

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Individual

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I arrived in Australia as a migrant child in the 1980s, in Ceduna, a small country town in regional South Australia. A community arts officer saw something in me. She got me an audition. I got in. That one act of investment, at grassroots level, in a child who didn't fit the expected profile of an artist, is the reason I am here today, thirty years into a practice that has touched thousands of lives.

I am writing this submission because that kind of investment is disappearing. And the consequences are real for every story that goes untold.

I work with migrant domestic workers, international students, disability inclusive theatre communities, and culturally diverse ensembles, communities whose stories are underrepresented in Australian cultural life. My practice is grounded in embodied cultural safety, the understanding that before anyone can tell their story, they need to feel safe in their body, in the language they are using, and in the room they are standing in. The Tinikling Devising Methodology, developed through a 2023 Vitalstatistix Adhocracy residency, uses body-first devising to let memory arrive without force. It centres lived experience as the source of story.

A Place for Every Story cannot be achieved without First Nations cultural authority at the centre, and without genuine resourcing of diaspora, multicultural, and disability arts communities asked to represent diversity without being resourced to do so.

For most of my adult life I have worked other jobs to fund this work. For four years I stood on the floor of a department store. I am not saying this for sympathy. I am saying it because it is the reality of independent community arts practice in this country, and almost nobody says it in the places where it needs to be heard. Fair remuneration for artists is not a nice idea. It is a cultural infrastructure question. If the people doing this work cannot sustain it, the stories stop.

The average Australian artist earns just \$23,200 from their creative work annually, half the minimum wage. 60% donate their time for free. And to be taken seriously in this sector, practitioners must see shows and maintain networks. A single ticket can cost eighty dollars. Access to professional development has a price of entry the sector never acknowledges.

Community arts and cultural development is where stories begin before they are ready for mainstage. It is the foundation of strong cultural infrastructure. It is the least resourced part of the whole.

The new National Cultural Policy needs to fund the development period, not just the product. Recognise community arts facilitation as skilled artistic labour with fair remuneration. And look seriously at a basic income for artists. Ireland trialled it. Germany has sustained it for decades. Australia has done it before. Artists need that same logic applied to them.

The community arts officer who lifted me in Ceduna in the 1980s was funded to do that work. That funding existed because a government decided every story mattered, wherever it came from.

It still does. More than ever.

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