

Hello,

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government's next National Cultural Policy as a disabled practising visual artist, arts worker and educator. I understand the sacrifices unsupported creative work demands and which this policy has the opportunity to address. Based on unceded Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung Country in Naarm/Melbourne, I acknowledge that this continent has been a place of creativity, teaching, learning and sharing since time began. To honour this legacy into the future will require meaningful investment and recognition; the arts depend not only on audiences and institutions but on the labour and wellbeing of artists themselves.

While the five pillars of *Revive* remain important, especially 'First Nations First', which, led by First Peoples, should foreground all decision-making, the next National Cultural Policy must go further in addressing financial barriers to creative work. Specifically, the 'Centrality of the Artist' pillar needs to shift away from symbolic rhetoric and become intrinsically embedded into economic policy. At a minimum, artists need secure income, fair pay and superannuation. [The Visual Arts Work report](#) found that the average income from a visual art or craft practice in 2023-24 was \$13,937 (well below the poverty line); that 82% of artists supplement their income through other work; and that arts workers earned an average of \$63,031 compared with \$100,017 earned by the general workforce. This reflects my own experiences. Although I'm highly qualified, completing a Master of Arts Management in 2023, I work long hours, sometimes seven days per week, for which I'm often underpaid or not at all. Last financial year, **I earned \$4,407.60 from my creative practice. During the same period, I worked six additional jobs, including casual or insecure contracts, and barely earned \$42,070.60.**

Also, I lost two of my main forms of income at the end of 2025. Due to suffering from severe burnout; caused directly by unrelenting work pressures in the arts sector (more specifically, within micro-to-small arts organisations with shoestring budgets and resources), my unscheduled stress-leave directly lead to 'being asked to consider leaving my position' in one workplace (after three years of employment), and a contract not being renewed in the other (after two years of employment). Without intending, my stress-leave became a fragmented period of attempts to quieten my mind and heal my body all whilst fearing the financial unknowns that awaited me at the end of my leave. The lack of job security across the sector is completely unjustified. And the lack of resources to better connect arts workers to occupational health and safety support is laughable.

I make four specific calls to policymakers:

Implement a national universal basic income scheme for artists. This would ensure a regular, fair income to sustain creative practice and address income insecurity. Such a program has benefits for all, seen through Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts pilot, which was recently made permanent. [The Conversation](#) reported that for every €1 of public money invested, society received €1.39 in return. Artists participating in the program also reported better mental health, general wellbeing

and productivity because ‘they were less stressed about their finances’. Formal employment status would also enable independent artists and arts workers—not considered employees if they operate as sole traders—to organise.

Connect public funding to fair pay for artists. Increase public funding so ALL organisations are required and resourced to meet [NAVA's Payment Standards](#). However, this also requires **a renewed national cultural funding policy** that **maintains and expands existing arts infrastructure** alongside a significant increase in multi-year operational, administrative and capacity-building support for S2M organisations.

This would also need to include micro-organisations who are directly support local community municipalities at a grassroots level.

Self-determined, community-led and community-engaged practices should be prioritised. This is ongoing work that directly boosts social cohesion, civic engagement, and the local economy. If we prioritise these practices, then it ensures Australia's arts and cultural organisations are safe for, led by and showcase the authentic, lived experiences of the artists and communities they serve (especially those from under-represented groups). Most inclusion and diversity initiatives tend to focus on audiences, but our sector's overall monoculture will persist until we improve access and representation at all points of engagement; from audiences and participants, to artists and cultural workers, leaders, board-members and policy makers (and everyone in between).

Also, we need to **protect what artists produce**, which is why **copyright, intellectual property and speech suppression laws are inseparable from cultural policy**. This includes: re-establishing a commitment to expert, independent and arms-length decision making free from government or third-party interference; revisiting the AI legislation, guardrails and policy assurances that vanished from last year's Productivity Commission report; rescinding or reimagining new speech suppression laws; and recognising and reversing artistic censorship (and creating new resources to help avoid and/or mitigate censorship in the future).

I am happy to discuss any aspect of this submission further.

Best Wishes,
Madeleine Sherburn