

National Cultural Policy Submission

A NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

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Summary

This submission draws on 10 years of grassroots discussion among curators, photographers, gallerists, photography historians, lawyers, and academics. First developed in 2013 by the National Visual History Group, it has been revisited and revised in recent years.

We encourage the National Cultural Policy to work with artists, institutional stakeholders and experts in the field to establish a framework that will secure the future of Australia's visual heritage currently held in Australian photographers' archives.

An initial investment of around \$3 million over three years to support development of emergency and proactive grant funding and feasibility of sustainable institutional capacity-building would:

- Pilot an emergency assistance grant program, including advice, collection management assistance, transport and storage for important archives at imminent risk. For example, an elderly photographer with a unique body of work created over a lifetime is unwell and their family do not have the resources to store their archive.
- Trial a proactive grant program to support archivists to work with privately-held, significant photographic archives in vulnerable formats. An independent peer assessment panel along the lines of the Community Heritage Grants process could provide a viable model. A cross-section of institutional representatives, experts, and departmental officers could assess applications against a significance assessment threshold.
- Grants would pay an archivist to work with each photographer for two-years part-time and support each photographer to effectively document their knowledge about their own life's work and collection, notate and prepare their archive for potential acquisition by institutions.
- Conduct stakeholder consultation, benchmarking, and research the feasibility of models for securing the future of photographers' archives. Collecting institutions, archivists, photographers, publishers, curators, academics will be among the important stakeholders.
- Establish a research and oversight body in the form of a Photography Council / Foundation with suitable governance mechanisms and a secretariat to advise the Australian Government.

First Nations first

Active support for First Nations photographers to document and preserve their archives is essential to recognising and respecting the crucial place of these stories, which are at the centre of our arts and culture.

First Nations stories from the 20th century are held within the photographic archives of both First Nations and non-First Nations photographers. Resources to support research into contexts of

creation, truth-telling, connections with community, family and Country, application of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols and storytelling around photography will be crucial to the future of Australian visual culture and offer a unique opportunity to access true understandings of Australia's past.

A Place for every story

Challenges

Much of Australia's national photographic heritage is held privately in photographers' archives. Photographic archives are irreplaceable resources for the understanding Australian identities, communities and environments now and into the future.

Photographic archives – especially those spanning both analogue and digital technologies – tend to be voluminous, complicated and difficult to identify, catalogue and preserve. Often contemporary documentation is limited and only the artist can give names, context and provenance to the images. Important archives may be lost without assistance. The task of caring for an archive can fall to descendants, who may not have the time, skills or knowledge, and the first-person oral history of that archive is no longer available.

Exceptional opportunities to reveal diverse and generational Australian visual histories reside in uncatalogued photographic collections nationally. Yet these Australian stories are at risk. There is no national support framework for the identification and preservation of photographic archives held by artists or their descendants. Survival of these rich visual resources is sporadic, ad hoc and often contingent on photographers having the private resources to organise and preserve their archives, before offering to public collections.

No currently existing institution has the resources to proactively identify, engage with, prepare and manage the volume of important photographic material that is currently held privately. There is currently no umbrella organisation, committee or grants scheme that provides advice, assistance or support for eminent and distinguished photographers or photographers' estates whose archives represent significant visual histories. Further, there is no single national network for making our visual heritage accessible.

Opportunities

This gap in Australia's cultural capacity is an opportunity to develop a national visual heritage estate of ongoing value and economic potential for cultural institutions and photographers. Multinational image-supply companies such as Getty Images make significant profits and are go-to sources for ease of search and licensing. There is untapped potential to create an Australian image database that will see income flow to artists and institutions – and, importantly, retain significant Australian cultural property.

Centrality of the artist

Photographers witness, document and interpret diverse visual histories. Photography is a powerful medium for artistic expression and a common language for reflecting humanity, identity, lives, stories, major concerns and personal experiences of our times and environments.

The body and documentation of an artist's work over a lifetime is an exceptional and crucial resource for curators and the nation's memory. Australia needs a new cultural policy initiative to preserve photographic legacies by assisting photographers to work with archivists – thereby addressing the

immediate risks to our visual heritage. Photographers' archives typically include analogue, born-digital, hybrid, and scanned analogue photographic images, documentation associated with photographers' lives work, including reference to notebooks, reference material, catalogues and other historical texts, and historic ephemera.

Strong institutions

While the suggested grant program would address some of the immediate risks to Australia's visual heritage, the National Cultural Policy should also strengthen our cultural institutions' capacities to acquire and preserve photographers' archives, making them more accessible to all Australians.

A national conversation between the following stakeholders is needed to advise the Australian Government on how best to preserve our national cultural heritage through photographic archives sustainably into the future:

- Identified Australian photographers, recognised by peers and institutions
- Institutions that are potential homes for intact archives
- Institutions that acquire or display selected images from photographic archives
- Cultural sector peak bodies; Universities
- Copyright brokers
- Archivists, photography studios and galleries, curators, and photography experts

Resources required include developing and strengthening national capacity for long-term storage, preservation and digital preservation of photographic archives, registration systems, digitisation and copyright management.

Essential actions—the National Cultural Policy should create a funded framework for researching exploring the feasibility of the following solutions:

- a liaison body that assists custodians to care for collections or transfer collections to existing institutions.
- a digital portal / database that draws on existing institutional digitisation resources to make the archives accessible to all Australians.
- a new cultural institution that is a repository for photographer's archives.

One crucial step to determining the feasibility will be support for researching international approaches to this issue. The human resources needed to strengthen institutions will include:

- Curatorial – people qualified to identify potentially significant archives and liaison with photographers
- Archivists – documenting and rehousing
- Registrars and collection managers, project managers, and rights managers
- Imaging experts – digitisation, digital preservation, digital archiving
- Finance – the receipt and management of the funds.

Reaching the audience

Audiences consistently respond enthusiastically to exhibitions of Australian contemporary photography online and physically – this is art and culture with cut-through. However, undigitised, uncatalogued work is now increasingly invisible and endangered. In an age when photography and video dominate public communication, photographic archives have never been more important.

There is potential to develop a vast repository of photographs from which the narratives of our nation could be shared with audiences both in Australia and internationally, online and through touring exhibitions and publications of excellence. The strong public demand for visual material demonstrates the dominance of visual culture and the value of images, and the potential to build a sustainable and enduring income stream for all stakeholders.