

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY CONSULTATION

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Culture as Civilisational Infrastructure:

A Submission on What the Next National Cultural Policy Must Understand

Opening Argument

Australia is being invited, once again, to articulate what it values about culture. This is not a routine administrative exercise. It arrives at an inflection point — a moment when the accumulated pressures of ecological disruption, democratic erosion, technological acceleration, and geopolitical realignment are converging into something that no single policy domain can contain. The question before this consultation is therefore more consequential than it may appear: not what the government should fund, but what kind of society Australians intend to become, and whether culture will be understood as the living means by which that becoming occurs.

This submission does not offer a sector wishlist. It offers a philosophical argument. The argument is this: culture is not an amenity that a prosperous society adds to its infrastructure once the important things are settled. Culture is the substrate through which a society thinks, disputes, reimagines, and reorients itself. It's the medium in which the future is rehearsed before it arrives. When policy treats culture as a managed sector producing consumable outputs — performances attended, exhibitions visited, screen minutes watched — it confuses the product with the process, and the decoration with the foundation.

The incoming National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to correct this confusion. Whether it takes that opportunity will determine whether Australia enters the coming decades with its collective intelligence intact, or finds itself

navigating an unfamiliar world with instruments calibrated for a world that no longer exists.

1. A Distinction the Policy Must Make: Culture and Art Are Not the Same Thing

Before any argument about what cultural policy should do, there is a prior distinction that must be made — one that most cultural policy frameworks, including Australia's, have consistently failed to hold clearly. Culture and art are not synonymous. Treating them as though they were produces a policy architecture that serves neither well and confuses both.

Culture, in the anthropological sense, is what a society already is: the accumulated sediment of shared practice, language, ceremony, norm, and identity through which a community recognises itself and reproduces itself across time. Culture in this sense is largely conservative. It is the inheritance, the given, the common ground. Supporting culture in this register means sustaining heritage, enabling participation, ensuring that the symbolic life of a community remains accessible and alive across generations and geographies. These are legitimate and important aims.

Art is something categorically different. Art — at its most necessary and most irreplaceable — is the practice by which a society interrogates, disturbs, and remakes what it already is. It is not the celebration of the shared; it is the friction applied to the shared. It introduces the genuinely new into a field that would otherwise reproduce itself unchanged. It makes the familiar strange enough that those inside a culture can see it, question it, and choose differently. Where culture tends toward consolidation, art tends toward rupture. Where culture confirms, art provokes. Where culture remembers, art imagines.

This is not a hierarchy — culture without art stagnates, and art without cultural ground has nothing to push against. But they are distinct functions, and they require distinct policy responses. A policy that funds art by the same logic it uses to fund cultural participation — measuring audience reach, democratic access, community representation — will systematically defund

the work that art most needs to do. The art most required at moments of civilisational stress is precisely the art that has not yet found its audience, that does not yet feel accessible, that disturbs before it illuminates.

Cultural policy in Australia has tended to collapse this distinction in one of two directions: either treating art as a subset of cultural production, evaluated by its contribution to cultural cohesion and national identity; or treating culture as the aggregate of artistic outputs, measured by consumption. Both moves erase what is most distinctive and most necessary about art as a practice. The new National Cultural Policy must resist both, and must build its architecture on a clear account of what art does that culture, left to itself, cannot.

2. The Misunderstanding at the Heart of Cultural Policy

The prevailing framework for cultural policy in Australia — and in most comparable nations — rests on an instrumentalist logic. Culture is supported because it generates economic activity, enhances social cohesion, attracts tourism, or projects soft power. These are not false claims. But they are secondary effects mistaken for primary purposes, and the mistake has consequences.

When culture is valued instrumentally, it becomes legible to government only through metrics that measure those secondary effects: jobs created, audiences reached, exports generated, diversity represented. The things that culture actually does — disturbing settled assumptions, incubating heretical possibilities, holding collective grief, transmitting tacit knowledge across generations, testing what it means to be human under new conditions — are systematically invisible to this accounting.

Revive represented genuine progress in recognising artists as workers and in articulating a more inclusive vision of whose stories belong in the national conversation. But even there, the architecture of the policy remained fundamentally economic and administrative: a framework for supporting a sector rather than a framework for understanding what that sector is for at a civilisational scale. The new policy must think at that larger scale — or it will

replicate, in more generous language, the same fundamental misunderstanding.

3. Civilisational Transition and the Stakes for Culture

We are living through what historians will likely identify as a civilisational transition: a period in which the operating assumptions of industrial modernity — unlimited material growth, human separateness from ecological systems, the sufficiency of technical solutions to complex problems — are being falsified by reality at accelerating speed. Transitions of this magnitude are rare. They are also, by definition, disorienting. The maps that guided the last era do not show the new terrain.

What guides a society through disorientation? Not economics, which optimises within existing assumptions. Not technology, which amplifies existing capacities. What guides a society through disorientation is culture: the accumulated wisdom encoded in story, art, ceremony, and shared symbolic life; the living capacity to imagine alternatives; the courage to grieve what is ending and to name what is being born. These are not soft contributions. They are the epistemic infrastructure without which no other infrastructure can be intelligently directed.

Australia is unusually, even uniquely, positioned within this transition. It holds the world's oldest living cultures — knowledge systems that survived the last great discontinuity and carry within them forms of attention, responsibility, and long-range thinking that post-industrial societies are only beginning to recognise as necessary. It is geographically embedded in the region that will define the twenty-first century's dominant civilisational energies. It has a creative population whose instincts — irreverent, cross-cultural, alert to irony, uncomfortable with pretension — are exactly the dispositions required when old certainties fail.

A cultural policy adequate to this moment would recognise all of this as strategic endowment, not as incidental charm. It would invest in culture not as enrichment but as readiness: the readiness of a society to think clearly under

pressure, to hold complexity without collapsing it into slogans, to find its way forward without a map.

4. First Nations Knowledge as Civilisational Resource

No submission on Australian cultural policy can speak honestly without addressing what First Nations cultures represent — not only as expressions of identity and heritage, but as repositories of knowledge about how to inhabit this continent sustainably over very long periods of time.

The dominant tendency in cultural policy has been to include First Nations arts and cultural practices as a component of diversity: important, valued, adequately resourced. This framing, however generous in intent, still positions First Nations culture as one strand within a pluralist tapestry rather than as the epistemological ground on which any genuinely Australian culture must eventually stand.

The new National Cultural Policy should move beyond representation toward recognition — recognition that the custodial relationship with country encoded in First Nations knowledge systems is not a cultural preference but a civilisational proposition about how human communities sustain themselves within living systems over time. At a moment when that question is becoming urgent for all of humanity, Australia has an extraordinary and largely unacknowledged resource. Policy should treat it accordingly: not as heritage to be preserved, but as intelligence to be in genuine dialogue with.

5. The Threat of Algorithmic Monoculture

Every consultation on cultural policy in 2026 must reckon with artificial intelligence — not merely as a tool that artists can use or a labour threat that workers must navigate, but as a structural force remaking the conditions under which culture is produced and received.

The specific danger is not that machines will make art. It is that the optimisation logics governing AI-generated and AI-curated content will systematically favour the familiar over the disruptive, the engaging over the challenging, the emotionally legible over the genuinely strange. Algorithmic

curation at scale produces monoculture: an environment in which the surfaces of cultural diversity proliferate while the underlying register of genuine strangeness — the strangeness that forces a society to revise its assumptions — is progressively extinguished.

Cultural policy has a specific responsibility here that no other domain of policy can discharge. It must actively fund and protect the conditions under which genuinely unsettling work can be made, distributed, and encountered. This means supporting not only artists who use AI tools, but artists whose practice represents precisely what algorithmic optimisation cannot replicate: the irreducibly human capacity to make meaning out of difficulty, to speak from positions of genuine risk, to disturb comfort in ways that open rather than close the field of possibility.

Copyright protections for artists in an AI-mediated environment are a beginning, not an end. The deeper policy question is whether Australia intends to remain a society capable of cultural self-determination — of producing and sustaining a cultural life that reflects its own distinctive encounter with this moment — or whether it will outsource that process to systems optimised for engagement metrics and global scalability.

6. Education, Imagination, and the Long Game

A cultural policy worthy of its name cannot limit itself to the professional arts sector. It must address the conditions under which the capacity for cultural participation — the ability to make, interpret, question, and contribute — is cultivated across the whole of society. That capacity is formed primarily in childhood, and it is formed through education.

Australian arts education has been systematically subordinated to the demands of economic productivity: the imagination is cultivated insofar as it can be rendered useful, and abandoned when it cannot. The consequences of this are long-range and difficult to measure, which is precisely why a short-term policy calculus fails to register them. A society that does not educate for imagination, for aesthetic attention, for the capacity to dwell within ambiguity

without demanding premature resolution — is a society that is quietly dismantling its own capacity for civilisational navigation.

The new National Cultural Policy should make a clear and explicit commitment to the arts in education: not as enrichment for the fortunate, not as therapy for the disadvantaged, but as foundational preparation for citizenship in a complex and rapidly changing world. This is not a cultural argument. It is an argument about national capability.

7. Toward a Policy Architecture Adequate to the Moment

What would it look like for Australia's National Cultural Policy to operate at the scale this moment demands? The following principles suggest a direction:

From sector support to civilisational investment. The policy should name, explicitly, that culture is being funded not primarily because it creates jobs or drives tourism, but because it is the medium through which a society navigates uncertainty, transmits wisdom, and rehearses the future. Every specific funding decision should be legible within this larger rationale.

From representation to epistemic sovereignty. First Nations culture should be engaged not as a component of diversity but as a source of knowledge that the rest of Australian cultural life is invited — and needs — to learn from. This reframing has structural implications for governance, for funding allocation, and for the way cultural institutions position themselves in relation to First Nations authority.

From risk aversion to creative courage. The culture most needed at a civilisational transition is the culture that takes genuine risks — that says things that have not been said, that makes forms that have not existed, that disturbs the comfortable and gives voice to the marginalised and the overlooked. Policy that only funds what is already valued is not cultural policy. It is cultural conservation. Both have a place, but they are not the same thing, and the balance between them should be made explicit.

From national to planetary orientation. Australia's cultural life does not end at its borders, and its cultural policy should not either. The challenges that culture must help navigate — ecological collapse, technological disruption, the breakdown of international order — are planetary in scale. Australian cultural policy should explicitly position Australian creative work within that larger conversation, and should support the international exchanges and collaborations through which Australian artists and thinkers contribute to, and learn from, the global effort to imagine what comes next.

8. A Case in Point: ELISION Ensemble and the Funding of Irreplaceable Work

I write this section from personal knowledge. ELISION Ensemble arose in part from my work at the Victorian College of the Arts in the mid-1980s. In 2026 it reaches its fortieth year. That longevity is not incidental — it reflects the ensemble's extraordinary capacity for self-renewal, its refusal to settle into a comfortable repertoire, and its sustained commitment to working at the outer limits of what contemporary instrumental music can do and mean.

ELISION is, by any serious reckoning, one of the most important arts organisations Australia has produced. Its seventeen musicians live across Melbourne, Sydney, Paris, Berlin, Bern, Stuttgart, Cologne, and Los Angeles. It has defined contemporary instrumental technique internationally; it has commissioned and premiered work by composers who are among the most significant artistic thinkers of our time; it operates across disciplines and cultures in ways that embody precisely the orientation this submission has argued Australia's cultural life requires. It is not a niche ensemble. It is a civilisational instrument.

And yet organisations of this kind exist in a permanent state of structural vulnerability within the current funding architecture. The reason is straightforward: the metrics that dominate cultural funding — audience numbers, ticket sales, broad accessibility, geographic reach — are not wrong in themselves, but they are systematically misaligned with the value that organisations like ELISION generate. The audiences for serious new music are

small by design, not by failure. The work is difficult by necessity, not by indulgence. The international reputation ELISION carries cannot be read off an attendance spreadsheet.

The consequence is that such organisations are perpetually at risk of being outcompeted for resources by organisations whose outputs are more legible to administrators and more comfortable for the public — orchestras performing familiar repertoire to large audiences, festivals with broad popular appeal, screen productions with measurable viewership. None of that work is without value. But the displacement of ELISION-scale organisations by more extravagantly funded popular institutions represents a specific and irreversible cultural loss: the loss of the capacity to make and sustain work at the frontier of human expressiveness.

The new National Cultural Policy should establish an explicit protection for what might be called frontier ensembles and organisations: those whose value cannot be measured by audience scale, whose work is internationally significant precisely because it refuses to be accessible on easy terms, and whose survival depends on funding logic that looks beyond the metrics of the mainstream. ELISION at forty is a proof of what such protection makes possible. The policy should ensure that the next forty years remain possible for ensembles of its kind.

Closing

This submission has not argued for any specific quantum of funding, or for the resolution of any particular sectoral grievance. Others will do that work, and it needs to be done. What this submission has argued is that none of those specific arguments will cohere — will amount to more than a series of competing claims on a finite pool of resources — unless they are grounded in a shared understanding of what culture is for.

Culture is how a society thinks about itself, disputes itself, and reimagines itself. It is the living record of what a people have endured and the living laboratory of what they might become. At a moment when the future is

genuinely uncertain and the old maps are genuinely failing, it is not an optional extra. It is, in the most literal sense, how we find our way.

The next National Cultural Policy has the opportunity to say that, clearly and without apology, and to build a framework for investment that reflects it. I commend that opportunity to those who will shape it.

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