

**Submission
No 13**

**INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURAL AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES IN
VICTORIA**

Name: Kate Larson
Date Received: 6 January 2025

Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament of Victoria

6 January 2025

Dear Committee Members,

RE: Inquiry into the cultural and creative industries in Victoria

As an arts practitioner and consultant based in Naarm/Melbourne, I welcome the motivation behind the inquiry into Victoria's cultural and creative industries, which recognises arts, culture and creativity as vital public services worthy of significant and strategic investment at a national, state and local government level.

Adding insult to injury

However, while I acknowledge your initial deadline has now been extended, it is unfortunate that flaws in the framing and timing of this inquiry have led it to perpetuate harm on the sector it aims to support.

This has primarily occurred as a result of:

- Asking the sector to do the legwork around the comparative data the inquiry needs (rather than providing us with a discussion paper to comment on). For reference, this deliberately incomplete submission has been made in an unpaid advocacy capacity with direct personal cost exceeding \$1,400. As an independent practitioner with no other form of income, I look forward to your advice on who I, and others like me, should invoice for this valuable cultural labour.
- It's narrow focus that prioritises Commonwealth over State Government responsibilities and some art forms and creative practices over others, and that steers responses away from key areas of identified sector need; and
- Tabling the inquiry over the sector's summer shut-down period at a time of unprecedented overwork, overwhelm and burnout.

Unfortunately, this has meant the Inquiry has been met with disappointment, disdain and a call for the sector to down tools rather than respond.

In this, I concur with the statement made by Theatre Network Australia, which notes TNA is "confident that the relevant Federal and Victorian public servants are well equipped and resourced to respond to the inquiry and provide the information it seeks to obtain. We do not believe that making submissions is the best use of the sector's time and energy, particularly over the end of year shut down period, and are not encouraging the sector to make submissions. TNA also does not believe that the information the inquiry obtains will lead to better Federal funding outcomes."

Culture is not an industry

The remit of the inquiry into the 'cultural and creative industries' is also problematic.

The emergence of the 'creative industries' rhetoric in the late 1990s was a tactical attempt to unlock 'jobs and growth' funding from neoliberal governments. Several decades later, we now have access to a

significant body of research that shows how lumping together artistic, cultural and vaguely-defined ‘making’ organisations and practices has, in the main, been unsuccessful, unhelpful and even counter-productive.

Far from the ‘creative state’ these policies hoped to evoke, this period has been characterised by dwindling public funding, an increasingly competitive, precarious and punitive economic environment, falling remuneration and job security, and rising education costs.

“Despite their gamble on the rhetoric of creative industries, art and culture and now more marginalised in public policy in any time since the 1980s,” Australian academic Justin O’Connor wrote in *Culture is not an industry: reclaiming art and culture for the common good* (Manchester University Press, 2024).

“The flawed ‘creative industries’ model has failed to deliver anything but poverty for working artists and writers,” Australian author Jennifer Mills wrote for *Pay the 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.”

Inquiry focus areas 1 & 2: Economic and social impact of the Commonwealth Government’s Australian cultural policy, Revive, on Victoria’s arts and cultural industries including the share of national arts and cultural spending going to Victoria and regional Victoria.

An article by David Burton published by ArtsHub in January 2024 (‘Creative Australia funding shock results show a sector on the brink’) revealed that Victoria and New South Wales continue to represent 51% of the country’s overall funding from Creative Australia (disproportionately concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney). This figure is relatively unchanged from the years prior to Revive.

In June 2024, Alison Croggon reported in *The Monthly* (‘Stage Plight: The state of Australian theatre’) that the total funding distributed by Creative Australia to the sector has decreased by 11.4 per cent in the last decade (after inflation). Grants to organisations have dropped by 66 per cent, and grants to individual artists by 88 per cent.

But investment is not the remit nor responsibility of the Commonwealth Government alone. Australian cultural think-tank A New Approach notes that Victoria is ranked second to last in per capita expenditure on arts and culture compared to other state and territory governments (exceeding only Queensland).

At a State Government level, Victoria’s per-capita expenditure fell by approximately 13.5 per cent from 2007–08 to 2021–2022. Compared to the 2023–24 revised figures, the 2024–25 Budget also includes a further 1.3 per cent funding cut to creative industries access, development and innovation output.

Strong institutions require significant and stable investment, but overall investment in Australian arts and culture isn’t matching our growing population. By international standards, A New Approach notes, we rank in the bottom quarter of OECD countries (investing just 0.9% of GDP in arts and culture in 2019).

Inquiry focus area 5: Whether the Revive policy and relevant state government policies and spending provide sufficient support and impetus to rebuild and sustain Victoria’s cultural and creative industries following the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector.

Australia’s arts, cultural and creative sector was among the first and hardest-hit casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic – nowhere more so than in Victoria, where much of the pandemic’s disproportionate and greatly avoidable impacts have put the sector in peril.

Arts participation is often talked about as a human right, but less is said about the rights of the people making that art. This Inquiry must directly address practitioners’ precarious and subsistence living conditions, which have worsened since the pandemic, even as we came to rely ever more heavily on their work.

Independent artists and arts workers (of which our sector has a disproportionate number) were ineligible to apply for much of the targeted COVID-19 support provided by Commonwealth and State Governments at the peak of the pandemic (an investment that did not last as long as the pandemic's ongoing effects). Investment in longer-term initiatives such as Arts Centre Melbourne's Arts Wellbeing Collective raised expectations and began to address growing needs, before being summarily shut down four days prior to the end of the 2024 working year (including subsequent erasure of its significant archive of sector mental health resources).

It's no wonder the 2024 Artists as Workers report from Creative Australia showed it's '*never been harder*' for Australian artists to make a living. The report notes that only one-third of artists have returned to pre-COVID working hours, with just over half partially returned or in the process of returning, leaving 16 per cent who don't believe they will be able to do so at all.

Overall, total incomes have either plateaued or fallen since 2000, so Victorian artists can now barely expect to exceed minimum wage (falling 26 per cent below the national average and 45 per cent less than similarly-educated workers – of which we are amongst the highest, though access to that education has also substantially decreased, along with the reputation of Victoria's arts education providers).

We are now in the midst of a nationwide cultural workforce and wellbeing crisis characterised by exhaustion, burnout and a new sense of perspective that has left many unwilling to put up with the poor practices of the past. It has also deepened our sector's prevailing monoculture and lack of cultural safety.

"As governments, advocacy groups, academics, and international agencies have been talking up the glamour of the creative industries," O'Connor writes, "upstairs, in Dorian Grey's attic, 'actually existing' creative industries looked very different. Studies of creative labour have been around for nearly two decades, stressing low pay, lack of pensions or health insurance, no paid holidays, precarity, self-exploitation and, indeed, exploitation. All the while, we followed the cheerleaders who told us how great this work was and how we will, eventually, make it. The pandemic merely stripped away the last illusions."

Our 'post'-pandemic workforce is far beyond burnout, with artists, arts workers, leaders and volunteer board members leaving the sector entirely (and not being replaced at anywhere near the same rate). With almost everyone experiencing some level of brokenness or burnout at the moment, Victoria's arts and cultural sector is being torn apart by austerity and precarity, poor governance, risk and crisis management practices, and even worse interpersonal behaviours.

Independent practitioners are finding it harder to make a living, refusing and being refused work, and being censored, silenced and punished for making issues-based statements at previously unimaginable rates. Organisations, funders and donors are losing credibility and viability, with recent fumbles and failures making mainstream news headlines and creating an increasingly unsafe and fearful culture that's undermining the value and impact of all of our work (with Victorian organisations regrettably leading poor practice in terms of censorship, cultural safety and conflicts of interest over the last year).

To address such systemic issues, this Inquiry must not only significantly increase all forms of arts and cultural organisational funding from across State Government portfolios, but also commit to a complete overhaul of policy, strategy and investment priorities and settings.

This includes recognising artists and cultural workers as essential workers, with the same rights as those in other industries – be that through a minimum artist income scheme or other universal basic services, wage standards, job guarantees, fellowships, public employment opportunities, or other forms of income support.

"All public funding for arts and cultural projects should be contingent on fair pay for the people who make the work," Mills suggests. "Alongside the current project-based model, arts funding should investigate and trial better ways of employing artists in more secure forms of work."

We also need policy settings around creative education and training, protection of copyright and intellectual property (including new protections for digital creation and distribution), support for mobility and export, innovative business models, fit-for-purpose legislative, regulatory, tax and investment

incentives, expanded collective bargaining rights, removal of tax on prizes and grants, and changes to superannuation and tax legislation to ensure artists receive superannuation on all their client income.

Without doing so, we risk homogenising the types of artists who can afford to work for so little return, and making creative practice something only the wealthy and privileged can afford.

Creating in a changing world

We live in polycrisis times: in post Voice referendum “Australia”, in the midst of visible local and international legal and human rights abuses, and in a decimated sector impacted by an ongoing pandemic, cost of living, climate and mental health crises, and more.

All of which has raised awareness of and reduced tolerance for things we’ve always known. Including that, in the main, our sector and organisations are not accessible, equitable, representative or culturally safe (and are, in fact, becoming less so). And that these issues are systemic and deeply embedded, and reinforced by funding and support that rely on us to do too much with too little in ways that compromise people and outcomes.

The benefits of engagement in arts, culture and creativity are countless, well documented and cut across all State Government portfolio areas – as well as 97% of the Australian community (more than double the number of people who engage on a similar frequency with sport).

This Inquiry has the opportunity to recognise this significant contribution by implementing new mechanisms for genuine cross-government collaboration, investment and support.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you need any further information.

With best regards,

Kate Larsen (she/her)

Living and working on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung, Naarm/Melbourne