

# National Cultural Policy Submission

**Madeleine Thornton-Smith**

**Submitted:** As a worker/professional in an industry who uses arts (e.g. art therapist, tour guide), As an artist

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:

## **The Centrality of the Artist**

My name is Madeleine Thornton-Smith. I am ceramic artist, tutor, advocate and occasional writer from Naarm/Melbourne. I have spent the last 13 years working as a disability carer, and the last 10 years as an art technician and tutor, teaching in public, not-for-profit and commercial studios. I have studied at various institutions including Monash University, Holmesglen Institute, RMIT University and CAE. My practice examines the hierarchy that exists between fine art and craft in relation to class and gender, with a particular interest in subverting meaning and value through remediation. I also have a strong interest in artists' labour. I have spent a lot of time the last few years advocating for artists and visual artworkers to get paid and treated better. I am excited that the government is keen to consider the 'artist as worker' in its National Cultural Policy.

Challenges:

The labour of visual and craft artists is often invisible to Australian society. Artists are frequently asked what they do for their 'real job' – that is, which job pays the bills? I have become interested in the working rights of artists and artworkers particularly since doing an internship with the Victorian Trades Hall Council and the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance a few years ago, and after experiencing insecure and unsafe working conditions as an artworker. I work in a council-run community arts centre and have worked at many private studios that sham contract their workers – that is, asking workers to get an ABN yet controlling their work, pay rate and often failing to pay superannuation. Sham contracting is rife in local government, not-for-profit and commercial studios. Sadly, dozens of ceramic tutors, potters and technicians contacted me when I did a callout for a recent article on the problem of sham contracting – and it continues to be an area of ongoing research and advocacy for me.

I have written about the fact visual artists and most artworkers don't have a union, and there is no visual arts industry award – thus are easily exploitable. Most visual arts tutors, assistants and technicians are not on the payroll, not paid superannuation (which is illegal even for contractors) and there are no minimum rates of pay. They often work in insecure, unsafe conditions where they have to purchase their own public liability insurance. Sadly, there are very few studios that actually employ artists and artworkers legally.

When exhibiting, artists often pay hefty fees to rent gallery spaces, from both publicly-funded and private institutions. Very few institutions pay NAVA-recommended artist fees and there is no penalty for not following industry standards. In Australia, receiving artist fees is not the norm, thus artists rarely feel like they have a 'real job'.

#### Opportunities:

I believe the government has the opportunity to treat artists and artworkers as genuine workers through a variety of measures. This may include:

- Introducing an award for artists and different types of artworkers based on industry (for example, painting tutors, ceramics tutors, jewellery tutors, art technicians, standardising and mandating artist fees for exhibitions, etc).
  
- Providing publicly-funded and run galleries and institutions with enough long-term funding to be able to consistently pay artists NAVA-recommended fees for exhibiting, public programming and education.
  
- Encouraging unions to represent visual artists – whether that be the MEAA, or another relevant union, to help enforce an artists' award
  
- Stamping out sham-contracting in the visual arts sector with the assistance of the Fair Work Ombudsman or other relevant industrial body. This is becoming a growing problem as young people lose industrial literacy and fail to know their rights in the workplace – and are repeating the cycle.
  
- Centrelink should consider artists working on exhibitions, grant-writing and other activities as work activities that contribute towards mutual obligations.
  
- Trialling a UBI for creatives (as Ireland is doing right now) or a wage insurance scheme (like France has for creatives) so we can move away from the competitive, unreliable grant system and towards a system that prevents artists from living in poverty.
  
- Reversing tertiary fee increases in the creative arts and humanities.
  
- Restoring enough funding for TAFE courses in the creative arts to start up again.

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:

### **The Centrality of the Artist**

Through my experiences as an artist, artworker and advocate I have come to the conclusion that artists are some of the most exploited professionals in the country, partly due to the unregulated nature of the industry and lack of union coverage. In Australia the prevailing attitude seems to be that being an artist isn't a 'real job', and is therefore not worthy of adequate payment, and this attitude often extends to teaching art too. Whether we like it

or not, the 'c' word comes into life as a practising artist – class. Under the LNP Australia has become deeply unequal country and since the pandemic, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen.

Being an artist takes money. Whether it be having the upfront cash to pay for gallery spaces, art materials and equipment, education and training or the privilege to *not be paid* whilst volunteering for prestigious galleries and art institutions. Accepting poor pay or no pay for one's labour as an artist or artworker seems to be a necessity, and undercutting our comrades the only way to success. Few artists from working class, disabled, indigenous or migrant backgrounds can afford this kind of self-exploitation. There is also a new class of artworkers in Australia, who are highly educated, yet poorly paid, juggling multiple insecure jobs, large HECs debts and unstable housing. As Justin O'Connor writes in "Blue wedge: Art, culture and 'the elite'", *"until the 1970s, the more educated you were, the more likely you were to vote for a right-wing party. Left-wing parties received a majority of working-class votes. Since then, the more educated you are, the more likely you are to vote for the left."* And yet, despite the emergence of a professional class that appeals to centre left parties, *"it is clear that the educated professionals were not the winners they thought they were, especially the younger generation."*(2021)

Many Australian professional artists, despite carrying multiple qualifications, are nervous to criticise problematic institutional practices lest they bite the hand that feeds them. The visual arts is an industry built on gratitude. Gratitude for exposure, for cultural capital. Not-for-profit and government-run institutions routinely pay their artists nominal fees rather than a living wage, if they pay at all – some even charge for their spaces. As a result, artists are often trained to consider their art as being separate from life, a trick that benefits those extracting profit from artists' labour: if art isn't 'work', then it doesn't have to be remunerated.

Having been brought up by a civil servant and a humanities teacher, I have a strong sense of the importance of the arts, education and the public good. The arts have been treated like a luxury that only the wealthy can afford the last decade, not what they are – a human right. Artists and artworkers give back to the community through their (often unpaid) work. It's time their job was taken seriously, and paid accordingly. I hope that this government will remember that art is work, and artists are workers, and therefore must be paid!

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

Artists are sadly taught in Australia that the arts scene is more battleground than community: failings are considered individual rather than structural. In the neoliberal world, artists are brands, and if they fail, the market has decided. But now, after years of neglect, artists are calling for recognition, for better funding, for fair pay, for community. In the alienating era of COVID-19, a solidarity model that puts the collective good above the individual is the way forward. Pay your artists!