

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public Submission

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*For a national cultural policy that supports artists as essential workers
Submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation 2022*

about me

I am an established, award-winning artist, curator, writer, dramaturg and producer often performing these roles simultaneously and retrospectively in highly collaborative artistic fields, operating at the intersection of performing, visual and media arts. In these roles, I have worked extensively in Australia, Asia and Europe. My work has been presented at major international festivals including Vienna Festwochen and Seoul Performing Arts Festival and Australia's major festivals. I'm known for making art at the edge of practice for which I have received numerous grants and fellowships from local, state, federal and international arts agencies. I have also brokered, initiated and held leadership roles representing the Australian arts scene in Asia and Europe. I have been, and continue to be, a public advocate for artist's rights and the role of artists and the arts in all social configurations. I have written extensively on these matters, notably the Platform Papers' Revaluing the Artist in the New World Order. I live, work and dream on the land of the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin nation.

Regarding the Centrality of the Artist

It's taken me weeks to write this. I put it down to the attrition of consultation fatigue. In my reckoning, there are more opportunities to contribute to consultation processes established by local, state and federal governments and to cultural institutions, advocacy groups and industry associations than there are grants for artists to make their work. These consultations are run by people paid for their work consulting with artists barely getting paid for their work, or their contributions to consultation. Artists ask government and industry representatives to dissolve this inequity, but nothing changes because this inequity is embedded in every transaction within the governance of the Australian arts. It's a systemic problem that is at the heart of my submission.

Attrition

Over the last ten years I've spent significant time trying to persuade artists whom I've mentored to stay in the arts. In most cases I've failed. Artists with 20 years of high-level experience have walked out of the arts taking with them knowledge that can never be recovered and artworks that will never be made.

The majority of Australian artists live on or under the Henderson poverty line. This means they cannot feed their families; they cannot see a future for themselves or their work; they cannot imagine pathways to improve their lot or the role of the arts in society.

Heads of university departments in arts and culture have confided that they would not recommend a career in the arts to their students, heart-breaking given my oldest is studying arts and humanities, heading for a significant life-debt to do so.

The arts, once considered a public good, has been marginalised by the creative industries model which twists art into an investment opportunity and not what it is, a public good. In this rubric, the only good art is art that can be turned into cultural product for consumption, for the cultural economy, visitor economy, tourism. Artists are now called creatives, desperately trying to turn artistic activity into profit-making schemes to justify 'investment'. But the arts are not sustainable under any mainstream economic theory, we all know that. So, across the funding regimes, artists working in the literary, performing and visual arts are marginalised while creatives working in the actual 'creative industries' - such as film, television, gaming, design, fashion - are prioritised. Creatives are cool. Artists are starving.

The big problem for any democratic society mesmerised by the neoliberal promise of creative industries is that culture is not possible without artists because the arts are the oxygen of cultural production. If you want to have a culture, artists are essential workers.

Arts Policy in Cultural Policy

At the heart of a nation's cultural policy is its arts policy. A clear measure of the health of an arts policy is the conditions under which the artist-population operates; this is where the crucial work of meaning-making occurs, where storytelling becomes not a singular act but multiple, shared tasks that resonate deep into the cultural sector to help make sense of society. In some ways, the artist is every nation's dramaturg, their task is to process - in the safe space of the arts - the many challenging, provocative and sometimes dangerous issues any society faces. They do that with conviction, passion and a high degree of skill and rigor. In order for this work to be done, the artist-population needs to achieve a critical mass and grow as the nation's overall population grows. In Australia, the meaning-making is not possible because the artist-population is far below critical mass. Over the last two decades, there has been a cascade of change in the arts climate, and artists have become the most endangered social species. This is not drama. It is fact. And this deficit creates a vacuum in our capacity as a people to understand who we are and why we are.

In the 2010s, the artist-population of Australia began to flatline at around 55,000 and then declined. In 2019, 48,000 people identified as artists working in the performing, visual and literary arts. Anecdotal evidence suggests a further decline of 20% during the pandemic which means around 38,000 remain, a drop of around 25% over roughly the same period that Australia's population increased by 15%. These brutal statistics of attrition are well-known and their causes well-documented. The most telling reason for this decline is the now near-absence of direct funding to artists - from 1990 to 2010 there was a decrease of 70% in direct funding on a federal scale and, in the decade since, this number has been whittled down to almost 90%. To be clear, almost no taxpayers' money directed to the arts ends up in artists' pockets.

If we agree this situation is parlous and threatens the bare minimum of artistic production needed to build culture and maintain a healthy democracy, then the clear option to underwrite a turnaround is a Basic Income for the Arts: the provision of a secure weekly wage to artists and arts workers working in the performing, visual and literary arts.

A Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) would bring Australia in line with other social democracies such as Sweden, Denmark and Norway, where the principles of a basic income are embedded in their social safety nets. A few years ago, Finland, The Netherlands and Scotland tested the waters. The Swiss put it to a referendum in 2016. Ireland comprehensively signed up a few

months ago; France and Belgium have had systems in place for decades. The City of San Francisco is one of many examples of basic income schemes for artists tested at local government level. The models are numerous; much of the work has been done for us.

Having studied these many schemes, the effect of a **Basic Income for the Arts (BIA)** is profound across measures of fairness, social and cultural justice, and impact on cultural production. They include :

- **Acknowledgement of the artist as an essential worker**
- Restoration of dignity to the work of artists and their daily life
- Iteration of the value of the arts in a democratic society
- Increased productivity driven by the elevation of artists out of long-term financial precarity to a relative position of financial independence

I have confined this submission to the amelioration of the deleterious financial conditions under which Australia's current and emerging artists and arts workers currently operate because a national cultural policy that does not recognise the principles of financial equity is a masquerade for social discrimination.

However, there are many additional, contextual recommendations that can support and facilitate this amelioration specific to the Australian context. These include :

- Change the obligations of the Australia Council for the Arts to allocate one-third of its grants budget to **direct funding** of independent artists through project grants and fellowships; in the interim, increase government funding to the agency to \$30 million a year tagged for this purpose
- Change legislation to ensure working artists are eligible for superannuation on all payments and clarify artists rights as workers in employment law
- Make public funding for arts and cultural projects contingent on fair pay
- As a condition of federal funding to universities, tag the provision of arts-and-humanities courses
- As a matter of urgency, reverse the previous government's arts-and-humanities fees' hike to encourage student uptake in the sector

Working out from this financial matrix, the following recommendations advocate for defining policy frameworks:

- First Nations leadership in arts and culture
- First Nations understanding of the importance of arts and culture
- Access to art and culture as a fundamental right
- Separate the arts from the creative industries rubric
- Establish a stand-alone Ministry for Culture
- Mainstream arts and cultural funding across government portfolios, benchmarking 1% of all government portfolios' budget to be spent on initiatives driven by the arts sector
- Centre climate action strategies in the management and delivery of artistic and cultural production