

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation

I am a mid-career artist with over twenty years of practice, working across multidisciplinary forms alongside ongoing roles in arts education and sector advocacy. I have taught in both secondary and tertiary contexts and currently work at a national peak body for the visual arts.

I was born in Australia and am of migrant heritage, and my practice operates across both local and international contexts. This submission is made in a personal capacity, drawing on lived experience of sustaining an artistic practice alongside employment, as well as broader observations of structural conditions affecting access, visibility, and continuity within the sector.

Who is explicitly recognised within policy frameworks shapes who is measured, funded, and supported within the sector.

My observations are grounded in experience within New South Wales funding and exhibition contexts, but reflect broader structural conditions that are visible across the Australian arts sector.

Anti-racism, cultural equity and freedom of expression

Anti-racism must be understood as a structural issue within the arts, shaping who is supported, represented, and able to participate.

Artists from culturally and racially diverse backgrounds continue to face barriers in access to funding, institutional networks, and decision-making structures. These inequities are not only matters of representation, but are embedded in how value, risk, and viability are defined within funding and selection processes.

The language and frameworks used to define discrimination and risk within the sector have material consequences. They influence how projects are assessed, how controversy is managed, and which artists are supported or excluded. There is a need for greater consistency and transparency in how these definitions are applied across publicly funded institutions.

Cultural policy should be grounded in principles that affirm that all people are equal in dignity and rights, and that discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, or cultural background has no place in publicly funded cultural institutions.

At the same time, freedom of artistic expression must be protected as a core condition of cultural practice. Artists must be able to engage critically with political, social, and cultural issues without fear of censorship, institutional pressure, or reputational harm.

Publicly funded arts and cultural institutions have a responsibility to uphold principles of equity, non-discrimination, and freedom of expression, ensuring that diverse voices are supported rather than marginalised.

Structural barriers in funding timelines and access

A key challenge within the current cultural funding landscape is the increasing concentration of funding opportunities into limited and infrequent application rounds.

Funding programs are often offered in a single annual round, with future rounds not always clearly scheduled. This creates extended gaps between opportunities and restricts access to those who have the time and administrative capacity to prepare applications at specific moments.

In practice, artists who are actively engaged in paid work, major commissions, or caregiving responsibilities may miss a single application window and subsequently face a prolonged period without access to funding. This represents a form of structural exclusion that is not based on artistic merit, but on unequal access to time and resources.

The reduction or removal of small and quick response funding further exacerbates this issue, limiting artists' ability to respond to time-sensitive opportunities or sustain continuity between major project cycles. Over time, this contributes to disruptions in visibility, professional relationships, and the ongoing development of artistic practice.

Structural barriers in exhibition access and production conditions

A related issue exists in the conditions surrounding exhibition opportunities.

There is a strong demand for exhibition opportunities, with very high numbers of applicants for open calls. These opportunities are often framed as accessible due to free application processes and open entry.

However, the conditions of participation frequently require artists to self-fund significant production costs. Exhibition fees are often not sufficient to support the development of a new body of work, particularly for artists exhibiting outside their local area.

This creates a situation in which access is technically open, but in practice limited to artists with independent financial means. Participation therefore becomes shaped by class, rather than being purely merit-based or genuinely open.

These structural conditions intersect with race and migration background, where artists from culturally diverse and migrant communities may have less access to institutional networks, funding pathways, and informal systems of support.

The funding and presentation loop

This issue is compounded by a structural contradiction between funding and presentation pathways.

Funding bodies do not always explicitly require confirmed presentation outcomes. However, in practice, proposals that demonstrate existing partnerships or financial viability are often more competitive.

Similarly, exhibition providers may not formally require artists to self-fund work, but viability is frequently assessed on this basis. For example, in a recent council-run gallery information session for an open call exhibition, it was stated that projects requiring additional funding would not be considered viable, despite the institution offering an artist fee that does not meet the cost of producing new work.

This creates a structural loop:

- artists require funding to produce ambitious or experimental work
- funding applications benefit from demonstrating existing partnerships or viability
- venues prioritise proposals that are already financially viable

As a result, artists without institutional backing or access to financial resources are excluded from both pathways. This disproportionately affects artists from working-class backgrounds and those who are not embedded within established networks.

This is not an individual shortcoming, but a systemic condition that cannot be resolved by artists alone. It raises broader questions about the relationship between funding models, exhibition structures, and access to production resources.

It also raises questions about how “viability” and “excellence” are defined within funding and selection processes, and whether these definitions unintentionally privilege artists with existing institutional access.

Experimental practice and access

These structural conditions particularly impact experimental and independent artistic practices.

Artists working outside established institutional frameworks often face additional barriers in demonstrating “viability” within application processes. When viability is measured through existing partnerships or financial stability, experimental work is implicitly deprioritised.

This limits the diversity of artistic practices that are supported and reduces the capacity of the sector to take risks, innovate, or reflect a broader range of cultural voices.

Class and economic precarity in the arts

Underlying many of these issues is the absence of a clear policy framework addressing class and economic precarity within the arts.

Artists are increasingly required to sustain their practice alongside multiple forms of employment in order to meet basic living costs, particularly housing. This significantly reduces the time and capacity available for artistic development and participation in funding processes.

Without structural intervention, long-term participation in the arts becomes limited to those with independent financial support, contributing to ongoing inequity in who is able to sustain a career in the sector.

International models offer alternative approaches. For example, France recognises intermittent artistic labour through income support systems, and Germany’s Künstlersozialkasse provides access to social security, including health insurance and pensions for artists. These models acknowledge that artistic work is cyclical and do not assume continuous income stability.

International context and Australia’s cultural positioning

Australia currently struggles to present itself internationally as a country that provides coherent, structural support for its artists.

This becomes particularly visible in international residencies, festivals, and exchanges, where Australian artists work alongside peers from countries with more sustained public investment in artistic practice.

Through my own experience working internationally, including participation in a residency supported by national funding, I observed that artists from other countries were often better resourced within the same institutional context. In many cases, they received more comprehensive support, including living allowances and longer-term investment, while Australian artists were expected to subsidise portions of their own participation.

In international contexts, it is standard for artist funding to recognise the full cost of participation, including living expenses such as rent. During my time in Berlin, I worked alongside a significant number of Canadian artists who were supported through multi-year funding programs that included living allowances as a core component of their budgets. This enabled them to participate fully in residencies and international opportunities without subsidising their own costs.

By comparison, Australian funding rarely treats living costs as legitimate or expected components of project budgets. There is no consistent expectation that artists' ongoing expenses, including rent, are supported, and even basic labour conditions such as superannuation are not uniformly applied across the sector.

This reflects a broader structural issue: artistic labour is supported through short-term project funding, rather than being recognised as ongoing work that requires stable living conditions.

As a result, Australian artists are often positioned at the lower end of international funding structures. While opportunities are highly valued, they can restrict participation to those with the financial capacity to absorb additional costs.

Australian artists are also informal ambassadors, hosting international peers, curators, and delegates within their studios and networks. The level of support available to artists directly shapes how the country is perceived within global cultural contexts.

Recommendations

In response to these challenges, the National Cultural Policy should:

- Increase the frequency and accessibility of funding opportunities, including the reintroduction and expansion of quick response funding
- Review funding and assessment frameworks that privilege pre-existing partnerships and financial viability
- Strengthen and enforce minimum exhibition fee frameworks, including mandatory minimum fees for publicly funded institutions that reflect the actual cost of producing new work, to prevent cost-shifting onto artists
- Introduce dedicated funding streams for mid-career artists working independently or in experimental practices, including support for research, development, and work without predetermined outcomes or institutional partnerships. These programs should address gaps for artists who are no longer emerging, but who are not attached to organisations or established networks. This is essential to prevent artists from stalling or exiting the sector due to a lack of viable pathways for renewal
- Introduce structural supports that better align with the intermittent nature of artistic labour, including income support models that recognise fluctuating income, improved access to social security systems, and targeted housing affordability measures for artists
- Improve support for international engagement, including ensuring funding covers the full cost of participation rather than requiring artists to self-subsidise
- Review and standardise definitions and frameworks related to racism and discrimination across publicly funded arts institutions, ensuring alignment with internationally recognised human rights principles that uphold equality and non-discrimination