

Artist-led Initiatives and Small Arts Organisations

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts.



Liquid Architecture
Christof Migone, *Hit Parade*, NGV Great Hall, 2014
Credit: Aksana Hugo Anastas

Author

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Contributors

This report drew on data collected from the following 19 small and artist-led organisations across Australia:

ANCA (Australian National Capital Artists) (Canberra, ACT)
anca.net.au

Articulate (Sydney, NSW)
articulate497.blogspot.com.au

Blindside (Melbourne, VIC)
blindside.org.au

Bus Projects (Melbourne, VIC)
busprojects.org.au

c3 contemporary art space (Abbotsford, VIC)
c3artspace.com.au

Discipline (Melbourne, VIC)
discipline.net.au

Dissect Journal (Melbourne, VIC)
dissectjournal.com

Firstdraft (Sydney, NSW)
firstdraft.org.au

Kings Artist Run (Melbourne, VIC)
kingsartistrun.org.au

Liquid Architecture (Melbourne, VIC)
liquidarchitecture.org.au

MOANA Project Space (Perth, WA)
moana-ari.com

Paper Mountain (Perth, WA)
papermountain.org.au

runway (Sydney, NSW)
runway.org.au

SafARI (Sydney, NSW)
www.safari.org.au

Seventh (Melbourne, VIC)
seventhgallery.org

Sticky Institute (Melbourne, VIC)
stickyinstitute.com

TCB (Melbourne, VIC)
tcbartinc.org.au

un Magazine (Melbourne, VIC)
unprojects.org.au

West Space (Melbourne, VIC)
westspace.org.au

Overview – What are Artist-Led Spaces and Small Arts Organisations?

This document is a case study in the value that small arts organisations and artist-run initiatives (ARIs) add to the overall ecology of the visual arts in Australia.

Australian ARIs and small arts organisations make a **significant contribution to the Australian arts industry**. They are incubators for the new; they present diverse and often innovative artistic programs; they provide support, opportunities and funding for living Australian artists; they develop audiences for contemporary art; they incorporate significant national and international peer-to-peer networks; and they foster the next generation of artistic excellence in this country.

Across Australia there is a **great diversity** of over fifty artist-led projects, artist-run spaces and small arts organisations as well as countless artistic collectives. They pursue incredibly diverse artistic practices, and provide community hubs for congregations of artists, arts workers and audiences with shared interests.

This substantial contribution is made possible by **modest investment from government** as well as strong and increasing levels of **philanthropic support and earned income**. ARIs and small organisations are also supported by **substantial contributions of volunteer labor**.

The small and artist-led sector encompasses a range of organisational models, from the **relatively established to new players on the arts scene**. Some are relatively institutionalised: for instance, West Space, an artist-led space in Melbourne, and Firstdraft, an artist-led space in Sydney, have celebrated their 20-year anniversaries. Others are highly dynamic: many artist-led projects exist for a few years or even months, taking advantage of specific opportunities or rising and subsiding in accordance with their organisers' energies and resources. This sector is able to change rapidly in response to opportunities, needs and desires.

ARIs and small organisations are formed for diverse reasons; sometimes, for instance, around spaces, projects, publications or specific art forms (such as sound art or live art). They operate according to **diverse organisational models**, some tried and tested and others innovative and entrepreneurial. Small organisations are often progressive, embracing modes of working that are cross-disciplinary and without hierarchy.

“In visual arts, it is the energy of our solo practitioners and the stewardship of our small-to-medium arts sector that matters most. This sector is the most active and most critical part of our arts ecology. It is this sector that is now the main target of unnecessary funding cuts.”

Sonia Leber & David Chesworth
Artists



Catalyst for this Report

The catalyst for this report is the Federal Government's transfer of \$104 million from the Australia Council for the Arts to create a National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA).



The Australia Council for the Arts has been a crucial provider of support to ARIs and small organisations. Under the previous funding guidelines, a significant portion of the \$104 million would have been distributed to the small-to-medium sector as well as to individual artists.

While the criteria are still relatively oblique, a reading of the recently released draft guidelines for the NPEA suggests that it is highly unlikely that many small-to-medium organisations will be successful applicants for funding through the NPEA. Given their grassroots nature and their key role as an incubator for new ideas, small organisations and ARIs may not be an easy fit for the three grants streams: Endowment Incentives, International and Cultural Diplomacy, or Strategic Initiatives.

The NPEA guidelines state that it is unlikely to provide operational funding, which indicates increased instability for those organisations currently receiving organisational funding from the Australia Council. This lack of security in the small-to-medium sector's organisational funding impacts the attractiveness to private sector support.

The NPEA guidelines also clearly stipulate that individual artists cannot apply for funding, which means artists – who are the core of the visual arts sector – will certainly be disadvantaged.

The removal of crucial funding from ARIs and small organisations, and from individual artists, will significantly impact the grassroots tier of the overall Australian arts ecology. It will mean vastly increased precariousness across the sector. The small-to-medium sector and individual artists are, by necessity, highly resilient and flexible; however, feedback across the sector indicates that significant negative impacts are expected. These include:

- the closure of spaces and organisations;
- loss of employment for paid staff;
- loss of funding for artists and other arts workers (such as writers and curators);
- loss of professional skill-building opportunities for paid and unpaid arts workers;
- reduced opportunities for the presentation of new Australian work;
- reduced capacity to generate Australian content and tell Australian stories;
- loss of specialist artistic content for audiences;
- reduced ability to liaise with similarly specialist national and international arts communities;
- reduction in private philanthropy.

These impacts will start to be appreciated in late 2016, when current funding contracts draw to a close and there is a drying up of funding available to ARIs, small organisations and artists.



runway: 1. launch #25 2. launch #24
3. launch of artist commissions.

Financial and Capacity Snapshot

This snapshot is based on data from the 19 organisations (listed previously) who gave data for the year 2014.

Financial data: Amount of government funding received \$ value (NB: 17 of the 19 organisations received government funding in 2014.) (i.e. federal, state or local council, operational or project-based)	\$979,702
Financial data: Self-generated income \$ value (NB: 18 of the 19 organisations self-generated income in 2014.) (i.e. fundraising, studio or gallery rent, bar sales, tickets sold, etc)	\$778,775
Financial data: Total turnover \$ value (The total turnover of these 19 organisations for 2014 amounted to approximately \$1,758,477.)	\$1,758,477
Financial data: Money paid directly to artists and other creative practitioners \$ value (NB: 16 of the 19 organisations paid money directly to artists or other creative practitioners [writers, curators, etc] in 2014.)	\$462,221
Financial data: Employment for (paid) staff Number of hours of paid work per week (NB: 10 of the 19 organisations had paid staff in 2014. These 10 organisations provided 332 hours of paid work per week for 2014. Organisations usually expressed this data descriptively i.e. 'one paid staff member 12-hours per week'. The level of payment per hour varies.)	332 hours per week
Financial data: Remuneration to (paid) staff \$ value (NB: 10 of the 19 organisations had paid staff, and this is the total remuneration for 2014.)	\$308,483
Financial data: Amount of in-kind/unpaid contributions \$ value (NB: 18 of the 19 organisations relied on volunteer or unpaid contributions of labour. The combined value of this contribution for 2014 was estimated to be \$1,523,190 for 2014. The following guidelines were suggested to help organisations add up contributions: • NAVA's 'casual staff rate' is \$23 per hour. • NAVA's 'Specialist middle managers' salary range for a small org (1–3 people) is \$40,238 - \$68,979.)	\$1,523,190
Support for artists: Number of artists programmed (i.e. whether across exhibitions, events, artist talks, etc. All of the organisations programmed artists in 2014.)	2,837
Artistic program: Number of exhibitions or events programmed (i.e. including exhibitions, events, lectures, performances, etc.)	1,836
Support for new work: Percentage of content that comprised new works (i.e. usually stated as '80% of all exhibited works were new works'.)	89%
Proposals: Number of proposals received (NB: 16 of the 19 organisations accepted proposals. These were annual or bi-annual public calls for proposals.)	3,469
Audience attendance: Number of people that attended exhibitions/events	235,794
Online visitation: Number of visitors to website or facebook page (NB: Only 11 of the 19 organisations could provide this data.)	229,744



Dissect Journal launch at the IMA, Brisbane, 2015.



Seventh Gallery Melbourne

Organisational Overview

There is a **great range of operational and funding models**, making it hard to summarise or generalise. Across the sector, some organisations are completely self-supporting (usually paying overheads through rental income from studios or galleries); some are completely managed and self-funded by the participants; some receive funding from government for core operational costs; and some exist on project-to-project funding. Many are a mix of the above: for instance, an ARI might receive rent through gallery or studio hire to cover their basic operational costs but also receive project funding that enables them to pay artists and writers for a discrete artistic program.

Of the 19 organisations surveyed, 17 organisations received government funding. In 2014, these 17 organisations received a total amount of \$979,702.

Of the 19 organisations surveyed, 18 organisations self-generated income. In 2014, these 18 organisations earned a total amount of \$778,775.

Based on these figures, the total turnover of these 19 organisations amounted to approximately \$1,758,477.

The last decade has seen **particular challenges** for this sector. Many of these relate to **housing affordability**, especially in urban centres where there are increasing cost-based obstacles impeding access to space. For instance, Melbourne has long had lively communities of independent arts spaces and venues, but their business models are becoming increasingly unsustainable as property rental prices continue to skyrocket.

Artists and arts workers are great subsidisers of small and artist-led organisations. This is already an under-resourced sector that relies heavily on volunteer and subsidised contributions. These contributions should not be undervalued. It is customary in the sector for many artists and arts workers to self-fund their projects as well as to contribute labor for free. Furthermore, in most artist-run spaces in Australia, artists pay a fee to hire the gallery space, an additional cost that is regretted by many in the sector.

The small and artist-led sector is an **increasingly professionalised and efficient ecology**. Those organisations that pursue organisational funding from government and the private sector must provide strong evidence of their governance and managerial abilities. Over the last decade many participants in this sector have undertaken professional capacity-building training. Examples of this include individual professional development programs (such as the Australia Council's 'Emerging Leaders Program') and organisation-wide capacity-building programs (such as Creative Victoria's recent 'Strategic Planning Capacity Building Program', a series of fortnightly webinars). Consequently, some organisations in this sector are skilled in a complex matrix of governance competencies, including business and strategic planning, board audits, developing plans for private sector and earned income, building and understanding audiences, assessing artistic vibrancy, conducting annual external financial audits, and developing sophisticated marketing plans. Those organisations competing for project funding are also practiced at writing and acquitting grants against complex criteria and following stringent reporting guidelines.

A great disadvantage of the re-routing of funding to the NPEA is that it **destabilises the careful governance work** done by small and artist-led organisations.

The small and artist-led sector works in highly professionalised but also highly entrepreneurial modes. The Australia Council has supported this growth not only through opportunities for direct funding for well-managed and high-achieving organisations but also through offering guidance and advocacy.

Furthermore, some of the **NPEA's processes seem to duplicate processes** already evident in the sector; for instance, the highly supported principle of peer assessment was already strongly in place at the Australia Council.

“Artist run initiatives (ARIs) perform a crucial function in the complex system of the contemporary art world.

They are the primary avenue for emerging artists to access new and broad audiences whilst providing support for young practitioners. ARIs provide a platform for innovation and exploration and importantly access to curators and writers and hence contribute a significant stepping stone in an artist’s career.

As a respected commercial gallerist for the past 24 years, I believe that virtually every artist I have represented has truly benefitted from their involvement with an ARI. Some of my very established artists continue to have ongoing involvement in these organisations. Any decreased funding to this sector of the visual arts would severely hamper their ability to function effectively.”

Irene Sutton
Sutton Gallery

Paper Mountain Perth



Staffing and Professional Development Benefits

Small and artist-led organisations are **significant employers**. In 2014, 10 of the 19 organisations had paid staff. These 10 organisations provided 332 hours of paid work each week. Over 2014, these 10 organisations distributed \$308,483 to paid staff. Much of this paid employment is under direct threat as a result of the change in funding paradigm.

Furthermore, a significant proportion of the work in small and artist-led organisations is done by **dedicated unpaid volunteers**, including committee and board members, volunteers and interns, and contributions from staff above their paid hours. These contributions are from people who love art and are passionate about what they do. In 2014, all of the 19 organisations surveyed relied on unpaid contributions of labour. They calculated the value of these unpaid contributions at \$1,523,190 (using NAVA rates of pay as a basis).

Artists themselves are great subsidisers of artist-led and small organisations. They often subsidise the development of the artwork that is presented through these organisations, as well as sometimes paying rental fees on space. Many artists also contribute to the volunteer management of ARIs and small organisations – hence, the notion of ‘artist-run’ or ‘artist-led’ initiatives. Many people work in multiple capacities across the arts – they may be artists who also act as curators, writers or arts administrators.

Small and artist-led organisations are important spaces for the development of **professional skills and peer networks for artists and arts workers**. They are places where critical discussions about art practice takes place. Furthermore, small organisations provide opportunities for artists to develop business and professional skills, such as marketing, writing and acquitting grant applications, strategies for audience development, and the multiple skills required to run any small business.

The small and artist-led sector also **benefits from the contributions and support of those working in industries outside the arts**. The boards of many organisations gather together professionals with wide-ranging experience: it is usual to see board members with professional experience in areas such as finance, law, health, architecture and design, construction, philanthropy, academia and education. The audiences that attend these artistic programs, and the increasing number of private donors that support these organisations, often come from outside the arts.



ANCA (Australian National Capital Artists) Canberra.
Opening of Graham Eadie's *Argonautica*, 2014

“Australia is internationally recognised for its artist run initiative network. Visiting curators, artists, writers and collectors always want to know which ARI spaces to visit to observe most closely the pulse of the local artistic community.

ARIs such as Westspace, TCB Inc, Firstdraft, Bus and Kings all play a key role in the creative life of Australia, nurturing artists at all stages of their careers; providing physical and social spaces for the artistic community to create, debate and grow; and providing an array of opportunities to artists, curators and writers that ensures a level of career sustainability. Without the work of ARIs and their programs the medium-to-large arts sector in Australia would struggle to maintain a genuine connection to new, emerging and experimental practices.

A country of our scale and geographical isolation requires a robust arts ecology that acknowledges through support the bigger picture of artistic life - the individual, collective and organisation; the emerging, mid-career and established; the new, experimental and tried-and-tested; the project, the pop up, the program, the publication, the tour, the festival.

A strong understanding of the life span of an artist’s career, and the necessary opportunities required to ensure its viability, is essential to best support and value not only the work of artists but the work of the organisations, individuals and structures that form our arts industry.”

Hannah Mathews
Curator



Firstdraft Sydney
Speculative Everything, curated by Amelia Wallin, 2014
Bergie Seltzer, curated by Will French, 2014

Support for Living Australian Artists

Artist-led and small organisations **work directly with living Australian artists**, providing crucial support to Australian artists of all art forms, ages and stages of their career.

This support is often in the form of **direct funding**. In 2014, 16 of the 19 organisations paid \$462,221 directly to artists and other creative practitioners.

This support is also in the form of **presentation opportunities**. In 2014, the 19 organisations worked with 2,837 artists and presented 1,836 exhibitions or events.

These presentation opportunities also overwhelmingly support artists to develop **new Australian artworks**. In 2014, the 19 organisations estimated that around 89% of exhibited works were new works.

This support is often in the form of **facilitating opportunities**, such as introducing artists to visiting inter-state or international curators and organisations, which can lead to significant future opportunities.

Most of these spaces accept proposals from artists and curators through **public calls for proposals**, which are usually offered on an annual or bi-annual basis. The figures give insight into what is a highly over-subscribed system. Of the 19 organisations surveyed, 16 accepted proposals. In 2014, these 16 organisations received 3,469 proposals.

Artist-led and small organisations often provide **crucial support for artists in the early stages of their careers**, including the transition from art school to a career as a professional artist. This support includes first exhibition opportunities, the development of professional skills, and critical feedback and mentoring. There are close relationships between these organisations and the tertiary art school system.

Importantly, small and artist-led organisations **continue to be profoundly significant to artists throughout their entire artistic careers**. Those involved in small and artist-led organisations regret the perception that it's primarily 'young and/ or emerging' artists involved in these initiatives, using these spaces as 'stepping-stones' on a career trajectory that presumably leads from small spaces, through the mediums, and up into the majors. The available evidence largely does not support this perception: the careers of artists tend to be far more convoluted and circuitous. In reality, many artists continue to be involved with artist-led projects throughout their careers, staying connected to other practitioners and audience members who share artistic concerns and who can participate in critical dialogue.

As noted, a significant concern within small and artist-led organisations is the **NPEA's guidelines that expressly prohibit individual artists** applying for the \$104 million of funding allocated by the Minister. The small and artist-led sector works directly with Australian artists and is keenly aware of the importance of direct funding for the development of Australian artists and new Australian artworks. The sector is concerned not only with the development of organisational sustainability but also with the enabling of funding for individual artists. Under the previous funding guidelines, some of the \$104 million would have gone directly to artists – indeed, the Australia Council has maintained that it is a priority to directly fund artists. Consequently, how to enable individual artists to directly access funding in this new paradigm is a major challenge for the small and artist-led sector.

“ARIs provide a pivotal platform for emerging artists, curators and writers to present new ideas and artworks, free from the pressure and compromises of the commercial and institutional sector that can inhibit the development of a strong and independent practice. Without this testing ground, the cohesive and sustainable structure for developing rich and innovative cultural practices will be broken.”

Nick Mangan
Artist



Paper Mountain Perth

Support for Traditions and Innovations in Australian Art

An important aspect of ARIs and small organisations is their support for specific artistic practices. These organisations tend to be **highly nuanced in their artistic offerings**, enabling artists and audiences access to specialist practices in the arts. Small organisations and ARIs can work in highly specific ways; they can be nimble and very responsive to changes in Australian and international art practices.

“I work as a haematologist at University Hospital Geelong and look after patients with blood cancers such as leukaemias and lymphomas. This is busy and often stressful work and I, like many of my colleagues, rely heavily on the enjoyment of art of all kinds as a means not only of daily escape from the demands of the job but also of ongoing and emotionally strengthening engagement with the wider non-medical community.

I have long had a passion for music and sound art. I have a particular interest in experimental and adventurous modern music. In 2015 I decided to make a philanthropic contribution to the local arts community. I donated \$10,000 to Liquid Architecture as a means of returning something to a local arts community that had long been engaged in presenting the kind of art that helps me to get out of bed every day.”

Dr David Kipp
Haematologist

ARIs and small organisations are important for **driving forward the leading edge of art practice**. Many small organisations are incubators for new practices that are not yet widely understood in mainstream arts organisations. Progressive, innovative, and unashamedly radical art is sometimes practiced and presented in this sector. Over time, these experimental practices and new innovations often prove important to the story of Australian (and international) art; however, while nascent, they are encouraged primarily through the support of the niche organisations, philanthropists and audiences that first show interest in them.

For instance, the Liquid Architecture Sound Art Festival has supported the growing field of sound art, with strong networks across Australia and internationally. Sound art has grown in visibility in the mainstream: for instance, MoMA in New York had its inaugural sound art exhibition *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* in 2013, featuring work by Marco Fusinato, who had previously presented work in independent collectives and artist-led projects in Australia.

In contrast, some artist-led spaces continue to **support practices with relatively long and interesting lineages** in Australian art practice. For instance, SNO (Sydney Non-Objective), a gallery based in Marrickville, Sydney, was opened by artists in 2003 as a way to continue supporting the development of new genres and practices of abstract art, a lineage with a rich history of Australian and international practitioners.

Another good illustration of the **long and distinguished history of artist-led projects in Australian art** is provided by the artists who were connected to Australian Impressionism (formerly, and still colloquially, known as the ‘Heidelberg School’). In 1889, a group of artists, frustrated at being ignored by established galleries and museums, and tired of having their new artistic processes ridiculed by the academies and critics, decided to independently present their work. The resulting *9 x 5 Impressions Exhibition* was one Australia’s first independent and artist-led exhibitions. While it was roundly ridiculed by the established art sector and contemporary art critics, the public was highly interested and most of the works sold. Now, many of the participating artists, such as Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin, are some of Australia’s most beloved artists. Their new innovations – lambasted at the time – have been reappraised as crucial to the development of a properly Australian art and Australia’s most established institutions compete keenly to hold the artworks in their collections. These once radical practices are now widely recognised as a vital part of Australia’s identity.

Many small and artist-led organisations have **extensive national and international networks**. The international art industry is a complex matrix in which peer-to-peer networks are highly significant. The spheres of influence for different artistic communities extend across Australia and the globe – they are complex and highly nuanced relationships. The international connections of the small and artist-led network should not be under-valued: many profound opportunities for Australian art practice on the world stage have arisen through shared artistic values held by smaller internationally-connected artistic collectives.

A recent example of **Australian ARIs on the world stage** is provided by the inclusion of the artist-led organisations Hell Gallery and Y3K Gallery in the Tate Modern’s *No Soul For Sale – A Festival of Independents*, which brought together over 70 of the world’s most exciting independent art spaces in a curated festival in the Turbine Hall in 2010. The small to medium sector is also an important supporter of cross-cultural arts practice and dialogue.



Seventh Gallery **Melbourne**



Sticky Institute **Melbourne**

Exciting Content for Audiences



The small and artist-led sector **generates significant audiences**. In 2014, the 19 organisations had a combined attendance of 235,794 for 2014.

Eleven of the organisations could provide data on the number of visitors to their website or facebook page. These 11 organisations had 229,744 online visitors in 2014.

The small and artist-led sector provides **multiple points of entry for diverse audiences**. These spaces and organisations typically foster a friendly, externally focused 'open door' model. Artist-led galleries and spaces are free for audiences to visit, while the cost of attending ticketed events and performances is usually very low, often in the range of \$5 to \$20. The core artistic program for many artist-run galleries turns over regularly, with new exhibitions opening every two to four weeks.

Alongside their core artistic programs, many spaces run **sophisticated public programs**, including, for example, artist talks, art history lectures, discursive programming extending on ideas in art projects, and specialist content for different audiences. Many spaces have free educational sessions for university or secondary students.

Many participants in the small and artist-led sector have been **early adopters and strong users of digital technologies and social media**. These organisations rarely have funding to support marketing budgets in traditional cost-for-placement marketing domains: instead, small organisations have exploited online and social media to develop strong cohorts of national and international followers. Many organisations have strong and sophisticated online presences, comprising websites and social media as well as, increasingly, podcasts, video and other digitally distributed content. Many use these platforms in creative and experimental ways. Many also attract coverage in mainstream media.

The audience demographic for the small and artist-led sector is broad, with **current audience segments** including:

- Practicing artists: emerging and established, across diverse art forms and from diverse communities.
- Arts industry professionals: those in the creative industries, such as writers, curators, arts industry colleagues, critics, designers, architects etc.
- Undergraduate and postgraduate cultural students and lecturers (fine arts, art history, architecture, craft, design, music, theatre, cultural and media studies).
- High school students
- Visiting international artists and arts industry professionals.
- Festival audiences.
- General public: audiences interested in the arts and cultural experiences.
- Tourists and visitors to Melbourne seeking cultural entertainment activities.

Many small and artist-led organisations are **practised at measuring impact** using a range of quantitative and qualitative measures. Most organisations consistently collect and evaluate quantitative data, such as audience attendance, subscription levels, ticket sales and website hits. Their ability to collect data was evidenced during the preparation of this report: most organisations were able to respond quickly and comprehensively to our request for information.

These organisations also **undertake qualitative and critical evaluation of their artistic programs**. Many continually assess the merit and quality of their programs and strive for best practice. Artistic quality is notoriously difficult to measure, but these organisations customarily have nuanced criteria that are aligned with their specific artistic interests. These are often internationally benchmarked: many participants are highly aware of international trends and dialogues in contemporary art and many also contribute to these dialogues. Many small organisations also adopt frameworks for measuring artistic merit developed by agencies in the sector. The Australia Council for the Arts' 'Artistic Vibrancy' framework is an important example of such research.



un Magazine Melbourne

1. *un Retrospective*, in *Melbourne Now*, NGV, 2014.

2. Launch of *un Magazine* 7.2