

Australia's cultural future depends on equitable investment

*Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts welcomes the opportunity to contribute to consultation on the next National Cultural Policy. As a regionally led contemporary arts organisation based on Wulgurukaba and Bindal Country in North Queensland, Umbrella sees the existing pillars of the National Cultural Policy as deeply interconnected. The next phase of policy must respond to **growing structural inequities facing regional cultural ecosystems, visual artists, audiences and arts education pathways.***

For 40 years, Umbrella has operated as cultural infrastructure embedded in regional life, supporting artists, commissioning new work, presenting exhibitions and festivals, delivering professional development, enabling participation and fostering dialogue across communities and generations. Umbrella supports contemporary practice that is both regionally grounded and outward-looking, ensuring artists and communities from North Queensland participate in national and international cultural conversations.

Regional artists should not have to choose between sustaining place-based practice and accessing national and international opportunities, markets and professional networks. As a contemporary arts organisation operating outside a metropolitan centre, Umbrella understands that sustained cultural investment is essential not only to maintain activity, but to build long-term regional capacity and keep North Queensland present within national and international cultural dialogue.

The next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity to move beyond short-term project frameworks toward long-term sustainability, equity and regional cultural leadership. Umbrella also supports the formal recognition of *Arts Learning, Participation and Pathways* as a sixth pillar of the national cultural policy. Australia's cultural future depends not only on artists and organisations, but on the educational, vocational and community pathways that enable creative participation, capability and workforce development across all stages of life.

Pillar 1 — First Nations First

Umbrella strongly supports the centrality of First Nations leadership, cultural authority and self-determination within Australia's cultural future.

Umbrella is based on Gurambilbarra / Townsville, a region that is home not only to the Traditional Owners of the Countries of North Queensland, but also to First Nations peoples from Countries across Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples represent 8.3% of the North Queensland population, significantly higher than the national average.

From Umbrella's founding by a small group of artists, including revered Waanyi [artist](#) Judy Watson, the organisation has provided a platform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, Culture and voices in dialogue with non-Indigenous artists and communities. This work has contributed to the ongoing process of addressing both cultural and structural disadvantage through visibility, dialogue, cultural exchange and contemporary artistic practice.

For Umbrella, First Nations First is not simply about representation. It is about supporting processes of truth-telling, cultural authority, decolonisation and self-determination through long-term relationships, equitable resourcing and genuine leadership.

Umbrella and other arts organisations in regional Queensland play a critical role in embedding First Nations leadership, cultural authority and self-determination within Australia's cultural system. Through long-term relationships with Traditional Custodians, artists and communities, regional galleries often provide more sustained and culturally safe engagement than short-term project models. They support contemporary First Nations practice, curatorial and employment pathways, and everyday operationalisation of cultural rights and community-led decision making. This work requires stable operational funding and long-term workforce investment, not short-term project grants.

Umbrella recommends:

- long-term investment in First Nations-led organisations and cultural programs (including investment for galleries supporting First Nations artists)
- protection and strengthening of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights
- greater support for First Nations curators, producers, educators and cultural leaders
- embedding First Nations leadership across governance, commissioning and policy development
- investment in First Nations-led arts learning, cultural transmission pathways and contemporary arts practice across regional, national and international contexts
- recognition of arts and culture as critical tools for truth-telling, cultural continuity and decolonisation

Regional arts organisations have an important role to play in creating platforms for First

Nations artists and communities, but this work must be led by First Nations people and supported through structural accountability and long-term commitment rather than symbolic inclusion.

Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story

*Umbrella's 40 years of sustained cultural production, artist development and public engagement demonstrates that **regional communities are not simply audiences for culture produced elsewhere, but active creators of contemporary Australian culture.***

North Queensland's cultural identity is shaped by diverse and intersecting realities including First Nations knowledge systems, migration, tropical environments, mining and agricultural histories, youth culture, climate realities and ongoing social change. Contemporary arts practice in regional Australia reflects these complexities in ways that are deeply place-responsive, interdisciplinary and community connected.

Current funding patterns across the Australian cultural sector demonstrate significant structural imbalance in the recognition and resourcing of the visual arts sector.

Creative Australia 2024–25 investment by artform:

- Orchestras — 26%
- Opera — 10%
- Music — 9%
- Theatre — 13%
- Dance — 9%
- **Visual Arts — 6%**

Regional inequity is similarly pronounced:

- 36% of Australians live in regional areas
- Regional organisations (all artforms) received only 13% of Creative Australia funding
- Queensland received 12% of Creative Australia investment overall
- Only 0.98% of Creative Australia investment benefited Queensland's visual arts sector
- Local government galleries received only 0.25% of Creative Australia funding in 2025

These funding patterns reveal an ongoing under-recognition of the visual arts sector and regional practice, and the role regional organisations play in sustaining Australia's cultural ecology. Regional galleries and contemporary arts organisations are not peripheral cultural amenities; they are long-term custodians of cultural memory, contemporary practice, public participation and local cultural identity.

Sustaining “a place for every story” requires sustained investment in the infrastructure that commissions, documents, preserves and makes those stories visible and accessible over time. Without this investment, cultural participation risks becoming increasingly centralised, episodic and homogenised, limiting the diversity of voices and experiences represented within Australia's cultural life. Moreover, regional organisations should not be expected to

deliver nationally significant cultural outcomes without equitable funding structures in place.

The public gallery and visual arts sector in Queensland is grateful for the Federal Government's *Sharing the National Collection* initiative. However, the program presented significant logistical and resourcing challenges for many regional Queensland galleries. The initiative places considerable pressure on regional organisations to maintain the infrastructure (including ongoing display and environmental conditions) and staffing required to support long-term loans from major national institutions.

More broadly, the predominantly one-directional structure of the initiative reinforces an implicit assumption that cultural value, important stories and authoritative collections primarily reside within metropolitan centres. This assumption risks perpetuating centre-periphery models of cultural value that position regional communities primarily as recipients rather than originators of contemporary cultural production.

Regional galleries, artists and communities are not simply access points for national culture; they are active producers of contemporary Australian cultural life. Regional Australia also has an important role to play within Australia's broader international cultural relationships. North Queensland's geographic position and cultural connections place organisations such as Umbrella in a unique position to support reciprocal exchange, creative collaboration and long-term relationship building across the Indo-Pacific region, for instance. Sustained investment in artist exchange, residencies, touring, research partnerships and long-term relationship development across the Indo-Pacific would strengthen Australia's cultural presence internationally while creating new opportunities for regional artists, communities and organisations. Contemporary cultural policy should better support regionally led international engagement, recognising that meaningful cultural diplomacy and exchange do not occur solely through metropolitan institutions.

Future touring and collection-sharing frameworks should also move toward more reciprocal and networked models that support regional authorship, two-way exchange and greater national visibility for regionally produced contemporary practice.

Umbrella recommends:

- increased investment in regionally led contemporary arts organisations
- recognition of artist-led, socially engaged and interdisciplinary practice
- support for place-based festivals, temporary activations and public realm practice
- more equitable distribution of cultural investment across metropolitan, regional and remote Australia
- touring and exchange frameworks and funding systems that support two-way cultural flows between regional and metropolitan contexts
- increased support for regionally led Indo-Pacific cultural exchange, residencies and long-term international relationship building

Without sustained investment, Australian cultural life risks becoming increasingly centralised and homogenised, limiting the diversity and richness of perspectives represented nationally and internationally.

Pillar 3 — Centrality of the Artist

*Umbrella acknowledges the growing precarity affecting artists and arts workers across the visual arts sector, and **supports stronger recognition of artists as workers and greater support for arts workers.***

Artists are increasingly navigating insecure income, rising costs, fragmented career pathways and growing expectations around unpaid labour, community engagement and administration. These pressures are particularly acute in regional communities where access to infrastructure, networks and professional opportunities is often more limited.

These challenges are compounded by the erosion of regional arts education and training pathways. Umbrella has witnessed firsthand the impacts of declining creative arts infrastructure in North Queensland and Far North Queensland, including the closure of James Cook University (JCU)'s Creative Arts programs — previously one of the only tertiary creative arts pathways available in the region. For decades, JCU graduates contributed significantly to the local cultural and creative ecology as artists, educators, curators, arts workers and community leaders. Many have gone on to shape the region's galleries, studios, festivals, artist-run initiatives and cultural organisations. Umbrella's own organisational capacity and artistic program have been strengthened by generations of locally trained practitioners who have chosen to remain and build practices within the region.

For Australia's cultural sector to thrive and be sustainable, it depends on a continuous pipeline of trained and experienced artists, educators, curators, producers, technicians and arts workers. The decline of regional creative arts education has significant long-term implications for workforce sustainability and cultural equity. Once artists and arts workers leave regional communities to access education and professional pathways elsewhere, they are less likely to return. At the same time, regional organisations are increasingly struggling to recruit locally trained arts workers, producers, technicians and emerging practitioners despite growing demand for cultural programming and creative industries activity.

This represents more than an education issue. It is a structural threat to regional cultural sustainability and to the long-term viability of contemporary arts practice outside metropolitan centres. Regional arts organisations increasingly find themselves compensating for the decline of educational and cultural infrastructure by providing mentoring, internships, workforce development, professional pathways and artist support without the resourcing normally associated with tertiary or training institutions.

The increasing cost of Creative Arts, humanities and related tertiary degrees is also creating significant barriers to participation and workforce sustainability. Policy settings such as the Job-ready Graduates program have contributed to escalating course costs, which have disproportionately affected students from regional, low socio-economic and diverse backgrounds, while sending damaging signals about the perceived value of arts and humanities education within Australian society.

This has implications far beyond workforce supply alone. Arts and humanities education develops critical thinking, contextual understanding, communication, cultural literacy and creative problem-solving capabilities that are essential not only to artistic practice, but to civic participation, democratic discourse and Australia's broader creative economy. The erosion of affordable access to arts and humanities education also risks narrowing the diversity of voices, experiences and perspectives able to participate in cultural life and creative leadership.

Umbrella believes the Office for the Arts and the Federal Department of Education should work collaboratively to address the ongoing decline of regional and accessible arts education pathways through coordinated policy reform and sustained investment in tertiary institutions. Supporting artists therefore requires more than project funding alone. It requires sustained investment in the broader cultural and educational ecosystems that enable artists, arts workers and creative communities to emerge, remain and thrive within regional Australia.

Umbrella also notes growing concerns regarding artificial intelligence, copyright protection and the unauthorised use of artists' work within generative AI systems. Contemporary cultural policy must strengthen protections for artists' intellectual property, moral rights and cultural authorship within rapidly evolving digital environments. Contemporary cultural policy should support pluralism rather than cultural conformity, recognising that the role of the arts is not simply to produce cohesion, but to create space for complexity, contestation, multiple perspectives and democratic cultural dialogue.

Umbrella recommends:

- stronger compliance with fair pay and industry standards, including the NAVA Code of Practice and an Award for Visual Arts workers
- increased operational investment in organisations to enable sustainable artist remuneration
- support for experimental, politically engaged and risk-taking contemporary practice
- stronger protections for artistic freedom and freedom of expression
- targeted support for regional artist development and commissioning
- expanded residency, internship and mentorship pathways
- stronger protections for artists' intellectual property and copyright within AI and digital environments

Umbrella is also concerned about self-censorship and institutional risk aversion within the arts sector. Contemporary arts organisations need support to be able to present ambitious and challenging work without disproportionate fear of controversy or political pressure.

Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure

*Umbrella's own organisational history reflects the precarity facing many regional arts organisations. Over four decades, the organisation has repeatedly leased, fitted out and relocated premises due to circumstances beyond its control, resulting in cycles of lost capital investment and instability. As identified within Umbrella's Strategic Plan, **a permanent, purpose-built home, alongside ongoing human infrastructure, is necessary to provide long-term security, sustainability and future growth.***

This reflects a broader national issue. Australia's cultural infrastructure challenge is not simply about buildings, nor solely about programming — it is about sustaining the ecosystems that enable artistic practice, workforce development, participation and public cultural life. In the lead up to the Brisbane 2032 Olympic Games, there is a significant opportunity for governments to invest in two interconnected forms of cultural infrastructure:

- physical infrastructure, including galleries, studios, storage, digital systems and purpose-built contemporary arts facilities with environmental controls
- human and organisational infrastructure, including artists, curators, producers, educators, technicians, operational staff, peak bodies and the long-term organisational capacity required to sustain cultural activity

Without investment in both, infrastructure risks becoming either underutilised buildings without sustainable programming capacity, or overstretched organisations delivering nationally significant outcomes without adequate facilities, staffing or security.

For 40 years, Umbrella has operated as independent cultural infrastructure embedded within community life in North Queensland, commissioning new work, supporting artists and arts workers, presenting exhibitions and festivals, fostering public dialogue and creating professional pathways. Many Regional arts organisations function as backbone cultural infrastructure within their communities, frequently operating simultaneously as presenters, producers, educators, employers, advocates and community connectors while managing increasing freight, travel, staffing, insurance and climate-related costs.

(North) Queensland's regional galleries and visual arts organisations face disproportionately high infrastructure and maintenance costs due to cyclones, flooding, humidity and extreme weather events. Environmental controls, collection care, disaster preparedness and climate resilience are essential operational requirements, not optional enhancements.

Regional cultural infrastructure should not be considered secondary to metropolitan infrastructure. North Queensland produces nationally and internationally significant contemporary visual artists and cultural activity. Umbrella's strategic direction explicitly positions regional practice within national and global dialogue while "destabilising traditional notions of centre and periphery."

Recent years have demonstrated the significant cultural, social and economic value generated by regional arts investment. Umbrella's PUNQ Festival reached more than 1 million people in 2024 and delivered an estimated \$4.9M in economic impact for Queensland while commissioning major new works and activating regional public space. Umbrella's nationally touring exhibition *Legacy: Reflections on Mabo* reached more than 52,000 visitors across ten Australian venues, demonstrating the national significance of regionally produced contemporary practice.

At the same time, the sector is experiencing growing workforce exhaustion and structural instability. Regional organisations increasingly struggle to retain experienced cultural workers and leaders due to insecure project and operational funding, workforce burnout and salaries that cannot compete with other sectors.

The increasing reliance on short-term project funding also places substantial administrative pressure on already under-resourced organisations. Repeated application, reporting and acquittal processes divert limited capacity away from artistic, community and strategic work.

Umbrella also supports renewed investment in peak bodies and intermediary service organisations that provide advocacy, workforce development, training, policy expertise and sector coordination. Umbrella believes that the erosion of these structures has weakened sector connectivity, workforce support and national cultural leadership.

Strong cultural infrastructure also depends on sustainable educational pathways. The closure of tertiary visual arts education in North Queensland has weakened the region's creative workforce pipeline, placing additional pressure on arts organisations to provide mentoring, professional development and vocational pathways traditionally supported through universities and training institutions.

Umbrella recommends:

- predictable, increased multi-year operational funding for regional arts organisations, supporting long-term organisational sustainability over short-term project cycles
- increased investment in permanent regional visual arts and cultural facilities
- recognition of regional galleries and arts organisations as essential civic infrastructure

- climate adaptation and disaster resilience funding for arts organisations and collections
- stronger support for workforce development and retention across the arts sector in regional Australia
- investment in purpose-built contemporary arts infrastructure in regional centres
- reinvestment in visual arts peak bodies and intermediary service organisations
- greater recognition of freight, travel and logistics as structural regional delivery costs
- stronger alignment between cultural policy, education policy and regional development strategies

A resilient national cultural sector cannot exist without resilient regional cultural infrastructure. Sustained investment in regional organisations is essential to Australia's long-term cultural diversity, workforce sustainability and civic life.

Pillar 5 — Engaging the Audience

*Audience engagement is changing rapidly across Australia, particularly within younger, regional and digitally connected communities. **Participation increasingly occurs through festivals, public space, socially engaged practice, digital platforms, interdisciplinary projects and community-led activity rather than solely through traditional institutional models.***

For regional communities, access remains one of the greatest cultural equity challenges. Audiences outside metropolitan centres should not experience reduced access to ambitious contemporary cultural and visual arts practice, or national or international cultural exchange, because of geography. Public galleries and contemporary arts organisations play a critical role in addressing this inequity. They are among the most accessible cultural institutions in Australia, providing free entry, public programming, education, outreach and intergenerational participation opportunities.

In Queensland alone, public museums and galleries engage more than six million visitors annually through exhibitions, education and public programs. More than 400 public museums and galleries are embedded within Queensland communities, with 81.5% located outside Greater Brisbane. These organisations often function not simply as exhibition venues, but also as civic gathering spaces, learning environments and first-access points to culture for young people and emerging audiences. Regional audiences are not secondary audiences. They are active participants in Australia's contemporary cultural life and should have equitable access to nationally and internationally significant cultural experiences.

Umbrella believes cultural participation should not be measured solely through attendance metrics, but through the extent to which arts and culture foster social connection, cultural

visibility, belonging, intergenerational exchange, creative participation and opportunities for communities to see themselves reflected within cultural life. Children and young people should also be recognised not only as future audiences, but as active cultural participants and collaborators in the present.

Touring remains one of the most important mechanisms for ensuring equitable cultural participation across Australia. However, regional touring is increasingly constrained by escalating freight, transport, insurance and logistics costs while funding levels have remained comparatively static.

Touring programs are essential not only for audience access, but for ensuring artists and regional organisations can participate fully within national cultural conversations. Umbrella supports increased investment in touring programs including Visions of Australia, through:

- increased overall program funding
- expansion to three funding rounds annually
- contingency funding eligibility for fuel, freight and climate-related impacts, and
- stronger support for regional logistics and transport costs

Regional organisations are also increasingly contributing to Australia's international cultural engagement. North Queensland's geographic position and cultural relationships place organisations such as Umbrella in a strong position to support Indo-Pacific exchange, reciprocal partnerships and regionally led international engagement.

The runway to Brisbane 2032 presents a significant opportunity to strengthen long-term regional cultural infrastructure, audience development and international cultural engagement across Queensland, ensuring the benefits of cultural investment extend beyond metropolitan centres.

Umbrella also notes that the absence of purpose-built contemporary visual arts infrastructure in Gurambilbarra / Townsville limits the sector's ability to attract touring exhibitions, support ambitious contemporary practice and fully realise audience development opportunities within the region.

Umbrella recommends:

- increased investment in regional touring and audience access initiatives
- increased funding for Visions of Australia and expansion to three annual rounds
- investment in digitisation, interpretation and outreach
- support for participatory and community-led cultural models
- stronger support for youth cultural participation
- investment in purpose-built regional contemporary arts infrastructure
- pathways supporting regional audiences to engage with national and international contemporary practice
- support for regionally led Indo-Pacific cultural exchange and audience development

Support for a Sixth Pillar — Arts Learning, Participation and Pathways

*Umbrella strongly supports the proposal advanced by the National Advocates for Arts Education to **establish a sixth pillar within the National Cultural Policy: Arts Learning, Participation and Pathways.***

Arts education is foundational cultural infrastructure. It is the system through which participation begins, creative capability is developed and pathways into lifelong cultural engagement and creative careers are established. Regional communities are currently experiencing the impacts of declining arts education provision, reduced tertiary pathways and increasing concentration of creative opportunity within metropolitan centres. These pressures have significant long-term implications for regional workforce sustainability, artist development and cultural participation.

Umbrella increasingly finds itself undertaking educational and workforce development functions traditionally supported by schools and universities (including mentoring, internships, artist development, public learning and professional pathways) which diverts time and money from its other necessary strategic and operational work.

Umbrella also supports Museums & Galleries Queensland becoming a registered training organisation to help address the current skills crisis across the gallery and visual arts sector. This would strengthen vocational pathways, professional development and regional workforce capacity, particularly in areas such as collection management, exhibition installation, public programming, gallery administration, conservation support and First Nations cultural practice.

Umbrella recommends:

- establishment of Arts Learning, Participation and Pathways as a sixth pillar of the National Cultural Policy
- a National Inquiry into accessible Arts Education and Training
- a nationally coordinated Arts Education Strategy
- stronger partnerships between the arts and education sectors
- investment in regional visual arts education and tertiary pathways
- nationally coordinated artist-in-schools and artist-in-community programs
- support for cultural institutions delivering education and outreach programs
- recognition of arts education as essential civic, cultural and workforce infrastructure
- support for Museums & Galleries Queensland to become a registered training organisation to strengthen vocational pathways and sector workforce development

Supporting arts learning is not separate from cultural policy — it is foundational to the sustainability, diversity and equity of Australia's cultural future. Without arts education there are no future artists, no culturally engaged audiences and no sustainable cultural ecosystem.