

AESTHETICS, DESIGN, IDEAS, PERFORMANCE AND IMAGINATION: HOW DO THEY CONTRIBUTE TO AN INNOVATIVE ECONOMY?

Intro by Helen O'Neil

The topic for this section puzzles most of my colleagues in the arts.

We create. We communicate and spread ideas, experiences, in new ways every day in the theatre, on the concert stage, on film and on the street. So what's to discuss?

As for the question of how aesthetic experience might fit in the innovation economy – ask any art curator about the auction world, or the rising tide of admissions to galleries and museums around the world as the on-line access to arts and information has created a new curiosity and thirst for firsthand experience of cultural work. Ask the commercial producers of music theatre who continuously chance the market with new work or revivals taking in new technology for staging, marketing and producing. They're innovating every day.

It seems almost incredible that we have had more than a decade of debate about innovation policies in which the cultural and arts industries have been almost invisible. But that is the fact.

In 2008, with a new Government promising to give Humanities and the Arts new recognition in the economic and social life of the country, I can hear cynicism and coming loud and clear from practising artists and live performance companies.

Another inquiry, another round of rhetoric followed by money that seems to be swallowed up in committee and research report, they ask. If you label it digital content the cynicism grows – IT people tend to take up the committee spots while the artistic producers get on with making movies, experimenting with new distribution media and increasingly blurring the lines between live performance, recorded and transmitted experiences in some parallel world

If economists and policy makers don't get it, we will continue to seek investment from arts authorities or private sources and will leave the economics and productivity debate people in business lobbies and financial services.

But the real reason for this discussion is that we need Government policy making to include the arts in its economic agenda as well as its cultural agenda. The costs of developing work for audiences and schools, and readers, and dealing with the increasingly large numbers of people who participate in the arts themselves means we have to look a major leap in the ways we do business, the work we make, and the ways in which we reach our audiences and collaborators.

To pluck an example from the weekend papers: there's an article about the Imax theatre production of a U2 concert which is being hailed as a totally new way of experiencing music performance, and rests on development of new creative skills in using digital processing of image and sound to create compelling viewing and listening. No doubt it will also prompt new visitors to music shops in search of interests, new on line traffic in downloading music, music notation and swapping of home based compositions and performances based on it.

We in Australia are experimenting with High Definition transmission of live performance from the Opera House to regional areas. But why isn't the Department of Industry investing in helping pay the costs of artists, in investing in training directors and technicians to make the transmissions the best in the world. It shouldn't be left to film schools and the Australia Council to decide where to take the money from to invest in this new area, when the likely beneficiaries of successful art in this area will be cinema operators, HDTV retailers and manufacturers, broadband operators, and the Government itself if it can hasten the adoption of HDTV and flog off the current TV spectrum for a few billion. Investing should be done by those who reap the return! There have been suggestions the artists should do the performances for free or taken amounts – name an engineer or scientist involved who is asked to do that in a commercial area.

So I hope today's discussion is about the ways of bridging the very real gap between people and projects in the arts and the more esoteric world of economic policy making.

To help us in the discussion I am introducing economist and consultant John Howard, who has been working with CHASS on a series of papers documenting the contribution of the arts, humanities and social sciences to commercial innovation in traditional areas of the economy including manufacturing and service delivery. He has also started looking at some examples of where we can show very clearly that artists and artistically based businesses drive technological adoption and business growth – from the role of music and drama in creating a demand for radio in the depth of the Great Depression of the 1930s on to the Australia Council's programs helping craft based designer access manufacturing in China, or markets in Europe.

The format will be:

I am asking John to draw on his considerable knowledge and will ask him to comment on three areas relevant to this gap between the arts and the innovation debate.

Then I want to open for some discussion of potential models, skills and projects where innovation policy and investment will make a real difference in creating and getting new work to the market – whether that be in schools, theatres, for telecoms or in homes.

I should start by mentioning that John brings a rigorous classical approach to the

economics of innovation – he isn't interested in industry protection and subsidy for business that wouldn't make it without a handout. But in the course of his studies he has developed a real appreciation of what non-profit businesses, local governments and research based institutions can do to change the business environment.

So the first question I wanted to ask John is about how is it possible is that our innovation has been dominated by the issue of how to help the men in white coats in the lab, a narrow approach based on commercialisation of technical invention

(Would you talk about traditional stuff based on manufacturing' but quickly get on to the issue of developing a problems based approach to research so that we look at broader issues of innovation in areas like bandwidth development or social welfare, or education)

The second question draws on your experience creating an innovation strategy for the ACT. Now this has the potential to provide a model for other cities than Canberra, and for state levels of government. What did you see for the role of non-profit or micro business in the arts area for the overall economy here?

(Follow up is really whether states and cities need an innovation strategy, or whether this is a Federal Government issues)

The third question is about an area that really caught my attention since I do worry about the steadily increasing number of young Australian graduating from universities with degrees in performance studies music, visual arts, animation and film production. Some will be artists; some will be producers some will go overseas. I want to ask about the role of the creative thinking we think is the province of the arts and cultural industries in knowledge transfer across Australian industry public sectors and non-profit business.

(Go for it.)

Thank's John now let's open for some comments and suggestions on where we can integrate innovation in the arts with innovation policy.