

Submission to National Cultural Policy

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I am an independent Australian artist and curator with more than thirty years' experience working with major cultural and educational institutions and organisations, small to medium companies, independent artists, and arts workers in Australia and overseas. In using the term 'artist' and 'arts worker', the main subjects of this submission, I refer to those working in the performing, visual and literary arts. I believe the concerns outlined here are central to the next iteration of the Revive policy and the future of Australian culture.

This is a snapshot of an artist's life mapping out various experiences and observations I would like to share from a period that paints a contemporary landscape of the working conditions of an independent Australian artist. Whilst many of these experiences are my own, I have drawn from my extensive network to help provide detail, and explanation of those experiences when shared.

From mid-2022 to end-2023, I dedicated my time to securing funding for a range of artistic projects either as an individual or as a member of established collectives. In the main, my tasks included application-writing, contract-negotiation, and engaging with presenting institutions and entities. In tandem, I spent time advocating for artists' rights, and supporting small organisations in their fight for survival. I see advocacy as a corollary of being a contemporary artist because of what it has achieved in the areas of artist remuneration and ensuring the viability of presenting and exhibition spaces. Application to these unpaid tasks required to make art and sustain one's practice is a key driver of the financial precarity in the independent artist's working life.

Contributing factors to financial and professional precarity include (1) an increase in institutional control over artistic practice and sector development, (2) an absence of institutional knowledge of artists' working lives (3) erasure of the arts and artists from policy and public domains (4) financial inequity in the sector (5) an increase in censorship. These factors sit under a broader umbrella of 'disappearing the arts', of disappearing artists from the cultural and social landscape which I will explain in detail.

The intensity of these factors has substantially increased since 2024 despite and in some instances as a direct consequence of government policy. The system is hostile, controlling, and exclusive.

(1) Institutional Control: endless, pointless unpaid labour

In early 2023, I was involved with a collective encouraged to apply for a grant 10 days out from the deadline by which time the grant round was (unknown to us) utterly oversubscribed. Out of almost 180 applications, eight were successful, just 4%. 60 hours of collective labour was lost putting together an application that had almost-zero chance of success.

With the same collective, I was involved in the 2023 application process for the Creative Ventures program run by the State of Victoria's creative industries agency, Creative Victoria. The application deadline was end of July with a published turnaround time of 12 weeks, the end of October 2023. Applicants were not notified until the end of the first week of January 2024, 10 weeks later. Correspondence from Creative Victoria provided no apology or explanation for the delay that was almost twice as long as the published turnaround time. Further, the previous two years' successful applications numbered 20 whereas in 2024 this number was reduced to 11. This was due to a \$1.7million cut in available funding for the program (almost 50%), a measure which Creative Victoria did not communicate to the sector. The head of one of the many unsuccessful companies likened the process to gaslighting the sector's small organisations and collectives.

Our combined labour for the application was around 160 hours or 4 weeks' work. Again, had we been informed the chances of application success had almost halved, we would not have expended weeks of unpaid work.

In a funding round for Creative Projects in 2024, Creative Victoria once again was not able to meet its notification deadline and gave no reason for not doing so. Worse still, the Creator's Fund - hitherto the agency's only source of direct funding to artists - was discontinued without sector notification. For context, the states of Victoria (28%) and NSW (31%) are home to most Australian artists.

On a national scale the statistics are equally disheartening. Australia's national arts agency, Creative Australia (formerly the Australia Council for the Arts) is the major source of funding for independent arts projects in this country. Arts editor Alison Croggon compared 2010-2011 figures with 2022-2023 figures, citing an 88% decrease in funding for grants awarded to arts projects by the agency.¹ Historically, this has been the major source of arts income for artists, direct funding (money that ends up in their pocket). Artists have suffered a generation of wilful neglect through a conscious, persistent withdrawal of direct government funding. This situation has worsened in the intervening three years.

4% is the *perceived* success rate of funding programs for independent Australian artists from dedicated State and Federal agencies. Sometimes it's less, sometimes it's more, and perhaps it's higher but that's the figure that artists in my networks use when discussing funding success in public settings. In early 2024, I was advised of a 2% success rate by a program manager at a state cultural institution. For Creative Australia's 2024 Creative Leadership program, more than 700 applications were submitted for 35 places, just 5%.

These conditions come with growing acknowledgement that each time an artist applies to government they become a statistic in the metrics that prop up the bureaucracy whose job it is to fund them. If a funding category generates 100 applications, then this justifies high staff numbers and salaries for bureaucrats. And yet only 4 applicants will be successful. For waged bureaucrats, high rates of applications for their programs are worn as a badge of honour, a validation of their work, demonstrating disregard for artists' material living conditions and the deleterious effects on their mental health and professional well-being.

This disequilibrium underwrites the sector and amounts to a form of coercive governmental control – we keep you busy applying for funding you will never receive for art you will never make. It compromises artists' capacity for contributing to civic discourse - what can you contribute when you're poor and exhausted? When two colleagues recently sought feedback on their application, bureaucrats advised them on strategies to make them even more competitive with their fellow-artists further inscribing a Hunger Games mentality in a diminishing, desperate artist-population. Anger, despair, and frustration are central to an artist's daily life as endless, pointless, unpaid labour strips them of dignity and agency. The exploding bureaucracy of Creative Australia has made this parlous situation even worse.

(2) Absence of Institutional Knowledge of Artist's Working Lives

In 2023, I was involved with a collective whose artistic project was programmed by a medium-sized Australian festival. Their ambit contract claim proposed that the collective would not be paid until after the festival had closed, meaning we, the artists, would have to cashflow the delivery of the project and our own labour costs, money we did not have. In my opinion, this contravened the festival's agreement with the funding body that had provided the monies for our presentation, an application process we had actively participated in. We communicated this to them and refused their offer.

¹ The Monthly, Alison Croggon, 2024

The festival ultimately agreed to pay 50% upfront and 50% on presentation although we were left with an impression that they did not understand why it was necessary.

In a separate context, a small organisation with which I am associated was directly asked to cashflow an industry event which they had been contracted to deliver by a funding agency. When advised the organisation did not have the funds to do so, the agency's representatives made it clear in conversation they did not understand how small arts organisations operate.

The professional intelligence that arts funding agencies possess on and about the independent and small arts sector has been on such a savage decline over the last decade that default settings within agencies are geared towards an institutional and corporate interface as opposed to an industry interface (there is no art or culture in this equation).

To be clear, very few state and federal arts bureaucrats have adequate industry experience before entering the field. Sometimes this is because the arts are the last in a long line of portfolios in one large Ministry - such as development, enterprise, media, or tourism - in which sector-specific expertise is lost in departmental confluences. As communicated by a fellow practitioner now working within a major agency, almost none of their colleagues have sold a ticket to a show nor tried to create an audience for one and yet they provide advice, opinion, and assessments on doing so. They have no understanding of an artist's working life and no deep knowledge of the sectoral dynamics their work serves. At the FACT conference in Melbourne at ACMI in early 2024, a senior executive of Creative Australia made the absurd claim on a panel that 'artists aren't very good at admin', a trope repeated ad infinitum over the last decade by bureaucrats who aren't very good at admin. There is a widespread sentiment in the arts community that artists are held in contempt by institutions and government.

(3) Erasure of the arts and artists

Contempt and control are longstanding obstacles to the independent Australian artist living a sustainable work life. A newer challenge is erasure from the public domain, located deep in sector and allied industries language. In a 2024 social media post on the professional platform, LinkedIn, a curator objected to the failure of a state government to acknowledge the work of artists on one of their projects. The reasoning provided by government was that the artists were considered *suppliers*. A further example is found in Creative Australia's 2024 style guide: staff are encouraged not to use the term 'artist' as it is perceived to have a hostile reception with the Australian public. 'Clients' should be addressed as *creatives*.

Like characters in a Milan Kundera novel, artists are being air-brushed out of social and civic worlds. In Victoria, the culturally transformative, 40-years old Ministry for the Arts was deleted in 2014 and replaced by a Ministry for Creative Industries. Arts Victoria is now called Creative Victoria. The NSW Arts Ministry's department is now called Create NSW. The Australia Council for the Arts is now called Creative Australia.

I have argued for a decade that government nomenclature is both symbolic and indicative. When a new government assembles its portfolios, it is not just assembling mechanisms for government, it is inscribing the values on which it will govern in the names it assigns ministries. No one talks about the arts anymore, only creative industries, and artists have been rebranded 'creatives' to align them with policy that cannot accommodate what they do nor why they do it. The erasure of the arts from government and public consciousness does more damage than any funding cut. I participated in an event in South Australia which still has a Ministry for the Arts. In a one-hour conversation, their Minister for the Arts and respondents in the room repeated the words 'the arts' and 'artists' so many times it was shocking for someone who had worked in the arts for a decade without a state Ministry for the Arts developing arts policy and delivering funding.

At the very least, Australia should have a stand-alone Ministry for Culture whose mission is to support and advocate for the arts and cultural industries.

(4) Financial Inequity in the Sector

In the last few years, I have been approached by recruiters to consider leadership positions at funding, presenting and educational organisations. In each instance, the annual salary package on offer was between 5 and 7 times more than what I was making as an artist. Why is a leading arts administrator considered 5-7 times more financially valuable than a leading artist? Especially when without artmaking, the administrator's position does not exist.

The paucity of fellowships – the only real form of direct funding to artists – is a long-term fact. Across government, the money on offer for these fellowships is unsustainable for what is required of successful applicants. But it is also emblematic of the differential in the value placed on the work of an artist and the work of an administrator. For many years, Creative Australia offered two-year fellowships of \$40K per year awarded to successful applicants across 9 categories – which is, in total, near to what I can gauge is Creative Australia's CEO annual salary package notwithstanding performance bonuses. In this configuration, the nation's leading administrator is considered 9 times more financially valuable than any of our leading artists.

Financial inequality is baked into the so-called Australian arts industry. It is fundamental to the industry's survival. Were artists paid equivalent wages to their institutional counterparts – administrators, bureaucrats, marketers, managers, producers – the edifice would crash. This default setting has meant that as wages for those working in the arts - other than artists - have increased, remuneration for artists has decreased. Financial discrimination against artists is a given, and the worst offenders are those who financially benefit and refuse to acknowledge or do anything about it. This has created an irreconcilable divide between artists and the cultural entities that constitute the Australian arts scene.

(5) Censorship

The Australian arts have a history of censorship that is both implicit and explicit.

The implicit has an insidious effect on the cultural milieu; it is the equivalent of 'perceived pressure' in sport. If an artist considers outing a funding agency or cultural institution for poor behaviour, they decide against that action because of the negative pressure they perceive they will suffer regarding future funding and employment opportunities. These decisions become reflexes embedded over time, diminishing transparency and sector justice. In the context of artist's rights, I've often seen artists and cultural operators decide against formally objecting and complaining for these reasons. It is why I have provided no attributions to any of the case studies mapped out in this essay unless they are in the public domain.

Implicit censorship in the arts also originates at the highest governance levels. In 2018, then-artist Gabriele de Vietri mapped the relationship between arts governance and the fossil fuels industry through the prism of board representation.² It is a chilling undertaking and explains, in part, the limited art addressing climate change - the most profound issue of our time -- being commissioned, created, supported, and presented in this country by mainstream organisations and institutions.



■ [Redacted]

[REDACTED]

Explicit censorship has ramped up. In 2024, the State Library of Victoria (SLV) terminated the contracts of four artists who had been contracted to run a Teen Writing Bootcamp. The artists share similar views on the Palestine-Israel conflict. SLV maintained the termination of the artists' contracts was a deferral of the program and that "*the deferral is not because of the political views or identity of anyone involved with the program.*" This official line persisted despite leaks from staff meetings to the contrary.⁴ SLV's actions sparked widespread and sustained criticism from the independent artists community and their own library staff. In State Parliament, now-Greens MP de Vietri called on SLV to 'publicly and fully account for its decision'.⁵ In July, evidence was cited in *The Guardian* that SLV surveilled the artists' social media accounts prior to terminating their contracts.⁶

The 2025 Venice Biennale censorship debacle needs only to be mentioned here and not gone over in detail. Its damage to Australia's international reputation has been profound as has its enervating effect on the national sector. Add the Adelaide Writer's Festival 2026 and the Bendigo Writer's Festival 2025 onto a long list of such transgressions, and there is now an established atmosphere of censorship in this country that, when uncontested, re-wires artist's reflexes speaking truth to power in both advocacy and creation contexts.

The lesson for cultural institutions is that free speech is not a convenience one can curate; it's a right we must protect even if the views expressed are antithetical to one's own. Free speech is a foundational principle of democracy and, whilst it might feel society is getting messier, it doesn't mean democracy is falling apart; it means we must operate different machinery to accommodate social change. It's a challenge highlighted in the complex role artists currently play in society. It is a burden artists should not carry alone in the cultural sector.

Summary

Many of the levers needed to address these sectoral conditions are no longer available.

Policy has shifted away from the arts to creative industries, dissolving decades of arts ministries and their invaluable historical expertise and institutional knowledge. Even in states where a ministry for the arts is retained, such as South Australia, the responsibility to and for artists is at the lower end of the scale. Benchmarking measures around direct funding for artists and the arts and direct funding for creatives and the creative industries are non-existent. The elision of the arts and creative industries – one, a public good and the other a commercial undertaking – is complete.

The shift in bureaucratic attitudes away from artists means token engagement in policy development. Artists feel they are a distraction, a fetish, a thing to be held in contempt or patronised, an afterthought at best, yet perversely they remain the pretext for many policy and funding decisions. This is endemic. It drives negative attitudes to equitable financial remuneration for artists' labour. In the big picture, such as ministerial or departmental budgets, most funds are ring-fenced for major cultural institutions and companies. This is true for Creative Australia – the National Performing Arts Framework - and for Creative Victoria – where in conversation in 2019 with the then-Minister for Creative Industries, Martin Foley, I was advised that 80% of the budget was ring-fenced for institutions. That figure has not improved. Direct funding to artists is near-negligible and decreasing as evidenced here.

⁴ <https://independentaustralia.net/politics/politics-display/state-library-victoria-cancels-pro-palestinian-author-for-cultural-safety,18445>

⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/gabrielledevietri/reel/C4trsuVPVvD/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/jul/17/state-library-victoria-social-media-israel-gaza-war-content-workshop-cancellations-ntwnfb>

Unsurprisingly, Creative Victoria is under siege from the local arts community determined to make arts funding an election issue.

Post-pandemic conditions have discombobulated these policy-institutional-financial settings resulting in the national and local scenes going further into disrepair. Music festivals, for example, are dying.⁷ The exodus of artists is the clearest indicator of a national evisceration. Some of which can be attributed to the pandemic. According to co-author of the 2024 Artist-Worker Report, Professor David Throsby, 16 per cent of the artist-population doubted they would return to the time they spent on their art before COVID. “More or less, they’re going to leave the industry, so that’s a waste of talent as a result of the impact of the pandemic.”⁸

The recent rise in censorship has compounded these new and longstanding issues and is having a direct impact on both institutional and philanthropic support for artists.

If we agree the situation is parlous, terminal, and threatens the bare minimum of artistic production required to build culture and support a healthy democracy, then the only clear option is the provision of sustained financial support for artists and arts workers in theatre, dance, music, opera, the visual and literary arts *outside* these historical settings.

Such support can come in a variety of forms; western and northern European democracies such as Belgium and France have successfully implemented schemes to provide artists with a living wage.⁹ These schemes are embedded in the infrastructure of their social and cultural services or are implied in the social safety nets of countries such as Denmark, Finland, and Norway. These do not exist in Australia.

Having studied these schemes, I believe a Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) would have a total effect across measures of fairness, social, financial, and cultural justice, and cultural impact including:

- Financial acknowledgement of the artist as an essential worker
- Restoration of dignity to the work of artists and their daily life
- Iteration of the value of the arts in a democratic society
- Increased productivity driven by the elevation of artists out of long-term financial precarity.

In 2025, Ireland made permanent its 3-year BIA pilot program. Its impact analysis was telling. Key findings include artists reporting an increase of 5.5 hours weekly spent on making work, research and experimentation and an increase in the completion of new artworks; recipients spent less time working outside the sector in order to make ends meet, and were more likely to be able to afford basic necessities; they experienced notable decreases in anxiety and depression.¹⁰ In effect, a massive uptick in autonomy, relevance, well-being and productivity. It is a compelling argument and one that can be made at multiple points of entry: social, cultural, artistic, and economic.

My argument for a BIA in Australia is not predicated on an ideal that artists are special or unique workers. It is an argument for addressing a vulnerable worker-population in serious decline. Based on David Throsby’s research identifying exit trends, estimates of Australia’s current artist-population are around 39,000 – higher than anecdotal evidence suggests but a significant decline of 11% on his 2009 Report in a period when Australia’s overall population increased by 21%.¹¹ In the preceding decade, artist-population figures had flatlined. It is a worker-population exhibiting clear long-term trends of unsustainability.

⁷ <https://www.nme.com/features/music-features/australia-music-festival-closures-3603106>

⁸ <https://www.indaily.com.au/arts-culture/2024/05/07/poorer-precariou-artists-struggle-to-make-a-living>

⁹ Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/294268/3555e53e-4882-403b-ab57-d09f31ffab9b.pdf#page=null>

¹¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/australia-population/>

If one were to objectively identify a sector of the labour force to test the efficacy of a basic income scheme, then the artist-population of Australia would be close to the top of the list. A BIA is a means to an end, not the end itself.

In the context of a national cultural policy that cites one of its key pillars as the centrality of the artist, such a measure is logical and necessary, the foundation on which a mature 21st C Australian culture can be built.

“Without the arts this is all you would have.”

To garner public support for the BIA Pilot Scheme, Ireland’s National Campaign for the Arts adopted a series of strategies. In the middle of the pandemic, it released a short video that begins: “Without the arts this is all you would have”, the screen cuts to a snapshot of white noise followed by a montage of text graphics that read: “There would be no film, drama, comedy, music, books, theatre, digital arts, dance, painting, poetry, animation, architecture, sculpture, spectacle, literature, joy, excitement, beauty.” It helped that most of the population was in lockdown and listening to music, reading books, watching film and tv; the campaign hit a nerve soliciting enormous public support for the scheme. This story, told at Bodies of Work Symposium (Adelaide, 2023) by Angela Dorgan, former Chair of Ireland’s National Campaign for the Arts, is an instruction for advocating a future that artists and citizens in every democratic society need to understand and must recreate for their own circumstances.

Artists take our dreams, thoughts, feelings, and shape them into meanings we share in public and private spaces. This is a process, a public good, the contribution of the arts to cultural formation, production, and social cohesion. It helps us make sense of who we are, what we are and why we are. Artists originate and do this work. Without them this kind of work will not be done. Our sense of identity, the evolution of our values and our understanding of relationships suffer. These constitute the interconnectedness of our lives and histories. When this work is hindered and compromised, we are damaged, cut adrift. The increased financial precarity of the artists’ life in our democracy has coincided with an increase in social division.

If we agree, as I have argued, that the arts system is broken and the arts are essential to a well-functioning society then the opportunity cost of not introducing a BIA is palpable, renting tears in the social fabric that will be impossible to repair.