

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Individual

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

The removal of Khaled Sabsabi and Michael Dagostino from representing Australia at the Venice Biennale exposed a broader structural issue within Australia's cultural sector. Regardless of individual views on the work itself, the incident revealed the fragility of institutional independence and the extent to which political, reputational, and media pressures can shape cultural outcomes.

For many artists, the issue is not only direct censorship, but the quieter and more pervasive culture of anticipatory self-censorship. Artists, curators, and institutions learn to predict what is fundable, politically survivable, brand-safe, or institutionally manageable. Over time, this narrows the range of ideas considered viable long before any formal intervention occurs.

This produces a widening gap between artistic instinct and institutional acceptability. Many practitioners feel pressure to frame work in administrative or market-friendly language in order to secure support. Experimental, politically difficult, or culturally uncomfortable work becomes harder to sustain within systems highly sensitive to controversy, reputational risk, and political scrutiny.

A healthy cultural sector should not merely support work that is already socially validated or commercially legible. It should also create conditions where difficult, unresolved, or challenging ideas can exist without immediate pressure to self-censor. The commercial art market is already well funded. Public cultural funding serves a different purpose.

The issue extends beyond any single funding decision. It raises broader questions about governance, artistic freedom, and the conditions under which culture is produced in Australia. If artists begin to internalise these constraints as part of the creative process itself, the limits on expression become structural rather than explicit.

Postwar Germany recognised that artistic and intellectual independence were essential to democratic life. Following the collapse of the Nazi regime, significant reflection emerged around the suppression of dissenting artists and the dangers of culture shaped by political power. Germany's strong public investment in the arts grew partly from an understanding that culture is not merely entertainment or branding, but part of the civic infrastructure of democracy itself.

Artists are often among the first to critically respond to political consensus, institutional power, and social conditions that may otherwise go unchallenged. Strong cultural policy should therefore protect spaces for experimentation, ambiguity, and politically difficult ideas, even when they generate discomfort or controversy.

Australia's National Cultural Policy should recognise that the arts cannot be valued solely through market performance, public palatability, or reputational risk management. A healthy cultural sector requires genuine institutional independence and funding structures capable of supporting experimental, critically engaged, and politically challenging work, alongside meaningful long-term support for the artists who devote their lives to this practice and the cultural value it produces.