

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts

My name is Kate McMillan and I am forty year old Visual Artist, now based in London. My home state is Western Australia and I left there almost three years ago in search of better opportunities for my practice. In general terms I might be considered successful – my work has been shown in major Biennales, museums and institutions around the world and I have had opportunities to research and be resident in Hong Kong, China, Switzerland, Germany, Japan and London. I have a PhD and teach art at various universities including Kings College, University of Creative Arts, Farnham and am an external examiner at Brighton University. I have sat as a peer on the Australia Council, on the Board of Directors at PICA and at NAVA. So I guess that makes me both a practicing artist, a teacher and also someone that has a long history of being a supporter and advocator of Australian Visual Arts for a long time. I have been mentored and supported by amazing women throughout my career and feel quite lucky.

However, the everyday experience of this seemingly successful career path does not feel particularly successful. When I graduated from Curtin University in Perth in 1994 I volunteered fulltime for a year running a local Community Art Centre. I worked in a part-time job throughout this year to pay my rent and to support my art practice which continued on top of my full time volunteering and my part time work. The following year I became involved in the Verge Gallery, an artist run space in Perth that provided cheap studios and gallery space to local and national artists. It was a lot of work but I also learnt a lot. In both these unpaid roles I learnt to work with local government and to advocate and promote what the arts contributes, which is sometimes hard to qualify to people who only want to see obvious dollar returns. I was involved with the Verge for about four years.

Throughout this period I worked as a cleaner, babysitter, mentor for young foster kids and eventually a casual academic. In the late 1990s I was asked onto the Board of Directors at PICA. I was one of the few artists of my generation that had survived working part-time and full-time jobs and maintained a serious art practice. Of the 100 people in my graduating year, only myself and one other person were still active artists after ten years. It would be another 15 years before I had a gallery that could actively sell my work, despite being in Biennale's, national shows, international residencies. Opportunities that rarely paid a fee, never sold my work and always required me to work in other jobs to fund production costs for my work. To be clear, this is not the same experience

as many other western democratic nations who offer private and government support for the arts in ways Australian artists could only dream about. And of course thriving art markets that mean that one day maybe, artists can quit cleaning work, bar work and other jobs, to be fulltime artists.

Only a handful of good contemporary Australian artists can work on their art fulltime – and no-one I know personally. Often they have partners who have supported them, or families. Or they spend the majority of their time producing highly saleable paintings, which distract from the real creative excellence they wish they could pursue. This of course means that these lucky artists are rarely working class, of colour or women.

Despite this incredibly hard slog it has been agencies such as PICA, Performance Space, the Centre for Contemporary Photography, artist run spaces across the nation that have supported me by showing my work, giving me hope that my work is worth pursuing and that I am part of something bigger than my own day to day struggles.

I have had two international studios from the Australia Council – Tokyo in 2002, which I count as game-changing to this day. My work shifted dramatically after having three months to singularly focus on my art – an experience that was completely new even after a decade of being an artist. Two years ago I received the London studio and decided to move to London at the same time. The studio gave me the legitimacy I needed to move in and become part of the London art world – perhaps the only place I can now live where there may be a future for what I do. There are thousands of artists living in this city, off their practices. The museums are free and revered. Culture is part of the national identity and people don't regard me with suspicion as if I'm another bludging artist trying to take tax payer dollars. I have cultural capital even though I still work three jobs and pour everything I earn into my next project, leaving me poorer than most.

Even before these cuts the Australia Council budget was, quite frankly, pathetic. There are so many projects that have not been realised or supported that should have been. Now there will be more. Last month the Australia Council did not have enough funds to support a major new show of mine alongside Fiona Hall at the Berlin Biennale next year at one of the biggest institutions in Europe, the Kunsthaus Bethanien. I am still in shock that an opportunity of this calibre can go unsupported. And now a whole generation, or more, of artists will not even get the early support I have had to travel and extend audiences for their work or to have worthy pursuits that don't have immediate economic outcomes supported.

We measure the value of a place by the culture it produces. Right now Australia ranks very low on the scale. Artists are leaving in their droves. It is too hard to throw away years of effort and hard work because there is just nowhere to go anymore. Opportunities run out very quickly and we are losing our storytellers to bigger and better narratives. I would like to come home – to do my culture where my stories come from – but I doubt that will ever happen. These cuts feel like the last nail in the coffin. But I will keep fighting from afar. Australia is full of great artists who have had to work harder than most, create ways around obstacles bigger than most - and I feel incredibly sad.