

A Guide for Venues: Engaging with First Nations Curators, Artists, and Audiences



NETS Victoria acknowledges and pays respect to the Woiwurrung (Wurundjeri) People of the Kulin Nations as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters on which our office is based.

NETS Victoria also pays respects to the Traditional Owners of the lands and seas across Victoria and throughout Australia and acknowledges Elders past and present. Working across Country would not be possible without the continuing custodianship of Australia's First Peoples of their unceded lands. It is our privilege to work on Country. NETS Victoria pays our deepest respects to Country and those who have looked after it.

NETS Victoria works towards supporting regional Victorians and regional Australians and connecting them with extraordinary contemporary art, craft and design. This means that NETS Victoria has the opportunity to work with many First Nations artists, curators, professionals and communities. NETS Victoria thanks them for sharing their knowledge, cultural expressions and stories.

Front Cover:

Visitors at the *Looking Glass: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce* opening, Flinders University Museum of Art SA, 2021.

Looking Glass: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce, was a TarraWarra Museum of Art and Ikon Gallery exhibition, curated by Hetti Perkins and toured nationally by NETS Victoria 2020–2023.

Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

Photograph: Brianna Speight

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What is this guide?

This guide is designed for venues working with NETS Victoria to host exhibitions, in particular, exhibitions that include the work of First Nations artists.

This is a resource guide for the venues to provide practical guidance on engagement with First Nations people and communities. In doing so, NETS Victoria will assist partnering venues with attracting First Nations audiences to exhibitions, ensuring exhibitions are conducted in a culturally respectful manner, and providing resources for venues to assist and support First Nations personnel, artists and audiences.

Introduction

This Guide is divided into 3 sections:

1 Connecting with First Nations Audiences

This section outlines what venues can do to ensure that First Nations people learn about the exhibition and want to come and see it.

2 Welcoming First Nations Audiences

This section contains the top tips that venues need to know when hosting an exhibition containing First Nations content.

3 Supporting First Nations staff, artists and audiences

This section helps venues create culturally safe and welcoming working environments, manage challenging or negative feedback, and provides referrals for professional services available.

NETS Victoria acknowledges that each exhibition venue will have its own methods for contributing to reconciliation and honouring and recognising First Nations peoples across Australia. This Guide is intended to complement the existing policies and procedures of host venues.

1 Connecting with First Nations Audiences

When hosting a NETS Victoria exhibition, create a plan for how you will reach out to local First Nations communities. It is respectful to have this early conversation with relevant First Nations people and organisations about the exhibition visiting their Country. Building this relationship early will help venues promote the exhibition (and themselves) to local First Nations audiences. First Nations people will be encouraged to come and check the exhibition out.

Work with the local community

It is important to reach out to local Traditional Custodians and your local Land Council well before the exhibition arrives at the venue. In addition to being an important respect protocol it will also help to identify any cultural considerations or further consultations that may need to be undertaken.

These organisations can also help venues advertise the exhibition to local First Nations communities. They usually have established communication channels that are trusted within the community.

Use this as an opportunity to start (or continue) a long-term relationship with local First Nations community organisations. Discuss ways you can work together to co-host events, cross-promote initiatives, and use each other's networks to amplify the reach of your advertising efforts.

Who are the prominent First Nations people who live in the local area? Reach out to them with an email or a phone call to invite them along to the opening night. Make sure you address them correctly! This means making sure you have spelt their name correctly. Make sure you have their correct titles, e.g.: Remember that for many First Nations people, it may not be appropriate to address them as "Aunt" or "Uncle" unless they have already indicated that they prefer everyone to address them with that title. It might be that only members of their family or community are permitted to address them in that way.

Advertise through local First Nations channels

Advertising through First Nations channels will increase the chances of First Nations people learning about the exhibition. Do some research about local, regional, and national, First Nations media outlets e.g. newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television programs. Prioritise local media channels. Some examples of such channels include:

Koori Mail

National Indigenous Times

3KND Kool 'N' Deadly radio station

NITV

You could also connect with Aboriginal community organisations in your area. In Victoria, these organisations include the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Inc (VACCHO), Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS), business networks like Kinaway Chamber of Commerce Victoria Ltd, Koorie Heritage Trust, and registered Aboriginal parties for example. There may be others in your local area. Reaching out to these community organisations is a good way to connect with community.

Don't forget that venues need to seek prior approval from NETS Victoria on any promotional material for the exhibition.

Check your advertising material

Whatever channel you advertise on, make sure that the language you use is engaging and accessible to First Nations audiences. Avoid any language that is out-dated or that might be offensive. An inclusive and respectful language guide developed by Reconciliation Australia can be found here.

Credit the artists in the exhibition. Make sure you spell their names right, and the names of their clans or language groups. If you are using photos of people (e.g. the artist) or artwork, make sure you have permission. This is especially important if the photos include First Nations people who have passed away. Many First Nations communities have cultural mourning protocols related to the use or reproduction of the name, image, or voice of a First Nations person who has passed away.

Refer to the Australian Government Style Manual for further guidance on culturally appropriate and respectful language when writing about, or for, First Nations people.

Remember that the venue agreement only allows images of the works in the exhibition to be used for purposes related to the exhibition and its promotion. You are not permitted to reproduce images of the works for other purposes. You must use the publicity images provided by NETS Victoria, as set out in the Promotions Kit to promote the exhibition.

Promote past exhibitions

Promote past exhibitions and community projects on your website and social media. First Nations people are more likely to attend the exhibition when they see these successful and culturally safe collaborations. If showing photographs of First Nations people, check you have named the people in the photograph, and that you have appropriate permissions to use the photograph/s.



Timothy Cook and Patrick Freddy Puruntatameri with their artworks.

Installation view: *One foot on the ground, one foot in the water*, Pinnacles Gallery, Townsville, QLD, 2023.

One foot on the ground, one foot in the water was a La Trobe Art Institute exhibition toured by NETS Victoria 2022—2024.

Courtesy Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association

Photograph: Will Heathcote



Installation View: Latrobe Regional Gallery, VIC, 2023.

Collective Movements a MUMA exhibition, curated by Kate ten Buuren, Maya Hodge and N'Arweet Professor Carolyn Briggs AM PhD with advice from Professor Brian Martin and toured by NETS Victoria 2022—2024.

Photograph: Christo Crocker

2 Welcoming First Nations Audiences

When hosting a NETS Victoria exhibition, create a plan for how you will make First Nations audiences feel welcome at the exhibition.

These are the top tips for successfully hosting the exhibition.

Plan for a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country

Make sure you organise an appropriate Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country through your local Land Council or by the appropriate local Elder, for openings or any public events linked to the exhibition.

A Welcome to Country is different from an Acknowledgement of Country. A Welcome to Country may only be performed by the Traditional Owners of the specific Country on which the exhibition or event is being held, while an Acknowledgement of Country may be performed by any person, including a non-Indigenous person. It formally *acknowledges* the Traditional Custodians of that Country and their continuing, unceded connection to Country.

If you are engaging a First Nations person to provide a Welcome to Country, you should pay that person for their time. Your local Traditional Owner representative group can advise further on organising the Welcome to Country, and tell you their fees to provide this service. A list of Victorian Registered Aboriginal Parties can be found [here](#).

If you are giving an Acknowledgement of Country, research the relevant language groups to acknowledge. While there is no specific wording for an Acknowledgement of Country, [Reconciliation Australia](#) suggest the following wording:

"I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today [insert relevant language groups if known]. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present."

However, adding your own words which cover your appreciation and understanding can present an authentic personal approach.

Follow cultural protocols

NETS Victoria will notify you of any specific cultural protocols for the handling, display, or advertising of the artwork in the exhibition. These cultural protocols are important to the cultural integrity of the work. Breaking these cultural protocols may change the meaning of the story and cause offence to the First Nations artist/s as well as local communities. An example of a cultural protocol might be that a cultural object must only be displayed or photographed in a particular orientation. Or there might be cultural protocols around attribution to be given to communities or families. For example, the artist wants to ensure that any attribution includes acknowledgement that the story comes from their language group, or has been passed to them from a specific family member or Elder.

Check the Venue Agreement which will:

- *notify you if the exhibition contains any culturally sensitive material;*
- *identify any communally owned ICIP, and cultural protocols;*
- *identify cultural protocols for appropriate use of any personal or cultural information shared by the First Nations artist; and*
- *provide wording for the ICIP notice.*

Follow engagement protocols

The diversity of First Nations people across Australia means that specific cultural protocols may vary widely. First Nations artists may also have cultural protocols derived from their specific family or cultural experiences. Engagement protocols like Creative Australia's Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts, provides guidelines on how to work respectfully with First Nations people, communities, and knowledge. These protocols guide good practice to build strong relationships. Use these protocols when you are hosting the exhibition and when you are engaging with local First Nations communities, for instance when you are building relationships with local First Nations community organisations as outlined above.

The National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) Code of Conduct also has excellent guidance for host venues of touring exhibitions.

Plan for the opening night

There are lots of things that you can do to ensure that the opening night is a success! Your aim is to showcase the exhibition just as the artists and curator planned, and to welcome any First Nations artists and local First Nations community members.

Ways to do this are:

- make sure that you have invited First Nations community members to the opening night, including any prominent First Nations people from your local community;
- if you have been working with First Nations community organisations, make sure that opening night invitations go to their senior leadership personnel;
- if you have been advertising through local First Nations media channels, invite personnel from those places to attend;
- make sure that you have considered the catering – making sure people have plenty to eat and drink will help create a welcoming environment. Make sure there are non-alcoholic alternatives for people. Consider engaging a First Nations caterer;
- engage someone from the local First Nations community to provide a Welcome to Country (see above);
- when you are booking the speeches make sure there is strong First Nations representation and that an Acknowledgement of Country is also given by speakers. NETS Victoria may arrange for artist or curatorial speeches in consultation with you. Consider including a speech from a prominent local First Nations person;
- if First Nations artists will be visiting, support an introduction between the visiting artists and the First Nations community representatives who are attending.

Make sure the cultural advisory notices are up

NETS Victoria will notify you if there are any necessary cultural advisory notices for the exhibition. These notices are separate from credits or explanatory panels for the artworks. Cultural notices might notify the First Nations audience member that the artwork contains names, images, or voices of First Nations people that have passed away.

For some artworks, they may engage with challenging or sensitive themes. These artworks may need a notice forewarning audiences that the exhibition (or a particular artwork) contains themes, images, or content that some people might find distressing.

From time to time, notices might include referrals to professional support services (see below).

Avoid out-dated and offensive language

The importance of using appropriate language in advertising material for the exhibition is set out above.

Also watch out for language elsewhere on your website, or social media. Make sure there is not any out-dated or offensive language elsewhere on your website or social media platforms that would undermine the trust of audiences. Whenever referring to First Nations people make sure their names are spelled correctly. If you are referring to Country, clan, or language group, make sure the spelling is also correct. Many clans or language groups have variations in spelling. If a spelling variation is related to an artist or their work, support their agency by supporting their spelling, even if it is different to common usage. For anything else, ask around relevant speakers/local Land Council or Elders which spelling is most generally accepted. If you are still unsure, you could provide both spellings and directly acknowledge that there are alternative spellings (eg.: Narrm/Naarm/Melbourne).

Check your gift shop

If you are selling any souvenirs in your gift shop that represent First Nations culture, make sure that they are genuine and have been made ethically. If you are unsure of how to tell if any of the souvenirs have been sourced ethically, start by asking your suppliers questions about how they got the stock:

- Do they work with the First Nations artists directly?
- Who are the First Nations artists?
- What's the story or meaning behind the artwork?
- Has the art been made under licence from the First Nations artist (i.e. with their permission and paid)?
- Does the artist get royalties?

Basically, you are trying to find out what you can about the supply chain so that you can see if:

- a) the First Nations work is actually made by a First Nations artists (and is not just copying the style); and
- b) that the First Nations artist has been treated fairly and paid throughout the process.

Usually, suppliers who are working according to best practice are enthusiastic to tell you about the artists they work with. If a supplier is reticent to give you any further information about their process or supply chain, this may be a red flag.

Source items for your gift shop that come directly from local First Nations artists in your community.

Or search for Merchandisers via [Supply Nation](#), such as [Ngarga Warendj – \(Dancing Wombat\)](#), [The Koorie Circle](#) or [Deadly Wears](#).

Check the venue agreement to see if NETS Victoria is providing any exhibition merchandise.

Consider including local exhibitions

If you have more exhibition space, consider showcasing a local First Nations exhibition at the same time. This can promote further inclusiveness with the local community, and non-Indigenous visitors will have the opportunity to learn about local First Nations artists.

Arrange for public programs

Incorporating cultural performances, workshops, and demonstrations into exhibitions is a powerful way to create a more immersive and enriching experience for audiences. These elements not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the exhibition but also provide a deeper understanding of the cultural context, traditions, and stories behind the artworks.

Always ensure that any public programming:

- is respectful of the First Nations artists and their artworks;
- follows any identified cultural protocols or guidelines;
- includes First Nations leadership where appropriate; and
- is conducted with the free, prior, and informed consent of the artist and the Traditional Custodians of any ICIP.

If you are engaging any performers (e.g. dancers) ensure that they are paid for their time.

Check NETS Victoria's Venue Agreement and/or Public Programs Kit for further guidance on developing public programming for the exhibition.



Smoking Ceremony at Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, for *Between Waves* opening 2024. *Between Waves* is an exhibition developed by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) curated by Jessica Clark, touring nationally with NETS Victoria 2023—2026. Courtesy Plimsoll Gallery
Photograph: Rémi Chauvin



Installation view: Bunjil Place Gallery, 2022.

'One foot on the ground, one foot in the water', a La Trobe Art Institute exhibition touring with NETS Victoria 2022-2024.

Featured from left: Patrick Freddy Puruntatameri, *Waiyai & Purukuparli* 2020, Timothy Cook, *Kulama* 2013, Timothy Cook and Patrick Freddy Puruntatameri, *Tutuni (Pukumani pole)* 2019, 2020, 2020, Timothy Cook, *Kulama*, 2014 and Mabel Juli, *Garnkiny Ngarranggarni* 2020.

Photograph: Christian Capurro

3 Supporting First Nations staff and audiences

This next section considers how you can ensure that the gallery is a culturally safe and enjoyable place to work for First Nations staff and volunteers. From time to time, venues may receive negative or challenging feedback in relation to First Nations engagement. First Nations staff and volunteers may want to make suggestions or express concerns about their experience working at the venue. Exhibition content may be sensitive or triggering. Venues need to know how to receive and respond to this feedback constructively. Venues may also need to provide referrals to First Nations staff, volunteers, or audience members who reached out.

Increase First Nations recruitment

If you do not already have First Nations guides and volunteers, consider future opportunities to increase First Nations representation at your gallery. Develop a simple strategy to:

- advertise roles through First Nations media and social media channels (see First Nations media examples in previous section);
- make the role attractive to First Nations people, including by showcasing the gallery's good practice engagement with First Nations people; and
- retain staff for the medium to long term.

Make sure your guides and volunteers are trained

Make sure that non-Indigenous volunteers and guides have appropriate cultural competence. Make sure that they know about the exhibition, and are able to answer questions from interested audience members. Consider engaging an appropriate cultural competency trainer to come to the gallery to run a workshop for volunteers and guides (and any other interested personnel!).

If you are wondering where to look for cultural competency training providers, check out the Supply Nation supplier list for cultural competency training providers, such as [Black Card](#) and [Arrilla](#). The [Koorie Heritage Trust](#) also offers a range of online and in person workshops and training.

Remember that under the venue agreement, NETS Victoria may ask you about the cultural safety of your venue. This means they may ask you about your cultural competency policy, what training you have done, and evidence of prior engagement with First Nations artists and communities.

Support staff on their learning journey

Respectful First Nations engagement involves actively listening to First Nations voices, acknowledging historical injustices, and incorporating community perspectives into decision-making processes. Gallery personnel might all be at different stages of their learning journey. They might need different levels of support. In addition to arranging for cultural competency training (outlined above) encourage staff to feel comfortable asking for further training when they need it. Encourage staff to attend local First Nations events and festivals. Venues can do this by featuring upcoming events in gallery newsletters, or send round a staff wide email.

Beware of cultural load

Cultural load is the invisible (and often unremunerated) work that First Nations staff and contractors are asked to undertake. Often this work is outside the scope of their duties. Cultural load occurs where First Nations employees are utilised as the authority on all issues and queries that pertain to First Nations peoples and culture. Often organisations do this unintentionally, but it can add up to a lot of extra work for the employee. It can often put them in difficult positions, especially when they are being asked to advise on cultural issues that are outside their own cultural experience (e.g. being asked about cultural protocols for a different language group). Encouraging staff to undertake cultural competency training, or to lead their own learning journey is a good way to ease the cultural load for First Nations staff. Examples include these lists of free online resources by [ABC](#) and [Australian Museum](#) or the [‘First Australians’ documentary on SBS](#).

Encourage feedback

Establishing open dialogue channels with First Nations artists, curators, audiences, and staff is essential for venues in fostering communication and trust. Providing platforms for First Nations people to promptly raise concerns creates a supportive environment where issues can be addressed in a culturally sensitive and timely manner. This process ensures that feedback is not only heard but also actively incorporated into decision-making processes.

Crisis Support

Promote and encourage First Nations staff, artists or general visitors to make use of mental health resources available. Discuss with NETS Victoria whether it is appropriate to include any reference to these resources in marketing and promotional material for the exhibition. For example, if the exhibition contains challenging or sensitive content. Examples of First Nations-catered mental health support services include [13 Yarn](#) and [WellMob](#).

In times of conflict involving First Nations staff, curators, artists and audience members, having a structured process with impartial mediators or facilitators is essential. These individuals should not only be skilled in conflict resolution but also well-versed in First Nations culture. Their cultural competence ensures a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand, facilitating communication, and assisting in finding resolutions that respect the cultural values and perspectives of all parties involved.

If you need support in your own reflection and learning, please reach out to relevant services, such as your organisation's Employee Assistance Program, or [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14.

Take time to reflect

Reflecting on challenging feedback, complaints, and disputes is a vital step. Reviews identify areas for improvement. Insights gained during challenging times can contribute to the refinement and enhancement of venues' policies and dispute resolution processes. By incorporating these lessons into policy development, the venue can better align with the needs and expectations of First Nations people, ensuring a more culturally sensitive and responsive approach.



Curator Stacie Piper giving a talk for *WILAM BIIK*, at Wangaratta Art Gallery VIC, 2022.
WILAM BIIK was a TarraWarra Museum of Art exhibition touring with NETS Victoria, 2021—2023.
Photograph: Erin Davis Hartwig



Opening night *ngaratya (together, us group, all in it together)* at Broken Hill City Art Gallery NSW, 2024. *ngaratya (together, us group, all in it together)* is a Bunjil Place Gallery exhibition, curated by Nici Cumpston and Zena Cumpston, touring with NETS Victoria, 2023—2025. Photograph: Priscilla McIntosh

National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Victoria is supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria, by the Australian Government through Creative Australia its principal arts investment and advisory body, and through the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments. NETS Victoria also receives significant in-kind support from the National Gallery of Victoria.

NETS Victoria is grateful for the generous support of our valued partners.



Published 2024

National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Victoria Inc.

ISBN: 978-0-6486691-7-3

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This Guide was developed through consultation with Terri Janke and Company, and NETS Victoria's Board of Management, Reconciliation Action Plan Working Group, and First Nations Advisory Group.