

National Cultural Policy Submission

Dr Nicole Canham

The Hon Mr Tony Burke, MP

Minister for the Arts

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Office of the Arts

Re: National Cultural Policy Consultation

Dear Mr Burke,

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process as part of the development of a new national cultural policy.

I have worked as a professional musician, festival director, educator and scholar for more than 25 years. At present, I teach at the tertiary level with a focus on developing and teaching coursework that will prepare graduates for sustainable futures in the performing arts. My contribution to this consultation process is framed by my wide-ranging experiences in the performing arts sector, and my expertise in precarious work, musicians' career development and sustainable models of career development in the arts. In my role as an educator, I feel particularly strongly that future generations of artists should have the opportunity to benefit from policy that recognises and values their contribution to our culture and to society.

The five pillars of the previous national cultural policy - **First Nations, A Place for Every Story**, the **Centrality of the Artist**, **Strong Institutions** and **Reaching the Audience** – have provided clear, aspirational targets for artists and arts organisations. However, as a vision for culture in Australia, the uneven ways in which this vision has been realised over the past decade,¹ and the [persistent inequities in the arts](#) sector, together with the recent challenges of the Covid-19 global pandemic, highlight key opportunities to enhance future policy. The continued marginalisation of artists as workers has particular implications for the realisation of pillars two (**A Place for Every Story**) and three (the **Centrality of the Artist**).

A Place for Every Story

The arts are often framed at the policy level in language that reflects the principles of economics more than art,² evident in funding structures that reflect free-market principles

¹ Bailey, Jackie, and Lance Richardson. "Meaningful measurement: a literature review and Australian and British case studies of arts organizations conducting "artistic self-assessment"." *Cultural Trends* 19, no. 4 (2010): 291-306.

² Hands, Karen. "Too big to fail: rethinking the foundations of Australia's performing arts policies." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 27, no. 4 (2021): 437-448.

and the language of investment. However, the arts can also be thought of as an ecology^{3 4}, rather than a free-market structure,⁵ which offers an opportunity to consider how the notion of **A Place for Every Story** might be expanded upon if artists were less focused on competing with each other while struggling to meet their most basic needs.⁶ The notion that cultural expression is reflective of the health of an arts *ecosystem* provides opportunities to do things differently as the new national cultural policy is formed. The hardship of artists during the pandemic highlights the limitations of [a binary view of workers](#) (full time employed or not) and ignores the reality that is shaping a growing percentage of working adult voters' lives: precarity is now a state of being, and the pandemic has stimulated a work and learning crisis.⁷ The negative impacts of precarious work patterns on musicians' health, for example, are sobering: Loveday, Gross and Musgrave⁸ recently found that careers in music were predictors of anxiety and a range of other reduced mental health and well-being outcomes. It is ironic, therefore, that though our national cultural policy might strive to highlight the best in all of us, those who dedicate their lives to making art and making art with others often do so at the cost of their own physical, mental and financial health. One way of mitigating the negative impact of artists' precarious work patterns would be to consider the values that underpin **A Place for Every Story**, and to ensure that *sustainability* is woven into the fabric of all elements of a policy that aspires to include the most diverse range of voices possible.

The Centrality of the Artist

Similarly, the concept of the **Centrality of the Artist** might be used to inform and shape other related policy areas, including but not limited to: [updating Centrelink policy](#) to recognise that arts work is often different from other forms of work (already understood and reflected, for example, in specific rulings by the ATO) and at a minimum [include the seeking of work](#), such as completing grant applications, in the new WorkForce Australia points system.

Finally, rather than continue to marginalise or maintain policies that perpetuate a lack of understanding for artists' work, it would be prudent to see artists' work in the light of long-term employment trends in Australia that have already been identified by the government: namely that [the number of people in part-time and casual work is growing](#) and those in standard (full time) work is falling. The fact that those in casual employment have generally

³ Barrett, Margaret. S. (2011). Troubling the creative imaginary: Some possibilities of ecological thinking for music and learning. In D. Hargreaves, D. Miell & R. MacDonald (Eds.). *Musical Imaginations* (pp. 206 – 219). Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199568086.003.0013>

⁴ Shevock, Daniel. 2018. *Eco-literate Music Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge

⁵ Ritchey, Marianna. (2019). *Composing capital : classical music in the neoliberal era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶ Qian, Jinghua. (2020, November). I can't apply for another grant. Un Magazine . Retrieved February 14, 2020, from <http://unprojects.org.au/magazine/issues/issue-14-2/jinghua-qian/>

⁷ Blustein, D. L., & Guarino, P. A. (2020). Work and unemployment in the time of COVID-19: The existential experience of loss and fear. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 60(5), 702-709

⁸ Loveday, C., Musgrave, G., & Gross, S. A. (2022). Predicting anxiety, depression, and wellbeing in professional and nonprofessional musicians. *Psychology of Music*, 03057356221096506.

not fared as well as those in full time employment during the pandemic⁹ highlights the broader failure of neoliberal narratives of work in general rather than poor individual career choices. Moreover, professions where face to face contact is important (e.g. Leisure and travel, which connects with many areas of the performing arts) are not only likely to have been most significantly impacted by the pandemic, but will also likely take much longer to recover.¹⁰

A new set of values must therefore be reflected in any new national cultural policy, including a commitment to prioritising sustainability and decent work – caring and compassion for all workers equally, regardless of their work patterns. A new national cultural policy must not only preserve the best elements of previous iterations, it must also map out a vision for the way forward through the recognition that valuing the arts means recognising the importance of the entire ecosystem. There are many signs that the ecosystem is suffering, particularly at the independent and small to medium levels, even while those parts of the ecosystem are responsible for the most innovative work.

We have a tremendous opportunity not only to build on the previous five pillars, but to leverage all that we have learned over the pandemic – much of which has highlighted the degree to which creative workers are marginalised at the policy level.¹¹ Policy reform in this area should seek to align the pillars with the values of sustainability, compassion and vision, that will enable artists to make the work that reflects the best aspects of our society and our collective imaginations, rather than to amplify our limitations.

Sincerely,

Nicole Canham

⁹ Cubrich, M., Tengesdal, J. A., Ugueto-Rey, G., Stahl, R., & Crow Brauer, M. (2022). Pandemics and precarious work: Translating research to practice for marginalized workers. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000327>

¹⁰ Lund, S., Madgavkar, A., Manyika, J., Smit, S., Eillingrud, K., Meaney, M. & Robinson, O. (2021). *The future of work after Covid-19*. McKinsey Global Institute. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19>.

¹¹ UNESCO. (2020). *Culture in crisis: Policy guide for a resilient creative sector*. UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374631>