

ANCP SUBMISSION

Australia's arts sector is built on the underpaid and often invisible labour of freelance artists. Freelance artists are asked to sustain the cultural life of this country while working within systems that are increasingly financially unsustainable, structurally exclusionary, and dependent on burnout as a mode of production. As a director who has come up through the independent theatre sector, I have witnessed both the extraordinary ingenuity of Australian artists and the deep systemic failures that continue to undermine the longevity of creative careers. The redevelopment of the Australian National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity not simply to celebrate the arts rhetorically, but to materially invest in the workers who make culture possible.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Incredibly grateful for the fellowship and positions provided I am still working other jobs to ensure financial and career longevity. Through these experiences, I have seen how independent artists are consistently expected to deliver ambitious, high-quality work under conditions of financial precarity, often working 60 hour weeks to deliver shows which put both their bodies and minds into modes of exhaustion. The industry relies heavily on unpaid labour, personal sacrifice, and the assumption that passion can compensate for a lack of structural support.

Access to affordable rehearsal and performing spaces remains one of the most significant barriers facing independent artists. Across [REDACTED] rehearsal rooms and theatres are prohibitively expensive, difficult to access, and buried beneath administrative processes that demand extensive organisational labour. Artists are spending more time navigating bureaucracy than engaging in creative development. Rehearsal spaces have no set guidelines on pricing meaning access points vary greatly with some rooms costing \$200 an hour up to \$400 for shows that might have total budgets of \$1000. Greater investment in free and subsidised rehearsal infrastructure is essential if independent work is to remain viable.

There must also be greater accountability around pathways into sustainable employment within the arts. Independent artists form the backbone of Australia's creative sector, yet opportunities to transition into long-term positions within major organisations remain limited and opaque. Clearer pipeline programs, mentorships, and equitable access initiatives are necessary to ensure artists from working-class, culturally diverse, and underrepresented backgrounds are not systematically excluded from leadership and longevity within the sector.

Alongside financial precarity, the Australian arts sector increasingly demands that artists function not only as practitioners, but as brands. Freelance artists are expected to constantly market themselves, maintain visibility, network relentlessly, and continually reinvent their practice in order to remain employable within an industry defined by scarcity and short-term contracts. There is little capacity for rest, stability, or creative recovery; periods of quiet are often interpreted as professional failure. The sector rewards perpetual productivity while offering very little structural security in return. In [REDACTED], career progression can feel deeply insular and unforgiving, with artists often struggling to move fluidly between companies and institutions unless they leave cities entirely in search of new networks or recognition. This creates a culture where exhaustion becomes normalised and where sustainable creative development is undermined by constant pressure to self-produce and promote. Rather than fostering long-term artistic growth, the status-quo often traps artists in cycles of dependence, making it increasingly difficult to sustain a career without significant personal sacrifice or existing financial privilege.

Financial insurance is often provided by donors, many of whom insist on implementing and enforcing certain political codes onto artists, therefore limiting access to ideas and creativity. Furthermore, siloing/discriminated against artists based on race/sex/gender.

It is equally critical that the National Cultural Policy continues to centre First Nations storytelling and support First Nations-led methodologies of making and collaboration (lilyology). These practices cannot simply be included symbolically; they require sustained investment, longer development periods, and infrastructures that allow cultural processes to unfold meaningfully rather than being forced into rigid colonial production models.

At the same time, rising ticket prices continue to shift responsibility for artist welfare away from governments and institutions and onto audiences themselves. This not only alienates audiences already struggling through a cost-of-living crisis, but risks turning theatre and live performance into culturally exclusive spaces.

Freelance artists are often balancing multiple jobs simply to survive while simultaneously attempting to create work within severely compressed rehearsal periods and inadequate budgets. This leaves little room for experimentation, collaboration, or artistic risk-taking; all of which are essential to a healthy cultural ecology. Increasingly, access to creative practice is becoming determined not by talent or rigour, but by who can afford to subsidise their own labour. The arts risk becoming an industry only accessible to those with existing financial privilege, fundamentally narrowing whose stories are able to be told.

If Australia is serious about valuing the arts, then artists must be recognised as workers whose labour generates enormous social, cultural, and economic value. Sustainable wages, healthcare support, accessible infrastructure, and long-term investment in independent practice are not aspirational goals; they are the minimum conditions required for a just and sustainable cultural sector.

-