

# National Cultural Policy Submission

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Dear Creative Policy Developers,

Thankyou for this call-out to Australian arts practitioners, for feedback on creative policies that affect us very directly. Like many people, I dream big whilst living within small realities, but I see the development of this new cultural policy as an opportunity to create dynamic change. If the change is big enough it can benefit more than just the arts sector; it can affect how we see ourselves as a society, how we determine social value in a world dominated by imposed consumer value systems, how we tell our stories and evaluate our place in the world, and can lead to opportunities for broad communities to participate in the social system that shapes their lives.

I am both a writer and a visual artist, which I've unfortunately come to accept amounts to double disadvantage. I have degrees in both fields (double HECS debt, and then some), and am about to walk away from my doctoral studies because the financial burden of continual 'working for nothing' is untenable.

From this position I am going to address three of the pillars under consideration; Centrality of the Artist, A Place for Every Story, and Reaching the Audience. I'm not going to give a broad overview of The Field(s). I'm going to respond informally by offering tiny insights and making big suggestions.

## **Centrality of the Artist:**

As a writer I've won a few literary awards and have had short works published, but have yet to have a full novel published. I am perennially 'emerging', and so my perspective is the vague perspective of an experienced beginner. The reality of an inaccessible publishing industry is beside the main point in this context, but the need to devote time to the writing and revision of multiple works, the need for immersion in the worlds we create, the years-long process of honing our craft, characterises the lifestyles of most writers in my position. Being taken away from this process to wash dishes for a living is soul destroying. There's so much to say about this, but this is basic mathematics and I won't repeat what I've no doubt other writers have described in depth. Suffice it to say, when there's money involved, it's not enough to sustain life.

I will, however, expand briefly upon my experience as a visual artist. Part of my practise involves submitting work for award exhibitions because I'm introverted enough not to want to stage a solo show. This has been satisfying in that it provides community and a sense of cultural participation. These exhibitions are an important part of the cultural landscape; they celebrate artists and the exchange of ideas; they allow a snapshot of social awareness and concerns, providing an avenue for the flow of thought and reflecting the national zeitgeist, as all arts do. They create excitement for audiences. But lately I've been disillusioned by the reality of the process, which is essential to the practise of so many artists. Where being selected for award exhibitions seems to amount to success, and to the gradual building of a recognisable practise that will lead eventually to a time when as an artist I can allow ideas to develop (slowly, as they must) without financial stress, the reality is that it's incredibly expensive, and

that end point is not likely to happen. To enter everything we need to enter requires the payment of entry fees. If selected, there's framing, and the cost of freight. Then there's the cost of return freight. This can amount to hundreds of dollars, on top of studio time and materials. We must continue to work our day jobs to support our art habit, paying for the privilege of having our work shown by galleries, rather than being paid for the work that they have the privilege of exhibiting. It suddenly feels demeaning. Applying for grants and opportunities adds up to a great deal of paperwork and, essentially, begging. If your practise is more about the sociology behind the work than the commercial product, then the idea that there's a sustainable career at the end of it is an illusion. This *is* the career.

The above is a simplification of a multi-layered artist's practise. But the point is, it takes years to build your practise. To do so without financial support requires squeezing more than one lifetime into each day. This is not just about time and money; it's about meaningful practise. As a member of an art collective, I recently participated in the running a grant-funded Covid recovery program in the City of Port Phillip. The hunger of the public for points of connection, creative activity and interaction was overwhelming. During that week I imagined how life would look, if as artists we were funded to be what we are. I thought about the organic presence of artists in the community as an opportunity to create a participatory funding model. An idea that exists elsewhere in the world and that I would like to develop further: *watch this space*.

Before something like that is possible, my starting-point suggestion for Centralising the Artist through creative policy is based on the concept of the Universal Basic Income; I would like to see artists eligible for an Artist's Living Wage, equivalent to a substantial part-time income. This suggestion has been made elsewhere, and comes with hurdles that need to be overcome, not least of which is the fact that there are *too many artists to realistically fund*. How to choose income recipients? Existing public funding models privilege too few artists/writers, and this presents the problematic other extreme. There are varied methods that could be applied, via the creation of inclusive guidelines. For example, university-educated artists who have earned their stripes, have continued to build a recognisable practise over a five year period after graduating, and whose practise is both sociologically engaged and not predominately commercial, could be eligible for ongoing funding. However it's managed, the goal of this support is to enable artists who have proven their commitment to their practise to develop and work without the distraction of unrelated full time employment. This is not a naïve plea for charity, but for an acknowledgement of the all-consuming and time-consuming creative process, and the hardship artists and writers (and other creative practitioners) face without support. It is a plea to acknowledge the value of an artist's life and work, and their intrinsic contribution to Australian culture.

### **A Place for Every Story:**

Or, *A Story for Every Place*. The importance of story to a nation's evolving identity is indisputable. The need for increased local production content/quotas on televisual streaming services, as well as normal television and radio programming, is something I would like to see emphasised in the proposed

cultural policy. Local cultural identity is essential in this post-truth world. We need stories that can solidify our identity through actual identification, that can unite us through expanded understanding of varied perspectives, and we need stories that are relevant to our respective experiences of life. Obviously, increased quotas will also increase opportunities for arts practitioners across the board.

### **Reaching the Audience:**

Equally important is the move away from perceived elitism in the arts. I draw your attention to the *Arts are Newsworthy* movement/petition, begun by the artist Nina Sanadze (et al). Radical but not new, as far as ideas go, this opportunity to increase arts literacy seems too important to dismiss. The idea is to include regular arts news items in daily broadcasts across all media, equal to the time and emphasis given to sports news items. This would expose the general public to a broad cultural vocabulary, removing the perception of various art forms as elite or impenetrable.

This is not just about promoting arts events, but about promoting cultural engagement and making the arts more approachable. It could increase interest in Australian books and their authors, through coverage of awards and literary events, that would in turn lead to improved literacy, larger readership and indirect support for the Australian publishing industry. It would elevate the place of the arts in general Australian cultural identity, which is dominated by sport and therefore alienates a great proportion of the population. Why not celebrate both? Why not celebrate the constant and varied range of arts happening around us daily? Why *not*?

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The artist – outside of notably lucrative career artist roles such as Famous Actress and Rock Star – experiences their centrality mostly as Fame, in whatever form that takes. What doesn't make sense is that whilst Fame can bring recognition of the artist's value, it seldom translates into the ongoing financial security that will enable the artist's ongoing creative output. And yet the empire of Arts Industries depends on the artist's creative output.

The Holy Grail for all of us is to be allowed to continue doing what we do. It's not a lot to ask. Many of us live on breadcrumbs while we hang on by a thread. We can stretch the tiniest bit of hope as far as we can stretch a dollar.

But it's exhausting. Please. Make arts funding meaningful. Acknowledge the importance of the arts by demonstrating your commitment to artists and their quality of life. Make it impossible for future Coalition governments to undermine the value of the humanities. Help us *thrive*.

(And please, read *Funemployed*, by Justin Heazlewood. He says it real good. He said it a long time ago. Many of the things you need to hear.)