

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE THE ARTS AND INNOVATION



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I want to talk this morning about some issues that have concerned me for quite a while, and which have been brought to a head by my recent five years in the United States. I'm sure when many of you saw this title, you thought, "Oh God, not innovation again! Here we go, another diatribe on how we all need to be faster, cleverer, newer, and funnier in the arts workplace, when we're already dancing as fast as we can!"

Well, I hope that's not how it will turn out. .

The arts *are* innovative. That is their nature. Most practitioners and arts workers would subscribe to that proposition. Most arts organisations would regard themselves as innovative and there is an underlying assumption that they should be. But what does that mean, in fact? I believe that to the extent that the arts in Australia could be regarded as "innovative", the term refers mostly to the *product* rather than the *producer*. What I want to focus on is the *process* and the *innovator*.

And what does this word "innovation" really signify? It's worth remembering that innovation is not just *invention*. New concepts, new technology or new products might be a part of the process, but they are not the essence of it.

New ideas may be involved; but so can existing ideas in a new setting. There have always been cheap restaurants or "food outlets", as we now say. Supermarkets long ago pioneered self-service and fast service. But it took McDonald's to bring them together in a way that revolutionized how a restaurant could be simple and fast and cheap. There was nothing *new* in the elements. It was their combination that was innovative.

So maybe innovation is just fresh thinking that creates new value for the user.

Workers in the arts and creative industries characteristically think of themselves as innovative. But even if your product is by some measure "innovative", the chances are you're stuck with a legal structure, funding model or work practices that belong in another age.

Perhaps you don't think of your product as "innovative". Maybe it's a traditional art or cultural practice. Is that a reason why your company shouldn't prize innovation in how you program it, add to its core repertoire, disseminate it, communicate to your patrons, manage and grow your resources to support it? Maybe for you, the innovation bar should be set even higher.

When I went to Miami in 2003, ages before we completed building our Centre I believed that engaging with the many diverse and at times dysfunctional communities in South Florida was an important task if we were to succeed, once the place opened. I spent a lot of time thinking and talking and debating about what makes society take ownership of arts institutions i.e. why do people care and why ultimately do they want to invest in them. Because that is, one way or another, what each of us in the arts invites society to do when we set ourselves up in the public domain. We seek the public's investment. It may be in money through asking them to buy a ticket or share their tax revenues with us; it may be through attendance, volunteering, participating or getting to know what we do and why we think it is valuable. It may be in skill or talent, time or energy. But it *is* investment.

And what do we give back? Why should they invest in any of these ways? What's the social dividend, if you like?

Well, you could say it's a transforming insight, an uplifting experience or just a good night out. But religion, adult education classes or sport can be all of those things, and some are considerably cheaper than a night at the opera. Some even promise eternal satisfaction.

What makes the arts different is that we have a unique capacity to tell the stories of those around us and to be particular—to be specific about how we tell them. In Miami I chose to find ways of linking with our strange and at times unnatural community by doing just that.

There was nothing innovative in this. Artists have been doing it since Homer. What I found strange in the US was that their arts centres, even a big multi-venue arts centre like ours, were only *presenters*. Presenters present. They don't *make*. And here I was, this funny foreigner with an accent that most people thought was South African, blundering around in a world that had its own ideas about what arts centres did and how they operated. What the American centres do is a) look after their resident companies: characteristically opera, ballet, symphony—maybe theatre, though not, as it happened, in our case; and b) they take their shopping cart to the arts mall (aka booking conference) and buy pre-packaged shows off the shelf—like frozen peas. And they thaw them out for touring.

To me, however, a presenter ought to present not just the pre-packaged but the fresh food as well i.e. the work made by our own artists in our own community. It never occurred to me that since we were building a new arts centre and trying to involve the community, our first priority should not be to engage the local practitioners. What did *they* have to say about themselves,

about the neighbourhood, about the world? And let me tell you, in South Florida there's a lot to be said about the neighbourhood and the world as seen through the eyes of the neighbours.

I dwell on this experience because, as it turned out, what I thought was pretty obvious and pretty ordinary was regarded as new, even revolutionary in a place that was used to a very different method of operation. In a future life, I may claim it was all part of some master plan, but the reality is that at the time I was just following my nose.

I did so by the obvious device of talking to artists. Asking them what they thought, what ideas they had about their practice; what ideas they might like to explore in the future, and how might we—the emerging monster of a building downtown—be able to facilitate that.

So I used the fairly simple method of calling for expressions of interest and, without going into detail, gradually built a system of trust, and a process whereby over time artists – especially community-based artists who had never thought of having a role in a palace of culture such as ours - came to make exciting work there in the halls, in the lobbies, in the Plaza and sometimes under my feet.

The outcome was a plethora of new pieces commissioned and created and presented in our first two seasons which touched on issues such as the body image—a hot topic in that body-worshipping city—the plight of Cuban refugees, HIV-AIDS, the loneliness of technomania and much, much else. It was messy and irritating and extraordinary. Through these artists and their practice we connected with Cuban, Haitian, white and black, African-American and Afro-Caribbean, poor and not so poor. But the real point is that we became a platform for new voices. I believe it was the single most important thing we did in those crucial first years. It was innovative not because of the work that was made. That was new and dynamic but most of it was not especially cutting edge. It was innovative because of who we were who hosted it. It was innovative because it happened in the best and newest theatre in town and not in a disused factory or someone's garage. It was innovative because it was about community pride.

I look around the world today and see orchestras failing; classical music, which has raised the worship of the past to cult status, in crisis and many other art forms in audience meltdown. Even where they're successful, they're playing essentially to more of the same people, rather than diversifying as they grow.

If theatre companies sometimes fare better it's in my view because they are presenting some of today's work as well as yesterday's. But they too seem to rely more on celebrity than substance in their quest for renewal. And why is this happening? Because in a world of financial uncertainty investment is going not to the creation of artists who make new work but to sustain those who interpret old work.

When the Prince Archbishop of Salzburg had his valet kick Mozart out of his house it was not because that old conservative did not like contemporary music it was because Mozart had not

created enough of it on time to satisfy his patron's demand. The 18th century courts of Europe did not want to hear the old, they wanted to hear the new. And they wanted the latest fashion in painters and writers and architects. Did that other great patron of the arts, the Church, stick with Gothic? Hell, no! They became classicists as fast as you could say "Renaissance" and when the fashion changed all that came down and the Baroque went up. Socially and politically conservative they might have been, but they knew how to invest in innovation in art. They also knew that if you wanted really good results, you had to know at least as much about the art as the artists you employed.

What I learned in Miami was how little skill our arts organizations today have, unlike those old royal courts, in fostering and managing innovation. Our structures were too arcane and archaic to find a proper place for innovation in our ranks. Our unwieldy institutions of part-time volunteer Boards and full-time, burnt-out management have little left over to devote to such things: no mental space to accommodate them and crucially no capacity to *learn* from each experience. How often have we heard the refrain: "What are we doing this for?" Which of us has not heard that from Board members, or from colleagues, or from the ever-flexible and adventurous subscriber family?

My answer would be: we are doing it to survive. To build a new and engaged audience which is more adventurous than the one we have, more open to change and innovation. In other words, more like the rest of the world. I think of all those people of my age who have adapted to new technology as if they were born to it, who email their grandchildren and swap anecdotes on Face Book, who happily read the latest novel, see the latest films and buy the work of contemporary painters, but who, nevertheless, believe that chamber music stopped with Brahms and still regard Bartok as dangerously modern. So I conclude that that paradox is not their fault, it is ours.

Like many companies who try to engage with the new, we in Miami bumbled along; I like to think some good work was made. Many colleagues in Australia have gone through similar processes. But few, I think, would claim that their organization has embraced new ideas; that they have found a special place in their practice for new work and those who make it, that when they program, they test it against the need for renewal and renovation; that they value innovation for its process as well as for its outcome; that their entire organization, however large or small, understands and learns from the experience. Or, wonder of wonders, that their Board offers leadership, guidance and finds resources for new work.

For me, then, innovation means two things: a preparedness to engage with artists in one's own society in the making of new work, and a preparedness to constantly renew and reinvigorate the organization itself while growing its capacity to do so. I have come to believe that most arts companies today do a very poor job of the former and have little or no capacity to engage in the latter.

Some corporations today allow their employees a proportion of their time to work on their own projects, provided they are within the company's mission. Yahoo is one such. But how many arts companies do likewise?

All the arts would like to think that somewhere, somehow they are devoted to research and development. But is that really so? Or are such activities almost always on the edge of their concern? Many corporations whose mission embraces research and development have worked to bring their “boffins” in from the cold and to place them at the centre of their corporate culture. Many have restructured so as to ensure that their internal processes are measured by the degree to which research and development and thinking about innovation are integrated into the daily life of the company. How many arts companies could be so described?

A number of times this morning I’ve used the term “learning”. Worldwide corporations are not only developing ways to value learning within their ranks but a job such as “Director of Learning” is now quite common. This is how we give value and resources and constant attention to innovation whether it be the absolutely new, breakthrough, cutting-edge development or just old ideas in a new setting.

So, to the extent that the arts do not do this, what is inhibiting them? We have a blizzard of vision statements on the subject; there are grant programs which encourage innovation; and there are brownie points for pursuing it.

I believe that the root of the problem arises from trying to attend to innovation, while operating in rigid, unadventurous work environments. For about fifty years in the English speaking world, the arts - and here I am thinking above all of the performing arts – have been urged, even compelled by their funding masters to emulate the business sector. There has been at almost irresistible pressure to conform to certain legal structures, methods of governance and methods of management. Who has not been told that they need to get more people with “business skills” on their board? More people with financial, legal, marketing prowess to guide and restrain the wilful artist—as though it were the arts that regularly had the corporate crashes, bankruptcies and shady dealings. That push has almost eliminated arts boards’ ability to make informed judgments about the very arts they govern.

Don’t get me wrong: I’m not arguing against accountability or due process or fiduciary responsibility. What I would argue against is the notion that those characteristics are found only in the so-called business sector, amongst people with MBAs, and never amongst those people who have spent a lifetime of being abstemious with public arts money for the very good reason that most have never had much. And I cannot help but be sadly amused by this conundrum: the very funding agencies who had pushed their clients in this unhelpful direction, now question whether the boards they engendered have the capacity to choose good artistic leadership for their client companies. *There* is irony for those who choose to contemplate it.

I believe that throughout the English-speaking world the Board system of governance in the not-for-profit sector has been a miserable failure. I wonder how many people in this room could put their hand on their heart and say that, except occasionally and then largely by accident, they have found their relationship with their Board a pleasurable, productive and stimulating

experience? Or for Board members, that their participation in the process to have been equally pleasurable and constructive? If I asked the same question in the US, where they rejoice in boards of 30 and 40 members, or in the UK, New Zealand or Canada, the answer, I believe, would be depressingly similar.

So to summarise: I believe we who work in the arts will continue to find it hard to locate innovation, fresh thinking, and fresh ideas at the core of our operating culture in any systematic way while we are squeezed into archaic and inappropriate management and governance schemes, borrowed from other sectors and poorly applied to our own. I not believe that we can create that culture unless we find new and, dare I say it, innovative ways of making systems of governance in which board and staff share their roles in a more collaborative model; and in which those who govern are qualified to make informed judgments about the art they govern and offer advice and leadership to the creative process.

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? Because something like that that might work for schools and charities and hospitals, can we invent no other model more suitable to who and what *we* are? Is this then the best we can do? As the kids say: "I don't think so"!

And if I am right, and the current model works so poorly throughout the English speaking world, where it has been so touted, let's do something about it. Perhaps we need to look at our mission, at our goals and at our practice, and ask ourselves what do we conclude from them? What should our organisations look like, how might they be made flexible enough to behave *in response* to our practice, instead of forcing the practice to respond to it?

Only if we are innovative in how we do business will we find our business to be innovative. And why in this worldwide arts community should Australia not be the inventor of the new management model? Who says it has to come from the North Atlantic? Let's get our arts into gear and show the way.

Justin Macdonnell has had a long career as an entrepreneur. In the 1980s he developed Macdonnell Promotions, an arts management company providing services internationally. He conducted several government reviews, published a critical history of the rise of the federal Arts Ministry, and in 1993 became Executive Director of the Australia-Latin America Foundation to develop a cultural exchange network. He has curated programs throughout South America and the Pacific and 2003–2007 was Artistic Director of the Carnival Center for the Performing arts in Miami. This year he returned to Australia to establish the Anzarts Institute, a think-tank for the creative industries.