

ANONYMOUS

As a practising artist, I approach the development of the next National Cultural Policy with deep scepticism. While the stated goals of centring artists and representing Australia's diversity sound admirable, the reality of arts funding and advocacy in this country tells a different story.

We are witnessing a troubling trend where artists are increasingly treated not as cultural leaders or creators of intrinsic value, but as service providers. Our work is instrumentalised as a tool for "social cohesion", community engagement, or keeping "youth off the streets". This utilitarian view, echoed in recent statements by Creative Australia's CEO, Adrian Collette, reduces art to a mechanism for managing social problems rather than a space for critical thought, beauty, and challenging discourse. When "value" is defined solely by measurable economic or social outcomes, we ignore the intrinsic, often unquantifiable value of art.

Compounding this is a rigid understanding of what constitutes an "outcome". Funding bodies demand tangible, physical products - something to hang, stage, or touch. This ignores that the most significant outcomes of artistic practice are often intangible: the development of a complex idea, the emergence of a new concept, the fostering of genuine discussion. An artist may spend a grant period exploring, failing, and discovering something they had never imagined - that intellectual and imaginative advancement is the outcome. If we refuse to trust artists to know when their work has been worthwhile, we are not funding art; we are commissioning predetermined deliverables. This approach stifles risk, punishes experimentation, and ensures that only safe, legible projects receive support.

This instrumentalism is compounded by a pervasive lack of institutional courage. As Cem A. articulates in *Consensus Aesthetics*, we are trapped in a climate of risk-aversion where funding bodies and institutions reward work that is agreeable, legible, and avoids genuine conflict. The drive for "measurable outcomes" and supposed "social cohesion" actively discourages risk-taking, complexity, and criticality. We are left with two narrow, safe categories of work: the unchallenging, pleasant community project, or overly academic, "ivory tower" art that speaks only to itself and fails to connect with lived experience. Neither represents the vibrant, critical, and challenging culture we should foster.

My scepticism is further deepened by the broader political context. The recent disinvitation and reinvasion of artists for the Venice Biennale, the collapse of the Adelaide Writers' Festival over the silencing of a Palestinian voice, and a general political climate hostile to anything resembling dissent - especially on matters of international law and human rights - signal a dangerous narrowing of permissible discourse. When the government and its agencies conflate critical art and discourse with a threat to "social cohesion", they are not simply administering grants; they are policing speech. Considering the events mentioned above, I fear that the new National Cultural Policy will become a vehicle for this very censorship, mirroring a troubling global trend that prioritises a manufactured, fragile consensus over a healthy, robust democracy.

To avoid this, the new policy must fundamentally shift its approach. It must move beyond the rhetoric of "centring the artist" and instead build structures that:
- embrace risk

Fund projects that are difficult, confrontational, and don't just deliver pre-determined, "safe" outcomes. An arts policy that can't tolerate failure and disagreement is an arts policy that has given up on art.

- expand the definition of outcomes

Recognise that a successful outcome can be a thought, a concept, a process of discovery, or a new conversation, not just a tangible object. Fund the intellectual labour of artists without demanding a physical "end product".

- don't instrumentalise arts

Free artists from the obligation to act as social workers or agents of government messaging, and instead fund the intrinsic value of artistic practice.

- protect dissent

Commit to protecting artistic freedom as a cornerstone of democracy, ensuring that funding decisions are never based on a work's perceived political alignment or its potential to disrupt a politically convenient "cohesion".

If the new policy simply repackages the current system of risk-averse, instrumentalised funding within a framework of absurdly defined, state-managed "social cohesion", it will not serve Australian culture. It will merely formalise its decline.