct specifications, but only a handful aired on ABC 1. All promos had ceased altogether by April 2011.

Regarding *Artscape*, the only episode that has received concerted promotion and publicity efforts was the externally produced *Jedis & Juggalos*, John Safran's documentary exploring why people identify as Jedis on the Census. This is a program which had very little to do with the arts.

Staff that produced *Artscape* documentaries were discouraged from seeking promotion for the programs they were making, as they were told that to do so would be at the expense of network priority programs. And the staff was not permitted to submit their *Artscape* documentaries for awards whereas externally produced *Artscape*s were regularly submitted for festivals and awards.

***So Art Nation and internally produced Artscape documentaries have effectively been starved of promotion and consequently the opportunity to connect with an audience.***

## **Frequent changes have caused "a disconnect" with the audience**

In the 10 years since 2002, ABC management has chopped and changed its middle managers (Executive Producers) and with it, the names and formats of its internal weekly arts programs, as well as timeslots and presenters – all with alarming regularity.

In the past decade TV Arts has experienced a revolving door of Executive Producers. Senior Management has installed 7 Executive Producers (9 including 2 caretaker EPs) that have come and gone over that period.

With each change of Executive Producer has come a new program and new presenters. This has amounted to big changes every 1 to 2 years. In 2002, the arts program *Coast to Coast* was axed and replaced in 2003 with *Sunday Afternoon* hosted by Jonathan Biggins who also hosted the arts review panel show *Critical Mass*. *Critical Mass* ran from 2003 to 2004 and was replaced by *Vulture* with Richard Fidler in 2005 which lasted just 8 episodes. Next came the one hour *Sunday Arts* show in 2005 hosted by Michael Veitch. It was in turn, replaced in 2010 by *Art Nation*, the half hour program with Fenella Kernebone in conjunction with the *Arts Gateway* –the ABC's arts portal.

It's worth noting that internal feedback to the staff of the Arts Unit about *Art Nation* from management (at the Executive Producer and Commissioning Editor level) has been entirely positive. An audience survey commissioned by the ABC in 2010 about the program and its presenter Fenella Kernebone was also overwhelmingly positive.

***The Unit has worked hard and harmoniously with the management which created these programs, but so much change to the format and timeslot has left the audience totally confused.***

***Who in senior ABC management is responsible or accountable for these frequent changes?***

## **The threat outsourcing poses to the ABC's editorial independence**

The ABC's editorial independence will be increasingly threatened by a 100 per cent arts outsourced model because of the commercial nature of much of the incoming content. An example of this is an *Artscape* program in 2011 – *Art in the 21st Century* acquired by the ABC and produced by the Gallery of Modern Art in Queensland (GOMA) about one of its own exhibitions. It was screened as an *Artscape* documentary on ABC1 earlier this year. It can be viewed on the *Arts Gateway* ([abc.net.au/arts](http://abc.net.au/arts)) While we are not critical of GOMA, who produced it, we are critical of ABC management for acquiring what is in effect a corporate video.

***Managing Director Mark Scott said on August 10: "Importantly, in commissioning co-productions, we exercise strong editorial oversight to ensure these productions meet our Charter and conform to ABC editorial standards."***

***If this is the case then how did the program Art in the 21st Century, essentially an advertisement, pass the ABC editorial policies? Corporate videos disguised as ABC arts programs such as Art in the 21st Century' with little or no editorial scrutiny do not meet the expectations of the ABC audience.***

## **How a decrease in resources has led to an up-skilling of the workforce**

For many years the ABC internal resources for arts – such as crews to shoot footage and post production hours in which to edit programs – have been steadily decreasing. In 2010, crew days were reduced from 5 to 2 per week, and edit shifts cut from 10 to 7 a week, then to just 5 per week in 2011.

Other comparable half hour internally made ABC programs such as *Can We Help* have had considerably more resources to make an equivalent amount of content. In response to these changes in 2010, Arts staff was asked to self- shoot and edit their own material where possible and therefore become increasingly efficient. Two camera course training sessions were provided along with a basic, introductory editing course. Staff producers armed with these new skills put them to good use meeting the cutbacks.

In response to these depleted resources, members of the Unit now shoot and edit much of their own material, even shooting on their own cameras – everything from stories to interviews and complex live music performances.

Most other internally made programs are not required to shoot and edit their own material. Every challenge management has given the Unit has been met by its cooperative staff. This fact is acknowledged by ABC management in the form of positive annual internal Performance Reviews of the staff.

## **Some thoughts on redundancy and why it is personal**

The definition of redundancy is when the skills set of the workforce do not meet the direction in which the company wants to go. How is it that a multi-skilled workforce of dedicated professionals is targeted for redundancy?

The staff of the Unit range in age from 50 down to 27. They are a creative, knowledgeable, motivated and performance orientated group of people (again supported by individual internal Performance Reviews) who make sophisticated arts television – both long and short form - for multiple platforms.

Yet from ABC management's various statements since announcing the cuts to the Unit, you would not get this impression. In fact you would barely know that the ABC Arts Unit exists at all. Our efforts have never been acknowledged in any of Managing Director Mark Scott's or Director of Television Kim Dalton's many speeches and our work has been excluded from show reels demonstrating the ABC's arts output to the private sector.

***The most egregious example of this occurred when the Arts Gateway – the ABC main arts portal - was launched with great fanfare in October 2009. The 5-minute show reel showcased dozens of arts-on the -ABC documentaries and programs including the internally made Tuesday Book Club with Jennifer Byrne. But it excluded any material made by the Arts Unit, be it Artscapes or Sunday Art' with Michael Veitch.***

Finally, when we were informed of our collective fate last month, we were told "it's not personal" - and yet our enormous contribution to the cultural life of our country has not been recognised.

In fact, Mark Scott and Kim Dalton's public comments made since the cuts were announced have cast doubt on the skills and professionalism of Arts Unit staff, inferring that they were incapable of making a program that would attract ratings and engage viewers.

Mark Scott and Kim Dalton have never once visited our department during their tenure. It is therefore not surprising that we feel disrespected by the ABC, but not by the audience and the arts community which we have always served and sought to connect with.

***We call on ABC management to review the decision to axe Art Nation –and with it the ABC TV Arts Unit.***

In alphabetical order

Jaya Balendra –Series Producer , *Art Nation & In Conversation with Virginia Trioli*

Fiona Dalziel – Reseacher, *Artscape*

Will Huxley – Content Creator, *Art Nation & Arts Gateway*

Josie Matthiesson – Researcher, *Artscape & Art Nation*

Klaus Toft – Producer, *Artscape & Art Nation*

Louise Turley – Producer, *Artscape & Art Nation*

Emma Watts – Producer, *Art Nation, Artscape & Arts Gateway*

Anthony Wyzenbeek – Producer, *Artscape & Art Nation*