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National Cultural Policy submission - Head On Foundation (NSW)

## The case for investment in Australia's photo art sector

Australia's photo art sector is a vibrant and deeply felt part of our cultural life, yet it remains too often overlooked and underfunded. Photography helps us make sense of history, identity, community and place. It captures the everyday and the extraordinary through one of the most affordable and accessible art forms for audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

Head On Foundation supports a National Cultural Policy that recognises photographic organisations as essential cultural infrastructure. As one of Australia's few organisations dedicated to photography, Head On has spent nearly two decades creating public value through exhibitions, education, artist development and broad community access.

This submission calls for stronger policy recognition, dedicated investment, and long-term support for the photo art sector so it can continue to grow, connect communities, and support Australian artists.

## Why the photo art sector matters

Photography sits at the centre of modern life, yet photo art is still too often absent from arts policy conversations.

It is both democratic and contemporary. It reaches people in galleries, public spaces, schools, regional communities and online. It brings art into daily life, and it makes cultural participation possible for people who may never otherwise encounter it.

### The sector deserves stronger support because it delivers:

- **cultural storytelling**, reflecting diverse identities, histories and lived experiences
- **public access**, through free or low-cost exhibitions and digital platforms
- **artist development**, with pathways for emerging, mid-career and established practitioners
- **visual literacy**, helping people read images critically in an image-saturated world, to bolster healthy democratic processes
- **community connection**, creating shared experiences across age, background and geography
- **international reach**, showcasing Australian voices to global audiences

## Head On Foundation's contribution

Established in 2007, Head On is Australia's only annual photo festival and one of the country's few organisations dedicated to photo art.

### Key achievements include:

- delivering **16 consecutive annual festivals** and other events throughout the year
- programming around **700 artists annually**
- presenting around **40 Head On-produced exhibitions** and **40 artist-produced exhibitions** across multiple states each year
- reaching large audiences through **free public, indoor and online exhibitions**
- engaging **over half a million viewers annually**
- supporting **First Nations artists and culturally diverse practitioners**
- delivering **workshops, webinars, artist talks and regional outreach**

These activities open doors for audiences, strengthen artists' careers and add real momentum to the wider creative ecosystem.

## Alignment with the government's policy priorities

The photo art sector aligns strongly with the five pillars of the current cultural policy framework:

### First Nations First

Photography offers a powerful platform for First Nations artists to share stories on their own terms. Policy should support self-determined practice, cultural authority and respectful collaboration.

### A Place for Every Story

Photo art reflects the breadth of Australian life. It can give voice to local, regional, multicultural and emerging communities in direct, accessible and compelling ways.

### Centrality of the Artist

Photo artists need fair pay, professional pathways, exhibition opportunities and development support. Policy settings should strengthen the artist's place in the sector and the broader economy.

### Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The sector depends on stable organisations, exhibition spaces, archives, digital platforms, education programs and national coordination. Without this infrastructure, access and continuity are lost.

### Engaging the Audience

Photography is one of the most accessible art forms for audiences of all ages. It reaches people in public spaces, online and through learning programs, making it highly effective for participation and audience growth.

## Recommendations

The sector faces persistent underinvestment despite strong public demand and clear cultural value.

**A stronger policy response should:**

- **support the sustainability of photographic organisations**
- **expand access to exhibitions and education**
- **strengthen regional and national participation**
- **improve pathways for emerging artists and arts workers**
- **increase recognition of photo art across the cultural sector**

## Conclusion

The photo art sector deserves explicit recognition in Australia's arts policy. It is inclusive, relevant and deeply connected to public life. Head On Foundation's experience shows that photography delivers measurable benefits for artists, audiences and communities.

With stronger policy settings and long-term public support, photography will continue to inform, connect and inspire Australians now and into the future.

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