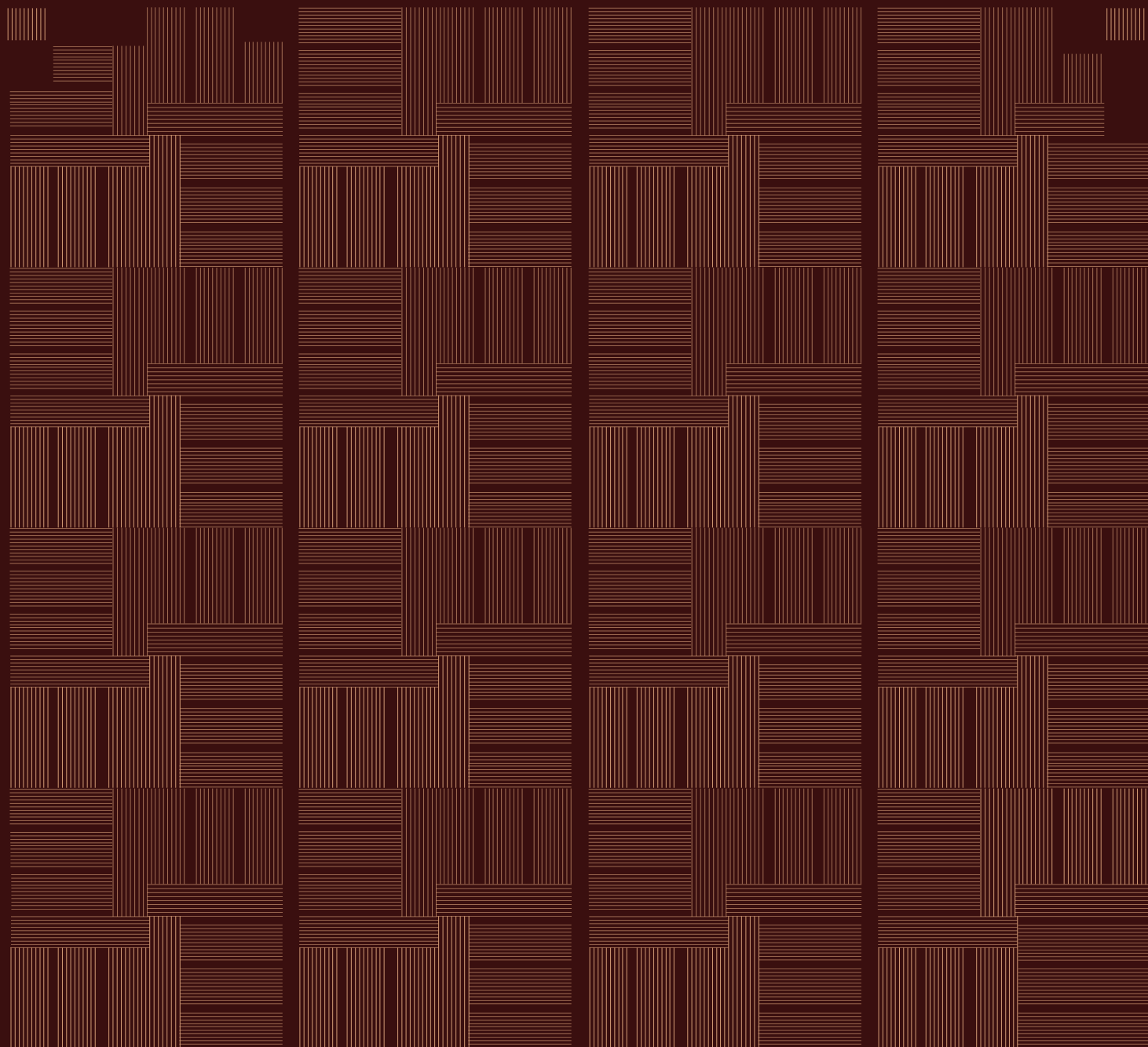


A Mapping of Aotearoa New Zealand's Creative Ecosystem





Ānō me he whare pūngāwerewere
As though it were a spider’s web

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Executive Summary

This mapping provides an overview of the cultural and creative industries in Aotearoa, drawing on existing quantitative and qualitative research. It comes at a timely moment, with the landscape on the brink of potentially significant sociopolitical and economic change.

In 2026, the country’s national arts agency will be changing how it invests in cultural institutions long-term, and who those institutions will be; there will be a national election, and, following a period of recession, it is possible that the country will see a more stimulated economy.

These shorter-term currents occur against a backdrop of more enduring evolution: a more confident expression and experimentation by Māori and Pacific artists, and a consideration among creative practitioners of their place in Aotearoa. As always, both environmental and financial sustainability remain key challenges given the country’s size and geographical isolation — but they also offer opportunities, as these same factors cultivate a community of well-connected artists well-versed in innovation and experimentation.

Technology continues to evolve, creating challenges for the sustainability of the media sector (and, consequently, coverage and critical documentation of artists) and posing new questions about data sovereignty and how emerging digital technologies may both support and undermine the work of creative practitioners.

For those who are interested in working with and in Aotearoa, beginning with a strong cultural understanding — as you would with any other country — is paramount, particularly as relationships are a fundamental foundation within te ao Māori (the Māori world). The challenges presented in this mapping also highlight the strategic opportunity to invest in platforms that facilitate international collaboration and exchange, and to allow artists themselves to develop the alchemical bonds that lead to true magic.

For touring companies and practitioners, the country’s unique geography presents both challenges and opportunities that should be taken into account, and part of ensuring a successful tour will be developing a thoughtful engagement plan that reflects a deep understanding of the communities in which you are presenting work.



Some Key Terms and Concepts

The following definitions outline key terms and concepts used in this report, grounded in an Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Arts and culture

When ‘arts and culture’ is used in this report, it refers to a broad and inclusive range of cultural and creative activities in Aotearoa that honour the many different worldviews in this country.

Much of this report, however, focuses on the arts and cultural sectors within the purview of Creative New Zealand (CNZ), which prioritises practitioners working across literature, visual arts, theatre, dance, non-commercial music, opera, ngā toi Māori (Māori arts) and Pacific arts. That said, creative practices not funded by CNZ are also touched on, including commercial music, fashion design, game design, architecture, film, and audiovisual content for television and radio. Indeed, many of the same challenges and opportunities mentioned in this report are being experienced across the creative industries more broadly.

Iwi Affiliations

Throughout this report, iwi (tribal) affiliations are included in parentheses after some practitioners’ names. This reflects a convention in Aotearoa New Zealand of acknowledging a person’s whakapapa (ancestry) and their connections to specific iwi and hapū (sub-tribes). These affiliations are not merely biographical details; they locate an individual within a network of ancestral, cultural, and geographical relationships that are central to Māori identity. An artist may affiliate with more than one iwi, reflecting the multiple genealogical lines that whakapapa encompasses. Similarly, for Pacific artists, affiliations to island nations or specific communities are noted where relevant. This practice is increasingly common in Aotearoa, and people will often speak to their ancestral lines when introducing themselves.

Practitioners

When practitioners are referenced, this refers to anyone working within the arts and cultural sector, including artists and arts workers who are operating behind the scenes.

Moana Oceania

In this report, we refer to Pacific peoples, but also want to acknowledge that there are many terms that are used to refer to people from this region. For example, Creative New Zealand uses Pacific, which is what is used in the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa Act 2014.

In recent years, there has been a push to examine this terminology. The term Moana Oceania was introduced by Aotearoa academic and curator Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai during the development of the book *Crafting Aotearoa: A Cultural History of Making in New Zealand and the Wider Moana Oceania*.

The name ‘Pacific’ was given to this region by a Portuguese navigator and explorer in 1521. Ferdinand Magellan’s ‘Mar Pacifico’ — the peaceful sea — emphasises a narrow perception of the peoples and places of Moana Oceania as peaceful, tranquil, passive, which is not how Indigenous peoples from this region see themselves. Pacific has become Pasifika, Pasefika or Pasifiki, but these transliterations are derived from the same root. Moana means Ocean in the Māori language and in other island nations such as the Cook Islands, Hawai’i, Sāmoa and Tonga. While it can never be truly inclusive because of the diversity of languages and cultures of Moana Oceania peoples, it has meaning and relevance to this place.

Oceania is another foreign name that was first used in the early nineteenth century. Today it is a popular alternative for Pacific because it suggests a sea of islands connected to each other, rather than isolated islands in a far sea. It is a name that is more meaningful to island nations that do not have the word moana in their languages. Together, Moana Oceania empowers and privileges Indigenous perspectives. It embodies a worldview that is strongly connected to Aotearoa but has its roots in the wider region.



Photo Andy Bridge, 2024

Glossary of Māori words¹

Aotearoa: New Zealand

Iwi: tribe; often refers to a large group of people descended from a common ancestor and associated with a distinct territory

Kaitiakitanga: guardianship

Kapa haka: Māori performing group

Kaupapa: topic, matter for discussion, plan, purpose, scheme, proposal, agenda, subject, programme, theme, issue, initiative

Kia ora: hello, cheers, good luck, best wishes

Kirikiriroa: Hamilton, a city in Aotearoa

Mana: prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma — mana is a supernatural force in a person, place or object and goes hand in hand with tapu, one affecting the other.

Manaakitanga: hospitality, kindness, generosity, support — the process of showing respect, generosity and care for others

Māori: the Indigenous people of Aotearoa, normal

Ngā toi Māori: Māori arts

Noa: ordinary

Ōtautahi: Christchurch, a city in Aotearoa

Ōtepoti: Dunedin, a city in Aotearoa

Pākehā: New Zealander of European descent

Raranga: to weave

Rangatahi: younger generation

Tā moko: traditional tattooing

Tāmaki Makaurau: Auckland, a city in Aotearoa

Tāngata moana: people of the sea, often refers to Pacific peoples

Tāngata whenua: people of the land, refers to Indigenous Māori

Taonga: treasure, anything prized — applied to anything considered to be of value including socially or culturally valuable objects, resources, phenomenon, ideas and techniques

Tapu: sacred, prohibited, restricted, set apart, forbidden

Tau iwi: foreigner, non-Māori

Te ao Māori: the Māori world

Te reo Māori: the language

Te Whanganui-a-Tara: Wellington, a city in Aotearoa

Tino rangatiratanga: self-determination, sovereignty, autonomy, self-government, domination, rule, control, power

Toi: art, knowledge

Wahine: woman; wāhine — women

Waka: canoe

Whakairo: carving

Whakapapa: genealogy, lineage

Whakawhanaungatanga: process of establishing relationships, relating well to others

Whānau: family, to give birth

Whenua: land, placenta

¹ Many of these definitions draw from *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*, a free-to-use online Māori Dictionary: maoridictionary.co.nz/

Introduction

This mapping provides an introductory insight into the arts and cultural sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, outlining key trends, challenges and opportunities within the cultural landscape. Drawing on existing research and media coverage, it seeks to centre the voices and first-hand experiences of practitioners and cultural organisations, particularly from the visual arts, craft and object arts, literature and performing arts.

Through this, the mapping aims to foster a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical

context shaping the cultural ecology in Aotearoa, allowing future initiatives, policies and strategies to be actively informed by the realities of practitioners operating on the ground.

This report is part of a new mapping series led by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) through its arts and culture portal, culture360.ASEF.org. This is the second in the series, following *Rooted in Practice: A Mapping of Lao PDR’s Creative Ecosystem Led by Artists and Cultural Professionals*.

Methodology

This report draws on existing research and literature on the cultural ecology of Aotearoa New Zealand, with suggested pathways for further reading provided in the Appendix.

Ömer Faruk Bekdemir, 2019



A Brief History of Aotearoa New Zealand

Ka mua ka muri
Walking backwards into the future

While the current arts and cultural ecosystem in Aotearoa is relatively young — New Zealand is, after all, one of the youngest countries on Earth — its history of cultural expression nevertheless dates back centuries, and it is impossible to talk about the present without understanding the past.

Early Māori Arrival

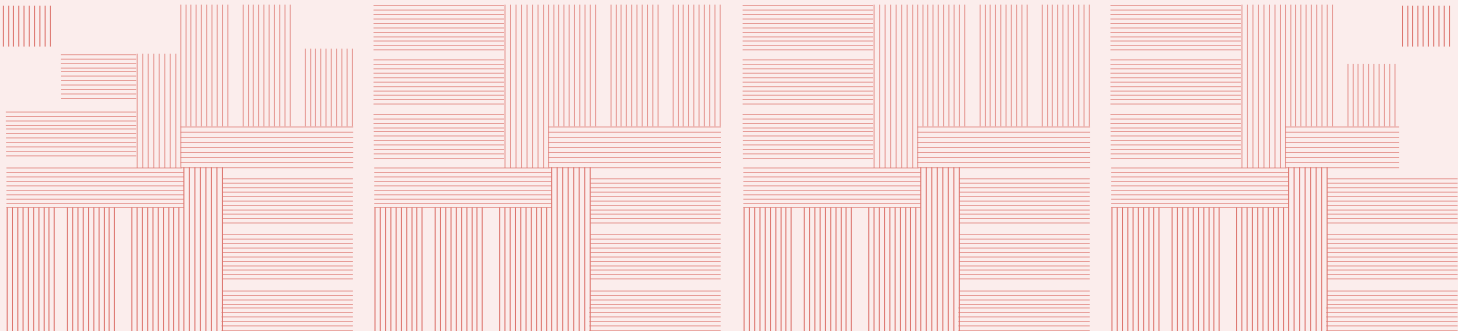
It is believed that Māori first arrived in Aotearoa in the 13th century by waka (canoe) from Polynesia. In Te Waipounamu — the South Island — charcoal drawings in limestone caves date back to this arrival and depict large birds that are now extinct, such as the moa and the Haast’s eagle. Many traditional Māori practices, such as raranga (weaving), whakairo (carving), kapa haka (performance), and tā moko (tattooing), continue to this day, with practitioners both honouring and continually evolving these cultural forms.

European Visitation

It was not until 1642 — more than four centuries later — that Europeans became aware of the country, and it was not until the late 18th century that explorers, missionaries and traders began visiting more regularly. Many English, French, and American visitors established bases from which to hunt seals, and when this industry began to decline in the early 19th century, attention turned to whales, flax, agricultural products, and timber.

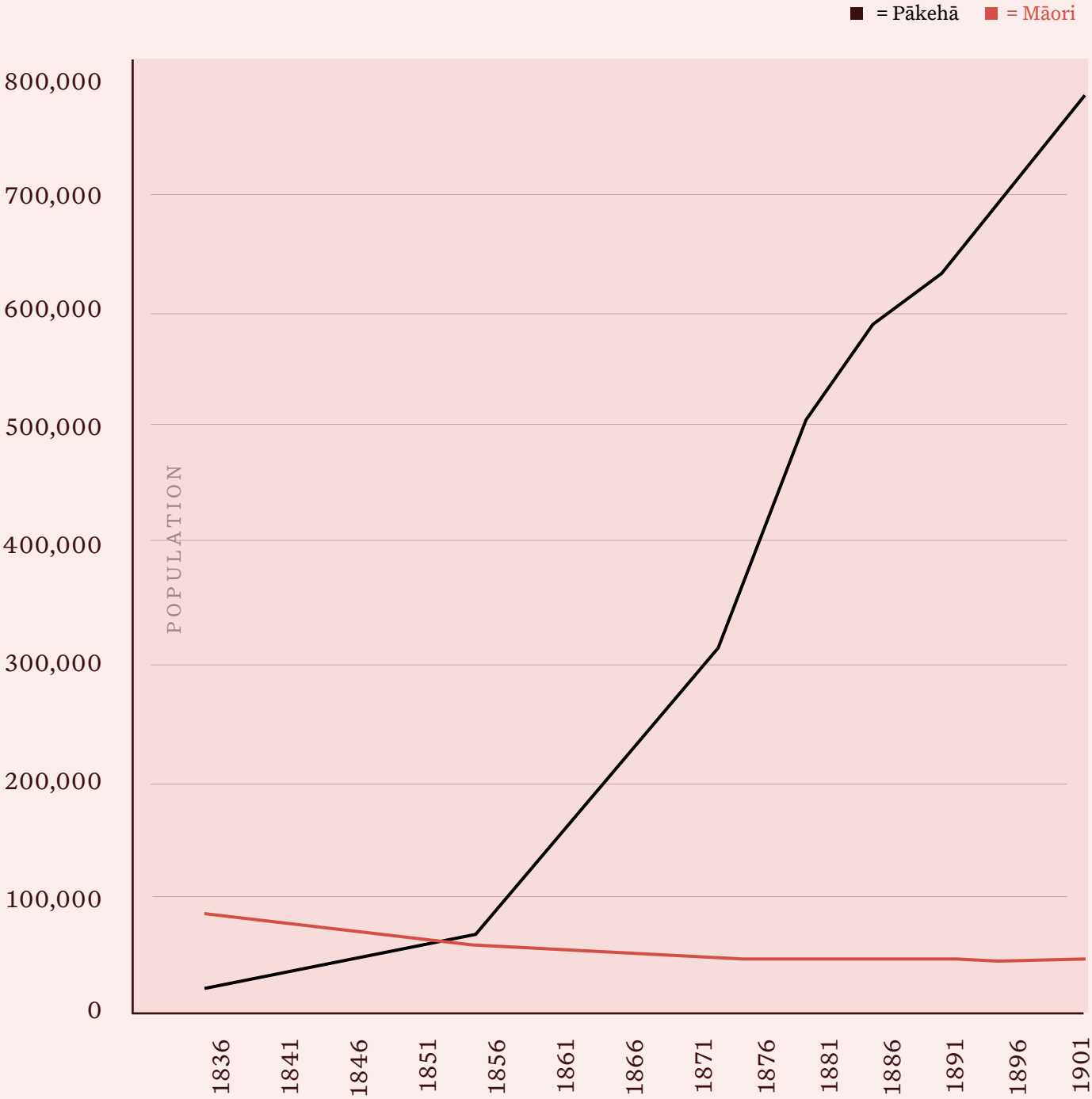
Two Very Different Treaties

As European visitation increased, there were concerns from a number of Māori leaders about the lawless behaviour of the British people in Aotearoa — who were operating outside British law — and the French colonising expeditions that were underway.



In response to these concerns, the Crown drafted a treaty in 1840: they would control their own subjects and become a strategic trade ally and protector. They would also have the right to live on the land and would have the first option on any sections being sold. Māori, in return, would retain tino rangatiratanga (sovereignty) over their land and taonga (precious treasures, both tangible and intangible). At least, this was what Māori understood they were signing. In reality, there

were critical differences between the English version (drafted by British officials) and the Māori version (the version signed by over 500 chiefs), including — critically — who would have sovereignty over the land. The English version gave the Crown full sovereignty, while in the Māori version, Māori retained sovereignty and simply gave the Crown the right to have governing power over their subjects.



King, Marcus, 1891-1983: [The signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, February 6th, 1840]. 1938. Ref: G-821-2. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [/records/22308135](#)

At the time te Tiriti (the Treaty) was signed, the population of Aotearoa was made up of approximately 115,000 Māori people and 2,000 European settlers. The graph on page 10 illustrates the dramatic shift in the years following the signing; indeed, the dominance of Māori in 1840 likely contributed to their willingness to sign te Tiriti in the first place.

In the years following, Māori were dramatically dispossessed of their whenua (land), primarily through bad-faith sales negotiations and confiscation. In 1860, Māori still held approximately 80% of the land in the North Island. By 1975, this was a mere 5%.

It was not just the land that was lost. The Native Schools Act 1867 established a national syndicate of schools that prioritised the teaching of English and, in later years, physically punished and humiliated children if they spoke te reo Māori. The Tohunga Suppression Act 1907 criminalised traditional Māori healing practices. Slowly but systematically, the language and cultural practices of Māori were suppressed and erased.

A Revitalisation

By the 1960s, only 25% of Māori were fluent in te reo (the language).² It was around this time that a group of students at the University of Auckland established Ngā Tamatoa, a collective of activists dedicated to promoting Māori rights. Working alongside groups like Te Reo Māori Society and Huinga Rangatahi (the New Zealand Māori Students’ Association), they presented a petition with more than 30,000 signatures to the Crown in 1972, calling for Māori to be taught in schools.

Shortly after this, the kōhanga reo (language nest) movement began, followed by the establishment of primary and secondary schools where Māori would be the primary language of instruction.

A Rectification

In 1975, the Waitangi Tribunal was established to investigate historic breaches of te Tiriti. The first settlement reached with an iwi (tribe) was in 1995 with Waikato-Tainui, who were invaded by the Crown in 1863 and had more than 1.2 million acres of their land confiscated. The total settlement package, comprising Crown-owned land and cash, was worth NZD\$170m.

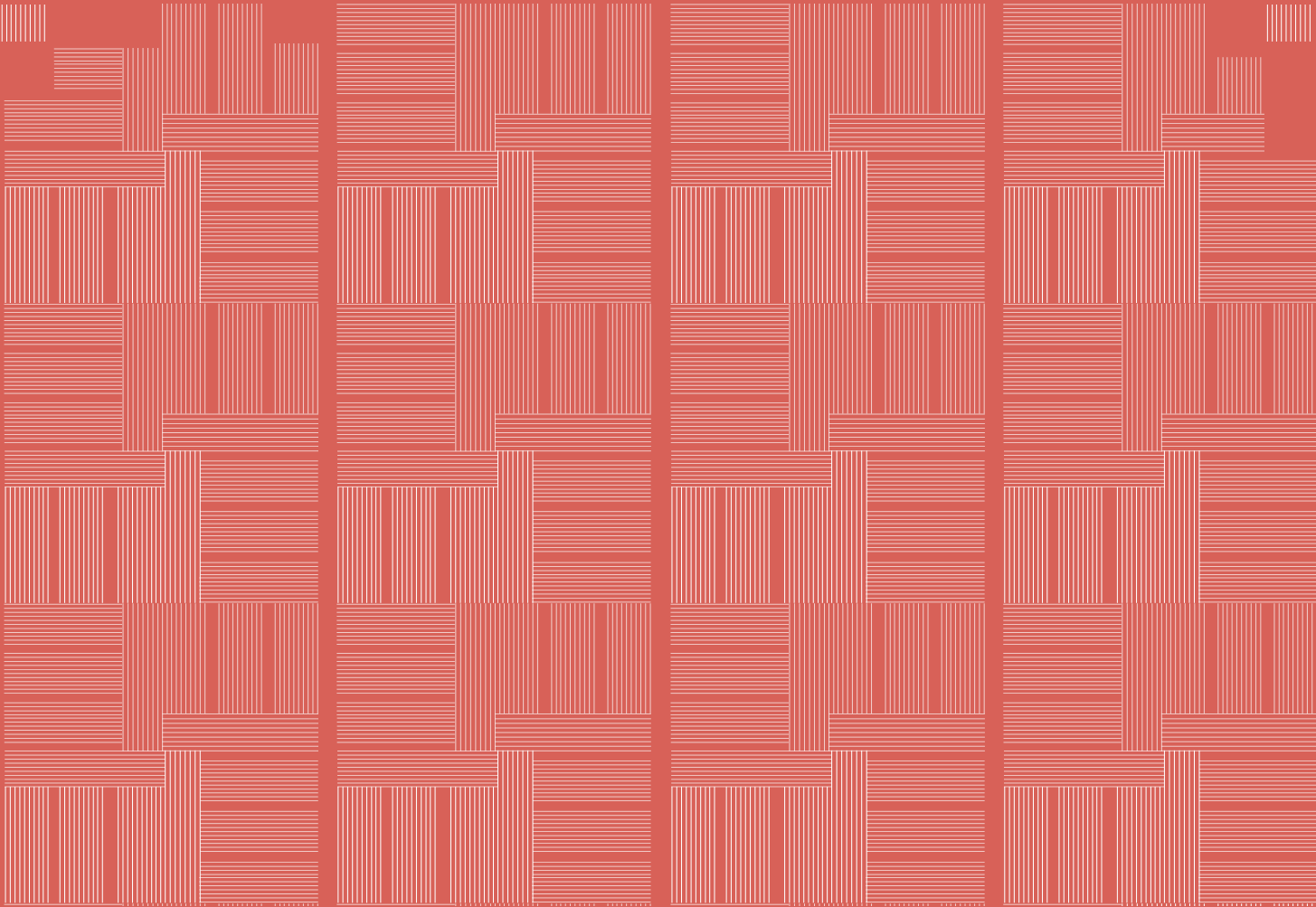
Many non-Iwi-specific claims have also been investigated, including the protection of and rights to mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), the right to radio airwaves, and the right to be included in decisions on foreign investments in the country.

The Changing Demographic

Different waves of migration have also contributed to the diverse cultural make-up of the country, shaped in particular by New Zealand’s colonisation and administrative control of Sāmoa, the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau at different points through the early-to-mid 1900s.³

During the late 1950s, many companies began recruiting cheap labour from the Pacific Islands. Although migrants required approval to live and work in the country, the government often overlooked this requirement — until 1974, when random checks and dawn raids on homes began taking place, targeting Sāmoan and Tongan people who were suspected of overstaying (despite the fact that the majority of overstayers were from Europe and North America). It has been described by academic Dr Melani Anae as “the most blatantly racist attack on Pacific peoples by the New Zealand government in New Zealand’s history.”⁴ Today, people from the Pacific Islands constitute 16.6% of the population of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) and 8.9% of the country.

Another key demographic is the country’s Asian population. Early Chinese migration driven by gold mining led to a series of policies that included the Chinese Immigrants Act 1881 — which imposed a poll tax on Chinese migrants and restricted the number of people who could migrate — and laws that denied Chinese migrants the pension, permanent residency, and citizenship. Many of these were overturned in the mid 1900s, and major waves of migration took place after legislative changes in 1987, which introduced a new merit-based system. This replaced policies favouring migrants from Europe and the United Kingdom (UK). The migration following this change was significant, and Asian communities now account for 31.3% of Auckland’s population and 17.3% of the country’s population.



² Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, “History of the Māori Language,” New Zealand History, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/maori-language-week/history-of-the-maori-language>.
³ New Zealand took control of German Sāmoa in 1914 as part of Britain’s military strategy. Their “tactless and authoritarian” colonial administration included a mishandling of the influenza pandemic of 1918 that killed 22% of the population, and very few New Zealand public servants seconded to the country “took the time to learn the language or fully understand the culture”. In response, a passive resistance movement called the Mau grew, envisaging Samoa Mo Samoa [Samoa for Samoans]. After Black Saturday (Sat 28 Dec, 1929) — in which eight Samoans taking part in a Mau parade were shot dead by police — tensions only increased, eventually leading to Samoa gaining independence in 1962.

Elsewhere, The Cook Islands and Niue were annexed by New Zealand in 1901. This was followed by a period of cultural and linguistic suppression until 1965 (Cook Islands) and 1974 (Niue), when both countries secured self-government in free association (that is, self-governing with New Zealand citizenship). This arrangement has led to significant migration to Aotearoa, with both countries struggling to retain working-age populations.

Unlike these other arrangements, Tokelau was transferred to New Zealand administration in 1926, and remains a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand. Major migration has taken place, and there are now more Tokelauan people living in Aotearoa than in Tokelau. Significantly, Tokelau is one of the most vulnerable territories in the world to sea-level rise, creating a dependency relationship with Aotearoa that speaks not only to historical colonialism but future survival.

⁴ Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage. “The Dawn Raids: Causes, Impacts and Legacy.” New Zealand History, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/dawn-raids>.

The Cultural Ecosystem in Aotearoa New Zealand

The Emergence of a Modern Cultural Ecosystem in Aotearoa

It is against this backdrop that the arts and cultural ecosystem has evolved. Following colonisation, art was deployed as a ‘civilising force’, with much of the infrastructural investment following a British paradigm, including the establishment in the 1880s of the country’s first public art galleries — [Dunedin Public Art Gallery](#) and [Auckland Art Gallery](#) — and its fine art schools, [Ilam School of Fine Arts](#), [Massey School of Fine Arts](#) and [Elam School of Fine Arts](#). During this period, Māori art was often treated through an anthropological rather than a contemporary lens, and the focus tended to be on teaching European schools of thought.

A desire to identify a distinct ‘New Zealand’ identity led to work by Pākehā (European New Zealanders) being centred. Paintings were defined by a hard light and bleached palette, depicting unsettled landscapes.

Work was characterised by a sense of isolation and a common ‘man alone’ trope of the solitary male figure exploring and working the land.

In 1946, artist Gordon Tovey was appointed as the first National Supervisor of Art and Craft for the Department of Education. In this role, which he held for 20 years, he pioneered a new approach to art education in Aotearoa that centred Māori knowledge and practice, with many leading Māori artists working as educators. By the mid-1960s — the same time that calls for language revitalisation were taking place — Māori culture was beginning to have a presence in every school around the country. Around this time, state patronage of the arts was established with the creation of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand (1963). This was later followed by the [Film Commission](#) (1978) and [NZ On Air](#) (1989). These organisations were responsible for developing the arts industries by supporting the work of writers, visual artists, performers, filmmakers, and musicians. Collectively, the establishment

of, and investment in, these funding bodies signalled a belief that the arts had public value.

As discussions about te Tiriti became more present in the national conversation, the Māori and South Pacific Arts Council (MASPAC, later named Te Waka Toi) was set up within the Arts Council in 1978 to “encourage, promote and develop the practice and appreciation of the arts and crafts of the Māori and South Pacific people in New Zealand.”

The desire to ensure a more coherent and equitable approach to arts and culture led to the establishment of the [Ministry for Culture and Heritage](#) in 1991 and, three years later, a change in legislation established the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa (operating as [Creative New Zealand](#)) and given a statutory responsibility to “encourage, promote, and support the arts in New Zealand,” with specific recognition of the arts of Māori and Pacific peoples.

A Bicultural Arts Sector?

Since the establishment of Creative New Zealand, the country has seen a committed investment in Indigenous voices. This has been coupled with an interest in how the arts sector can both reflect the country’s bicultural foundations and address the significant effects of colonisation and the ongoing systemic inequities experienced by Māori — which include worse health outcomes, higher rates of child poverty, and unjust overrepresentation in the justice system.

This bicultural aspiration was seen perhaps most strikingly in the arts sector during the establishment of [The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa](#), which officially opened in 1998. Partnership with tāngata whenua (people of the land, refers to Indigenous Māori) informed the architectural design, the organisational structure, and the ongoing running of the institution, which includes Māori representation at governance and senior leadership levels as well as in the public-facing elements of the Museum’s operations, such as exhibition and event programming. Considered innovative at the time, this approach has not been without its challenges and criticisms; it nevertheless demonstrates how deeply embedded these aspirations have been in Aotearoa over the past three decades.

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 2015



Shifts in How the Nation Values Arts, Culture & Creativity

The country has also witnessed a governmental shift from focusing solely on the economic value of culture to understanding its role in well-being and social inclusion. Under Jacinda Ardern’s Labour government, a revised Living Standards Framework was rolled out by Treasury, which emphasised the role of the arts in individual and societal well-being.

“Arts and culture are not a ‘nice to have’,” Ardern stated during the Budget 2018 announcement. “They are an essential part of our individual, community and national identity... There is increasing evidence of the many benefits of cultural participation in areas such as health and education, and of its value to social cohesion and community resilience.”⁵

While this resulted in only a nominal increase in ministry funding, this shift has been reflected in a greater emphasis on accessibility, in terms of how funding is applied for, who is receiving that funding and how that work is presented. Accordingly, increased attention has been paid to the artistic representation of minoritised communities in Aotearoa, including Disabled artists, Queer artists, and artists of diverse cultural heritages.

A Lean Funding Ecology

Today, the majority of arts funding in Aotearoa comes from four main channels:

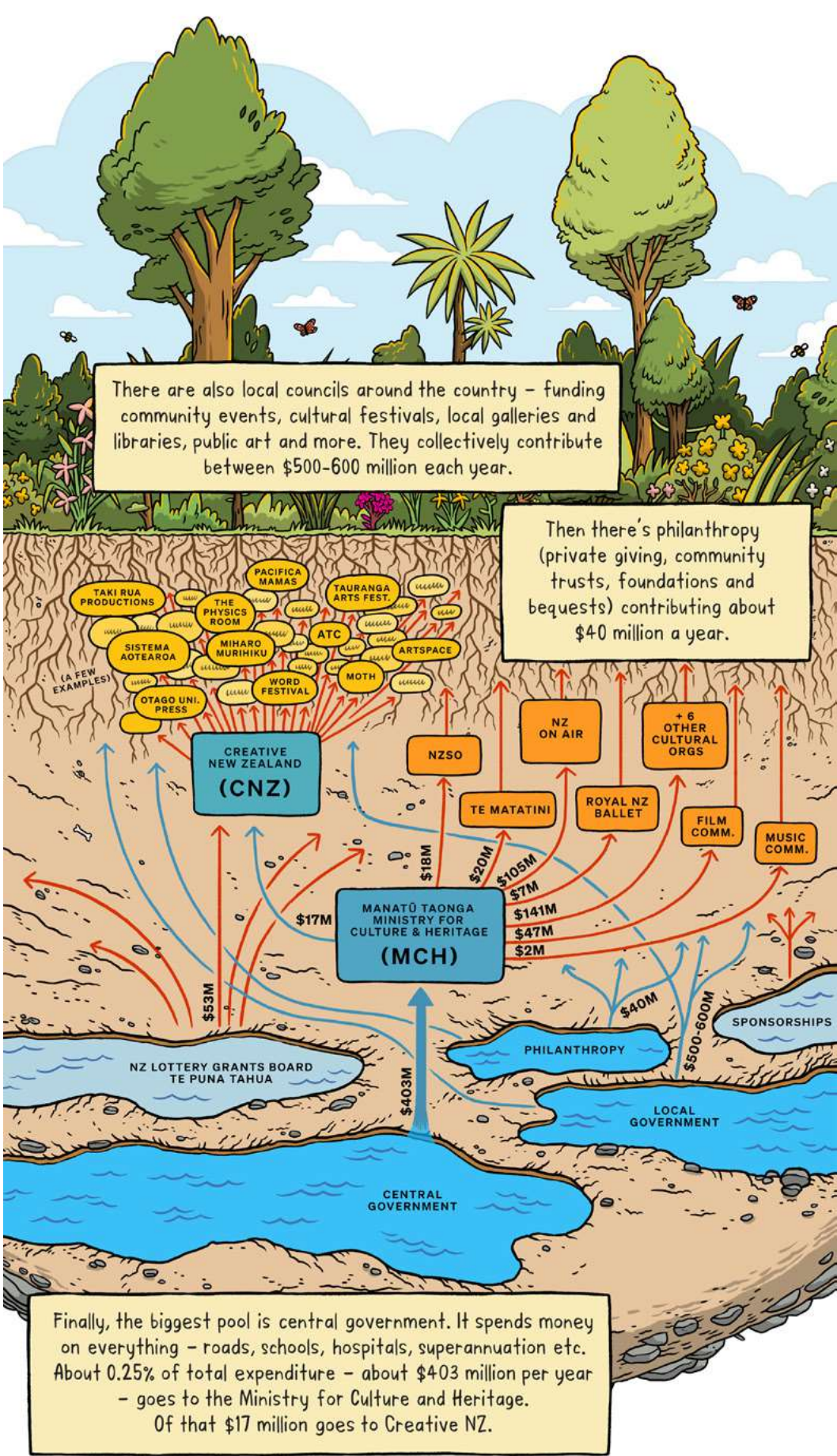
- **State funding:** The Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage receives a budget that it then annually distributes

to funders such as Creative New Zealand (NZD\$17m), NZ on Air (NZD\$105m), and the Film Commission (NZD\$5m). There are also a small number of arts organisations that receive funding directly from the government, including Te Papa (NZD\$44m), New Zealand Symphony Orchestra (NZD\$18m), Te Matatini (NZD\$19m) and the Royal New Zealand Ballet (NZD\$7m).⁶

- **The New Zealand Lottery Grants Board Te Puna Tahua:** Profits from gambling are returned to the community through grants. In 2024/25, Creative New Zealand received NZD\$60m to support the arts.⁷
- **Council funding:** Local councils also fund cultural institutions and events (approx NZD\$500-600m). Many cities have council-funded and operated galleries and theatres, alongside funding festivals, performances, and exhibitions.
- **Philanthropy:** New Zealand has an emergent culture of philanthropy, with this accounting for approximately NZD\$40m each year.⁸ Organisations like The Arts Foundation Te Tumu Toi have played a significant role in growing this culture.

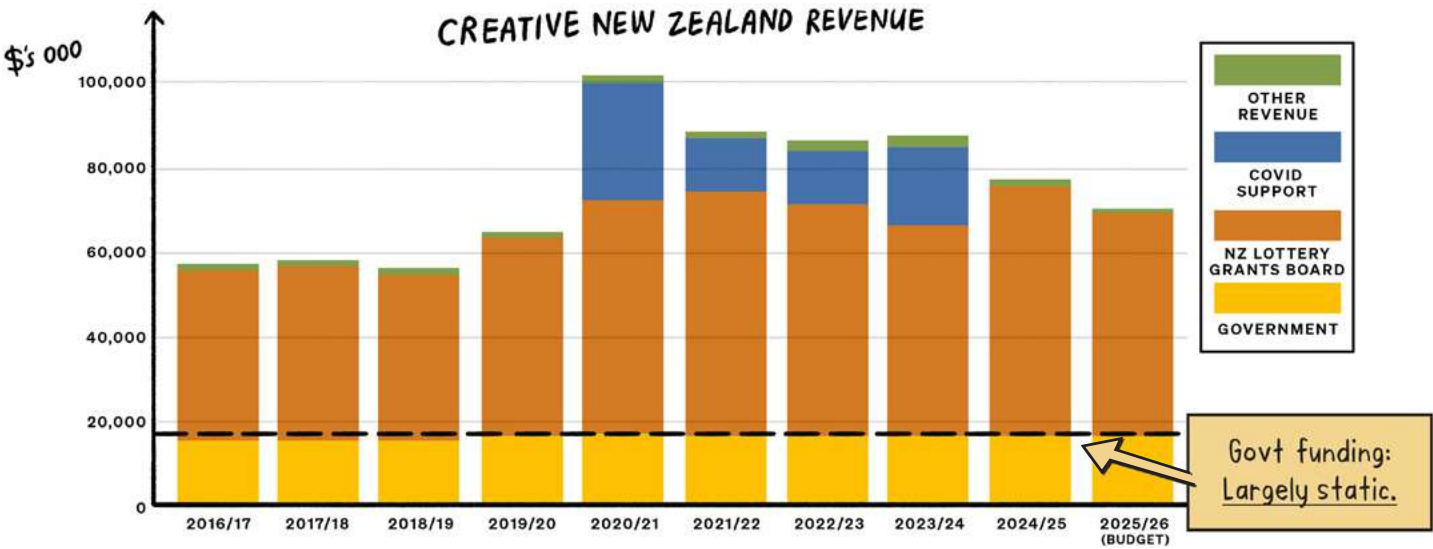
Artists’ primary pathway to funding tends to be through Creative New Zealand, and demand has long outweighed what the institution is able to provide. This is unsurprising, perhaps, given the government contribution to the funder has remained essentially static over the past 20 years, accounting for only 0.01% of the New Zealand budget — despite the fact that the arts and cultural sector contributed NZD\$17b, or 4.2% of New Zealand’s GDP.⁹

⁵ Office of the Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage, “Recognising the Importance of Our Arts, Culture and Heritage,” Beehive.govt.nz, May 16, 2018, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/recognising-importance-our-arts-culture-and-heritage>.
⁶ Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, “Budget 2025: Vote Arts, Culture and Heritage Factsheet,” September 4, 2025, https://www.mch.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2025-05/budget_2025-vote_arts_culture_and_heritage_1.pdf.
⁷ Creative New Zealand, “Annual Report 2024/25”, October 30, 2025, https://creativenz.govt.nz/-/media/project/creative-nz/creativenz/publicationsfiles/annual-report/2025_annual-report.pdf.
⁸ John McLeod, “The New Zealand Support Report: The current state and significance of giving in New Zealand and the outlook for recipients,” JBWere Philanthropic Services, February 2020, <https://www.jbwere.co.nz/assets/Philanthropic-Services/jbwere-nz-support-report-digital.pdf>.
⁹ Infometrics, “Arts and Creative Sector Profile 2024” (report prepared for the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, March 2025), <https://www.mch.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2025-03/arts-and-creative-industry-profile-report-2024.pdf>.



Challenges, Trends and Opportunities

While government funding for CNZ has remained largely static for twenty years, Lotteries funding has increased over time. In that time inflation also means the cost of putting work on has massively increased, and our population has increased by 29% - that's nearly an extra 1.2 million people to reach.



Govt funding: Largely static.

Demand for funding now far outweighs the amount CNZ is able to distribute. In the last financial year, CNZ had requests for over \$105 million in short-term grant funding, but just over \$13.5 million to distribute. This year, CNZ has around \$13 million to distribute in these grants.

Image above: Arts Funding 101 — Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa with Toby Morris (2025)

¹⁰ Contemporary HUM, “Crossing Currents: Episode 6 – An Interview with Mataaho Collective at the 60th Venice Biennale,” Contemporary HUM (blog), August 3, 2024, <https://contemporaryhum.com/writing/crossing-currents-episode-6>.
¹¹ Anita Felicelli, “Q&A with Tayi Tibble,” Alta Journal, April 19, 2024, <https://www.altaonline.com/books/poetry/a60517029/tayi-tibble-rangikura-interview-anita-felicelli>.

We are seeing a more confident expression and experimentation — particularly among Māori and Pacific artists — catalysed by decades of protest, policy change and cultural revitalisation

Mataaho Collective — who were awarded a Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2024 for their work *Takapau* — are large-scale installation artists who draw on Māori weaving practices. Rather than solely using traditional materials like harakeke (flax), they often draw on industrial materials more commonly used in the labour force (“an ode to our roots, our families”). *Takapau*, for example, draws on weaving patterns used in whāriki (woven rugs or mats) and uses hi-vis tie-downs, stainless steel buckles and J-hooks, with the installation evoking the transition from Te Pō (the perpetual night) to Te Ao Mārama (the world of light).

This experimentation is something the collective thinks about deeply. “The works that we make together as Mataaho always look to a continuum of innovation,” says member Erena Arapere-Baker (Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangātira), in an interview with *Contemporary Hum*.¹⁰ “We are inspired by the customary works of our ancestors, but are applying the techniques and methods and materials of how we live today, materials that we face and see and connect with here and now.”

This collective and experimental way of working is increasingly common, particularly among Māori and Pacific artists. Another example is *CONJAH*, a performance collective led by Jahra Wasasala (Fijian, Pākehā) and Ooshcon (Sāmoan, Pākehā). In 2025, they premiered their immersive performance work,

DARK/DARK/DARK! at Kia Mau Festival. Colliding large-scale projection, heaving costuming, and hardcore music, the work draws on “known and speculative Tangata Moana [people of the sea, often refers to Pacific peoples] lineages of darkness and storytelling” to create “a door to a pluriverse of subterranean ancestral ecologies.”

This is evident across all forms of creative expression. Consider in literature, for example, poet Tayi Tibble’s melding of te ao Māori with hip-hop and pop culture. Colonisation is referenced in the same breath as The Kardashians, sex, and group chats. “As modern Indigenous people, we contain multitudes,” Tibble says in an interview with *Alta*.¹¹ “Colonisation has forced us to change and adapt and live in the modern world, the same as everyone, so the use of different registers and languages and references is just as natural — how we live and talk — and so that’s also how I write.” When asked if integrating pop culture was a ‘rebellion’, she says: “There is a sense of rebellion in combining Western influence with our traditional worldviews. For me, taking up space on the page is the same as taking up space in person; it’s inherently rebellious because colonisation was meant to erase us. We were not supposed to be here, and so being “here” in all the different forms indigeneity can take is defiant, but also celebratory.”

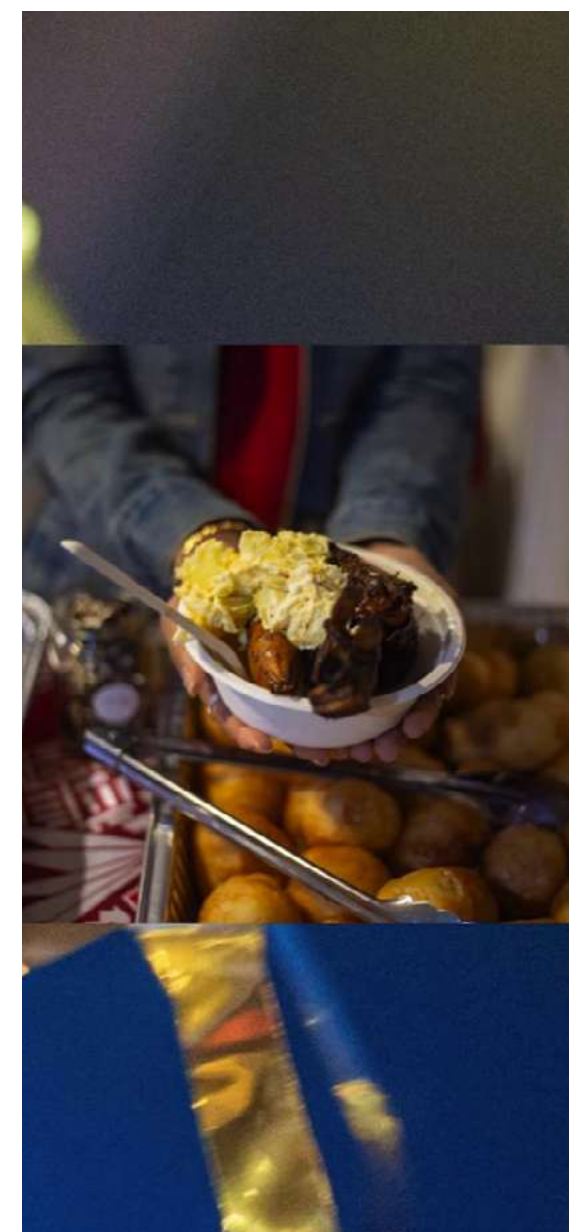
This liberated and innovative form of creative expression owes much to the revitalisation of Māori and Pacific cultural knowledge that has taken place from the 1980s, creating a foundation from which artists can play. It has also led to a number of international collaborations, particularly between Indigenous artists, and is something that presenters and venues are increasingly interested in supporting, both here and abroad.

Alongside this, Indigenous artists are pushing for sovereignty not only over their work, but *how* they work.

This is evident in the establishment of large-scale Māori-led institutions such as Māoriland — which hosts the world’s largest international Indigenous film festival — and performance-centred festivals such as Te Tairāwhiti Arts Festival and Kia Mau Festival, as well as at the level of individual artists. Many are choosing to

forge independent paths using social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok rather than follow traditional career trajectories (visual artists choosing not to have a dealer, for example). Many collectives are also working in this way, evident in community-led artist-run spaces like HOEA! Gallery and Wheke Fortress.

MOTHERLAND/HOMELAND at HOEA!



WHEKE FORTRESS

Speaking as one of the keynote speakers at Nui te Kōrero 2025 — Creative New Zealand’s biennial arts leadership conference — Co-Director of Wheke Fortress, Jessica Hansell aka Coco Solid (Ngāpuhi, Sāmoa, Germany) described the space as “an opportunity to give ourselves and our fellow artists in the kaupapa-driven trenches the richest splendours known to humankind: space, time, and like-minded company.”

As the name suggests, the space is multi-tentacled and includes a gallery, music studio, sewing room, animation

collective, and streaming functionality for Revolution TV, their independent broadcasting platform. Much of the work that takes place is a response to the traditionally extractive and transactional mode in which Western institutions operate:

The gallery is actually a way to give people access to underground art... Young brown artists who cannot fit into the Arts Industrial Complex can have a platform and the validating experience they actually deserve as real talent, not strategised talent, in constant service to White ideals and White proximity.

Speaking to the guiding principles of the space, Hansell said:

We centre our cultures — Tangata whenua, Pasifika, tau iwi [non-Māori] of colour living in Aotearoa — through a very queer, gender-diverse lens. Having said this, it is considered by almost everyone to be a very femme and wāhine-centric coded space, which proves that the inclusion of everyone is a lot easier outside of cold patriarchal programming.

We prioritise Indigenous trans artists... because their liberation begets liberation of all.

Our youngest community members have real co-designing authority and very real

say. Rangatahi [young people] are the future so we give creative control where we can see a gift and we help them take risks with real-life projects to see them in their power.

We talanoa [talk] around privilege and conflict as a normal part of the space. Everyone understands that while it is an Indigenous pan-Pacific kaupapa [initiative], a north star for the space is land back and fighting inequities for tangata whenua.

“The hierarchy of these notions are like a moog synthesiser playing a complex chord,” she concludes, “The composition can only sound good if all notes are played at the same time. These ideas as musical notes are inextricable in their intersectionality.”

Mataaho Collective, *Takapau* (2022). Polyester hi-vis tiedowns, stainless steel buckles and j-hooks. Site-specific reconfiguration, Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa. 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Marco Zorzanello



Top: *DARK!DARK!DARK!* Photo: Threading Frames.

Bottom: Mataaho Collective, *Takapau* (2022). Polyester hi-vis tiedowns, stainless steel buckles and j-hooks. Site-specific reconfiguration, Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa. 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia. Photo: Marco Zorzanello.



Tāngata Tiriti artists and organisations are also increasingly considering their place in Aotearoa

For those who are tāngata Tiriti (non-Māori, here by virtue of te Tiriti), consideration of how they can be good te Tiriti partners is increasingly common. Many institutions have dedicated Māori leadership, advisory and specialist roles. Independent practitioners — particularly those who explore their identity through their work — are increasingly reflecting on their position in Aotearoa as part of this.

One example is artist Steven Park (6x4). Born in Korea and living in Ōtautahi (Christchurch), Park is a multidisciplinary artist creating textile work, jewellery, and woodwork. Much of his focus is built on a rejection of the unsustainable practices common within the fashion industry, and recently, he has been working with local linen, indigo and silkworm growers to create his own materials. “Working with these raw materials has deepened my practice and allowed it to be rooted in a sense of place,” he writes in an essay for *Satellites*.¹² “They are loaded with meaning: telling the story of the land, the growers, the traditions of the materials, and the connections I made through them. As I navigate my place in Aotearoa as tangata Tiriti of colour, I have found that grounding this in my practice has been deeply important.”

He goes on to say:

Though I am not tangata whenua [Māori], I have had the privilege of sharing spaces and conversations about craft with toi Māori artists. Through these relationships, I have learnt, and continue to learn, how the significance of material provenance is foundational and inherent to te ao Māori [the Māori world] through whakapapa [lineage]. I am continuously grateful to have been imparted such precious wisdom, as it helps me deepen my growing understanding of the relationship that tangata whenua have with this land. It gives me guidance on how I can honour these ideas through my own practice and support the Tino Rangatiratanga [sovereignty] of Māori, who are intrinsically tied to the whenua [land]. In a world that demands constant speed and growth, I think we can all benefit from finding moments to align with our environment, with the earth that gives us life and from which we are inseparable.

It is notable that this is an evolution from the early 2000s, when people were more likely to ‘adopt’ Māori cultural practices such as pepeha (introductions), whereas this represents a more nuanced exploration of being tāngata Tiriti in Aotearoa, something which has been of increasing interest to international partners and collaborators as well, as they reflect on their own place in the world.

¹² Steven Junil Park, “And my water returns to that of the great river,” *Satellites*, Issue 5, December 20, 2024, <https://www.satellites.co.nz/magazine/issue-5/and-my-water>.

Top: Steven Junil Park, Planting hopes like seeds for the coming year (nest basket and basket vase). These baskets were made from dried stalks of organic Japanese indigo grown locally by a close friend Gina Russell of Papahoa (formerly ‘growing textiles’). They were leftover after removing the fresh green leaves to be used for ice extraction dyeing and the pulp from this process made into beads. Pictured in the nest basket are dried indigo leaves and ceramic eggs made by Cheryl Lucas. In the basket vase is dried and retted linen also grown by Gina.

Bottom: Steven Junil Park (pictured), Asians Supporting Tino Rangatiratanga hand-sewn and naturally-dyed ramie flag with carved fist and bamboo pole. Featured in *PUPURITIA: Storytelling and Contemporary Textiles* at Objectspace (2025). “I made this flag in the leadup to the hikoi in November. Earlier that year we started a chapter of Asians Supporting Tino Rangatiratanga in Ōtautahi and some of the members were driving up to attend. Unfortunately I was not able to make it but I wanted to send them off with something to represent our chapter. The symbol on this flag does not belong to me: I acknowledge Linda Munn, Hiraina Marsden and Jan Smith for its design, but we as the members of ASTR stand in support for what it represents. Toitū te Tiriti!”





On 19 November 2024, an estimated 42,000 people walked to the grounds of parliament, as part of a nine-day march all around the country protesting the Treaty Principles Bill. Photo: RNZ/Layla Bailey-McDowell

Aotearoa New Zealand is currently contending with a government that is actively attempting to undo much of this progress

Investment in Māori, Pacific and other minoritised artists has been an important focus for the arts sector in Aotearoa over the past three decades. At this time, however, the country is contending with a centre-right coalition government that has implemented a number of regressive policies that have a disproportionately negative impact on Māori. This includes the attempted (and failed) introduction of the highly controversial Principles of the Treaty of Waitangi Bill, a subsequent bill that removes the requirement for schools to honour te Tiriti o Waitangi, and a range of budget cuts that undermine the bicultural model that has shaped cultural policy for decades.

In December 2025, a United Nations committee expressed a number of concerns around “the disestablishment of the Māori Health Authority in 2024 and significant budget reductions affecting the Ministry for Ethnic Communities,

the Ministry for Pacific Peoples and Te Puni Kōkiri, the Ministry of Māori Development,” and urged the government “to uphold its commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi as a constitutional framework for equal participation and partnership between Māori and the Crown.”¹³

Alongside this are worrying developments for arts and culture, including the axing of art history as a dedicated subject at high school, the ongoing disestablishment of the humanities at the tertiary level, and cuts to funding for the Ministry for Culture & Heritage.

With 2026 being an election year, the trajectory of the creative and cultural sector will inevitably be shaped by whoever steps into power — not only in terms of these broader social policies but also in the way in which they decide to invest in the cultural sector.

¹³ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, “International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: Concluding observations on the combined twenty-third and twenty-fourth periodic reports of New Zealand,” UN Doc. CERD/C/NZL/CO/23-24, December 19, 2025, <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=1x8AsKR7wbyhTj5L%2FBqy3zu4EEqhheHPc25OvZNQtYWKDTUTGBaMgCECWtNGgCA7pfS3R3uMOTFqlhZj1YdlAK2Fvk07qrysftP4bULQl4%3D>

The country is on the precipice of major changes in arts funding — and, potentially, the shape of the sector in Aotearoa New Zealand

In addition to a potential government change, Creative New Zealand is undergoing a ‘transformation process’ with major changes underway to how they deliver their arts funding. In 2026, there will be a major shift in how they invest long-term in cultural institutions.

Historically, the funding agency has offered three- and five-year funding to key arts organisations in Aotearoa. In recent years, there has been limited change to the portfolio of funded organisations, with applications only open to existing investment clients and other organisations by invitation.

This changes in 2026, with a new fund opening to a wider pool of institutions across the country, with no guarantee that existing investment clients will be re-funded. It is, potentially, a clearing of the slate. The first tranche of results for this fund will be announced mid-2026, and will signal the direction the country’s arts ecology will take over the next three years and beyond.

Within all this, career and organisational sustainability remain an ongoing challenge for creative practitioners

This is a problem endemic to Aotearoa: the country’s size and geographical isolation pose unique challenges to the development of a sustainable career.

Aotearoa has a population of only 5.3 million, and its largest city, Auckland, is considered one of the most geographically isolated cities in the world.¹⁴ Despite a culture market penetration of 94%,¹⁵ this nevertheless represents a small market in which many practitioners are competing against one another, and where career specialisation tends to be quite rare due to the limited ongoing opportunities available.

This naturally leads to the creation of an industry of generalists, with artists and arts workers often side-stepping into arts administration, education, marketing and hospitality to make a living, rather than honing their expertise in one role.

These challenges to sustainability are further exacerbated by the high cost of living in city centres, which, post-pandemic, has been compounded by a recession marked by rising inflation and with unemployment at a nine-year high (5.3%).¹⁶ This, in turn, has led to increased challenges in terms of reductions to audiences’ discretionary spending and private sector unwillingness to offer philanthropy or sponsorship.

¹⁴ In terms of distance to another city with at least 1 million people
¹⁵ Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, “Audience Atlas Aotearoa New Zealand 2025,” Creative New Zealand, September 2025, <https://creativenz.govt.nz/development-and-resources/research-and-reports/audience-atlas-aotearoa-2025>.
¹⁶ Gyles Beckford and Felix Walton, “Unemployment rises again to near nine-year high of 5.3 percent,” RNZ, November 5, 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/business/577881/unemployment-rises-again-to-near-nine-year-high-of-5-point-3-percent>.



Barbarian Productions. Photo: Rebecca McMillan

As a range of practitioners identified in *The Future of Arts Development in Aotearoa New Zealand* (2025):¹⁷

Covid has had a significant impact on our organisation, and we are finding both membership and sponsorship is becoming harder.

Sponsorship for art events is becoming more difficult to obtain in the current economic conditions so cash grants from the likes of CNZ [Creative New Zealand] is crucial to maintain events.

Funding is an ongoing challenge for our organisation particularly given the relatively poor funding and sponsorship opportunities available in our city.

As the economic environment becomes difficult, so does finding other funding e.g. corporate sponsorships.

Artists were already struggling: In 2023, *The Profile of Creative Professionals* reported that the median creative income for creative professionals was NZD\$19,500 (compared to the national median salary, NZD\$61,600¹⁸), with a recent feature by newspaper Stuff reporting that people need a household income of around NZD\$125,000 to be able to live a ‘comfortable’ life.¹⁹

¹⁷ Creative New Zealand, “The future of arts development in Aotearoa New Zealand: What arts organisations told us about the support they need to make a positive impact with communities” (report, July 2024), https://creativenz.govt.nz/-/media/project/creative-nz/creativenz/pagedocuments/20240624_future_for_arts_development_report_organisations.pdf.
¹⁸ Kantar Public, “Profile of Creative Professionals,” Creative New Zealand, November 2022, <https://creativenz.govt.nz/-/media/project/creative-nz/creativenz/publicationsfiles/2023-profile-of-creative-professionals/profile-of-creative-professionals---main-report---pdf.pdf>.
¹⁹ Emma Ricketts, “How much money do you need to live comfortably? We’ve crunched the numbers,” Stuff, August 30, 2025, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/nz-news/360805577/how-much-money-do-you-need-live-comfortably-weve-crunched-numbers>

Increasingly, practitioners are beginning to organise and respond to this situation, with collectives like Art Makers Aotearoa offering advice on funding and benchmark fees. In a report published during the pandemic, *We Can Build a New Utopia*, artist and writer Jo Randerson — who runs Barbarian Productions — made this important point:

Art should not be a vocation that is only available to those who have families wealthy enough to back them, or enough systemic privileges to access opportunities. We need to work collectively to disrupt the hierarchical pay scales... there also needs to be equity and transparency in pay rates across arts organisations. I refuse to be on any more projects where we pay a projector more to be in the room than a live person.

Funding is also highly competitive in Aotearoa. In the recent Creative Fellowship round for CNZ, for example — a prestigious grant that allows artists time and space to develop their practice — only 45 people were funded from 453 eligible applications.²⁰ Similarly, the project grants stream saw 36 projects funded from a possible 342 applications.²¹

Due to an essentially frozen level of state investment, the knock-on effects of this for long-term investment clients have been noted, with multiple organisations commenting on this in *The Future of Arts Development*. “Our funding from CNZ has risen only 6% over the past 5 years. In comparison, the country’s consumer price index (CPI) has risen by 20% over that same amount of time,” noted one organisation. “Our costs as an organisation go up, even when our funding doesn’t. We’re then expected to deliver the same, or more on a rapidly dwindling budget, or spend a lot of our time finding other funding to pay for the ever-increasing bills.”

²⁰ Creative New Zealand, “Creative Fellowship Fund 2025 - Round 2,” funding results, posted December 3, 2025, <https://creativenz.govt.nz/funding-and-support/results/funding-rounds/creative-fellowship-2025---round-2>.
²¹ Creative New Zealand, “Creative Impact Fund 2025 - Round 2,” funding results, posted December 3, 2025, <https://creativenz.govt.nz/funding-and-support/results/funding-rounds/creative-impact-fund-2025---round-2>.
²² Kantar Public, “Profile of Creative Professionals,” Creative New Zealand, November 2022, <https://creativenz.govt.nz/-/media/project/creative-nz/creativenz/publicationsfiles/2023-profile-of-creative-professionals/profile-of-creative-professionals---main-report---pdf.pdf>.
²³ In the year ending August 2025
²⁴ Ima Caldwell, “As record numbers leave New Zealand, why are most people choosing Australia?” The Guardian, November 3, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/03/new-zealand-economy-record-numbers-leave-why-people-choosing-australia>.

Also noteworthy is Creative New Zealand’s current lack of an international strategy, although the organisation has identified this as a strategic area of focus. Following the pandemic, the dedicated budget allocated to international initiatives, outside the Venice Biennale and FestPAC, has decreased, limiting the extent to which the national arts funder has been able to support a key component of career sustainability for artists. This is despite the fact that two-thirds of creative professionals collaborate with overseas creatives to sustain their careers.²²

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that following the pandemic, the country witnessed a significant exodus of early- to mid-career artists, with many migrating to Australia and the UK to build more sustainable careers there. This is not exclusive to artists, of course. In the past year, 73,900 New Zealanders moved elsewhere,²³ with more than half going to Australia, where salaries adjusted for GDP per capita are 34% higher, at NZD\$64,400, compared to New Zealand’s NZD\$48,000.²⁴

Within the arts sector, this ‘brain drain’ creates an ageing of the ecology, with those in stable jobs tending to ‘hoard’ their roles, while younger talent is lost to international shores.

The flip side of these challenging conditions in Aotearoa — a country that nevertheless still offers a degree of sustainability compared to countries where public art funding is non-existent — is a small and deeply connected sector in which it is much easier than in more hierarchical countries to have direct access to senior figures in institutions. As a result, it is easier to establish innovative partnerships and collaborations — both nationally and internationally — owing to the more intimate interpersonal nature of the landscape.



FALE SĀ / SACRED HOUSE — FAFSWAG, for Manchester International Festival 2025

The cost of experimentation is rising —and so is the cost of scale

One of the consequences of a resource-stretched sector during a period of uncertainty — with so many long-running organisations unsure if they will receive the operational funding needed to continue beyond 2026 — is a risk-averse leadership presenting more conservative programming: an attempt to appeal to those with more discretionary revenue, and to offer more mainstream entertainment appeal. This environment also favours smaller, more tourable works that are cheaper to present: smaller casts, streamlined sets.

The unintended consequence is that large-scale, ambitious works, alongside more experimental works, or artists working outside the mainstream, are less likely to be programmed by major institutions — despite many of those same artists experiencing success internationally.

As a result, artists are increasingly turning their attention to opportunities overseas, developing and presenting new work for international festivals — like FAFSWAG’s *Fale Sā* (2025, Manchester International Festival) — and collaborating with artists on an international stage, with works like *Suara / Oro Rua* (2024, Singapore International Festival of Arts) and *Look at Them!* (2024, Edinburgh Fringe Festival).

One-off initiatives like the NZD\$2m Festivals Commissioning and Presentation Fund — presented by Performing Arts Network New Zealand (PANNZ) with Creative New Zealand — represent attempts to address this issue, but are nonetheless one-off funds with no clear long-term commitment.

Environmental sustainability continues to be baked into the work that artists do

While the cost of creating and touring is a key consideration for practitioners developing new work, so too is environmental sustainability, something that has long been a natural part of te ao Māori. Different cities often have Facebook groups where production companies share resources they no longer need (such as set pieces) to encourage recycling and reuse. In 2025, *The Green Theatre Touring Guide* — the first of its kind created specifically for an Aotearoa context — was published by Playmarket.

Written by Hannah Smith and Ralph McCubbin Howell, co-directors of *Trick of the Light Theatre* (*The Bookbinder*, *The Griegol*), the pair emphasise the importance of writing a guide like this for an Aotearoa context²⁵:

There are a number of excellent resources around the world that can help... but these come from contexts far removed from our own. The Theatre Green Book in the UK is geared towards productions on a West End scale, reference tools from Julie’s Bicycle assume materials are coming from Europe and that travel by train is an option... Even closer to home, Arts on Tour’s Green Touring Toolkit (Australia) refers to an average national tour covering more than 10,000km on the road, and is predicated on audiences from multiple cities with populations in their millions.

Aotearoa is different. We have a small population, scattered across several

islands. Touring nationally inevitably involves a trip across the Cook Strait. Making a living from theatre often means touring overseas, and this inevitably involves at least one long-haul flight (taking a train to Edinburgh isn’t an option).

Tools offered in the guide include templates for a green rider, a materials inventory, and a touring sustainability plan, as well as guides on calculating your environmental footprint and on sustainable materials and initiatives for recycling and disposal.

The writers also offer a word of encouragement for artists in Aotearoa:

Remember this: you’re a theatremaker from the ends of the earth. You’re used to making extraordinary work with scant resources (and using those resources again and again). On a global scale, shows from Aotearoa are already compact and nimble, and because our population centres are small, we’ve worked out how to tour. But we can do more. Some of the stuff in this guide will be things you are doing already, the rest of it will build on skills that you already have.

It is this precise predicament that offers both a challenge and an opportunity for practitioners in Aotearoa, with the specific geographical context necessitating an innovative and resourceful approach to working.



Suitcase Show by Trick of the Light Theatre. Photo credit: Rebekah de Roo.

That said, knowledge and resource sharing are still nascent in many ways

Given the sector’s interconnectedness, it may seem surprising that the sharing of knowledge, resources, services, and spaces is not more common. Part of this is due, perhaps, to the way in which funders tend to pit organisations against one another: claiming they want to see partnership, but inadvertently incentivising self-interest.

In *The Future of Arts Development*, practitioners emphasised how valuable investment in shared resources would be²⁶:

We would appreciate open access resources (digital templates, software, hardware) for practitioners... a library of tools we can hire for free or very cheaply such as audio description equipment, wireless headphone systems, captioning/surtitle equipment and programmes.

Ways that creative organisations and creatives can share resources to ensure they benefit the whole community. We seem to work in silos and end up purchasing the same equipment when if we worked together, it would be more viable.

Perhaps more fundamentally, creating moments for a burned-out and resource-stretched sector to spend time together was emphasised as a need, too:

Connecting with other arts organisations, both nationally and internationally, would provide valuable insights, foster collaborations, and open up new avenues for partnership and funding. This would enable us to learn from others, share our experiences, and collectively contribute to the growth and development of the arts sector.

At a time when organisations seem to be siloing themselves in response to economic downturn, [Creative New Zealand] could counter this by providing a neutral space to help foster and hold collaboration. Greater support for bringing arts organisations together to share best practices, key learnings, data and insights, would have a positive impact on the industry as a whole and create a more sustainable ecosystem.

²⁵ Trick of the Light Theatre, “Welcome to the green theatre touring guide,” Green Theatre Touring Guide, accessed 2026, <https://www.greentheatre.co.nz/>.

²⁶ Creative New Zealand, “The future of arts development in Aotearoa New Zealand: What arts organisations told us about the support they need to make a positive impact with communities” (report, July 2024), https://creativenz.govt.nz/-/media/project/creative-nz/creativenz/pagedocuments/20240624_future_for_arts_development_report_organisations.pdf.

Traditional media is dying, for better or for worse

Globally, traditional media has been experiencing profound disruption and transformation over the past two decades, compounded by the rise of social media and streaming platforms, which have dramatically reduced advertising revenue.

In Aotearoa, this has been particularly profound due to the size of the sector, and between 2006 and 2018, the number of working journalists more than halved from 4,284 to 2,061.²⁷ The challenges faced by media organisations were accelerated during the pandemic and the accompanying drop in advertising revenue: Bauer Media (which published a suite of lifestyle and current affairs magazines) closed its operations. The two main news companies both struggled: Stuff was on the verge of closure and was ultimately sold to its CEO for NZD\$1, and all major media companies in the country underwent restructuring during this period, some multiple times. Newshub — the newsroom serving Three, one of the main TV networks in Aotearoa — closed in 2024, and a year later, TVNZ shut down a number of their current affairs programming.

What does this mean? It is harder than ever for artists to get national or even city-wide coverage for their work, and even harder to get a review — something which feels especially pertinent when considering ephemeral forms of art that have no external documentation otherwise. Not only does it mean losing a form of archival documentation, but a loss of the understanding of the critical response to a work at the time of its presentation, and a valuable resource that contributes to the development of an artist’s career by supporting funding, touring, awards, and acquisitions.

²⁷ Jeff Loan et al., “The implications of competition and market trends for media plurality in New Zealand” (report prepared for the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Sapere Research Group, November 2021), <https://www.mch.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-10/sapere-report-media-plurality-nz-feb22.pdf>.
²⁸ Rosabel Tan and James Wenley, “New Mirrors – Strengthening arts and culture media for Aotearoa New Zealand” (research report, Creative New Zealand, November 2023), <https://creativenz.govt.nz/development-and-resources/research-and-reports/new-mirrors>.

In the report *New Mirrors (2024)*, Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi), member of Mataaho Collective, adds²⁸:

[Media coverage] is really important... There needs to be high-quality writing about this work so that when the institution or the curator goes to the wider acquisitions meeting, they can cite this well-written article that shows the value of what we’re doing...

Mainstream media coverage also serves the art world as well... it feeds into broader knowledge and people knowing that this work exists... it has the ability to translate those stories and what you’re doing to a broader audience. Those are the times when we’ve received a lot of love from our families, because then, they get it.

When it comes to certain functions that marketing and publicity serve, social media has stepped in. Through these platforms, it is easier than ever to reach an audience, to amplify word of mouth and offer direct contact with an artist. This, in turn, has significantly shifted the way people learn about artists and support their work — and with social media being a way that many curators and programmers are discovering new artists, it is a channel that is increasingly beneficial for artists to maintain.

The use of AI and other new digital technologies is an ever-evolving conversation

Artists and cultural organisations are both harnessing and wary of AI, given the potential impacts of plagiarism, cultural colonisation, environmental destruction and financial loss.

Award-winning photographer Yvonne Todd — known for her uncanny editorial portraits — has declared that she is now working only in AI. “AI makes images that I can’t make without considerable resource,” she said in an interview with national broadcaster RNZ. “So that’s the appeal.”²⁹ Elsewhere, a number of books by successful authors were disqualified from the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards in 2025 for having AI covers. “Book covers speak to what’s inside the book, interpreted by sentient, compassionate, empathetic, thoughtful people,” said Chloe Blades, judge in the PANNZ Book Design Awards, in an interview with RNZ. “It’s those characteristics that AI can’t offer that give a book its character and soul.”³⁰

There have also been cases of actors losing voice work to AI alternatives or not being aware that they were signing away their rights for their voice to be used in future projects without pay. “Once that’s done,” says actor Jennifer Ward-Lealand, recently named Vice

President of the International Federation of Actors, “that voice can work for 10 years, 20 years, 30 years.”³¹

For Māori, there are many concerns around data sovereignty, including unauthorised data harvesting, the inappropriate use of cultural symbols, and the risk of a cultural flattening. There have, however, been many examples of experimentation and exploration. This includes the Te Hiku Media Papa Reo project, a speech recognition and language model for te reo Māori. Artists like Kereama Taepa have also been experimenting with digital technologies, primarily 3D printing and virtual reality. “The virtual and digital tools used by Taepa enable him to create taonga Māori in a way that would be impossible with traditional methods,” observes Zoe Black in an essay for his 2025 exhibition, WāMua at Jhana Millers Gallery. “Yet, important aspects stay tied to his whakapapa. Here, the legacy of the carving style of Te Āti Awa is honoured in how the wheku [face] are shaped. Their peaked heads in respect of Taranaki Maunga, as they have always been. For Taepa there is a necessary balance of what is drawn from the past to take into the future.”³²

²⁹ Culture 101, “In a first NZ artist Yvonne Todd turns to AI,” RNZ, November 16, 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/culture-101/audio/2019012901/in-a-first-nz-artist-yvonne-todd-turns-to-ai>.
³⁰ Morning Report, “Top writers ruled out of NZ book awards due to AI covers,” RNZ, November 18, 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/life/books/top-writers-ruled-out-of-nz-book-awards-due-to-ai-covers>.
³¹ Simon Mercep, “Acclaimed Kiwi actor at forefront of effort to protect artists from AI,” 1 News, December 27, 2025, <https://www.1news.co.nz/2025/12/27/acclaimed-kiwi-actor-at-forefront-of-effort-to-protect-artists-from-ai/>.
³² Zoe Black, “Level Up,” Jhana Millers Gallery, October 2025, <https://jhanamillers.com/exhibitions/152-kereama-taepa-wamua/>.



In a briefing to the government in June 2025, Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage emphasised “supporting effective AI and digital technology oversight without stifling culture and creativity,”³³ in particular noting the recommendations set out in *Ko Aotearoa Tēnei* by the Waitangi Tribunal (2011), which emphasises the need for a co-governance model to ensure Māori are making decisions about their own taonga.³⁴ Māori data sovereignty expert Karaitiana Taiuru underlines this in *Public Service Association*, saying “Māori voices and perspectives (and all other parts of our society) must be integral to every stage of AI development and implementation, while advocating for robust regulatory frameworks that protect and promote Māori interests.”³⁵

Kereama Taepa, *Pekapeka*, 3D-printed photopolymer resin and lacquer, 2025

³³ This is further emphasised in Amplify, the new national strategy for arts and culture. In this, considerations around how to “Support the creative and cultural sectors’ uptake of new technology, including responsible use and development of AI and accessibility technology” is explicitly stated, including “Consider how government can support sustainable development of AI in the creative and cultural sectors through cross-portfolio work led by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment. Sustainable development of AI would build on existing usage in sectors and support economic potential while being responsive to concerns about misinformation, workforce, privacy, IP and data sovereignty.”

³⁴ Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, “He Whakamāramatanga mō Ngā Tirohanga Wā Roa / Long-term Insights Briefing 2025: Te Ahurea i te Ao Matihiko / Culture in the Digital Age” (draft for public consultation, June 2025), <https://www.mch.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2025-06/Long-term-Insights-Briefing-2025.pdf>.

³⁵ New Zealand Public Service Association, ed., “AI For Good: 10 perspectives on artificial intelligence,” Progressive Thinking series (April 2025), <https://psablogfiles.blob.core.windows.net/blogassets/AI%20for%20good%20perspectives%20book%202025%20final%20screen.pdf>.

For the first time, Aotearoa has a national creative and cultural strategy guiding top-down decisions

In 2025, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage also released *Amplify: A Creative and Cultural Strategy for New Zealand*, outlining how the government will be prioritising support for the creative and cultural sectors over the next five years. While there does not appear to be additional funding tagged to the delivery of this strategy, the priorities it sets out highlight where public sector energy is likely to be focused in the coming years, including:

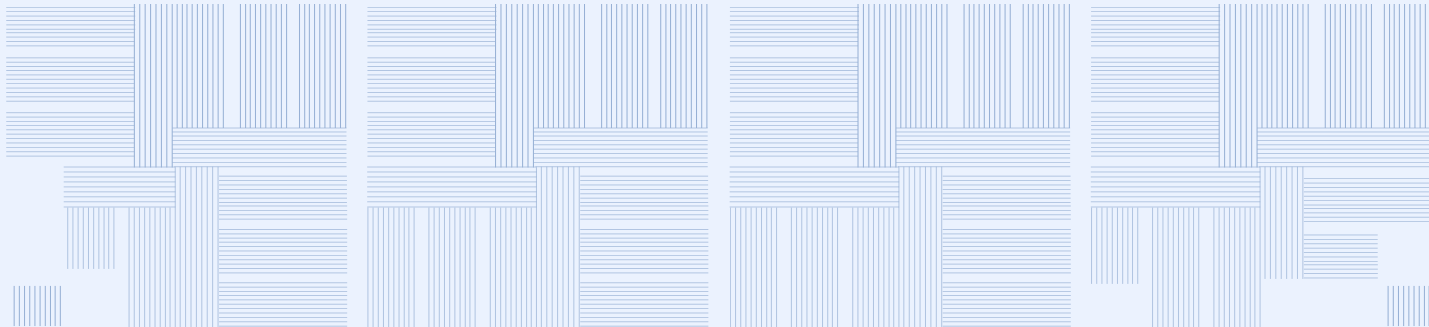
- A government-led focus on leveraging alternative funding sources for the sector to support sustainability
- Working across the government to enable the creative and cultural sectors to support social outcomes, for example, providing support for people experiencing mental health challenges and those at risk of entering the youth justice system
- Growing creative exports and cultural tourism to attract more high-quality foreign direct investment into the sector and facilitate new opportunities for creative career development

- Partnering with creative and cultural sector stakeholders, local government and Māori to strengthen infrastructure for the health and sustainability of arts, culture and heritage. In particular, this involves Creative New Zealand exploring how it can place arts development decision-making closer to the communities that those decisions impact

The 2030 targets outlined in this strategy include:

- The economic contribution of the arts and creative sectors grows to at least NZD\$22 billion (of GDP), with a focus on cultural exports and tourism
- A 10% increase in the number of New Zealanders engaging with New Zealand arts, culture, and heritage
- 5,000 more people working in the creative and cultural sectors

The opportunity inherent in this strategy is a national document that key stakeholders can refer to in shaping the arts ecosystem over the next five years. Artists and institutions can see where their operations and aspirations align with this strategy, and consequently advocate for their involvement in this vision for the sector.





Recommendations for practitioners and organisations looking to work with and in Aotearoa

The following section offers recommendations for practitioners and cultural organisations looking to work with and in Aotearoa.

For cultural institutions

Start with relationships and a shared cultural foundation

It is clear from this mapping that one of the strongest aspects of the cultural landscape in Aotearoa is the many Māori and Pacific artists pushing the boundaries creatively — doing so in ways where they can maintain sovereignty over not just their work, but how they work.

Within te ao Māori, whakawhanaungatanga (the process of establishing relationships) is a critical first step to any partnership or collaboration. This is true of many of the collectivist cultures that co-exist within Aotearoa, too.

Given the importance of this, transnational projects should prioritise this first-phase investment to truly flourish. Allowing time to establish and deepen relationships with potential collaborators — and to develop a mutual understanding of each other’s cultural practices and contexts — always leads to a stronger working relationship, particularly within an Aotearoa context.

Use this time to invest in your understanding of the sociopolitical and cultural history of the regions where you hope to work, and to develop a fluency in the basics of te ao Māori (including the language). In turn, it is equally important to share your own context, in particular the elements that may be distinctly and even unexpectedly different from the collaborators you may be working with. This might include the funding context, the political climate, the religious landscape, cultural expectations, as well as more individual characteristics, such as your preferred way to communicate and work.

These details may be as fundamental as the hours you expect to work to things that you require at your accommodation. “Indonesian people need to eat rice.” Historian and curator Sadiah Boonstra mentions in *New Waves*. “Sometimes they can’t eat anything else, so there needs to be a rice cooker or access to rice.” Seemingly small differences like this can have a major impact. “Once the dancers feel uncomfortable in the setting in which they’re supposed to be performing, it throws them off their game.”

In Aotearoa, you might find that — generally speaking, as it is impossible to summarise such a diverse country — people have a more informal, flattened hierarchy, and are reluctant to speak about their achievements, sometimes even downplaying them. Practitioners do not have to navigate censorship laws as other countries do, so artists are legally free to speak as they wish and make the work they want, including work that is critical of the government. Email and phone are the most common communication tools, with Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram and WeChat mainly used within specific communities. When meeting with people from collectivist cultures (Māori, Pacific and Asian communities), you might bring a small gift, such as food or a creative offering.

Where possible, visit Aotearoa in person first. It goes without saying that kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) experience allows for deeper engagement. Where you are able to do this, work with a host partner who can shape your visit with you, offering cultural advisory and introducing you to artists and organisations relevant to your project. Alternatively, you might consider investing in more formalised opportunities to deepen this intercultural fluency, such as tours for small delegations of artists and arts workers similar to the model adopted by the [Asian Producers’ Platform Camp](#).

Consider where creative visions and resources may complement or intersect

The geographical distance of Aotearoa and its growing import culture means certain resources and processes are less available or accessible, curtailing experimentation. One example of this is in the use of technology in both creation and presentation; while some pathways are relatively inexpensive and accessible — the use of AI, for example — it is more challenging to experiment with processes like large-scale 3D printing and photogrammetry or in display technologies like volumetric display, holography and custom LED walls. The flipside to this is the expansive natural environment and Indigenous knowledges that sit at the foundation of the country. There is, therefore, an opportunity to strategically consider how collaborations could capitalise on the unique offerings that partners bring to the table.

Invest in platforms that facilitate international collaboration and exchange

Touring (both inbound and outbound) presents greater financial challenges compared to other countries, again due to its geographical characteristics. As a result, Aotearoa artists are increasingly migrating to other countries or working directly with institutions overseas to create and present work internationally. In many cases, those works do not end up being presented back in the country, despite audience interest, due to programming and economic restrictions. For similar reasons, audiences often end up travelling internationally to experience work and see artists who are not touring to the country.

Given these challenges, as well as the unique voice and strength of artistry coming out of the country, platforms that facilitate international exchange are a strategic solution to developing and touring new work.

There are many examples of this happening internationally. Within the performing arts,

there have been a range of collaborative initiatives to develop new work, like the NEW BUND 31 Young Creator Program and the Asia Connection: Producers Camp. We have also seen more focused collaborations, such as the Seoul Performing Arts Festival’s Creative Lab, presented in collaboration with Melbourne’s AsiaTOPA and individual festival directors match-making artists. For visual artists and writers, opportunities for exchange often take place at group residencies and labs, such as the Physical Futures program, a collaboration between C-LAB in Taipei and Critical Path in Sydney.

Creating a space for artists to experiment and develop ambitious new work that can tour internationally is a critical step in meaningful exchange — and, critically, aligns with New Zealand’s new arts and culture strategy. Based on the success and challenges of previous initiatives, these platforms should be multi-year, they may be residential, and will require appropriate investment for development and presentation. They should allow for true experimentation, too. Failure should be cheap, not rare.

Opera for the Dead, Monica Lim and Mindy Meng Wang. Photo: Dewie Bukit
Supported by the Next Mobility Project run through Seoul Performing Arts Festival (SPAF)



For practitioners and touring companies

Develop your intercultural fluency

Aotearoa has a unique cultural context with Māori culture being a foundational part of everyday life. Allow time to engage in research before you visit, and approach your interactions with an open heart and mind, knowing that there will be unexpected learnings for both you and your hosts along the way.

Consider where your creative interests may have chemistry

Given the strength of the work being created by Māori and Pacific artists in Aotearoa, there are natural alignments for transnational Indigenous collaborations where practitioners may be exploring similar ideas but in different cultural contexts. Similarly, the strength of our Aotearoa Asian artists offers unique opportunities for collaborations that may explore elements of diaspora. More than anything, finding opportunities to discover and meet artists will be — as in any context — the vital first step.

Remember that Aotearoa New Zealand is an island at the bottom of the world

This geographical distance has been discussed extensively. Be prepared not only for the costs of travelling to Aotearoa, but within Aotearoa as well. The country lacks a comprehensive rail network, so getting around requires either road transport or flights. Production costs also tend to be greater due to the higher cost of local materials, but so too is the cost of shipping: make sure you understand what the most cost-effective and sustainable approach will be. And remember that the country has very strict biosecurity laws, so there are certain foods and materials you will not be able to bring into the country.

Develop a thoughtful engagement plan

This mapping has illustrated several challenges practitioners may encounter. The country is experiencing the decimation of the media landscape, a risk-averse cultural sector, and a government intent on dismantling the humanities, leading to ongoing devaluation of the arts and a need for greater advocacy. On the flip side, everyone is well-connected and reaching audiences via social media is easier than ever. This is the context in which your work will be presented, and thinking through both the marketing and public programme — specifically how your work will connect with audiences in Aotearoa — will be crucial. If you are touring in partnership with local presenters, this is a plan to develop with them. In some cases, it may be their responsibility, but it is encouraged that you advocate for this and consider how your work might connect with specific communities.

Conclusion

This mapping offers insight into the evolution of the cultural ecology in Aotearoa New Zealand — a country still navigating its bicultural foundations, its ever-evolving identity, and how creative expressions reflect this.

In many ways, Māori and Pacific artists in Aotearoa are leading the way globally when it comes to an Indigenous imagination, not only as artists pushing boundaries and experimenting with creative possibilities, but as leaders reimagining the systems and structures that shape the sector. By the same token, there is still a long way to go. While there is a groundswell of support for this ongoing evolution, environmental, educational, and social policies are currently being passed that undo much of the work of previous decades.

In terms of cultural sector policy, however, for the first time in history, decisions will be guided by a national creative and cultural strategy, which seeks to support the economic sustainability and growth of the sector while emphasising the role of the arts in delivering positive social outcomes. Supporting career sustainability is particularly important in an Aotearoa context, given the country’s limited public funding, a small market, and its geographical distance from the rest of the world, which makes touring more challenging than in areas connected by road and rail.

The national arts development agency, Creative New Zealand, is also rolling out significant changes to how it invests in cultural organisations long-term, and with 2026 being an election year, there is the potential for the creative sector to change dramatically over the next decade.

Capitalising on the opportunities presented by the cultural ecology in Aotearoa will involve first developing a robust understanding of the cultural contexts in which you will be working, with relationships being an important foundation for any creative endeavour, but particularly within te ao Māori. Investing in platforms for international collaboration and exchange is a strategic recommendation to address many of the challenges often encountered, enabling the development of new work that stands tall on the international stage.

Critically, this mapping is only the beginning of the conversation — particularly given the ever-evolving context of the cultural ecology — and future dialogue and research may build on these insights to explore additional transnational collaborations that will strengthen connections between Aotearoa and the world.

Further Reading

- [Mapping Creative Sector Investment and Outcomes](#)
- [Creative New Zealand — Arts Funding 101 Guide](#)
- [Green Theatre Touring Guide for Aotearoa](#)
- [*The future of arts development in Aotearoa New Zealand*: What arts organisations told us about the support they need to make a positive impact with communities](#)
- [*A Profile of Creative Professionals 2023*](#)

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