

National Cultural Policy Submission:

Structural Support for the Neurodivergent and Disabled Independent Artist

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Link: <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/new-national-cultural-policy>

Accessibility Note: Use of Assistive Technology: Due to the cognitive and administrative barriers associated with my disability, structuring complex written documents is a significant challenge. To ensure my lived experience is clearly communicated in this consultation, I provided my complete, raw thoughts and utilized AI assistance (Google Gemini) to organize them into this readable format. All insights, experiences, and policy recommendations contained within this submission are entirely my own.

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Introduction: A Personal Perspective

I submit this document anonymously. I am a first-generation migrant, born in Europe in the 1980s and arriving in Australia in the 1990s. I am also an autistic, disabled, and emerging artist currently in my second year of professional practice. I have chosen to withhold my identity because, unfortunately, significant stigma regarding neurodivergence, disability, and cultural background still exists within the professional art industry.

My artistic pathway has not been traditional. I do not have a formal university arts education because the sector's structure is fundamentally inaccessible to me. Traditional institutional study demands seven hours of constant engagement, five days a week.

Due to my neurodivergence, my brain reaches cognitive overload and shuts down after three hours of intense, high-level thinking. However, my neurodivergence is my creative engine. The sheer output, deep self-taught historical knowledge, and rigorous intent toward perfection that I achieve within my focused hours often far exceed the results of standard, prolonged neurotypical education.

To truly foster a place for every story, the National Cultural Policy must recognize, value, and support non-traditional pathways, judging artists by their merit and vision rather than their capacity to endure neurotypical institutional structures.

1. Financial Sustainability, Grants, and the "Pension Trap"

For independent artists who rely on the Disability Support Pension (DSP), current federal regulations create a significant barrier to professional growth. Applying for crucial development grants is currently a high-risk endeavor. If grant funding is paid directly into an artist's personal bank account, it is treated as income. This directly and severely impacts their pension, despite those funds being earmarked strictly for project costs. This creates a paradox where career success and securing funding directly results in financial instability regarding basic living support.

- **Interagency and Auspicing Collaboration:** We propose important collaboration between Centrelink, Creative Australia, and other relevant government agencies to formally recognize and streamline processes with specialized "Art Auspicing" services (there are a few around Australia). Currently, these services voluntarily manage funds for disabled artists (who are on DSP etc) in two critical ways: holding grant funds strictly for creative purposes (such as materials and studio or gallery space) and managing exhibition earnings through a structured invoice issuing process to safely navigate DSP thresholds. However, without formalized government collaboration, this process remains administratively heavy and slow. By formalizing this relationship and providing additional funding to support auspicing organizations nationwide, government agencies can dramatically reduce paperwork and accelerate the approval process. This structured collaboration is essential to increasing access to major grants, unlocking national and

international residencies, and expanding exhibition opportunities for the disabled sector through the process of disability artists registering to create more opportunities for them.

- **Maximizing Cultural Output:** This structural protection empowers disabled artists to contribute equally to national cultural development. In fact, when freed from the anxiety of the "pension trap" and supported by robust auspicing frameworks, neurodivergent artists often produce a substantially higher volume and depth of cultural output than their neurotypical peers.
- **Basic Income Trial:** We also strongly recommend implementing a multi-year funding trial for disabled artists, drawing inspiration from the successful Irish basic artist income model. Perhaps in some way somewhat similar to recent trials in Ireland but more for support for exhibitions or shows in a larger cohort that can include neurodivergent artists on the DSP and or the NDIS but means tested. Providing financial stability for one major project per year over a 3 to 4 year period would allow neurodivergent artists to focus on high-quality output without the constant threat of poverty.

2. Global Connectivity and the Cultural Development Exemption

Australian artists must be able to connect with international markets and audiences to build sustainable careers. However, current DSP travel regulations restrict overseas stays to a maximum of 28 to 30 days. This effectively prevents disabled artists from participating in meaningful, long-term international residencies or global exhibition tours, including major government-funded opportunities like international Biennales.

- **Cultural Development Exemption:** We recommend the introduction of a "Cultural Development Exemption" for artists receiving government support. If an artist receives an official invitation to a recognized international residency, or secures a grant for a major international show, they should be permitted to travel for the full duration of the program. This can be managed through the submission of formal proof of participation and regular progress updates to Centrelink. This exemption is essential for true equal opportunity, ensuring that disabled artists are not locked out of major cultural moments and can actively contribute to the cultural development and advancement of Australian culture on the global stage.

3. Addressing Educational, Technical, and Sensory Barriers

Professional arts practice and the education required to enter it demand significant physical, cognitive, and logistical labor that is currently unsupported for neurodivergent creators.

- **Flexible Higher Education Pathways:** Current higher art education demands a rigid

structure, often requiring seven hours of engagement, five days a week. For neurodivergent students, this often leads to cognitive overload and exclusion, despite their ability to master the material in a fraction of the time. We recommend creating highly flexible, outcomes-based educational models. If a neurodivergent student can demonstrate mastery in three focused hours a day, they should be supported to do so. This could be achieved through government-funded online support workers, or specialized traveling artist-mentors who deliver tailored, in-home education. This would allow disabled artists to complete their training efficiently, accommodating their unique cognitive pacing and necessary medical appointments without compromising the quality of their education.

- **Art Support Workers:** There is a critical gap between clinical NDIS support and professional arts industry assistance. Funding models must be adapted to include provisions for "Art Support Workers". These specialized workers would assist neurodivergent and disabled artists with the heavy physical demands of artwork preparation for exhibition, gallery setup, complex installations, and logistical transport.
- **Targeted Equipment Access:** Dedicated grant streams should be made available specifically for the technical hardware required by disabled artists to bring complex, immersive visions to life.

4. Removing Administrative Friction

The heavy administrative burden of the arts industry is one of the most significant barriers for neurodivergent creators, who often process information differently.

- **Navigational Services:** We urge the establishment of government-funded navigational services. These services would assist neurodivergent artists in translating complex exhibition packs, managing grant acquittals, and tracking residency opportunities.
- **Application Reform:** Grant applications should offer longer lead times and simplified, accessible documentation to accommodate different cognitive processing speeds.
- **Comprehensive Application Support:** The current grant and residency application processes are highly complex and often completely inaccessible for neurodivergent artists. While some auspicing services currently offer one to two hours of grant writing or financial reporting assistance, this is simply not enough time to overcome the administrative barriers. We urge the government to co-fund these specialized services so they can provide comprehensive, wrap-around support. With adequate government funding, these organizations could offer a complete package, handling both the detailed financial preparation and the extensive grant writing with sufficient time allocated. This ensures applications are fully ready for submission, removing the heavy administrative friction that currently locks disabled artists out of major cultural opportunities.

5. Community Coherence through Multisensory Art

Immersive, multisensory art experiences provide a vital, unspoken bridge between neurotypical and neurodivergent audiences. Environments that stimulate multiple senses are highly appealing and accessible, acting as a unifying force within the community.

- **Normalization of Neurodiversity:** By specifically funding the placement of immersive, neurodivergent-led experiences in public spaces, the new policy can normalize neurodiversity and foster genuine community coherence.
- **National Register:** We propose the creation of a secure, government-managed register for disabled and neurodivergent artists. This would allow public institutions and galleries to proactively invite diverse creators to exhibit, with the understanding that necessary transport and logistical costs would be subsidized by the state or local government or federal government body.

6. Needs-Based Equity and Sector Coherence

For the Australian arts sector to achieve true coherence, funding frameworks must guarantee equal access to opportunities for all disadvantaged and marginalized cohorts. While the continued and dedicated support for First Nations arts is a vital pillar of our cultural identity that must remain, a forward-looking cultural policy must ensure that this same level of targeted, structural support is extended to the disability sector and first-generation migrant artists (artists born in another country).

- **Needs-Based and Income-Tested Funding Models:** True equality in the arts means distributing support based on the functional needs, financial realities, and practical barriers faced by the artist today. Crucially, this support must be income-tested as usual. Funding should be directed to those who genuinely lack financial privilege, ensuring that public money is not given as blanket support to individuals who may have a disability or migrant background but possess significant independent or overseas wealth. Speaking from my own lived experience as a migrant arriving in the 90s, artists who have immigrated to Australia, who come from culturally diverse backgrounds, or who navigate profound disabilities often experience severe systemic disadvantages. Funding models must be calibrated to provide equitable, financially-tested support across all these cohorts, ensuring every genuinely disadvantaged group is empowered to contribute to the national narrative on an equal playing field while using government funds wisely.
- **Universal Anti-Discrimination and Parity:** A truly inclusive cultural policy must actively dismantle prejudice and ensure zero tolerance for discrimination against any cultural, ethnic, or religious background, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for artists of Jewish, Arab, Asian, African, European, and all other descents.
- **Equality Within Disability:** Furthermore, equality must be strictly enforced within the disability sector itself. Invisible, cognitive, and mental health disabilities must be met with

the exact same level of validation, targeted funding, and structural accommodation as physical disabilities.

Conclusion

I submit this document anonymously not by choice, but out of necessity. The stigma surrounding neurodivergence, hidden disabilities, and cultural backgrounds remains deeply pervasive, both within the professional arts sector and throughout everyday business and society. Revealing my complete identity as a disabled, first-generation migrant carries a very real risk of professional marginalization, financial impact, and prejudice. My necessary anonymity serves as living proof of the exact systemic barriers and societal biases this policy must actively dismantle.

The value of an artist to the Australian cultural landscape should not be measured solely by traditional commercial sales, administrative agility, or neurotypical educational endurance. These are metrics that inherently disadvantage artists with hidden disabilities and those navigating the complex realities of building a life and career as an immigrant.

By providing structural financial stability, flexible educational pathways, global connectivity exemptions, and true needs-based equity across all diverse cohorts, the next National Cultural Policy can empower neurodivergent, disabled, and migrant artists to share their unique perspectives on both the national and global stage.

This holistic, supportive framework is essential for fostering a deeper, more inclusive community coherence and ensuring there is truly a place for every story.

Kind regards,

Anonymous neurodivergent and first-generation migrant artist

(Who lives with mild autism and ADHD)

Melbourne, Australia

Dated:

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