

Submission to the National Innovation System Review by the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

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“Can we imagine a better world? Are we asking the right questions?”

This question focuses our attention on the generation of novel and fresh ideas. Producing new knowledge and approaches involves pushing boundaries, and questioning the status quo.

At PICA we imagine a better world in which our society as a whole is open minded, questioning, receptive and accustomed to being challenged and in turn keen to challenge the status quo.

Contemporary art is by its very nature innovative and challenging and the above statement can easily describe the communities of artists and audiences that PICA works with on a daily basis.

A better world would be one in which the arts is accepted, valued and integrated into all aspects of our life and work. By valuing creativity, seeing it as an essential part of our physical, social and economic and environmentally sustainable existence, we create a culture that is equipped and ready to come up with new answers to big issues and to imaginatively foresee and solve problems.

We believe that at PICA we have been asking the right questions. How can we provide artists and other creative thinkers the time, space and other resources to develop conceptually refined and complex new ideas and approaches? How can we equip them with the best tools, knowledge and skills to do this? How can we develop a far larger and more diverse audience for our programs, one that is engaged, enquiring and responsive to new ideas and practices?

“How do we solve the big challenges we face as a country, an industry or as a community?”

Outcome oriented research and inquiry is the only response to the big challenges confronting us as Australians and global citizens. How do we do this better? How do we increase business investment in innovation?

At PICA we believe a collaborative approach is one that solves the big challenges. By allowing cross-disciplinary research and exploration and by bringing the arts and humanities communities into big issue discussions we are more likely to generate the type of creative energy and lateral thinking required. Let's bring diverse voices to the problem-solving table!

Artists are great issue generators and cultural organizations like PICA provide a platform for artists, writers, performers and film-makers to present the pressing concerns of the day to the broader community, raising awareness, rallying opinion, stimulating discussion and generating solutions.

True innovation requires the space and time for the creation of ideas. This space to play, a forum for open-ended exploration should be less focused on outcomes. At PICA we value this so highly, safe in the knowledge that in the long term the community will see the returns, that we offer a range of opportunities for artists to work in this way.

We provide R&D funding for cross-disciplinary research projects but do not ask for set outcomes, we offer studio space for artists to extend their practice and are working on an extensive triple phased development program for contemporary performance.

For example, in 2005 PICA awarded an artist an R&D grant to explore the use of interactive computer controlled laser projections to create intimate virtual theatres that 'pop up' in public space once the sun goes down. In February this year the same artist used this research to present a highly successful interactive night-time laser projection public art work in one of Perth's inner city laneways. This artist has more recently won a commission to create a major public art work for a new, state of the art industrial park 30km north of the Perth city.

As an organisation within a highly, perhaps over regulated industry we call for more flexible, organic systems of governance and infrastructure, ones which allow for risk, failure even and which ultimately foster artistic outcomes.

We call for new public policy metrics which are less prescribed and more able to validate, describe and account for the value of new creative knowledge, research or content; that are more accommodating for interdisciplinary practices and oriented to 'pure experimentation' rather than to finished outputs.

“Could we do everyday things better?”

This question focuses our attention on creative problem solving; everywhere, by anyone. How can we continually increase value? This question invites us to build on our national 'can do' culture.

To build on our 'can do' culture we need to think more in terms of 'can-do differently'. As a culture we need to celebrate ingenuity, quirkiness, creativity.

We need to change attitudes to culture and the arts so that it is seen as a necessary part of our lives and our future. We should look at the role the media can play in this – by integrating arts into broader discussions and not relegating it to a separate section of the paper or to a couple of hours on a Sunday afternoon.

Cultural organizations like PICA also have a role to play here by delivering engaging and accessible education and awareness programs, by promoting the contemporary arts to new and more diverse communities and by facilitating feedback and open discussion.

PICA is about to engage in a research project aimed at establishing the optimum framework for a schools education program. By looking at best practice examples from around the world and analysing our own unique context and requirements we hope to be able to pilot a “next practice” schools education program aimed at developing a “can-do differently” culture.

The introduction or re-introduction of foundation year courses at Universities would also go a long way in equipping our workforce with creative problem solving skills. There is nothing like a humanities education to broaden one’s outlook and view the world from a different and multiple perspectives.

“How do we get more firms and organisations to use the best available tools and techniques, from anywhere around the world, in what they do?”

This is about putting innovation to work. It addresses the diffusion of knowledge and techniques across whole industries and communities. Do we have the skills and training to take u this innovation challenge?

We do this well at PICA through strong national and international networks and exchange programs. We share ideas, artistic product and knowledge with peer organizations on a regular basis and facilitate the exchange of skills between artists, performers, writers and curators at different stages of their careers, or working across different artforms or from different parts of the world.

For a number of years now PICA has been running an important professional development program for art school graduates and their teachers in association with our HATCHED National Graduate show. The best tertiary art school graduates from around the country come to Perth in April each year not only to participate in this high profile exhibition but also to meet each other and benefit from a day of presentations and discussion by leading Australian artists and arts professionals about the opportunities and pathways open to them once they leave art school. Recent years have seen the addition of a fully-refereed symposium that tackles the latest issues associated with arts education and we are planning to expand this program even further in the future by incorporating one or two day master-classes by key national and international figures.

“How do we make it easy for people to use tools or apply ideas in novel ways?”

This involves expanding on the work of others, so people need the freedoms to use and adapt other people’s tools or ideas. What are the barriers to adaptation and novel applications?

Again allowing the time, space and place for play is vitally important here. We need to celebrate this exploration and resource it! For example PICA facilitates hybrid performance residencies in which leading Australian practitioners from very different fields come together simply to explore new ways of working together.

In August this year a dramaturg, a composer, an artist who works with robotics, an instrument maker, a video artist and a percussionist will spend two weeks in our performance space to examine what is possible when robotics and interactive installation are used in performance within a rigorous methodological framework.

One barrier to this type of adaptation and novel application is the fear of failure. By removing this fear and accepting that in order to get a great long-term result, failure in the short-term is ok, or even desired, great leaps can be made.

In Western Australia the perceived lack of support for this sort of exploration is an issue, as is the associated brain drain caused by talented creative individuals forced to move to more supportive, accepting and culturally vibrant environments.

Broader social, economic, health and environment issues would benefit greatly from a collaborative approach and input from the arts, humanities and other creative industries. Fresh minds used to lateral thinking and the application of old tools in new ways may provide some startling input. Artists in many ways are professional imaginers.

“How do we educate and equip our people to be creative and innovative, life-long?”

This is about how we, as a country, build and nurture human and social capital. It is about building skills.

It is interesting to note that our ability to be innovative is often in adverse proportion to the level of creative education and/or activity we have or are undertaking. For most students today arts education tends to peter out at the end of primary school. A consistent contact with the arts throughout education is required for Australians to be creative and innovative.

The arts education that is offered in schools today also tends to be at the more traditional end of the spectrum. It is innovation and the arts that needs to be embedded in the school curriculum.

There is a role here for PICA as we foster, promote, present and talk about the most innovative art forms around and those that blur the boundaries between painting, video, sculpture, installation, dance, theatre and music.

PICA for example has been supporting a ground-breaking WA artists collective whose members have backgrounds in visual art, film theory, new media, performance, psychology and live art. This collective has a long standing pre-occupation with issues of privacy, surveillance and its impact on social codes of behaviour in the public realm, responding to trends in local and global surveillance and increases in national security. Most of their artworks respond directly to a city, town or site investigating it's fears, hopes and concerns about personal freedoms, often offering up darkly humorous survival tactics for living in a panoptic 21st century. They often engage the public within their artworks - activating viewers through eccentric acts of intervention, on the streets, on-screen and in any other spaces they can get away with. With the assistance of a PICA R&D grant they are currently exploring and testing the technical parameters for combining MMS (multimedia messaging) and text messaging marketing software for a new interactive performance within an empty shopping mall.

“As a relatively small country, how does Australia prioritise its innovation efforts to make the most of what it has or can do?”

None of us can do everything; so how do we decide on what we should concentrate on? How do we balance our priorities across the claims of industry, research, and the community.

We believe it is about thinking long-term, about making basic cultural shifts, particularly in relation to arts and education. Priorities should be given to those areas that will have a long lasting effect and that are “innovating” rather than using “innovation”. It is also unwise to allocate to particular fields but rather create an open pool for ideas.

When PICA makes decisions on what areas of innovation to support we take into account the existing opportunities for artists in WA and Australia. There are already many support mechanisms for emerging artists yet little for those that are in the middle of their careers or established. PICA offers these artists opportunities such as commissioning of new work, R&D funding, residencies and exchanges with national and international peers and more generally exposure to new ideas and practices. Most importantly this is all done in a risk-friendly, non-commercial environment. The by-products of artists innovating might lead to commercial outcomes or advances but this is not an imperative or a driver.

“What mechanisms could we put in place to support a culture that promotes the generation of fresh ideas and risk-taking?”

- Arts education and exposure to innovative arts throughout schooling to establish the appreciation and application of ideas
- Foundation year courses at Universities that educate diversity and embed creative thinking
- Incentives for all workplaces to make time and space for risk friendly creativity
- Paid “study leave” or “time out” for workers to follow inspired research and development opportunities and creative development
- Review of over-regulation of arts and cultural organizations to enable them to be more responsive and free to direct and drive innovative projects
- More support for open-ended individual or collaborative creative research projects
- Make the most of what we already have – support organizations to use their connections, expertise and space