

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation 2026

Submitted by Selene Bateman, CEO Auspicious Arts Projects Inc May 2026

About Auspicious Arts Projects

Auspicious Arts Projects is a not-for-profit creative community management organisation with over 30 years of experience supporting independent artists across Australia. We provide artists with the legal, financial, and administrative infrastructure they need to make work: auspicing grants, managing budgets, contracting artists, and providing insurance and workcover.

In 2025 alone, we managed 561 projects across 250 clients, and administered more than \$21 million in arts activity.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the next National Cultural Policy, and we do so with both urgency and hope. Our submission focuses on the Centrality of the Artist pillar, the lens through which we are best placed to speak.

The Centrality of the Artist

Revive: A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place was a landmark moment for the Australian arts sector. After nearly three decades without a national cultural policy, its recognition of the artist as worker, and its commitment to fair pay and safe working conditions, was both overdue and genuinely welcomed. We acknowledge the progress made.

But the data tells us that for independent artists, conditions have not improved since 2023. In many cases, they have gotten worse.

In late 2024, Auspicious surveyed over 100 of our clients across artforms, career stages, and locations. What emerged was a sector under profound financial stress. Artists are not just struggling to fund their work, they are struggling to stay in the sector at all.

One long-term client, an established artist with a strong track record of funded work, described her grant success rate dropping drastically. She has taken on work outside the arts for the first time in 25 years. *"The conditions of working in the arts are cruel and demeaning. I don't think that I live in a culture that truly values or supports the arts."*

She is not alone. Across our survey, the themes were consistent: funding rounds are more competitive, success rates are lower, the unpaid labour burden is unsustainable, and burnout is endemic. Multiple respondents described colleagues leaving the sector permanently, or considering leaving themselves. One described the independent arts as *"in free fall."*

In 2024 Theatre Network Australia's This Is How We Do It Survey found that:

- 79% of independent artists work in jobs outside their creative practice
- Independent artists earn an average of just \$21,608 per year from their art

- 27% are rarely or never paid superannuation when contracted for creative work

The amount of unpaid labour carried out by independent artists is staggering and unsustainable.

Based on our 2024 client survey, artists report spending an average of 15 hours per week on unpaid work. Across AAP's 250 direct clients, that amounts to an estimated \$9.75M in uncompensated labour annually (250 artists x 15 hours x 52 weeks x \$50 per hour).

To put that in context, the artists we work with receive a combined \$5 to \$6M in grants per year. Their unpaid labour is worth nearly double the amount they receive to carry out their projects.

It is worth naming a structural inequity that sits at the heart of this submission. When arts organisations are funded, that funding pays the salaries of arts administrators. When cultural infrastructure is built, that funding pays the wages of construction workers. In both cases, the people who support the arts are employed, salaried and protected. But the artists themselves, the reason any of this exists, are not. With very few exceptions, such as the Ballet or Opera, artists are not employed full time by organisations. They are independent, project-based and financially exposed in ways that no other participant in the arts ecosystem is. If we are unwilling to give artists the security of employment that we extend to those who support them, then the least we can do is ensure they have a secure and liveable income. That is not a radical proposition. It is a basic matter of equity.

The Artist in a Disrupted Future

Artificial intelligence is transforming the nature of work at a speed and scale that no policy framework has yet adequately addressed. For artists, this presents both a direct threat to their livelihoods, through the unauthorised use of creative work to train AI models, the erosion of copyright protections, and the displacement of creative labour.

But artists are not only victims of this disruption. They are also part of the solution. As traditional employment becomes increasingly precarious for everyone, not just artists, the question of how people find meaning, purpose and connection becomes urgent and universal. Artists have the skills to help communities engage with creativity, find purpose and build connection.

However for this to happen, we need political will and genuine investment now. The next National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to get ahead of this. But it will require a massive rethink of how Artists and the Arts are valued.

Recommendations

1. **Living wage for artists.** The current funding and welfare system was not designed for the realities of independent creative practice. Artists earn an average of \$21,608 per year from their work, and the gap between that figure and a sustainable income is not being closed by incremental grant increases alone. We urge the government to seriously investigate models that provide artists with greater income security,

including basic income models being trialled and adopted in other countries such as the UBI program in Ireland, or France's intermittents du spectacle scheme.

2. **Significantly increase funding for Fringe Festivals.** Fringe festivals are a critical part of the independent arts ecosystem, but the costs passed on to artists, registration fees, ticketing charges and production expenses, mean many artists lose money to participate. Better funded Fringe festivals can absorb those costs, support artist development, and fulfil their original purpose: giving independent artists a platform, not a bill.
3. **Commit to the arts as essential social infrastructure.** AI has the potential to fundamentally disrupt the nature of work. If work becomes scarce or optional, the threat is not only to people's livelihoods but to their sense of purpose and belonging. Artists and arts workers are uniquely positioned to facilitate spaces where people explore creativity, find meaning and connection. For that to happen, the infrastructure that supports them must be strong. Right now it is fragile, underfunded and at risk. The arts must be explicitly recognised and resourced as essential infrastructure for human wellbeing, on par with health, education and housing. That will require political will, and a willingness to seriously rethink how we value creative work in our economic structures.

About the Author

Selene Bateman is the CEO of Auspicious Arts Projects, co-convenor of the Arts Industry Council of Victoria, and a member of the Advisory Board of the Deakin University Arts and Cultural Management Program. She is a 2025 Churchill Fellow, currently investigating capacity building and skill development models for independent artists in Canada, Ireland, Sweden, and the United States. She has worked in the arts sector for over 20 years as an arts administrator, producer, and project manager.