

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public

Organisation

Red Room Poetry

Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

Founded in 2003, Red Room Poetry is Australia's leading organisation for commissioning, creating, publishing and promoting poetry.

Since Revive was launched in January 2023, we have seen many attempts to marginalise and censor artists for their political views. We cannot recall a time in living memory when the climate of fear was as corrosive as it is now. In several cases, government-funded or controlled organisations (both state and federal) have either directly implemented or advocated for the silencing of individual artists.

To recognise the Centrality of the Artist (Pillar 3) to a dynamic culture, and the importance of risk in creative work, means acknowledging and defending freedom of expression as a right. Whether one agrees with an artist is irrelevant. Cancelling performances, publications, awards and grants on the basis of political views, often shared in forums outside of an artist's practice, is the fastest and surest route to a fragile rather than Strong Cultural Infrastructure (Pillar 4).

The implementation of these acts of cancelling and silencing is inconsistent. Neither artists nor arts organisations know exactly when and how the next incident might occur. Censorship has become a sword of Damocles threatening to fall at any time. It shouldn't need reminding, but decisions about whether speech is criminally inflammatory is a matter for the law and judgements should never be pre-empted through punitive acts of shaming and censorship.

We therefore urge the new cultural policy to:

- Embed a commitment to 'freedom of expression' into Pillar 3 as a right rather than an abstract principle. Unfortunately, the phrase is no longer enough. The cultural policy needs to define freedom of expression and provide guidance for a) what actions an individual or organisation should take if they/it have suffered discrimination and been punished for exercising freedom of expression, b) how an organisation should operate if it feels free expression has slipped into inflammatory hate speech - i.e. a process, supported by law, rather than impulsive behind-the-scenes cancellations.
- Avoid nebulous phrases, which are easily misinterpreted to support acts of censorship, and in any case cannot be measured, like 'social cohesion'. Difference of opinion is a sign of a robust, democratic society. Whether opinions are expressed politely or with passion and anger is irrelevant, as long as individuals operate within the law.