



PERFORMANCE
SPACE



National Cultural Policy Submission

2026

Performance Space

National Cultural Policy Submission

Performance Space

Creating the Future of Art

The ideas that shape Australian culture rarely announce themselves. They emerge first at the edge, in studios, in experimental spaces, in the work of artists who are not trying to reach the mainstream but to interrogate what culture is capable of. Performance Space has held that edge for more than forty years. Not as a stepping stone to somewhere else, but as a place of genuine and sustained creative inquiry whose influence travels through the broader ecology in ways that are rarely traceable, and almost never credited.

When a major festival takes a formal risk, when an institution commissions something genuinely strange, when a playwright breaks with convention or a choreographer dismantles what dance is allowed to be, somewhere in that origin is the experimental sector. Not because its artists went there, but because its ideas did. The experimental and independent sector is not the periphery of Australian arts. It is the space from which the whole culture draws.

Australia's next National Cultural Policy now has an opportunity to invest in the conditions that make that space grow, and become more robust. Performance Space makes this submission as an organisation that has spent four decades understanding what those conditions require and how we can shepherd Australia's most dynamic artists and ideas into the futures they envision. A securely funded and valued experimental arts sector delivers a richer future for all Australians through the championing of ideas, forms, and ways of making that enrich the entire ecology.

The Pillars of Revive

Performance Space supports the development and delivery of the National Cultural Policy and its critical role in shaping Australia's cultural life. We acknowledge the strong foundation of the Revive policy. It highlighted the critical need to support pathways and workplace safety for arts workers and artists through the funding of Support Act and the establishment of a Centre for Arts and Entertainment Workplaces. The re-establishment of the Asia Pacific Arts Awards has shone much needed light onto the dynamic and multifaceted creative work happening in our region. The revamped International Engagement Fund has been critical in supporting Australian artists and organisations to deepen their impact overseas. The continuation of the critical Festivals Australia program has enabled organisations like Performance Space to nurture strong and robust partnerships with our peers, particularly in the regions.

We are excited to be working from these foundations to build the future of Australian art and culture through the next National Cultural Policy. Performance Space welcomes the chance to both deepen the commitments made in Revive and to explore opportunities for further growth, particularly in independent touring, the small-to-medium sector, and the absence of a national commissioning architecture. We strongly support the actions around increased funding to Creative Australia to support more small-to-medium arts organisations, drive the development of new artistic works of scale and continue activities and programs that support live performance, festivals and touring. Performance Space is at the forefront of designing and delivering programs and strategic initiatives that can further these aims.

Our work engages all five pillars of Revive in diverse ways. In particular, by ensuring the **Centrality of the Artist, A Place for Every Story, Strong Cultural Infrastructure** and **Engaging the Audience**.

We provide critical support to independent artists across their careers, enabling them to maintain sustainable working lives in the face of rapidly changing conditions for creative work. Without spaces to experiment - and sometimes fail - we cannot expect artistic innovation to emerge. Without support for their development, we cannot expect artists to be equipped to navigate the complexities of larger institutions and international engagement. We are the bedrock from which artists can be ambitious, take risks and be supported at critical junctures in their careers. We invest in the full cycle of making new work - from ideation, creation and presentation to national and international touring. Our record of supporting innovative artistic practice is evident.

Through the Experimental Commissioning Consortium (ECC), originally devised by Performance Space we, as one of 16 organisations around Australia, will be commissioning new Australian work that will have a guaranteed national audience. This network supports creative practice well beyond the major festivals, which are all held in capital cities, and major institutions that are ill-equipped to engage meaningfully with independent artists. Our work will reach the regions and smaller cities, furnishing under-resourced presenters around Australia with new Australian work - because cutting-edge art should not live only in our urban centres.

We also forge partnerships internationally.

Our international work is structured around five key principles, that initiatives are:

- **Artist-centred** - activities are developed to ensure that benefit flows to artists, and in consultation with them
- **Reciprocal** - each participant gives and gains in equitable measure, which we understand does not always mean equal
- **Ongoing** - we do not engage in 'single encounter' or 'one off' programs, rather we build relationships that unfold across projects and years
- **Values-led** - we work with people we trust, at the speed of trust, and with a commitment to ongoingness in all our activities
- **Sustainable** - we aim to develop programs that can happen in some form without additional support, so that they can continue and be sustained in the absence of external investment if required

Through these partnerships across Australia and the Asia Pacific we build audiences for cutting-edge artistic practice, **Engaging the Audience** through sharing both full-length works and regular work-in-progress and short work nights, which build literacy and engagement with experimental practices amongst and across diverse communities.

Our artist cohorts are varied in every sense - of different cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, working across multiple art forms and hailing from around the world. **The Artist is Central** to all that we do. Our programs have consistently championed work from First Nations artists, culturally and linguistically diverse artists, artists with disability and neurodivergent artists, LGBTQIA+ artists, regional and remote artists, both young and older artists, working class artists, and often artists who live with complex intersections of these identities and experiences. We provide **A Place for Every Story**. And we have a 40 plus year track record and a robust, healthy organisation providing **Strong Cultural Infrastructure** in the sector.

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth

Small-to-medium organisations and independent and experimental creative practices are critical to the circulation of ideas, forms, and ways of making that enrich the entire ecology. However funding for these organisations has largely stagnated - or diminished - across the last decade. The cost of doing business has risen significantly in every area. Funding has not. In spite of this, the small-to-medium sector has sustained delivery of culture-defining work through extraordinary organisational resilience and the commitment of the diverse creative communities and audiences that support us. Increased investment in this part of the sector will yield disproportionate results - we consistently 'punch above our weight' in impact and reach.

There is also a dearth of collaborative commissioning and effective national touring in the independent and experimental performing arts sector. Over the last decade, we have seen the loss of a number of critical mechanisms that supported this work, including Time_Space, facilitated by Arts House, and the Mobile States touring initiative, delivered by Performing Lines.

The loss of these - and other - initiatives, compounded by the “Covid normal” landscape of increasing costs and decreasing platforms for experimental work, has resulted in limited mobility, long-term support and career pathways for independent and interdisciplinary artists and arts workers, as evidenced by Creative Australia’s recent *Artists as Workers* research paper, and SaCSA’s *SHAPING TOMORROW: Workforce Planning Report (Arts) 2024*.

A commitment in the National Cultural Policy to investment in rebuilding commissioning and touring networks at the small-to-medium scale will enable organisations like Performance Space to leverage our work and share it with growing audiences. It will provide artists with a firm foundation from which to develop ambitious work, work that can adapt to the diversity of contexts it might meet, and that is underpinned by conceptual and technological rigour. Organisations devoted to the development and presentation of this work are of vastly different scales, resourcing and locations, and participate in multiple intersectional communities specific to their context. A one-size-fits-all approach to cross-sector collaboration is unlikely to work - we need to invest in structures that are adaptable, scaleable, and nimble, capable of functioning for both the sector as a whole and the hyperlocal modalities that our organisations operate within.

Initiatives like the ECC, by which we have mobilised 16 organisations nationally to date to co-invest in new work, our international exchange programs and artist development streams look to acknowledge the complexities that inform our work and celebrate them as strengths that are particularly evident in independent and interdisciplinary practice. . The appetite, ambition, and vision is there. Investment in this vision would be game-changing for our sector. We innovate models of collective working that provide long-term support and career pathways to independent artists. We see the critical role our sector plays in informing, expanding and enriching other art forms and creative ecologies. Experimental practices are the bedrock of artistic innovation and a barometer for the health of our arts and culture.

Strong Foundations

Performance Space was formed in 1983 by a group of artists in response to a lack of space and context for their creative practices. For more than 40 years we have identified, nurtured and presented new trends and expanded forms in art and performance. We are a leader in the small-to-medium sector, impactful in our strategic vision, and strongly networked nationally and internationally. We are driving sector-wide innovation, including through the newly launched national ECC, which will be devoted to the development and presentation of independent and interdisciplinary art and performance.

We are funded by all three tiers of government via Creative Australia (4 year funding), Create NSW (8 year funding), and City of Sydney (3 year funding) and have an annual turnover of \$1.45 million. Of this support, just over 50% goes to salaries and wages for arts workers (often practising artists themselves) and more than 30% goes directly to artists in fees. Our organisation is lean and people-centred. From 2023 - 2025 we have supported 469 artists and have developed, commissioned and presented 79 new works. Leveraging public investment, we seek to attract significant investment from philanthropy, through partnerships and from our

community. Every public dollar invested in an organisation like Performance Space attracts co-investment and participation that commercial models cannot replicate.

We have an ongoing team of six across 5.2 FTE, regularly employ contractors and casual staff, and support internships through partnerships with universities and programs like Create NSW's Creatability program. We are a critical training ground for future arts leaders. Our current Artistic Director previously worked as a contracted Festival Producer and then Senior Producer within the organisation. Our current Program Manager began with us as a casual Junior Producer. Our most recent Program Coordinator is the current Director of Parramatta Artist Studios. Our former Artistic Directors have gone on to artistic leadership positions at Sydney Opera House, Asia TOPA, international arts festivals and key roles in funding and peak bodies.

Our reach is national - we have supported artists from every State and Territory in Australia - and international, with a focus on the Asia Pacific region. Over the last three years, we have presented the work of artists from Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea and artists of the Indian diaspora via Australia and the UK. We currently have formal partnerships and informal collaborations with organisations across the region, including three active projects funded via Creative Australia's International Engagement Fund. For several years we have received significant support from philanthropic foundations for this work.

Defining Australia's Cultural Landscape

Our impact across more than 40 years has been transformative for artists and has shaped Australia's cultural conversations. We provide clear and sustained pathways to independent and experimental artists across their careers. We do this through creative development, commissioning, presentation, advocacy and partnerships. As a direct and demonstrable result of engagement with Performance Space, artists secure larger opportunities and reach new audiences across Australia and internationally.

Our work resonates not only in Australia, but brings the cutting-edge ideas and previously unimagined forms of Australia's experimental artists to the world stage. Too often our international peers are pleasantly surprised by the robust and thriving experimental art scene in Australia. We want to change that. A few recent examples of this include:

- After premiering his first theatrical work *THUNDERBLOOM-LIVE* at Liveworks 2024, HOSSEI has been funded through Creative Australia's Major Festivals Initiative to create its sequel, produced by Aphids and championed by Sydney Festival. *THUNDERBLOOM-LIVE* was radical in its centering of an aging, disabled, immigrant, mothering body in its main character. It wrenched the musical form out of its familiar frame and fused it with a joyful Persian pop sensibility previously unseen on our stages.
- Dance artist Brooke Stamp's first full-length solo *Mickey*, commissioned by Performance Space, went on to a Greenroom Award winning season at Rising from Liveworks 2023, is showing at PICA this month and is currently in planning for a European tour. *Mickey*

reimagined what choreography can be and do, drawing on more than twenty years of performance history and embodied knowledge to regurgitate it in a totally new form that had audiences fascinated, confused - and coming back night after night.

- Dance artist Rhiannon Newton's work *Long Sentences*, presented at Liveworks 2025 is touring to Singapore this month through our partnership with Dance Nucleus.
- First Nations choreographer Amrita Hepi's *Rinse* has toured extensively across Europe and North America since its premiere season at Liveworks 2022. Performance Space has consistently championed First Nations voices across our programs, and *Rinse* is an exceptional example of a First Nations artist firmly at the forefront of artistic practice. *Rinse* asks us to question our relationships to 'beginnings' in profound ways - how do we understand where our stories, histories and selves begin, and what would happen if we started out somewhere else entirely?
- Following co-commissioning and presentation at Liveworks 2017, Nat Randall's *The Second Woman* has toured the world and been translated into numerous languages with ongoing touring support from Performance Space. *The Second Woman* exploded the idea of what theatre can be, seeing the lead artist perform the same scene 100 times over 24 hours, opposite a different performer each time. The work's relationship to endurance, duration, liveness and image continues to have a profound impact on Australian artistic practice, and has garnered rave reviews and obsessive fans around the world.

These and many other outcomes have shaped the creative ecology that we operate in today. Performance Space's significance as an organisation is both current and historic. We were one of the founding resident companies of Carriageworks, which we helped to secure as an arts precinct under the leadership of our former Artistic Director, the late and great Fiona Winning. We have shaped - and continue to shape - Australia's cultural life. Our previous home at 199 Cleveland St has remained an important venue in Sydney's performance scene, currently occupied by Strut and Fret and operating as The Grand Electric. We hold an archive of over 40 years of boundary-pushing artistic practice in Australia, the acquisition of which we are in discussion with the State Library of NSW about acquiring as part of their collection, and the digitisation of which we are hoping to secure investment in. The archive is a treasure trove of creativity that we want to make accessible to artists and new audiences, both nationally and internationally.

Recommendations for the Future of Experimental Art

Alongside our colleagues in the small-to-medium sector, we call for an acknowledgment enshrined through policy of the critical role organisations like Performance Space play in ensuring Australia's independent artists can sustain impactful practices in challenging times. Their voices are necessary conditions of a well-rounded civic life and community resilience, to ensuring **A Place for Every Story**, to nurturing our capacity for critical thinking and to a robust and future-focused economy in the face of a rapidly changing world through genuine innovation. In Australia's next National Cultural Policy, we advocate for:

Deepening support of commissioning and touring for small and medium organisations

- An ongoing commitment to a national commissioning and touring fund for small-to-medium organisations, such as the ECC. The Major Festivals Initiative and CIAF furnish this support for works of scale and metro audiences. Without the same support for work within the small-to-medium sector for presentation in urban centres and the regions, our artistic ecology becomes imbalanced and unsustainable. Independent and experimental artists need such support to expand audiences, secure mobility and build sustainable practices.
- Incentives for the commissioning and presentation of new Australian work of all scales to support risk-taking programming should be introduced through dedicated funding streams and commitments enshrined in the National Cultural Policy.
- We support the submission made by the Australian Live Performance Export Alliance to recognise international engagement as critical to the careers of Australian artists, the reputation of Australia overseas and the long-term viability of the performing arts ecology. We particularly endorse their recommendation that international cultural engagement is identified as a strategic priority in the next National Cultural Policy.

Unlocking strategic funds that allow responsive and adaptive cross-sector work

- Funding streams that specifically support cross-sector collaboration and networked approaches, that multi-year funded organisations are eligible to apply for. We are currently locked out of the majority of national funding schemes, limiting our ability to innovate new programs, respond to opportunities or support artists between strategic planning periods (four years). Creative work moves fast and the small-to-medium organisations that hold the vast majority of innovative practice must be able to respond adaptively to the rapidly changing conditions of production artists are working within.

Recognition of experimental practice as a hothouse for ideas and a cultural catalyst

- Acknowledgement of experimental practice as a critical breeding ground for culture, and a unique form with its own art historical lineage distinct from emerging practices, digital or "immersive art", and dedicated support and recognition in policy that reflects this.

Experts in this field of practice should be consulted to develop a definition of experimental practice that is apt to protect this unique and distinct status.

To ensure that independent and experimental artists are able to thrive and serve their critical function to the circulation of ideas and new forms of creative expression, we must also enshrine freedom of such creative expression within the National Cultural Policy. We must ensure continued independent and arms length funding processes across Federal, State and Local governments. Politicians at all levels must not influence or give advice that results in the provision or removal of funding support of a particular project or artist. This is already enshrined in the *Creative Australia Act* (Cth) 2023 (section 14(2)) and needs to be upheld in the National Cultural Policy. Strong cultural infrastructure must be based on artistic freedom of speech. This is already enshrined in the *Creative Australia Act* under section 11(1)(e) (“to uphold and promote freedom of expression in the arts”) and needs to be enshrined in the National Cultural Policy.

In experimentation we meet the unknown. From the unknown emerges the future. The unique space of our experimental and independent arts sector is a shared space. A space where ideas are born and nurtured. A space from which innovation and true creative genius emerge. A space that does not need to take its cues from what already exists, but ushers in cultural expressions and ideas that are unquestionably of and for our times. A space where artists and audiences meet. Our work generates value across the whole arts ecology and beyond, building Australia’s capacity for empathy, tolerance, and critical thinking. We expand what is knowable, thinkable and possible, and we are supported by a genuinely engaged community in this critical work. We ask only that our National Cultural Policy recognise this deep value.