

**National Cultural Policy Submission**

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Public

Individual

Stephen Noonan

Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I have been a professional performing artist for thirty years. I work more than fifty hours a week. I hold four years of tertiary arts training. I have toured my work from the Arts Centre Melbourne to Lincoln Center in New York, from Horsham to Havana. And I have never, not once in three decades, earned above Australia's poverty line of \$25,428.

I do not write this to seek sympathy. I write it because my experience is not exceptional. According to ██████████ 2024 study, the average income of Australia's 48,000 professional artists is just \$23,200, with half earning less than \$10,000 annually from their practice. 89% of artists are currently engaged in some form of training, up from 72% in 2016. We are getting more skilled and less sustainable simultaneously. That is not a paradox. It is a policy failure.

The Centrality of the Artist is the right principle. But the current ecosystem makes it structurally impossible for most of us. Arts priority flows primarily to institutions, festivals, performing arts centres, galleries, companies rather than to the artists who create the work. When institutions and companies are the priority they naturally prioritise their own operational needs. Artists are left competing for what remains: platforms, exposure, residencies. None of these pay bills. None of them appear in ██████████ income figures.

My proposal is simple: place the artist at the centre. The NDIS transformed disability support in Australia by establishing that funding follows the recipient, not the institution. What if we applied that logic, even modestly, to the arts? Centrality of the Artist looks like this, a direct allocation of fifteen percent of available arts funding to individual artists, this would be a would be transformative pillar of a cultural policy. It would not diminish institutions, the remaining eighty-five percent would continue to sustain their vital work. But it would acknowledge what ██████████ data makes plain: 78% of Australian artists work on a self-employed or freelance basis. Our cultural policy model was designed for a world where the majority of artists were employed by companies and institutions. That world never fully existed, and it certainly doesn't now.

In five to ten years, meaningful change looks like this: a professional artist skilled, trained, internationally recognised, deeply committed to their practice can sustain a career without poverty. Not wealth. Just sustainability. The infrastructure of our cultural life is only as strong as the people at its centre. I have given thirty years to that centre. So have thousands of others. Revive has named us. Now it must prioritise us.

We do not need to be celebrated. We need to be the priority of a cultural policy, The Centrality of the Artist means nothing if the artist cannot pay rent or mortgage, cannot plan a season, cannot commit to the work without a second or third job subsidising the dream. Name it if you mean it. Prioritise it if you name it. It is not a slogan. Make it the number one priority.