

National Cultural Policy Submission

Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts

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

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

Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts is an independent platform for contemporary and experimental arts practice operating on Wulgurukaba and Bindal Country (Townsville, North Queensland). Umbrella runs an annual program of onsite and touring exhibitions, public programs, arts residencies, makerspace access, professional development programs, special events and a biannual festival, Pop Up North Queensland (PUNQ). Umbrella is integral to our region's thriving culture and creative economy.

Our artistic direction focuses on providing a platform to express and amplify the distinctive and authentic contemporary voices of our region. North Queensland (NQ) is home to both Traditional Owners of the Countries of the region and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from Countries across Australia. From our founding by a small group of artists including revered Waanyi artist Judy Watson, Umbrella has provided a platform to share Indigenous art, Culture and voices.

Since relocating to a new building, in the aftermath of the 2019 monsoonal event, we have been empowered by a larger space to present an exhibition of NQ First Nation Art in every round of our eight annual exhibition periods. We have also initiated partnerships with First Nation's owned and run organisations in NQ including Giringun Art Centre and Big Eye Arts and Culture. These two new dedicated initiatives have provided huge value to our peer organisations, artists, and audiences. However, this added layer of work is being done without a significant increase to our core funding.

Umbrella has proudly presented a booth, at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, representing NQ First Nations artists since its inception more than a decade ago. Our awarding winning touring exhibition *Legacy: Reflections on Mabo*, co-curated with Gail Mabo, brings together 26 Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to reflect on the paradigm-shifting work of the late Eddie Kioki Mabo. On the road for five years, it will be hosted by its final venue Rockhampton Museum of Arts into 2025.

There are a wealth of opportunities to support the unique emerging First Nations voices which take the form of artists, artworkers, Cultural leaders and dedicated organisations. In the National Cultural Policy we support this pillar of centrality of First Nations arts and Culture. We believe that this involves decentralising investment and privileging regional and remote funding and infrastructure that often provide a supply chain to 'traditional' centres which are currently well appointed.

A Place for Every Story

North Queensland has a rich and distinctive cultural and artistic voice, which has a unique value in lives of people from the North. It offers a diverse and enriching perspective for people from other parts of Australia and the world. Remaining true to our community roots, our artistic direction is deliberately geared towards showcasing the unique voices, stories and talent of North Queensland visual artists and our broader community. As a strategic priority, we continue to provide opportunities to acknowledge, uncover, showcase and grow the rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Island and non-Indigenous arts culture in North Queensland, as an important part of the distinctive North Queensland voice.

We believe it is important that there are multiple 'places' for regional stories and voices. These places are in our own regional location, in global digital environments, in national institutions and in peer exchanges locally, statewide, nationally and internationally. In a National Cultural Policy, we would welcome the activation of places that platform a diversity of Australian stories. We would like to see, within that policy, a greater commitment to resourcing places and platforms that address legacy inequity in the distribution of resources, to empower places for regional stories. We would welcome a policy that destabilises the notion of the centre in Australian storytelling; a policy that particularly speaks to the marginalisation of regional and remote communities in our national narratives. We would also like to see support for market entry points for regional artists to grow their commercial viability other than art fairs in Sydney or Melbourne that are cost prohibitive for the undervalued work of emerging, midcareer and even senior artists based in regional Australia.

The Centrality of the Artist

Umbrella started its life as an Artist Run Initiative (ARI) 36 years ago, and it is our intention that it remain a space that invites experimentation and gives artists permission to explore new ideas. We hold an important place in the arts ecology in North Queensland and Australia. An essential element of visual arts practice is continually being exposed to the practice of other artists, to inspire new ways of thinking and making. We aim to give our artists and community access to diverse artistic practice from outside of North Queensland, alongside our local artist exhibitions and workshops. This helps grow the vibrancy of experiences available to our community and tourists.

Creating a thriving arts industry in North Queensland requires commitment to supporting artists at all stages of their career – transitioning from school to further education, onwards to an emerging creative practice, refining further over time through exhibiting/work experiences and higher education (where relevant) into an established artist or artworker. Umbrella is passionate about staying in touch with the needs of our local community and nurturing artists as they change over time. We do this by advocating for the needs of our arts community – the core gaps currently being the need for greater investment in arts education and entry-level career opportunities in the North; providing access to space and resources; and opportunities for work experience both at the exhibiting artist and arts worker levels.

In more than a decade we have seen the erosion of tertiary level arts programs across the nation. During this time Umbrella and our community, fought to retain the James Cook University (Townsville) Bachelor of Creative Arts course which tragically closed in 2018. We are reminded daily of this incredible loss to not only emerging artists but also artworkers. We struggle to recruit skilled local staff. Skilled artists and artworkers are essential to our creative and vibrant economy in North Queensland. In the National Cultural Policy, we would welcome the creation of meaningful and sustainable pathways through award rates in the arts and corresponding art funding to support those rates enabling us to retain qualified staff. We would like to see artists and artworkers acknowledged as essential workers as was proven in the COVID pandemic. We would like to see federal support of tertiary arts and cultural programs.

Strong Institutions

Over the last 36 years Umbrella has consistently grown and proven our organisational strength as a financially resilient and entrepreneurial organisation that is fit for the future. Since our establishment in 1986, we have grown our creative and intellectual capital however we have consistently lost our capital investment in infrastructure due to the lack of a permanent home. This

has seen us lease buildings in and around the CBD and absorb and then lose the financial investment including the costs moving and fit out.

Regional arts and cultural workers in NQ deserve a purpose-built space in a larger arts precinct that is commensurate with the level of their work and invites respect and recognition from local and growing visiting audiences.

Umbrella is ready to seize the opportunity of growing regional populations and cultural tourism to bring North Queensland art and culture into a global dialogue. As an independent organisation, acting as a creative incubator for artists and curators at all stages of their career, we are a natural compliment to the local regional gallery but also have a clear delineation in our roles. With all levels of government willing to invest in an art infrastructure (ideally an art precinct) for Townsville we will see a leveraging of strong institutions to create cultural capital and growth of our local economy including employment. We would welcome a policy that looks to the regional investment in infrastructure leveraging creative, economic and social outcomes.

Reaching the Audience

Reaching over one million people through our onsite programs, touring exhibitions and public artwork in 2021, Umbrella reinforced its position as the premier Queensland independent contemporary art organisation north of Brisbane. Through attention to our four pillars of operation and programming - Excellence, Innovation, Community and Critical Engagement - we delivered a program of exhibitions, events and professional development, which enhance and grow the creative ecology of North Queensland. Please see our 2021 Annual Report [here](#).

Audiences are looking for authentic and unique arts and cultural experiences in regional Australia. Over the last three decades Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts has been a driver of the elevation of the innovative and exciting arts and cultural practices of North Queensland. Over the last three years we have been growing our platform and strategically developing our program and projects to meet this growing market demand. The growth of our biennial festival, PUNQ, is part of this strategy.

Beginning in 2017, PUNQ was conceived as a pop-up space art festival to activate the Townsville CBD in the 'renew' model forged by Marcus Westbury in Newcastle in 2008.

In 2021, Umbrella expanded the role and geographic size of the festival to respond to the growing market demand for regional arts and cultural experiences. We repositioned PUNQ as a national level event, leveraging the participation of recognised Australian artists to highlight the creative voices of our region through an innovative program of site-specific art installations and performances.

New to the festival:

- **FIRST NATIONS FIRST** // In 2021 the festival took place across North Queensland on the Countries of the Bindal, Gugu Badhan, Nywaigi, Warrgamay, Bandjin and Gudjal peoples. The program celebrated and illuminated our places, our histories, our present and our futures through the eyes of our creatives and Cultural peoples. Working on Country in this way saw the PUNQ team consulting with Traditional Owners across the region to provide Indigenous agency in the projects and to ensure that Cultural protocols were followed. The festival launched in partnership with the newly-opened Big Eye Arts and Culture Centre (Townsville's only Indigenous-owned and run art centre). The Big Eye Arts & Culture Centre Manager Aunty Rosalind Sailor launched their PUNQ mural commission, *One Journey: Many Stories, Many People, Many Places*, which presented local histories from an Indigenous point of view.
- **SITE-SPECIFIC ART COMMISSION PROGRAM** // PUNQ 2021 celebrated the distinctive landscapes of NQ, inspiring cultural exchange and transforming perceptions, providing

unique creative experiences for locals and visitors alike through a site-specific ephemeral art program. Leading Queensland and national contemporary artists and arts organisations were invited to choose an NQ site and engage with its histories, present and / or futures. This resulted in a truly unique, challenging, and sometimes playful program of work that drew audiences across the region to engage with 'place' in new ways.

To grow this festival we received Arts QLD COVID responsive funding, designed to activate 'spaces and places'. Unfortunately, our application to the Australia Council for our national level expansion of festival was deemed part of a high percentage of applications dubbed 'Unfunded Excellence'. To sustain and mature the audience growth of the festival and our important organisation we need to see policy that aims to fund excellence and its multiple subsequent outcomes. In this we would like to see a policy that delivers a larger investment dispersed by the Australia Council. We would welcome a policy that equitably decentralises funding as a key priority - to realise unleveraged opportunities in regional and remote Australia. We would welcome a policy that looks to multi-year project funding to enable recipients to capitalise on initial investment and build sustainable legacies particularly in reaching audiences.