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This submission can be published

Minister Tony Burke
Federal Minister for the Arts
Office for the Arts
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts

culturalpolicy@arts.gov.au

Dear Minister Burke,

Introduction

I am writing on behalf of the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] is a Yolŋu owned and governed Aboriginal art and culture centre located on [REDACTED]. Established in the 1960s, the art centre has supported generations of Yolŋu artists, cultural leaders and arts workers and currently works with approximately 60 active member artists and many more family members connected through daily cultural and studio practice.

Governed by a Yolŋu Board of Directors and incorporated under the CATSI Act, [REDACTED] operates with strong cultural authority, financial accountability and community governance. The organisation meets its obligations to ORIC and operates to ensure that decision making remains grounded in Yolŋu law, kinship and cultural responsibility.

For over 35 years, [REDACTED] has supported artists to maintain and share culture while generating income, employment and opportunities for future generations. The art centre is both a commercial enterprise and a cultural institution. It is one of the few locally governed organisations [REDACTED] providing consistent, meaningful employment and economic participation in a community facing significant structural disadvantage, limited services and very few formal employment pathways.

[REDACTED] is classified among Australia's most disadvantaged communities under the SEIFA Index. The community experiences high levels of food insecurity, overcrowding, climate vulnerability and economic disadvantage, alongside ongoing challenges associated with remoteness and access to services. In this context, the role of the art centre extends far beyond the production and sale of artwork.

[REDACTED] is a place of cultural continuity, intergenerational learning and community wellbeing. It supports language maintenance, ceremony, youth engagement, aged and disability inclusion, cultural education and the preservation of knowledge systems held by senior Yolŋu people. Through painting, weaving, sculpture, digital media and cultural documentation, artists continue to practise and strengthen living Yolŋu culture while contributing to one of Australia's most significant contemporary art movements.

Strong culture is the foundation of strong communities. Any future National Cultural Policy must recognise that remote Aboriginal art centres are not peripheral cultural organisations. They are essential community infrastructure.

About our organisation

██████████ directly responds to the priorities of our Yolŋu owned and governed organisation and community.

The art centre functions as a cultural, economic and social hub on Yurrwi and surrounding homelands. It supports artists in generating income in culturally appropriate, strengths-based ways while maintaining strong connections to Country, ceremony and ancestral knowledge systems.

██████████ supports artists working across bark painting, weaving, sculpture, timber, ochre painting, digital media and emerging contemporary practice. All works are grounded in living cultural knowledge and are created using materials harvested directly from Country, including ochres, fibres, bark and timber. This makes the practice slower, seasonal and labour intensive, but it is also what gives Milingimbi art its cultural integrity and significance.

The art centre contributes locally through:

- providing structured and meaningful employment pathways in a community with very limited job opportunities
- supporting artists to generate independent income through ethical artwork sales and exhibitions
- maintaining a culturally safe place for community members to gather, work and share knowledge
- supporting intergenerational transfer of language, ceremony and cultural practice
- partnering with local organisations ██████████
- creating opportunities for young people to engage with culture through contemporary creative practice
- strengthening community pride, identity and wellbeing.

██████████ also contributes regionally, nationally and internationally through exhibitions, partnerships and cultural leadership.

Recent and ongoing projects include collaborations with the Australian Museum, University of Melbourne repatriation researchers, major collecting institutions and national galleries. ██████████ artists have exhibited nationally and internationally and continue to contribute to Australia's cultural identity through highly respected contemporary Indigenous art practice.

Projects such as the ██████████. Our ██████████ demonstrates that remote Aboriginal art centres are sites of innovation as well as cultural maintenance.

The ██████████ Keeping Place

The ██████████ Keeping Place is one of ██████████ most important foundational and structural cultural initiatives.

Established in 2020, ██████████ is a community-controlled digital keeping place housing thousands of repatriated images, recordings, artworks and cultural materials sourced from institutions across Australia and internationally. Its purpose is to return cultural knowledge to community and support Yolŋu people to reconnect with their documented history on their own terms.

For over 100 years, researchers, anthropologists and collecting institutions documented Yolŋu people, artworks, ceremony and cultural life. Much of this material has remained inaccessible to community for generations.

██████ reclaims Yolŋu authority over this material.

The Keeping Place allows artists, Elders, children and families to access historical photographs, recordings and artworks connected to their ancestors, clan groups and Country. It supports language maintenance, artistic development, cultural education and intergenerational learning while also creating new pathways for digital skills, archiving and community engagement.

As our past is birthing our future, so we walk in the footsteps of our ancestors.

The work of ██████ demonstrates that remote art centres are not only producers of contemporary art but also critical custodians of Australia's cultural heritage.

Core funding and operational sustainability

While the achievements of ██████ are significant, they are increasingly difficult to sustain under current funding and policy settings.

Like many remote Aboriginal art centres, ██████ is experiencing rapidly increasing operational costs including freight, fuel, insurance, utilities, staff travel, vehicle maintenance, council rates and building maintenance. These pressures are compounded by our island location and dependence on air and sea freight.

As a remote organisation, our operational costs are substantially higher than those of urban arts organisations. Freight costs for artworks and materials continue to rise. Food and fuel costs have increased significantly. Insurance premiums have nearly doubled in recent years due to climate-related risk.

At the same time, core operational funding has not kept pace with these increases.

IVAIS remains the only stable operational funding stream available to remote art centres, yet current funding levels are no longer sufficient to sustain essential operations. Where IVAIS funding once supported management salaries and core administration, it now covers only part of these costs.

The reality is that art centres are being asked to deliver increasing levels of governance, reporting, cultural care, workforce development, digital documentation, collections management and partnership work without adequate operational support.

Remote art centres cannot continue to absorb these pressures indefinitely.

Recommendation:

- Increase IVAIS operational funding to reflect the true cost of operating remote Aboriginal art and culture centres in very remote Australia
- Introduce indexed funding arrangements responsive to inflation, freight and climate-related costs
- Recognise operational staffing, cultural supervision and collections management as essential infrastructure rather than project based extras.

Staffing and workforce development

██████ faces ongoing challenges attracting and retaining both local and relocating staff.

The organisation operates in one of the most remote regions of Australia, accessible only by air and sea. Housing shortages, rising living costs and workforce competition from government and service sectors make recruitment extremely difficult.

At the same time, local Yolŋu staff require culturally appropriate and flexible employment structures that recognise ceremonial obligations, family responsibilities and the realities of remote community life.

Despite these challenges, the art centre remains deeply committed to creating meaningful local employment pathways.

Through daily studio operations, [REDACTED] supports artists and arts workers across painting, weaving, sculpture and digital media. Staff are trained in artwork handling, documentation, digital cataloguing, sales support, collections management, freight logistics and community engagement.

This work builds transferable skills while strengthening confidence, cultural authority and long-term employment participation.

However, this workforce development requires intensive supervision, mentorship and ongoing support. Without dedicated staffing resources, there is significant risk of employee disengagement, loss of digital and documentation standards and reduced long-term employment outcomes.

Recommendation:

- Invest in a Remote Art and Culture Centre Workforce Development Plan focused on pathways for arts workers, managers, cultural leaders and board directors
- Support long-term traineeships and culturally aligned employment pathways for First Nations arts workers
- Fund secure staff housing and workforce infrastructure for remote art centres
- Recognise cultural supervision and mentoring as essential workforce infrastructure.

Artists' livelihoods

Senior artists are the cultural foundation of [REDACTED]

They are teachers, mentors, knowledge holders and community leaders. They carry language, ceremony, songlines, design systems and cultural authority that underpin both contemporary art practice and community life.

Yet many senior artists who have dedicated decades to teaching younger generations continue to live below the poverty line.

Much of the cultural labour they undertake like mentoring, consultation, teaching, cultural governance and ceremony is unpaid or only intermittently funded through short-term projects.

This is not sustainable.

If Australia values First Nations culture as central to national identity, then senior cultural practitioners must be properly supported to continue this work.

Recommendation:

- Establish a Basic Income for Artists program for recognised senior remote Aboriginal artists and cultural practitioners
- Create dedicated cultural leadership and mentorship stipends for Elders working through art and culture centres
- Recognise cultural teaching and knowledge transmission as essential labour within Australia's cultural economy.

Infrastructure and climate change

Climate change presents an immediate and ongoing threat to remote art centres.

In East Arnhem Land, rising temperatures, cyclones, flooding and seasonal instability are already impacting infrastructure, programs and operational costs.

██████ requires climate-appropriate buildings, secure housing, reliable vehicles, safe workshop infrastructure and digital systems capable of supporting collections management and artwork preservation in extreme environmental conditions.

Current infrastructure funding is fragmented and inadequate for long-term planning.

Without sustained investment, remote art centres risk losing the physical infrastructure required to continue cultural production and preservation.

Recommendation:

- Establish a National Art and Culture Centre Infrastructure Fund for climate-appropriate buildings, housing, vehicles and digital systems
- Introduce subsidised freight and shipping support for remote art centres
- Develop a government-backed insurance model for remote cultural organisations impacted by climate-related risk.

Cultural heritage and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)

██████ plays a dual role in supporting contemporary cultural production while also caring for and protecting Yolŋu cultural heritage and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).

The organisation is increasingly called upon to work with museums, universities and collecting institutions on exhibitions, repatriation projects, research, consultation and cultural interpretation. This work is essential to ensuring that Yolŋu knowledge, histories and cultural materials are represented respectfully, accurately and under appropriate cultural authority. However, it places significant pressure on the limited staffing and operational capacity of remote art centres.

Remote Aboriginal art centres are now carrying major responsibility for community based collections management, digital repatriation and the protection of ICIP, often without dedicated long-term funding or policy recognition. This includes navigating complex issues around cultural authority, consent, access protocols, data sovereignty, copyright and the appropriate use and circulation of cultural material in both physical and digital environments.

The ████████ Keeping Place demonstrates the critical role remote art centres play as custodians of community cultural collections and leaders in Indigenous data sovereignty. Through Djalkiri, Yolŋu people are reconnecting with historical photographs, recordings, artworks and archival material held in institutions across Australia and internationally, while also ensuring that access and interpretation remain governed by Yolŋu law, kinship systems and cultural protocols.

As demand for repatriation, digital access and institutional collaboration continues to grow, remote art centres require sustained support to undertake this work safely, ethically and in ways that protect cultural authority for future generations.

Recommendations:

- Formally recognise remote Aboriginal art and culture centres as custodians of community collections and key partners in repatriation and repatriation processes
- Strengthen national protections for Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), including culturally appropriate consent, attribution, access and governance frameworks
- Invest in First Nations-led digital archiving, collections management and preservation systems
- Support Indigenous data sovereignty and culturally appropriate protocols for digital access, cultural governance and the management of sensitive materials
- Build long-term funding pathways for community controlled keeping places, repatriation initiatives and ICIP protection work undertaken by remote art centres.

Closing statement

██████ supports ANKA and the national alliance of Aboriginal art and culture peak bodies in calling for a long-term, coordinated and properly resourced approach to strengthening the remote Indigenous arts sector.

Everyday we see how culture, employment, education, wellbeing and community resilience are interconnected through the work of the art centre.

Remote Aboriginal art centres are not simply arts organisations. They are community infrastructure. They are places of cultural continuity, economic participation, education, healing and intergenerational exchange.

The National Cultural Policy 2026 consultation paper recognises that culture shapes how Australia understands itself and that First Nations cultures are a defining source of national cultural strength. ██████ strongly supports this principle.

If Australia is serious about a “First Nations First” cultural policy, then remote Aboriginal art centres must be recognised as essential long term cultural institutions and funded accordingly.

Without a targeted approach within a short time Art Centres in remote and very remote regions will be no longer viable to operate.

Without sustained investment, Australia risks losing not only globally significant artistic practice, but also the living cultural systems, languages and knowledge traditions that underpin it.

Yours sincerely,

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