
For a national cultural policy that supports artists and writers as essential workers: submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation, July 2022

About me

I am an established author, editor and critic based on Kaurna Yerta (Adelaide). My latest novel, *The Airways* (2021), was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award and shortlisted for an Aurealis Award for Horror. *Dyschronia* (2018) was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin, Aurealis (for Science Fiction), and Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature. My work includes teaching and mentoring, curation and assessment, and collaborations with other artists; I am also a widely published essayist and a strong advocate for the rights of writers and artists, with key interests in art as labour, the climate crisis, gender and the body. In 2022 I am pursuing these subjects as Artist in Residence at Vitalstatistix. I am an active member of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the Australian Society of Authors, and Writers SA.

I have published five books, received numerous grants from national and state arts bodies, and my work has taken me around the world, with residencies in New York, Berlin and Beijing. Even so, fifteen years into writing full time, I struggle to earn anything close to the minimum wage. In a 'good year' I earn around \$30,000, which puts me on the Henderson poverty line. According to Macquarie University research, I am doing better than most of my colleagues.

The working lives of artists and writers

For a long time, but particularly in the last decade, working artists and writers have been operating in a climate of profound funding scarcity. This has not only impoverished us, but devalued our labour socially. I have watched as many of my peers, successful mid-career artists and writers, move into day jobs which sap their energy and detract from their capacity to make work.

During the pandemic, some were eligible for JobKeeper payments. This gave many independent artists and writers a chance to experience a living wage and regular income for the first time. Others struggled through alone or with community support, unable to access payments. Now that pandemic support has been withdrawn, my peers are experiencing burnout and recognising how unsustainable their working lives had become, even before the pandemic.

The flawed 'creative industries' model has failed to deliver anything but poverty for working artists and writers. Built-in precarity and low pay make working in the arts a form of sacrifice, creating impossible barriers for people without other sources of income or support. Artists and writers are forced to adopt a small business, fee-for-service model,



negotiating every contract individually. We have no minimum wage, no access to superannuation or sick leave, and no capacity to bargain collectively. Exploitation is rife and underpayment is the norm. This has devastating consequences for access to culture as well as for culture itself.

What we need

A new National Cultural Policy needs to change the way that arts and culture are valued. It should **recognise that artists are essential workers**, and look closely at the ways government can act to directly improve the working conditions of artists and writers.

A cultural policy that recognises artists as workers will recognise that **we are entitled to the same rights as other workers**: fair pay, superannuation, leave entitlements, capacity to bargain collectively, and recourse to dispute resolution when conflicts arise.

A cultural policy that recognises artists as workers will also support artists who are out of work, making sure they are eligible for the same social support benefits as other workers. This will require **abandoning the current 'mutual obligation' measures** in favour of a system that recognises the unpaid work, care work, and lifelong self-education that form part of creative practice.

While recognising the important contribution of volunteers, a renewed cultural policy should **defend artist wages** and conditions for the benefit of all. The arts is one of our most precarious workplaces, and regulating the gig economy to protect working artists would enable the arts and culture sector to lead the way to protect all workers from exploitation.

The funding of the Australia Council for the Arts should be not only restored, but increased and fairly distributed. The arm's length peer review process must be protected from the uncertainty created by changes of government.

All public funding for arts and cultural projects should be contingent on fair pay for the people who make the work. Alongside the current project-based model, arts funding should investigate and trial better ways of employing artists in more secure forms of work. This includes exploring the multitude of initiatives that could directly support artists and cultural workers such as a **basic income scheme, job guarantees, fellowships, and public employment schemes** such as artists in schools. When funding arts organisations, funding bodies must prioritise organisations and projects that directly employ artists in secure work.

For writers, public lending and copyright payments are an essential source of income. It is vital that the PLR/ELR scheme be expanded to include **digital lending rights**, as recommended by the Australian Society of Authors.

A National Strategy for Literature should be developed, as already exists for other art forms, to ensure that adequate funding is directed to writers and to literature, and to ensure that Australian literature is sustainable into the future, with fit-for-purpose institutions, fair remuneration, and the provision of secure work.

The National Cultural Policy should follow and support First Nations leadership in arts and culture and learn from First Nations people about the importance of arts and culture, expanding our awareness of its importance: in daily life, as a force that binds us together as a society, and as a collective responsibility.



A strong cultural policy will also move art and culture beyond its institutional niches and advance investment in arts and culture through other institutions including health and education, establishing and defending the public value of arts and culture from early childhood to tertiary institutions and through adult education opportunities, **directly employing artists** at every step.

Generations of cuts have favoured large, established companies and punished the small to medium sector. A robust National Cultural Policy will acknowledge that art and culture are an ecosystem, and that the vast majority of opportunities for participation happen at the local level, via small to medium arts organisations, and direct resources to these levels appropriately. Any restoration or increase in funding must restore the balance, as well as directing core funds to those who need it most – our independent artists and writers.

In summary, a robust and sustainable National Cultural Policy should:

1. Acknowledge that artists are essential workers;
 2. Acknowledge that culture forms part of the foundational economy, and that access to art and culture is a fundamental right;
 3. Follow and support First Nations leadership in arts and culture and learn from First Nations understanding of the importance of arts and culture;
 4. Restore and increase Australia Council funding with a focus on small to medium organisations and the direct funding of independent artists and writers;
 5. Make all public funding for arts and cultural projects contingent on fair pay;
 6. Increase the number of fellowships offered to reflect the value and breadth of our working artists and writers, and pay them a living wage;
 7. Invest in long-term ways to fund working artists and writers more sustainably, such as a Basic Income and public employment schemes;
 8. Abolish punitive mutual obligation requirements for artists who are out of work, and for everybody;
 9. Invest in arts and culture by employing working artists and writers throughout education, literacy and reading initiatives, public libraries, and health care settings. Establish and fund salaried residencies in schools, libraries and health care settings;
 10. Extend the Public Lending Rights scheme to include Digital Lending Rights, and develop a National Strategy for Literature to support and protect Australian literature into the future;
 11. Invest in Australian arts and culture by protecting the working conditions of artists and writers, regulating gig work, ending sham contracting, and creating fair access to superannuation, leave entitlements, collective bargaining, and dispute resolution;
 12. Remove tax on prizes and grants, change superannuation and tax legislation to ensure working artists and writers are eligible for superannuation on all payments, and clarify our rights as workers in employment law.
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