

**CREATIVITY** The arts can help us to tackle the challenges of the future by helping us to think differently, argues **Juliana Engberg**.

# The state of the arts

**W**E IN THE ARTS HAVE always argued that they are "good" for people. They add to humanity, create the conditions for a civil society, encourage tolerance and ways to deal with new ideas, encourage empathy and analysis. The economic rationalists said bah humbug, show us your tangibles. And so we have.

During the Howard era (following guidelines put in place by the Keating government) the arts have demonstrated their worth, and their struggle to survive, via business-viability reviews and sector inquiries. Using economic and demographic modelling, we have plotted the positive impact of the arts on tourism, education, investment markets, technological and new-media innovation, town planning, design and creative exports.

However, it is dangerous for the arts to abandon its assertion of intangible benefits in favour of an exclusively we-pay-our-way and our-outputs-are-up argument. I want to reassert the belief in the importance of creativity as a means to helping us become more adaptive, innovative individuals. Because, as we all know, we have a great deal of new thinking to do if we are going to work our way through some of the massive challenges we face as a nation and a planet.

While many have always intuitively argued the case for the intellectual and emotional benefits of the arts, we now have scientific evidence to support the theory. The emerging area of neuro-aesthetics is interesting in this context. I am referring to cognition and the arts — the way the brain is activated when it encounters something extraordinary, something that dislodges mundanity — a calisthenic workout for the mind.

The arts and sciences have become distanced in our education system. But, increasingly, it is clear that the arts and sciences together are the bedrock of creativity. Starting with imagination, we move to ingenuity through experimentation to deliver innovation. We need to offer opportunities to re-engage the imagination: to enliven our senses and

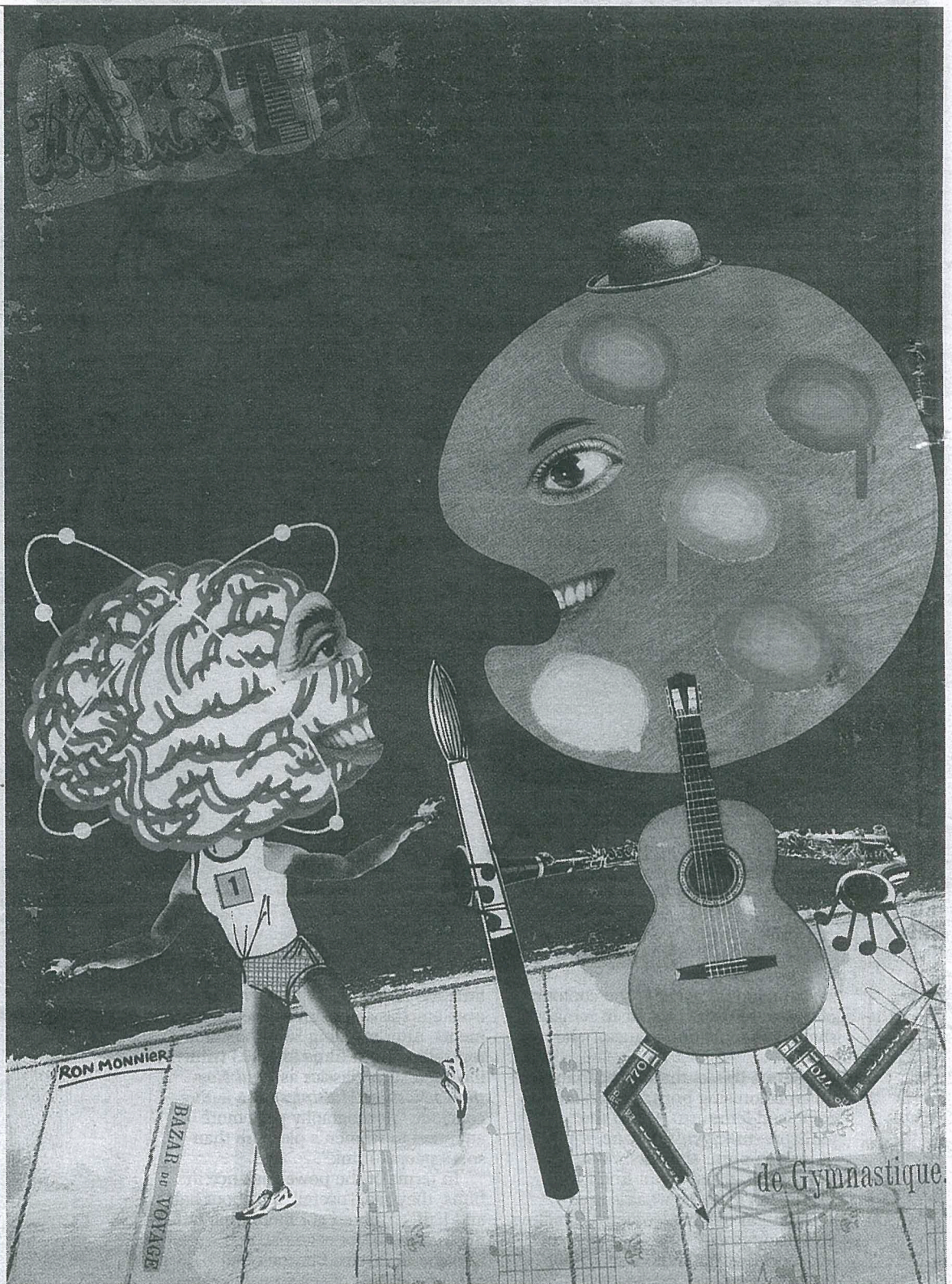
intellect; to stop the Google-rot of information passivity that will dog generations to come. The arts have a vital role to play in this campaign.

When mapping the brain activity of people watching dance, looking at visual art or listening to music, scientists have found that there is increased synaptic activity and greater interaction between the left and right hemispheres of the brain. These neurological discoveries have led to the development of the notion of multiple intelligence, and the idea that interaction with the arts can enhance our cognitive capacity. The arts can improve our linguistic, mathematical, musical, spatial, interpersonal and physical skills.

Engagement with art can also benefit the health of the mind and body. A recent study found that in a controlled group experiment of business executives visiting an art gallery during lunchtime, stress levels reduced by as much as 31%. As our population ages, this is surely going to be one of the important tools to fight brain attrition.

Tapping into this trend, there's an increasing number of interactive visual-arts projects. Installations such as Mike Nelson's *Lonely Planet* (a series of meandering abandoned rooms) and the Makeshift Collective's playful cardboard maze, both recently presented at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, turn the viewer into an active participant. Similarly, contemporary dance works created by choreographers like Gideon Obarzanek, Rebecca Hilton, Prue Lang and Stephanie Lake have become more interactive, requiring the audience to engage with the performers and the performance space.

As society relies more on virtual space and telecommunications, as it will and must do if it is to be environmentally sustainable, we need to counter this synthetic life by finding opportunities for more tangible experiences. We need to evolve and keep our minds and bodies agile. We need to become more genuinely, not virtually, haptic again: to feel our bodies and test our perceptions. If we are to keep our minds and bodies agile, we must give ourselves the



chance to deal with the incongruent and encounter the cognitive conflict that gives rise to thinking. It's what I call positive apprehension: that moment of radical misunderstanding that leads us to use our brains again. Art is great at creating these moments of arresting, conflicted thoughts.

**T**HE VALUE OF THE ARTS, however, does not lie solely in their economic and health benefits. Equally significant is the inherent philosophical and emotional dimension of the arts. Because the arts employ metaphor and abstraction, allegory and illusion, analogy and experimentation, they help us to think through our human situation. They provide a prism through which we can consider ethics, justice, psychology, history and future thinking — the arts offer "what if" scenarios. That's one of the reasons business and leadership courses, looking to the arts, are now trying to improve their employees' emotional intelligence, problem solving and team building through theatre, dance and visualisation — in other words, playing.

We really need this dimension of thinking in Australia, where, in the main, we are pragmatic rather than philosophical or contemplative — reactors rather than revolutionaries. We need to nurture revolutionary thinking to create evolutionary futures.

Legislating nationalism is deadly jingoism and creates a fortress mentality. National myth making for the sake of bolstering a selected version of history is deceitful and

patronising. Australian artists — writers, dramaturges, visual artists, choreographers, composers — will find their own stories to tell, and we do not need to insist upon their adherence to the notion of nationhood. There are prizes for that. Instead, government needs to nurture excellence in the arts. Australian artists should work on any and all vehicles that extend their ability to communicate passionately in their chosen medium.

It is equally important that Australian artists and audiences have the opportunity to see the best of the world's art practice. Young practitioners and art students, in particular, will benefit from encounters with their international peers. The lessons we can learn from exposure to international works will help foster new thinking. We must guard against insularity.

More support is required to enable our artists to create new works that can enter national and international repertoires, whether they are created from the ground up, or are interpretations. We must enable our most talented artists to be mobile, but they must also be well supported at home so that their expertise is not lost permanently to overseas opportunities. Better still that they are encouraged to move freely in and out of Australia, creating ever-extending corridors of reception for up-and-coming generations of Australian artists. We need to be exhibited in the Venice Biennale, heard in Montreal, read in the London Tube and watched at the Shanghai Dance Festival. Our national confidence is greatly

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increased by supporting our artists to engage with the rest of the world and by assisting these chances with sophisticated interconnected promotion and strategic alliances.

In dealing with the arts, I appear to have drifted into science and into education, economics, health and the environment. If it were up to me, I would set up portfolios with titles such as education and arts; technology and arts; economics and arts; health and arts. Knowing this is not practical, I like to hope that many of those core portfolios might take account of the arts when devising their own policies. However, may I make a pitch for an arts portfolio that is not some barnacle on the bum of another, but a significant concern, to take account of its centrality and connectivity to other aspects of governance?

**T**HE ARTS ARE, OF course, not exclusively the business of the federal government. They are best served by a partnership between all levels of government — federal, state and local — as well as non-government support. And, at this moment, we have the unique situation of Labor governments presiding over federal and state concerns. This is a wonderful time to encourage a discussion between both levels of government about devising policies in education and health to create greater access to the contemporary arts for students at all levels, and for the ageing and recuperating.

It should be clear that I place a high value on the idea of the audience as the main beneficiary of the arts. We need greater capacity to attract people to our activities. An injection of funds into promotion and audience-development strategies will reap multiple rewards, not just for arts audiences, but for education, tourism, local economies and labour forces.

There is no point investing resources in bringing people to art events that are average and

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uninspiring. At the heart of this whole enterprise are the artists and creators. We need to assist our local practitioners to learn, explore and improve. I would like to see the creation of key centres for arts learning, where the work of artists can be raised to a level of professional excellence. Not just new and digital-media product, as mentioned in Labor's election statement (which I think should be the domain of communications), but the core arts.

I want to see these centres invite visiting and contracted faculty from around the world to profoundly contribute to the learning of skills and philosophies that are central to ground-breaking arts. Residency programs (such as the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam) could also foster exchange between local and international peers. Such programs promote artistic growth and create long-term benefits in the form of international communities and connections. Let's not be parochial.

I would like to see mentorship become a part of our approach to long-term skills development. Can we devise, perhaps in co-operation with one or several of the philanthropic organisations, a scheme such as the exemplary Rolex mentor program, which brings young professionals into contact with experienced people in their chosen area to work with them, develop projects and have a groundbreaking experience?

Our artists need opportunities to grow, to increase their ambition and abilities and to continue to evolve in response to physical and psychological shifts within society. Across all art forms, more money needs to be allocated to the creation and commissioning of new works.

Artist fees in most art forms remain pitifully low. As far back as 1994 David Throsby and Beverley

Thomson evaluated artist fees and found them to be inequitable. Today the same situation applies. A new review of the fee structure for artists needs to be undertaken, and monies swiftly allocated to address this anomaly between creators and the contribution they make to the creation of wealth and confidence in society.

Many areas in the arts still need financial stabilisation. Others need consolidation and some need growth. A redefinition of the Australia Council's "key organisations" should be undertaken. At present the category is too large and indistinct, with a massive variance occurring within its spectrum. There is a need for a new platform of support for "flagship" organisations across the art forms. Flagship organisations are those that commission ambitious new works and engage with multiple audiences. They need differentiation from the incubator groups catering to niche and cognoscenti clusters. These flagship organisations already exist, but are buried in the morass of "key organisations." Their leading role in creating national cultural assets and setting the national cultural agenda needs to be recognised and supported. Funding these organisations will assist the arts to flourish, make them more accessible, and by extension create an adaptive, innovative society.

The "small to medium" performing-arts sector was analysed in 2002, but no particular financial action was taken. The Myer report on the visual arts was only partially adopted. These are urgent issues. Artistic and professional outputs have already plateaued in this vital part of the arts sector. We need government funds to increase our capacity, to bring human resources up to an acceptable professional level and to best serve our artists and audiences.

**T**HE FUNDING MATRIX for the arts sector is now complex and potentially exciting. Private philanthropy is on the rise, while corporate support is shrinking or being detoured to other concerns.

The emergence of private prescribed funds is a positive development for the arts, but private patrons naturally have partisan points of view and will not support the basic infrastructural and administrative needs of organisations, which remain the responsibility of government. The see-saw of non-government support will always make the arts precarious and vulnerable. Government must look to the long-term stability of the arts sector.

In closing, a story.

Recently a teenage Sudanese boy came to one of the arts immersion sessions run by ACCA in conjunction with Chunky Move and the Malthouse Theatre. According to his teacher he has been, since his arrival here, withdrawn, uncommunicative and sad. You can guess the reasons why.

During the workshop session he slipped back into the exhibition. Our education leader went in search of him to find that he was dancing between four video works. She asked him, "Do you like dancing?" "Yes," he said.

She organised for him to do a workshop with Chunky Move's hip-hop group. He loved it. During the visual-arts session, led by artist Laresa Kosloff, he created an entire film storyboard and animatedly talked about the life he had come from.

He had created his new Australian story. He found tools to communicate that day. The teacher cried. We all cried.

Need I say more?

This is an edited extract from *Dear Mr Rudd: Ideas for a Better Australia*, edited by Robert Manne, Black Inc. Agenda, \$29.95, available March 3.

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