

Australia: Artists expose devastating impact of government funding cuts

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Artists, musicians and senior cultural administrators appearing before a New South Wales parliamentary inquiry in Sydney on December 10 delivered a damning indictment of the state Labor government's cost-cutting measures. Their testimony exposed the destructive impact on cultural life of deep funding cuts and bureaucratic restructuring being implemented by federal and state governments.

The evidence revealed not isolated administrative failures, but a systematic undermining of publicly funded arts organisations. Across disciplines—visual art, music, performance, craft, design and dance—witnesses described worsening job insecurity, unpaid labour, collapsing institutions and the silencing of dissent within a funding regime that increasingly treats artists as expendable.

Independent visual artist Stephanie Peters told the inquiry that despite more than 14 years of professional experience across public art, community engagement and cultural programs, her working life remains “extremely precarious.” Like most independent artists, she survives on short-term contracts, unpaid development work and uncertain grant cycles, without access to a living wage, affordable workspaces or basic professional protections.

“These are working people essential to delivering cultural outcomes for NSW communities,” Peters said, yet artists are routinely excluded from decision-making processes that directly shape their livelihoods. She said that artists who speak publicly about funding failures risk being labelled “difficult” and quietly excluded from future work.

Professional jazz musician and academic Darren Heinrich described similar conditions. Despite four decades of professional experience, international recording credits, multiple albums and the world's first

PhD in jazz organ improvisation, Heinrich told the inquiry it remains extraordinarily difficult to earn a viable income as a working musician. Nearly half of professional musicians earn less than \$15,000 per year.

Both Peters and Heinrich detailed the demanding character of competitive grant systems. Peters applied for 17 expressions of interest in a single year, many requiring days or weeks of unpaid preparation. Heinrich said individual grant applications can demand 40 to 50 hours of work, diverting musicians from practising, teaching or performing. Applicants often wait months for decisions, only to receive generic rejection emails without meaningful feedback. In some cases, Peters said, Create NSW did not even publish the names of successful applicants, preventing artists from understanding what work was being funded and why.

This lack of transparency has produced a climate of fear. Artists are reluctant to request feedback or criticise funding bodies such as Create NSW or Sound NSW for fear of being informally blacklisted. Heinrich warned that even seeking clarification can result in artists being viewed as “troublemakers” within a tightly controlled funding ecosystem.

Leaders of small and medium arts organisations described the sector as being in open crisis. Lisa Cahill, Executive Director of the Australian Design Centre (ADC), told the inquiry the organisation will be forced to close by June 30 next year unless emergency funding is secured. Founded in 1964, ADC supports about 1,000 artists annually and reaches up to 350,000 visitors through exhibitions, touring, publishing and digital platforms.

Despite operating with just five full-time staff, ADC has had its core operational funding progressively slashed. Four-year state funding of \$300,000 per annum—already cut by more than 50 percent in

2016—will be reduced to \$150,000 per year from 2026. Operational support from the Albanese Labor government has also been withdrawn.

As a result, 18 annual exhibitions in Sydney will cease, the Object Shop supporting 150 makers will close, touring exhibitions will end, and initiatives such as Sydney Craft Week may collapse. If ADC closes, New South Wales will become the only Australian jurisdiction without a government-funded craft and design organisation.

Justine Shih Pearson, CEO of PACT Centre for Emerging Artists, described a similar crisis. Founded in 1964, PACT supports hundreds of young and emerging artists through theatre, dance and performance. Despite receiving four-year funding from Create NSW, PACT's allocation this year was cut by 50 percent—from \$200,000 to \$100,000 per year. Pearson said the organisation has been forced into crisis restructuring, cutting staff by a third and reducing creative opportunities for emerging artists by more than 50 percent.

Carl Sciberras, general manager of Dance Makers Collective, described the human toll of the cuts. After the government's funding announcements, he spent hours on the phone speaking with arts workers "beside themselves, some of whom were borderline suicidal," unable to reach anyone at Create NSW for days. "Those sorts of things are disgusting," he told the inquiry.

Sciberras explained that Dance Makers Collective leverages nearly \$9 for every dollar of state funding yet will receive just \$150,000—barely enough to employ two staff. He condemned the chronic underfunding of the arts as a political choice, driven by the false premise that culture is a "nice to have" rather than an essential social need.

The funding crisis extends to major cultural institutions. State Labor budget cuts forced the Art Gallery of NSW to eliminate nearly 12 percent of its workforce amid a \$7.5 million revenue shortfall. The Museum of Contemporary Art cut 20 percent of staff and introduced adult entry fees to remain solvent.

Regional arts organisations outside Sydney reported severe funding problems. Witnesses rejected the portrayal of regional arts as secondary. Despite COVID, natural disasters and rising costs, regional New South Wales produces nationally significant work,

but this is being hollowed out by the restructuring of Create NSW funding.

At the centre of the crisis is the dismantling of Regional Arts Development Organisations (RADOs), previously treated as essential service bodies. Forced into competitive funding pools, at least one RADO—servicing Dubbo—has been completely defunded, shedding staff and ceasing services. Tracey Callinan of Regional Arts NSW warned defunding a RADO punishes entire communities, depriving artists of mentoring, advocacy and professional development.

As funding contracts, exhibitions are cancelled, commissions eliminated and community programs abandoned. First Nations engagement and youth pathways are often the first to go.

Arts funding at both state and federal levels has fallen to historic lows, with federal arts spending under the Revive program at just \$25 million for 2025–27—below pre-2013 levels. Meanwhile, governments are committing hundreds of billions to military expansion and maintaining vast tax concessions for corporations and the wealthy.

These developments are mirrored nationally. In Victoria, the state Labor government has ordered Museums Victoria to axe 55 jobs and is raising entry ticket prices. The Australian Ballet reported losses of \$21.5 million, offset only by private philanthropy. Melbourne's La Mama Theatre has suspended programming for a year after unsuccessful federal funding applications.

The destruction of cultural infrastructure is not accidental. It is the product of cost-cutting policies aimed at shifting the burden of economic crisis onto working people. Artists, cultural workers and regional communities are told to accept insecurity, unpaid labour and institutional collapse while tax concessions and other measures to boost private profit are offered to big business.



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