

## Anonymous

### The centrality of arts workers

I wish simply to plead the case of **small-to-medium sector arts workers**.

I have been one such arts worker for the majority of a twenty year career in Australian arts. The majority of that time has been spent in small arts companies. We are the SMEs and micro organisations that power innovation, agility and risk-taking in Australian arts. You'll find us in regional cities where major companies are entirely absent. Early career arts workers are more likely to start and develop their careers with us. Emerging artists are more likely to have their first publication or production or exhibition with us. More home grown Australian work is produced and presented by us, especially First Nations and culturally diverse work.

The employees of such companies are not often discussed in Senate inquiries or cultural policy submissions. The word "worker" barely surfaces in the six pages of the submission from A New Approach. Small-to-medium arts employees struggle for visibility in the national conversation about arts and culture. We are most often referenced in recycled debates about the inequity of funding between National Performing Arts Partnership companies and the rest of the arts sector. We focus on this inequity a great deal. And everyone seems tired of our continuous refrain that more funding is desperately needed for the S2M sector.

There's a very simple reason for this.

The Australian arts funding framework results in small arts companies that can never be sustainable.

### An entire industry resting on unethical extraction of labour

Arts workers are exhausted. We are burnt out. We are demoralised. This is not a symptom of a pandemic. It was a chronic state well before 2020.

It's chronic because **there is not a sustainable business model for small arts companies that exists without an unethical extraction of labour and capital from the employees of these companies, and from the artists they attempt to serve.**

The expectations of state and Commonwealth arts funding bodies swamp the capacities of small organisations to meet them. To justify multiyear funding, we are expected to have best practice governance and operational management, robust commercial acumen and diversified income streams including healthy private sector and philanthropic support. We are expected to have healthy financial reserves and meet strict targets for financial ratios. We are expected to couple this with artistic vision and creative innovation, to produce work, grow audiences and meet the needs of priority stakeholders. We are expected to pay industry benchmarked rates to artists (but no funding agencies care what we pay to administrative staff as long as we achieve all the above)

These expectations may be steep, even unrealistic, but they are nothing compared to the expectations we place on ourselves to make good art, to make something of quality and significance with and for artists and audiences.

### **Not enough workers, too much work**

Great. Except most small arts companies have a mere handful of employees at best. Perhaps 4 or 5 FTE if they are lucky. And so we try to meet these expectations with a 0.4FTE marketing and program coordinator over here, or a 0.6FTE producer over there. We try to cram full-time artistic director and general manager roles into one position because that's all we can afford. We hire people on short, fixed term gigs because permanent staff are too financially risky. We simply cannot keep our organisations adequately staffed.

Given the workload and hours, salaries are unconscionably low. It is common to find positions that are remunerated barely above the national minimum wage. Often our funding is not indexed at all, and when it is it is never pegged to the rate of inflation. Therefore organisations face a diabolical choice between offering salary increments to staff or allowing real wages to decline in order to continue to deliver programs and services.

The result of this is an insidious and inescapable cycle, both for employees and small organisation employers. We cannot offer long-term stability to staff and so they hop from short-term contract to short-term contract. Too many workers never earn basic benefits owed to them under the National Employment Standards, such as paid parental leave or long service leave. Low pay combined with the prevalence of part-time contracts results in appalling superannuation balances for many arts workers, who are punished with an impoverished future should they stay in the industry long-term.

Meanwhile, employers struggle with high turnover, overburdened teams and entrenched burnout. They cannot afford the employee wellbeing or assistance programs that might feebly prop up the mental health of their staff. It is these conditions which make unethical practices such as unpaid internships and over-reliance on volunteers so hard to stamp out.

You'll find these conditions everywhere: in small presses and literary journals, in youth arts orgs, in regional theatre companies, in most arts festivals. This reality is over-represented in First Nations arts and CALD sectors, the majority of which are independent or S2M.

### **Funded to fail**

Perhaps because it serves political ends, or perhaps because there is just never enough money to go around, government arts agencies persist in distributing organisation funding in amounts that all but guarantee failure to thrive. Sometimes as little as \$65K per year is considered "organisational funding" and is not even enough to justify the workload of biannual reporting. It is certainly not enough for ethical, fair remuneration for arts workers.

While many independent artists at least have defined pay rates, either under a modern award (such as LPA) or set by the peak body for their artform, this is not the case for most administrative staff. They are paid according to what most small orgs can afford.

After two decades in this industry, it is becoming harder and harder to accept the bland admonishments of government arts agency employees who, in relatively entry-level or middle level roles, earn more than I could ever pay the most senior and experienced arts professionals in exchange for their soul-crushing weekly hours.

## **What can be done?**

If this all sounds like a whinge, it's hard for me to know how to answer. I've turned my mind to this for 20 years. I have tried many different strategies and tactics to escape these realities. I have tried to shape and squeeze and mould myself and the organisations I have managed to meet the expectations and KPIs of funders. The maths simply doesn't work.

Small arts organisations aren't able to fix this, much like individuals can't fix climate change by separating their plastics. There are, however, practical things government can do:

1. **Restructure the Commonwealth arts funding framework.** The National Performing Arts Partnerships model not only privileges an unfair and unrepresentative cohort and disenfranchises entire artforms (literature? visual arts?), it also consigns S2M companies to a "funded to fail" reality.
2. **Insist on a sustainable floor on annual funding for arts organisations.** \$150K per annum, minimum.
3. **Reduce the reporting workload on arts administrators.** A decade past, the Australia Council and most state arts agencies had nationally harmonised reporting templates. This is no longer the case and doubles or triples the workload of grant reporting.
4. **Lead the establishment of a National Portable Long Service Leave scheme.** Templates and precedent exist for this in the construction industry and community services. It is eminently achievable and is a pragmatic solution with profound long-term tangible benefits for arts workers.
5. **Ensure realistic indexation of multi-year funding.**
6. **Support research into salary and wage surveys in the S2M sector.** Transparency and benchmarking is needed to help establish minimum ethical standards of pay and conditions for arts workers.

Most importantly, governments can and should adopt more realistic expectations about what is achievable and reasonable for small organisations to do and be. Without this change, we can never find new and better models for small companies to thrive.

This National Cultural Policy process must not remain silent on the plight of small organisation arts workers. We are the boiler room of cultural production in Australia.

It is of course ironic, and underlines my point, that I am writing this submission after 1:00am. When else is the work to be done?