

Individual Submission to the National Cultural Policy (REVIVE)

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Hi, my name is Imogen Ross. I am a freelance theatre designer and maker, a primary, secondary and tertiary art and design educator, a postgraduate researcher and academic, an active member of APDG and Scenolab, and I currently work as Sustainability Manager at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), with responsibility for embedding environmentally sustainable practices across arts training and live events/screen production.

My submission advocates for a stronger, embedded focus on environmental sustainability and ecological responsibility within Australia's National Cultural Policy (REVIVE), across all areas of creative endeavour. I suggest that sustainability be recognised not as a peripheral concern, but as a core principle shaping the future of how Creative Arts are funded, made, toured and taught in Australia.

This shift towards sustainability would contribute to a more resilient, responsible, and forward-thinking cultural sector, capable of responding meaningfully to the urgent realities of climate change, and positioned to influence broader societal change.

The Problem

The current policy framework acknowledges the importance of place, First Nations knowledge, and cultural sustainability, but does not adequately address the environmental impact of creative industries and artistic production itself.

My sector, the live performance and screen industries are resource-intensive, relying on:

- Short production cycles that generate significant material waste
- Touring models dependent on high-emissions transport
- Production practices that prioritise speed, cost, and spectacle over longevity or reuse

From my own professional experience across theatre design, education, and institutional leadership, I see firsthand that:

- Materials are frequently discarded after single use
- There is limited infrastructure for storage, reuse, or circular production
- Sustainability is often treated as an optional add-on rather than a standard practice

- Artists and educators lack the funding, time, and policy support needed to shift their methods

At the same time, Australia's ecosystems are uniquely fragile and already under severe pressure from climate change. There is currently a wide disconnect between the stories we tell about environmental crisis and the way we are encouraged to materially produce and tour those stories.

Why This Matters Now

Environmental sustainability is a pressing issue because:

- The arts sector has both a responsibility and a powerful capacity to model alternative ways of living and making
- Without intervention, unsustainable practices will become further embedded as production scales return post-pandemic and post-war in the Middle East
- Artists are increasingly motivated to act, but systemic change cannot occur without policy support and strong leadership and robust advocacy.

As an educator and sustainability advocate, I see a growing generation of artists who are ready to work differently, but who lack structural frameworks and financial incentives to support that shift.

Recommendations and Solutions

1. Embed Environmental Sustainability as a Core Principle of the Policy

Sustainability should sit alongside cultural value, access, and diversity as a central pillar of the National Cultural Policy.

This includes:

- Explicit language acknowledging climate change and Australia's ecological responsibility
- Recognition of the arts sector's environmental footprint
- Alignment with Australia's broader climate goals

2. Introduce Sustainability Requirements and Incentives in Funding

Funding bodies should include clear sustainability criteria in grant applications and reporting.

To address this, I recommend:

- Introducing environmental impact statements as part of funding applications
- Providing additional funding for sustainable materials, processes, and auditing

- Publicly rewarding projects that demonstrate circular design, reuse, and low-waste outcomes

3. Invest in Sector-Wide Infrastructure for Circular Production

A major barrier is the lack of shared systems for reuse and resource circulation.

I recommend:

- Long term investment in shared material libraries, prop and set reuse facilities, and digital inventory systems that encourage resource sharing.
- Support for cross-institution collaboration (e.g. between arts companies, training institutions, and independent artists)
- Development of national or regional “circular production hubs”

4. Support Education, Training, and Research in Sustainable Arts Practice

Change must be embedded in how artists are trained, funded and encouraged to develop future business models.

This includes:

- Funding for curriculum development in sustainable design and production
- Support for research into new materials and ecological performance practices
- Professional development opportunities for current practitioners

As someone working across education and industry, I see this as a critical leverage point for long-term change.

5. Encourage Low-Impact Touring and Digital Innovation

Touring models need to adapt to a climate-constrained future.

I recommend:

- Supporting longer runs, localised production models, and regional co-creation
- Incentivising reduced freight and travel emissions
- Funding innovative digital or hybrid distribution models where appropriate

6. Recognise the Role of the Arts in Ecological Storytelling and Behaviour Change

Beyond operations, the arts play a vital role in shaping public imagination.

The policy should:

- Acknowledge the arts as a tool for ecological awareness, resilience, and cultural adaptation
- Support works that engage with environmental themes and community connection to place
- Recognise the leadership of First Nations practitioners in sustainable and relational ways of making

Personal Case Insight

Across my diverse practice, as a designer, educator, and sustainability lead, I have worked on productions where entire sets are discarded after a short season, despite the labour and resources embedded in them. At the same time, I have also seen the creative potential unlocked when sustainable constraints are embraced, leading to innovative design solutions, inter-departmental collaboration, and deeper engagement with materiality and circularity.

The challenge is not a lack of willingness - it is a lack of systemic support, policy direction, and resourcing.

Conclusion

Australia's National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to revive and align cultural ambitions with the pressing ecological realities of our time.

By embedding environmental sustainability into the core language of the policy, the Government can:

- Model strong policy action and leadership to artists and creatives.
- Support a smooth transition to more responsible creative practices
- Strengthen the resilience of the arts sector – the imagineers of the future!
- Empower artists to develop and lead cultural responses to climate change

The arts are uniquely positioned to help Australians imagine and enact more sustainable futures. This potential must be supported through clear policy direction, practical resources, and meaningful investment.

Sincerely

Imogen Ross