

National Cultural Policy Submission

Melbourne Fringe

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

About Melbourne Fringe

Melbourne Fringe democratises the arts. Our vision is cultural democracy – empowering anyone to realise their right to creative expression. At 40 years old, we are Victoria’s longest running and largest multi-arts festival. We support the development and presentation of artworks by, with and for the people of Melbourne and beyond, running the annual Melbourne Fringe Festival, the year-round venue Fringe Common Rooms at Trades Hall, and through game-changing sector leadership programs. We believe that equitable access to the arts and creative expression are fundamental human rights and vital to a creative, healthy, cohesive society.

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

It is vital that First Nations artists, producers and arts organisations are supported to make self-determined work of national significance. There is a rich ecology of independent First Nations artists and producers making work across all artforms in Australia, however these practitioners require dedicated support structures to develop their skills.

A First Nations skills and workforce capacity building plan development program is required to enable career progression in the arts industry for First Nations arts workers and producers, with appropriate cultural and industry support, embedded within a network of existing arts organisations to provide supported employment pathways. In addition, there is a need for increased funds to commission new work from emerging artists.

A Place for Every Story

We need to support participation by children and young people as an investment in Australia’s future as a creative nation. An investment to support and engage young Australians in the arts is crucial to supporting the resilience of the next generation of artists and culture makers.

We support the submission from a cohort of leading national Young People’s Arts companies: Arena, ATYP, Shopfront, St Martins and Polyglot to support a Young People and Culture Plan to engage young Australians in arts-based community programs.

There is an urgent need for targeted funding for youth arts through the Australia Council for the Arts, and for increased education funding in primary and secondary schools, and for creative arts courses in tertiary institutions.

A National Digital Strategy is urgently required, including professional development, investment in new and emerging digital art forms and models that support access to local content.

The Centrality of the Artist

A National Cultural Policy requires a radical approach to put creativity at the centre of our culture and shift away from insecure work. Independent artists are the lifeblood of the creative industries. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted independent artists, as the casualised nature of employment in the arts meant that many artists did not receive government support during the lockdowns, and even now are vulnerable to lost income due to illness.

There needs to be radically increased investment in project grants via the Australia Council for the Arts to reduce the precarity of independent artists who make work on a project basis.

The Australia Council's fellowships program must be significantly increased.

There is a critical skills shortage in the arts as many practitioners have left the industry for more stable work. The pandemic also saw a hollowing out of creative arts and performance degrees in Australia's universities, reducing the pathways for the nation's next generation of artists even further.

It is imperative that an investment in capacity building programs is made for the next generation of artists, technicians, production managers and producers. Funds to the Australia Council to reinstate the ArtStart program would allow independent practitioners to hone their business skills and develop their career pathways.

Strong Institutions

Small-to-medium sized companies are an integral part of the arts ecology and punching above their weight, reaching 9.4 million people each year. Small-to-medium organisations are also industry leaders in the areas of innovative programming and access and inclusion, requiring additional investment to fully realise their potential.

The arts industry is extremely vulnerable and additional Federal government stimulus is required to ensure that this important and thriving industry continues to strengthen its contribution to the economy and create jobs in this sector.

We support Theatre Network Australia's calls to increase funding to the Australia Council by \$130 million per year, \$40 million of which would be for companies to bolster the Four-Year Funding Program, further investment in the National Partnership Framework and increased organisational funding through the Projects for Organisations funding rounds. This is vital and urgent.

A new, national portfolio approach could see a more strategic approach to sustaining organisations' funding across artforms and size.

A new multibillion dollar future fund, Australia's Creative Future (modelled on existing funding models for science, and the ALP's public housing future fund), should be initiated to ringfence and secure funding for organisations into the future.

Reaching the Audience

Festivals are uniquely placed to reach large and diverse audiences through their innovative and accessible programming. In 2019, 8.7 million people attended an arts festival according to the National Arts Participation Survey.

An overhaul of festivals funding is required to ensure that Australian festival organisations can reach new audiences. Currently the Major Festival Initiative only supports the major international arts festivals – there needs to be a review of this program. With increased funding, it could include other significant arts festivals across Australia such as Fringe, music and writers festivals. In addition, an increased investment into Festivals Australia to expand eligibility for that program would support the ecology of festivals in both metropolitan and regional centres.

We support Theatre Network Australia's submission which calls for a Young People and Culture Framework.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

Melbourne Fringe has long valued the contribution of First Nations artists and producers. Now in its sixth year, our Deadly Fringe program addresses the under-representation of First Nations artists and producers in the broader arts sector, leveraging Melbourne Fringe as a platform for expression and a training ground for emerging arts workers, forging pathways to ensure a strong First Nations presence in the content, presenters and programmers of the future.

A Place for Every Story

Unlike other Fringe Festivals, Melbourne Fringe curates focus program streams to achieve our vision of empowering anyone to realise their right to creative expression. Together with our open access programs this enables artistic participation by those who don't or can't create their own independent work. These projects include large-scale participatory civic projects, and dedicated programming streams for children, people who are Deaf or with disability, and First Nations Australians. These streams empower artists to create new works which give agency for new ideas and individual voices to be heard, ensuring we engage with artists at all stages of their careers.

The Centrality of the Artist

In 2019, Melbourne Fringe supported over 2,900 artists to make and present 458 events across 116 independent arts venues. In 2021 we launched the Fringe Fund, a new initiative to support independent artists at all stages of their career to make new work, develop their skills and provide a supported presentation platform in our annual Festival. The Fund supports artist commissions which pay independent artists to make new work for Melbourne Fringe and will reduce barriers so anyone can be a part of Fringe.

Strong Institutions

Melbourne Fringe is a perfect demonstration of how supporting small and medium organisations has a broader impact on the sector. For every \$1 of core funding we received in 2019, we paid \$2.21 directly to artists and leveraged \$4.79 of earned income. While the organisation is in a solid financial position, our core funding has proportionately reduced from 24% of income in 2013 to 11% in 2019. Core investment in small and medium arts organisations has a significant return on investment and is imperative to their financial sustainability.

Reaching the Audience

Melbourne Fringe's programs have enormous participation numbers, huge audience reach and deep cultural impact. In 2019 over 70,000 ticket buyers generated \$1 million in ticket sales revenue sustaining and strengthening the independent arts sector. An average ticket price of \$23 makes the arts accessible for all, and our work contributes over \$14 million to the local economy each year.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

There needs to be a major commissioning fund for projects of scale up to \$500,000. We must encourage Australian artists to think on a global scale, and the current \$100,000 maximum project funding available to organisations through the Australia Council is simply not enough. Instead of importing work from overseas, we should be empowering Australian artists to make significant national works of scale.

An increase of the Australia Council's Arts Projects for Individuals and Groups and for Organisations is vital for the continuation of innovative and ambitious work in this country. There is an unacceptably high level of unfunded excellence in the current applications to the Australia Council's project grants; an increase of \$25 million per annum as argued by Theatre Network Australia would facilitate ambitious new works across the sector.