

ISLAND

▼ Ideas. Writing. Culture.

National Cultural Policy Submission

22 August 2022

Island Magazine welcomes the opportunity to submit this input regarding the development of a new national cultural policy.

Much has been written in previous submissions to the 2020 Parliamentary Inquiry into Creative and Cultural Industries ('Sculpting a National Cultural Plan') and in the current consultation process regarding **the lack of funding for Australia's literary sector (both in total and in comparison to other art forms), the poor incomes of writers, and the immense value of literature to the community and our national culture** – and we lend our strong support to the views offered in those submissions (see current submissions by Garner, Mills, Writing NSW; and 2020 submissions by Tsiolkas, Wood, Menzies-Pike and more).

In addition, we wish to draw attention to some structural challenges in the not-for-profit, non-commercial literary ecosystem that are less frequently discussed. Our feedback is based on *Island's* experience as a not-for-profit micro-organisation based in Tasmania but publishing a highly regarded national literary magazine of short fiction, nonfiction, poetry and arts features since 1979. Some of our experience, and consequent recommendations, may be relevant to many other small not-for-profits within literature as well as in other areas of the arts.

Why do small, not-for-profit literary organisations such as *Island* matter?

Like other small literary magazines, *Island* provides Australian writers of short-form fiction, nonfiction, poetry and arts features with opportunities to:

- create new works that tell diverse stories and contribute to Australian arts and culture
- experiment and take risks to extend the boundaries of creative practice through new or hybrid literary forms (without the pressure to conform to 'commercially viable' genres)
- reach national and international audiences (via print and online publishing), including gaining attention from publishers, literary agents and writers' festivals
- publish work that may otherwise be hard to place
- gain remuneration from author payments and/or prize money (which often facilitates 'more time to write')
- build portfolios, experience, credibility and confidence – all of which are of great importance to new and emerging writers
- gain career and skill development through the experience of working with professional editors and designers
- engage in innovative, collaborative cross-sector projects that connect writers with other art forms and cultural organisations (e.g. *Island* has created opportunities for writers to participate in multi-arts festivals and create new works connected with visual arts exhibitions and museums).

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As such, literary magazines form **an enabling infrastructure for a vibrant literary sector** in which:

- new talent is spotted and careers are nurtured
- new and emerging writers can ‘try out their voice’
- new ideas and forms can be tested – driving innovation
- longer works can be initiated and incubated
- funds can be leveraged from philanthropy and grants to filter through to a wide range of deserving writers and highly skilled arts workers (such as editors, designers and arts administrators) who may not apply for, or indeed be eligible for, individual grants
- readers can access diverse literature and be exposed to genres, styles and writers they might not otherwise access – a positive contribution to plurality and the richness of our society.

It is notable that *Island* receives approximately 3000 submissions annually from writers who seek to be published. We are only able to publish a small fraction of these submissions (less than 5% each year across our print and digital publishing program). This indicates the **vast demand** from Australian writers for publication opportunities.

How can we maintain vital literary infrastructure such as literary magazines as ‘strong institutions ... which sustain our arts and culture’?

As a small organisation that has been able to maintain continued activity and existence over 43 years, despite two year-long periods without any federal or state arts funding, *Island* is familiar with being described as determined, resourceful, agile and resilient; however, it is equally true that, like many literary magazines and small arts organisations, *Island’s* existence is precarious, fragile and uncertain. We have witnessed such vulnerabilities end the existence of many worthy similar organisations over recent years. Once such publications/organisations are lost, they are difficult to reinvigorate and, unfortunately, rarely re-emerge from hiatus.

Island’s current existence is dependent on a single-year state government arts grant, philanthropy, other small project grants, and earned income (including sales and advertising). *Island* has not held multi-year funding from federal or state bodies since 2016, which limits job security, impedes planning and requires significant investment of energy, time and creativity in continuous funding applications. Given the longer term impacts of COVID, current and increasing inflationary and cost-of-living pressures, and reduced discretionary retail spending, we anticipate reduced revenue from sales, subscriptions and advertising in the near term, coupled with an increasingly stretched philanthropic sector experiencing unprecedented demand. These circumstances will no doubt affect many organisations across the arts spectrum, increasing the overall funding demand and competition. Without an increase in arts funding at all levels of government, the arts sector is likely to become a ‘Hunger Games’ scenario, rather than a thriving, collaborative ecosystem.

The Australia Council’s literary funding is divided between individual grants and organisational grants. Outside the small multi-year organisational funding envelope (which supports only a few organisations across the country), project-based organisational grants are only offered twice a year, only cover a single year of project-based activity, and have a low success rate (of approximately 15%). We do not deny the vital role of individual grants for writers (to which the majority of the Australia Council’s literary funding is directed), but **we recommend a significant increase in funding for small not-for-profit literature organisations, including an increase in multi-year organisational funding opportunities to increase stability and security.**

(It is also worth noting that many temporary COVID-recovery funding opportunities, such as the very welcome RISE funding, focused primarily on compensating for lost public participation and performance opportunities. However, COVID impacts have also significantly affected organisations

that are not involved in performance-based or public-facing activities. As such, COVID-related recovery grants have not necessarily been a lifeline sector-wide.)

What we describe here through the lens of the experience of *Island* is likely to apply in some measure to other literary magazines such as *Meanjin*, *Westerly*, *Overland*, *Griffith Review*, *Voiceworks*, *Australian Book Review*, *Cordite*, *Sydney Review of Books*, *Mascara Literary Review* and more. However, many of these organisations enjoy the financial or in-kind support of a university partner in forms such as staff salaries, accommodation, publication costs and more. *Island* is not currently so fortunate. **We recommend that a national arts policy investigate opportunities to encourage broad sustainability initiatives, such as incentives for university or private sector patronage of small arts infrastructure (across art forms), including opportunities to build new capacity in the sector by providing professional industry experience for students and graduates** (see 3.69, 3.81 and 3.82 of the 2020 Parliamentary Inquiry into Creative and Cultural Industries - 'Sculpting a National Cultural Plan'). Unfortunately, despite *Island's* desire to provide opportunities to interns and volunteers to grow capacity in the sector and transfer skills and knowledge, our staffing complement is so small (approx 1 FTE) that we are only able to resource our existing program of activity. Extra support for capacity-building initiatives would be a welcome addition to the health of the future arts sector.

In addition:

- We support a **greater recognition in policy development of the value of the literary sector** (both individual writers and key literary infrastructure).
- We support a **coordinated model of funding** between state and federal governments, guided by a National Reading & Writing Framework with an increased level of baseline literature funding, as proposed by the Australia Council.
- We recommend continued investment in remuneration, job security, capacity building, professional development, and fair workplaces for artists and arts workers to create a **more sustainable sector** with less risk of burnout and loss of talent to other sectors (see 6.61, 6.64, 6.66 'Sculpting a National Cultural Plan').
- We recommend an **extension of metrics of success and impact** in the non-profit arts, recognising the intangible, non-commercial and long-term hard-to-quantify benefits of artistic practice (see 3.4 and 3.9, 'Sculpting a National Cultural Plan').
- We recommend **continued designated support for regional artists and arts organisations**, particularly in recognition of the more limited philanthropic and funding opportunities available outside of the larger metropolitan regions and states.
- We recommend **increased availability of monthly (or at least quarterly) 'quick response' arts grants**, to enable greater agility for artists and arts organisations to respond to new short-term opportunities or meet short-term needs. (Twice-yearly grants have a 6-month lag between application and activation, which is problematic when an organisation is existing in a single-year organisational funding model.)
- We recommend **increased designated support for digitisation and preservation of back-catalogue**. For example, *Island* has published work by more than 2000 Australian writers since 1979, often first works or early works that have not been anthologised or reproduced elsewhere. These treasures exist only in hard-copy archives. It would be of benefit to Australia's literary culture for this creative output to be made accessible to new audiences and preserved for posterity.