

Response to the National Cultural Policy Consultation Paper:

Sustaining Creative Cultural Continuity

by Susannah Keebler, PhD

I am a dancer, choreographer, educator, and researcher, originally from the U.S., based since 2008 in Mallacoota, East Gippsland, VIC, where I live and work on Bidwell, Bidwell-Maap, and Yuin Country. My practice has developed through sustained relationships between dance, place, and community. My current work as a largely independent artist moves between choreography, performance, writing, research, and teaching. Live-arts artists and educators frequently also become organisers, managers, producers, directors, educators, archivists, documenters, administrators, and caretakers of the conditions through which creative work continues to exist. My comments are drawn from my practice-led research for a PhD thesis titled, “The Embedded Dancer: Disruption and Continuity of Dance Practice in Regional Australian Communities in the Context of Crisis and Climate Change,” which puts forward a model of creative practice called Embedded Creative Practice, developed through long-term dance practice in regional and post-disaster contexts, examining how artistic continuity is sustained across disruption and crises.

Revive made an important shift in recognising artists as both workers and creators, and in repositioning arts and culture as central to Australian life rather than supplementary to it. The consultation paper continues this trajectory through its emphasis on participation, resilience, infrastructure, and cultural sustainability. However, many of these terms still operate primarily through administrative and managerial frameworks that recognise culture most clearly where it becomes measurable through public delivery, participation metrics, institutional systems, and visible, public outcomes. What remains less visible are the long-term conditions through which creative continuity is actually sustained over time, particularly in regional and in crisis-affected contexts.

The consultation paper states that the government is seeking views on how Australia’s cultural infrastructure can remain “resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose,” including how “existing partnerships, investment, infrastructure and systems could be used more effectively to support long-term sustainability.” This is useful. However, in many regional contexts this sequence is often reversed. In many regional and crisis-affected contexts, long-term sustainability is often maintained

less through permanent institutional systems alone than through the ongoing work of artists sustaining relationships, adapting practice, and carrying continuity between recognised projects and outcomes.

Creative continuity precedes policy recognition. The work persists first through accumulated practice and relationships, attentional knowledge, adaptation, iteration, and on-going commitment. It is only later and only sometimes supported through institutional visibility. Artists in many regional communities already function as cultural infrastructure. They maintain continuity between projects while carrying technical, administrative, educational, and relational labour often without permanent venues, stable employment structures, or long-term institutional support. This continuity is frequently sustained through self-organised and under-recognised labour occurring between recognised outcomes: between performances, between grants, between rehearsals and classes, between moments that administration can measure. What disappears within policy language is often precisely the continuity through which culture remains alive.

The consultation paper repeatedly invokes participation, engagement, sustainability, resilience, infrastructure, and place of practice. These terms emerge primarily through sociological, economic, and managerial frameworks rather than from creative practice itself. While some such frameworks are important, they also risk positioning the arts principally through measurable social outcomes while obscuring the internal conditions through which creative work develops such as experimentation, rehearsal, interruption, attention, failure, return, relationships, memory, and long-term continuity. This is especially important in relation to a creative practitioner's place of practice.

Within policy frameworks, place can become understood primarily as a site for delivery, engagement, or regional servicing. Embeddedness is then interpreted through organisational presence or geographic fixity. Embeddedness emerges through long-term attentiveness to changing environments, reciprocal relations with communities, ecological conditions, memory, repetition, movement, and return. Embeddedness in place of practice should therefore not be understood solely as fixed attachment to one locality. Many regional artists, educators, and culture workers sustain continuity through overlapping and evolving place relations across multiple sites over time. Movement between places does not weaken embeddedness; often it is part of how continuity itself is maintained. The regional artist frequently inhabits a dispersed geography of return with relationships sustained through ongoing practice rather than permanent institutional occupation.

The next National Cultural Policy could engage more directly with artist-led and practice-led understandings of infrastructure, sustainability, participation, and continuity. Cultural continuity refers not simply to the persistence of activity, but to the conditions through which creative relationships, methods, knowledge, and artistic presence remain sustainable across time. Different artistic practices survive through very different material conditions, labour structures, audiences, temporalities, relationships to infrastructure and markets, and the ways creative work circulates. While broad policy categories such as participation, infrastructure, innovation, sustainability, and the creative economy, as used in Revive, are important, they can also risk obscuring the different conditions through which artistic practices continue to exist across time. This is not an argument for fixed disciplinary hierarchies, nor for competition between art forms, but for recognising that creative practices emerge through different relationships to bodies, technologies, mediation, transmission, time, communities, labour, ecology, and place.

Cultural policy therefore requires sufficient flexibility to recognise that different artistic practices operate through different material, practical, and economic conditions, and may require different forms of support in order to remain sustainable. This is especially important in relation to practices such as dance and other live arts, which often sustain public cultural life through embodiment, co-presence, repetition, rehearsal, teaching, and long-term relational continuity that cannot be fully measured through market scalability, digital circulation, or short-term project outcomes alone.

Recent discussion surrounding the National Cultural Policy consultation, including commentary in ArtsHub concerning the relationship between games funding and broader cultural investment, usefully highlights not only uneven funding conditions between art forms, but also the very different ways artistic practices operate within market economies. Dance, for example, often sustains significant cultural and social value through embodied transmission, live co-presence, rehearsal, teaching, relational continuity, and long-term community engagement, while remaining comparatively difficult to scale within commercial markets or platform economies. By contrast, digital games may simultaneously generate substantial cultural value, accessibility, employment, technological innovation, and commercial revenue while also aligning more effectively with scalable digital distribution, export models, platform circulation, and private investment structures.

These differences should not diminish the cultural importance of any creative form, nor deny its significance for different communities, including participants whose forms of access, sociality, and creative participation may occur substantially through digital environments. However, they do raise important questions about whether all art forms can or should be understood through equivalent economic and infrastructural models. Practices grounded in embodiment, co-presence, relational continuity, and non-scalable forms of participation may require different forms of public support precisely because these conditions are becoming structurally harder to sustain elsewhere within contemporary social and economic systems.

Key recommendations:

- Recognise on-going creative and cultural practice and continuity itself as a form of cultural infrastructure, particularly within regional and crisis-affected communities.
- Develop longer-term funding and employment structures for artists and creative practitioners that support ongoing creative practice between discrete project cycles.
- Ensure cultural policy remains responsive to the distinct material, relational, and economic conditions through which different artistic practices operate.
- Support artist-led and arts educator-led regional structures in which creative practice drives programming, participation, and community engagement.
- Recognise that live arts and embodied practices sustain forms of public cultural life, including co-presence, intergenerational exchange, attentional practices, and community cultural continuity, that may not be fully sustained through market economies or digitally scalable models alone.
- Ensure policy and funding frameworks are informed by practitioners with lived experience of practice within the specific creative and artistic forms they are designed to support.

Working in post-bushfire East Gippsland has shown me that culture is not only something that returns after crisis. Often it is what allows continuity to persist during crisis itself. A workshop, a rehearsal, a makeshift gathering space, an ongoing community class, the artist who continues showing up across years of instability; these are not secondary to cultural infrastructure. In some regional communities, they are the infrastructure. Resilience, however, is too often used within regional arts discourse as a polite term for unsupported endurance. The capacity of artists to absorb

expanding layers of labour without structural support should not be mistaken for sustainability. What appears from outside as resilience frequently conceals exhaustion, volunteer overextension, private subsidy, attrition, and the gradual erosion of the very conditions that permit creative continuity to exist. What is increasingly at risk in many regional communities is not creativity itself, but the long-term conditions that allow creative practice to remain continuous across time. A future National Cultural Policy therefore has the opportunity to recognise that culture is not sustained only through visibility, presentation, or measurable outcomes, but through continuity, ongoing relationships, repeated acts of attention and return, and the conditions that allow artists, arts educators, and culture workers to continue working across long periods of uncertainty and change.

Without stronger support for continuity itself, cultural policy risks supporting the appearance of cultural life while gradually eroding the conditions that make cultural life possible.