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Cultural leaders must show they can inspire nation

Rosemary Sorensen | April 04, 2008

DELEGATES were named last week for the Creative Australia forum at the federal Government's 2020 Summit in Canberra on April 19 and 20.

On Monday, anticipating the Government's review of the national innovation system, a forum was held in Sydney to discuss how the arts can contribute. And a new think-tank called Anzarts, headed by arts administrator Justin Macdonnell, has been founded to provide leadership in cultural policy debates.

To understand present thinking within the arts, The Australian asked cultural, business and academic leaders for the key ideas that will drive the innovation debate.

Narelle Kennedy, chief executive, Australian Business Foundation

DON'T make the mistake of equating innovation only with hi-tech products. The key to achieving innovation is the smart application of knowledge for novel and imaginative problem-solving, for customers and communities.

Intangibles are the tools of trade in the arts, humanities and creative sectors.

They can be used to boost innovation by helping enterprises discover ways of competing more intelligently. This means motivating, managing and inspiring people; creatively solving problems; and reinventing businesses so they engage and attract sophisticated consumers.

The arts sector will shape the innovation agenda not by separating itself and seeking special treatment but by blurring the boundaries and demonstrating how its expertise can benefit the nation.

Scott Rankin, artistic director, Big hART

BOARDS of arts companies ought to be chosen to support maverick activity rather than to attempt to rein it in because of an aversion to risk. Artistic directors need to be trusted for their vision.

The audit and governance culture endemic in the arts is destroying innovation rather than supporting it. These (governance) skills need to be seen for what they are: small, simple and relatively unimportant, that should be serving the agenda rather than setting it.

Flagship companies, when they produce flabby, sloppy, provincial work year after year, should be de-funded. Funding should be the least discussed topic for artists rather than the most because if you can't make a go of it, you're not being creative.

We need to establish a culture of critique, rather than allow critics to act as mere consumer advocates.

Sharon Bell, University of Canberra

IS it possible to legislate for innovation? Will an innovation system produce more innovative outcomes? We know from experience that innovation is likely to occur in the marginal and peripheral spaces, rather than the centre.

A rethought, reinvented innovation system needs to be an enabling system. It does not just allow room for the confronting or the subversive but recognises the importance of process, structure, policy and all the diverse media that allow the time and space for the exercising of the creative imagination.

It was Einstein who said, before we invented the knowledge economy: "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

Justin Macdonnell, executive director, Anzarts

INNOVATION means two things: a preparedness to engage with artists in one's own society in the making of new work and a preparedness constantly to renew and reinvigorate the organisation itself.

We must find new systems of governance for arts organisations in which board and staff share their roles more collaboratively.

Are we so limited in our thinking that we can come up with no better way of doing business than a company limited by guarantee with a board of seven and an uneasy diarchy of general manager and artistic director? What should our organisations look like? How might they be made flexible enough to behave in response to artistic practice, instead of forcing the practice to respond to it?

Sam Watson, chairman, Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts

THE national indigenous arts sector is centred on Sydney and the existing networks are owned and controlled by the inner circle of funding agencies such as the Australia Council. I call on the Rudd Government to conduct a broad-ranging review of the Australia Council and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board.

For too long any indigenous person who has sought a future in the arts sector has been forced to flee to Sydney to court the power bloc that controls resources.

Across the sector - in film, literature, theatre, performance and even in digital and new art - the main beneficiaries of government funding happen to have Sydney or Melbourne addresses.

We need to break this hidden power bloc or the national indigenous arts culture will never achieve its potential.

Evelyn Richardson, chief executive, Live Performance Australia

WE would like to see the innovation agenda result in investment, export strategies, skills development, research and development, and access for regional Australians.

Investment incentives for the live performance industry should be introduced, akin to those enjoyed by the film industry. Export and trade programs would assist commercial producers and arts companies seeking to tour Australian productions overseas.

Helen O'Neil, executive director, Australian Major Performing Arts Group

COMMITTING resources to arts education is the best way to develop Australian talent. By using the arts infrastructure - non-profit and community-based venues, producing companies and creative talents - we can make our cities synonymous with rich and lively cultural life. We should invest in innovative work (which may be too risky to fit into established cultural programs) and search for projects that are driven by creative thinking and which connect with audiences.

Melinda Rackham, executive director, Australian Network for Art and Technology

QUICK thinking and nimble innovation are the order of the day. Be small to think big. Small, dynamic, responsive cultural organisations are pivotal. Today's disruptive technologies have opened up new opportunities for artists to work with rapid-growth technology in dynamic economic environments.

An organic model of arts innovation is very different from the one we have seen previously in this country, which invests in real estate rather than research.

We know innovation does not increase proportionally with infrastructure investment and rarely appears when you set out to trap it.

Engaging artists for residencies at universities and other research centres, for as little as four months, is both exceptional investment value and highly resonant in these times of viral communication, prolific partnering and networked knowledge.

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