

Lightness Flexibility Resilience

tools for survival in the 21st century

keynote address for RAISE YOUR VOICE
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Thankyou – Thanks elder present for their welcome, acknowledge traditional owners, pay respects to elders past and present.

As usual for me, the maverick, it's daunting to face a large group of experts in any field, since I am not one. However I was asked to say something today about things arising from the 20:20 summit and about some of the issues arising from what I wrote in the Griffith Review's Creativity issue. The 20:20 tag was something that the Queensland Library tacked on to the end of PR for a talk I did there with Julianne Schultz who , as co-chair of the Creativity stream, and with ongoing roles close to government *could* probably tell you a lot about what has flowed from the summit. But, sorry to disappoint, I'm afraid I don't know much about that – like all of you I have been able to detect significant new resourcing for indigenous art and activity, for contemporary popular music and for drama production at the ABC, an enthusiasm for creative industry including a new centre at UTS (and I'll say something later about creative industries) and some positive talk about arts in education: there has also been an added resource to the Australia Council for Artstart which is for young artists at the beginning of their careers, and I am part of a small (non-government) group getting its head round support for individual artists.

These are all good things, a pretty good record for 18 months in government, and I can see that they have sort of flowed in part from 20:20 where there were urgent discussions about the need for promoting the centrality of arts in life as a whole, for arts at every level of education, for more Australian content on our screens, for more Australian work in our programs, for tax incentives for the support of the arts, and some kind of rationale around something like a working wage for artists.

Formally unconnected to what has been happening in that sphere, though I do know that informally some have been listening, I have been thinking and speaking more about some larger principles and approaches- philosophies if you like. Hence the title: Lightness, Flexibility and Resilience.

I will finish by tie-ing some of these things in to your specifics in museums and galleries, and will also say a few things about the current taste for Creative Industries , as different from Art, but I'd like to start by talking about Resilience Thinking.

This was something I began exploring last November as a result of my contact with Dr Brian Walker who is the president of the global Resilience Alliance. Brian used to be with the CSIRO and is still connected with them. I had invited Brian to the series of 19 Alfred Deakin Lectures I curated for the 2008 series in Melbourne and regional Victoria, and was immediately attracted to Resilience Thinking and its possible applications for the arts. It has proved a rich seam, and some of that thinking emerged in the Griffith Review essay which began as the Wal Cherry Memorial Lecture in November 08

Resilience theory began in the first half of the twentieth century with an Austrian economist, and is now deployed for environmental modelling. **Resilience is defined** as ‘the capacity of a system to avoid disturbance and still retain its basic function’.

While this framework has arisen from first economic and then environmental studies, it immediately struck me as applicable to all systems, ecological, human and sociological. I believe it provides an unusually robust defense of how we might approach a resilient arts sector. I’m quoting from Brian Walker’s book with David Salt – Resilience Thinking, published by Island Press in 2006. And I suggest that as I quote here and there, you think of what it means in terms of own organisations, as I speak.

“...we are all part of some system of humans and nature (socio-ecological systems). How do you approach the task of management in this complex world ? Do you assume things will happen in much the same way tomorrow as they did yesterday ? Are you confident the system you are working in won't be disrupted by little surprises ? Do you appreciate what's needed for a system to absorb unexpected disturbances.?

...All of these questions relate to resilience, the ability of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure. [The questions] also relate to concepts of sustainability and the challenge of servicing current system demands without eroding the potential to meet future needs... How can we make the systems that we depend on resilient ?”

Resilience Thinking , Brian Walker and David Salt (Island Press 2006).

The theory goes that “most systems of nature usually proceed through recurring cycles consisting of four phases; rapid growth, conservation, release, and re-organisation. I see this kind of phase in arts companies or rock bands. First rapid growth when things are achieved on the smell of an oily rag, incredible effort for little initial return except developing the quality of the work and its reputation.

Next conservation ; the period in which growth slows, methodologies settle or as the book describes

“the competitive edge shifts from opportunists...to specialists who reduce the impact of variability...[there is] more specialisation and greater efficiencies of large economies of scale... As the system’s components become more strongly interconnected, its internal state becomes more strongly regulated. Prospective new entrants or new ways of doing things are excluded...Efficiency increases and the future seems ever more certain and determined” (Ibid)

This is the arts phase in which a company solidifies its reputation , starts paying people properly, gets an important board and starts to become trendy– at this point it’s harder for younger or different artists to ‘get in’ because the work of the company is based on its success so far. This feels confident and lasting . It makes a virtue of ‘exclusiveness’.

“...The growth rate slows as connectedness increases, the system becomes more and more rigid, and resilience declines. The cost of efficiency is a loss in flexibility. Different ways of performing the same function are eliminated in favour of doing the function in just the most efficient way. Increasing dependence on existing structures and processes renders the system increasingly vulnerable to disturbance. Such a system is increasingly stable – but over a decreasing range of conditions”

According to resilience theory, the transition from conservation to the next phase called 'release' can:

“happen in a heartbeat. The longer the conservation phase persists the smaller the shock needed to end it. A disturbance that exceeds the systems' resilience breaks apart its web of reinforcing interactions. The system comes undone. Resources that were tightly bound are now released as connections break and regulatory controls weaken. The loss of structure continues as linkages are broken, and natural, social and economic capital leaks out the system...

In ecosystems, agents such as fires, drought, insect pests and disease cause the release of accumulations of biomass and nutrients. In the economy, a new technology or a market shock can derail an entrenched industry. In each case, through the brief release phase, the dynamics are chaotic. But the destruction that ensues has a creative side. Tightly bound capital is released and becomes a source for reorganisation and renewal...

So..actually very positive , as long as you're prepared to go through total chaos and the loss of everything as you have thus far known it – even so, new things will grow out of that chaos...

...In the chaotic phase uncertainty rules; all options are open. It leads quickly into a phase of reorganisation and renewal. Novelty can thrive. Small, chance events have the opportunity to powerfully shape the future. Invention, experimentation and re-assortment are the order of the day.”

(Ibid)

And indeed in various places such as the UK as a whole, in a small way in South Australia , in the theatre and music boards of the Australia Council and in other places, this kind of chaotic event has been enabled in some areas of the Arts – they announced that all bets were off, re-assessed and defunded older companies and released funding to new ones.

That kind of thing needs to happen more often. No matter how good a company or institution's reputation, if it has ceased making inspirational work then the resources should be released for new energies to make use of them.

So, applying Resilience Thinking to the arts and, for instance, the current enthusiasm for Creative Industries, one can easily see that it's a good thing to pump more resources(money, infrastructure etc) into them . In some ways it 's helping to promote resilience in that it invests in, and promotes , the new (lighter, quicker, more flexible for a growing audience) instead of just constantly bolstering the old modes which plod along in a typical phase of outdated and heavy mechanisms for an ageing audience or a changed economy.

But I have to say that this investment cannot be at the expense of Art . And I think at this stage I should say something about how I see the difference – between Art and Creative industries. I think it's dangerous to use Creative Industry as an all embracing term which includes art. I believe they are different beasts – that art often proceeds from something other than the commercial motivation or financial regulation that defines industry , and that art is frequently unprofitable, haphazard and nothing like any concept we have of an 'industry'.

I believe that any form of art , perhaps new, ground-breaking and unfamiliar ,which arises unbidden from those who are driven to express themselves, just like art or craft which arises from socially or ceremonially utilitarian sources, is of every bit as much value as art which makes the leap into industry – that is, art which is organised, regulated and created with a market and profit in mind.

The danger in lumping arts with creative industry is that it may start to be assumed that only those things which act in a business-like way and can be profitably marketed and replicated or duplicated en masse, as in other industries, are worthy of investment. There are many activities in the arts which are not financially profitable, which are ragged at the edges and are disorganised, but are of immense social and human value – not least of which is that they inspire those working in creative industries and are often the first step of something which later itself makes the move into creative industry. In addition these sometimes crazy, usually unrecognisable, often unbeautiful expressions of original thought and experimentation often give us the jolt which is the shock of the new – scientifically proven to stimulate our brain function in ways that no other experience can.

Prof Ramachandran has shown that genuine and unexpected adventures in art have the power to stimulate the creative muscle in everyone – not just art-lovers, but all of us in any walk of life, and that nothing else so stimulates all parts of the brain simultaneously.

That said, the move from art into creative industry, or a direct dive straight into industrial applications of creativity, can lead to activities which are both beautiful, functional, popular and profitable – and as such are also, in addition to art, worth investing in. We should applaud the Federal Government's moves in this direction – the % royalty for resale of visual art, contemporary music initiatives, and the new UTS Centre for Creative Industries and Innovation. These are all good initiatives.

But in the current enthusiasm for training and investing in Creative Industries we must also maintain the structures, systems and resources, as well as creating opportunities, for the development and nurturing of the kind of art which may never end up in the creative industries, but will be nonetheless of equal value. And indeed the new Artstart program is also a good move in this direction.

Yet I would make the point that at present the economic and industrial bottom line is figuring large in all art forms, and that genuinely innovative experiments (which have the greatest chance of defining what a clever country really is) are equally at prey to the frequently ill-judged evaluation and exploitation of market forces and opportunities.

Even though the products of such art may remain largely ephemeral – such as a live performance which goes unrecorded, or a long process of research and investigation which results in no product at all, we must acknowledge the value of things which are not necessarily for sale, not designed for a tourist or international art market, not destined to recording or manufacturing contracts and mass production. We need to place greater value on the power of the ephemeral and the intangible. We must remember that original and unfamiliar excursions into art are the stimulus for many in the Creative Industries where practitioners rely on the fresh and original ideas, images and methodologies of new artists – or old artists on new adventures.

This is the value of all artists everywhere. The thing is, you just never know where the next great artist, or movement, or industry is going to spring from: and often it's from extremely unlikely places.

We need to have faith in investment of all kinds – infrastructure, education and training, materials, mentors, funding, private and corporate sponsorship – for things which may have no immediate demonstrable result, no great beauty, no shining prize-winner, no chart-topper. These encounters with art may produce many years later not just a great artist, but a bright scientist, an engineer, legal brain, sociologist, architect – or simply a group of people whose story is recorded and preserved for generations to come. This is all very much about maintaining diversity and building resilience

My fear is that the current fad for Creative Industries - which are acceptable in that they are profitable, and therefore can be more easily argued to Treasuries - may be a trigger for cutting the cake in their favour, thus disadvantaging the arts, rather than doing what we all think is needed, and that is increasing the size of the cake. Precisely because of the proliferation of these new industries.

Unfortunately the pattern often goes like this. A government will strike out with a new initiative to support a new form or branch of activity, and then those with experience, resources, audiences and powerful Boards - that is the most conservative and most business-like of arts institutions - will make absolutely sure that the new initiatives do not come at the expense of their patch. If the cake is not going to grow larger and it means borrowing from somewhere, the sad and customary pattern is that the resources are bled away from the very sector that most needs support – ie the independent, the small, the ugly and the unknown - which thus far do not have the audiences or infrastructure or powerful Boards to defend their cause. Yet this is by far the most vital part of the system – the raw seed that eventually grows to feed the majors and the industries. Wounding and depleting the ecological system at its source is probably the most destructive act you can inflict upon the Arts.

As Resilience Thinking says:

“Efficiency is a cornerstone of economics, and the very basis of environmental economics [and I would add ,these days, of arts economics – recent years have seen unprecedented pressure on artists and arts organisations to be more efficient – to the point where the business plan is more vital to funders than the quality of the ideas]. The paradox is that while organization is supposedly about efficiency, because it is applied to a narrow range of values and a particular set of interests, the result is major inefficiencies in the way we generate values for societies.

...Being efficient, in a narrow sense, leads to elimination of redundancies – keeping only those things that are directly and immediately beneficial. ...this kind of efficiency leads to drastic losses in resilience...

Optimization does not match the way our societies value things either. It promotes the simplification of values to a few quantifiable and marketable ones...It also discounts the values placed on beauty or on the existence of species for their own sakes” (Ibid)

Since education is in the news , I think this would be ringing cathedral bells for educators and for you in the public gallery and museum sector, parts of whose core business relates to education. Efficiency and optimization made classics redundant many years ago, the loss of Anthropology courses in universities, the loss of Latin and Greek in schools in favour of the more immediately useful Asian languages. I understand that Humanities have been all but divorced from QUT where people talk about Creative Industry Training as the new frontier. And I do know that there are some fine minds in the Creative industry area there and that they are curiously aligned with me on the plea for a holistic approach which acknowledges the importance of the feral feeders into their more industrial applications.

I hear about 'skilling up Australia' for which TAFE systems everywhere will need to 'optimise' their courses to meet the official demand for skills in engineering, geology and defense , in order to attract government funding. Without some strong advocates Arts in the TAFE system could be in peril: I'm happy to have been able to exercise that advocacy for the Adelaide Centre for the Arts – a hands-on arts training institution which may be the last of its kind to survive intact, especially if current tensions can't be resolved at the VCA

What the entirely plausible ,and very much globally supported , Resilience Theory would surely have us asking questions about is the kind of future society we are building for , if we allow the many species of humanities to die. Many are gone already and the reduction in our cultural diversity will surely be as damaging there as in its human and environmental parallels. I'm sure this in particular must sound warnings for you , since so much of your work is around preservation and memory, which in some instances is the only remnant of something now extinct, whether that be a culture, a bird, a flower , a language or a school of painting.

By all means make way for new technologies, back the future: but unless we take care of the whole, and especially its most feral edge, those vitally important little wildfires that ensure new growth, then we are dooming our future system of culture to weakness and bleak instability. Quoting Resilience Thinking one final time:

“the more you optimise elements of a complex system of humans and nature for some specific goal ... the more you diminish that system's resilience. [and I am suggesting that we may be facing the optimisation of Creative Industries over Art because the former, as profitable and popular pursuits, are more acceptable to the public and therefore a Treasury, than the latter which is usually unprofitable and often unpopular]

“A drive for an efficient optimal state outcome has the effect of making the total system more vulnerable to shocks and disturbances...

...While that may sound counterintuitive, it is the inevitable conclusion reached by many studies investigating how socio-ecological systems change over time...

...The bottom line of sustainability [a word much bandied about in Arts and Culture these days] is that any proposal for sustainable development that does not explicitly acknowledge a system's resilience is simply not going to keep delivering the goods (or services. ..

the key to sustainability lies in enhancing the resilience of socio-ecological systems, not in optimising isolated components of the system” (Ibid)

If you ask me what does a creative society look like, what does a creative workforce look like , all I can do is point to its pre-requisite – a society which encourages its leaders to use the money it gives them (usually in the form of taxes) to ensure **resilience** – that is, ensure a society which has the ability to absorb change without entirely changing its identity and function.

This resilience is built all the time and every step of the way by ensuring that not just the tall trees are nurtured, cared for and invested in but that all the little wildfires, all the little experiments, failures or not, are equally supported, so that when the tall trees totter and start to decay – as they absolutely will (look at what’s being said right now about energy or cars or manufacture or sheep or wheat – those mainstays of our society just sixty years ago), the saplings are already strong enough to keep the forest alive.

It is not enough to go off on a tangent today , this decade perhaps– diverting resources to one branch called Creative Industry with powerful arguments of jobs and profitability – and bleed the more feral , utterly unprofitable , ephemeral and philosophical sap from the tree. All of it needs equally to be sustained and nurtured

We have now had the advantage of seeing in the USA (and then globally) a very good example of a major disturbance. An endemic weakness in the financial sector in the USA has caused massive disturbance throughout the world. In the USA the knee-jerk reaction of their larger arts institutions has proceeded to reduce, rather than build their resilience, which might better serve them in disturbances to come. They have been inclined to shore up the major headline programs, and cut away the small ones, the less glitzy- the education programs, the community programs, the emerging artist access.

Yet these are the very things , closer to the ground, which would build resilience through its broader base. You can so easily see through the prism of Resilience Thinking how flocking to the gamble of a blockbuster is pitching for efficiency, and a kind of facelift uplift for the sake of maintaining appearances for stakeholders and shareholders alike – look at us, we're doin' just fine ! Yet beneath the patent leather there may well be holes in your stockings. In financially scrapped times, the only thing you can say for certain about blockbusters is that a) they will just get more expensive and b) you will never really be able to predict success – taste, weather, war, local tragedy can all have an impact. Is it wise to gamble when the stakes are so high ?

Or might it be better to take a slice off the main program, one less major exhibition this season for your devoted, but possibly ageing, audience to ensure the maintenance of all those things you are doing to develop the devoted audience of the future.

And to the Resilience Thinking mix , I would add a dash of Italo Calvino. In his 6 Memos for the Millennium he wrote:

“ Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness, and that what many consider to be the vitality of the times – noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring – belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars.”

This deserves special attention in the context of collecting institutions. So much of your time and space and budget must be caught up in things which are solid and sometimes difficult to move. I do also mean ‘thinking’ that’s difficult to move too, and I recall the discussions when I was working towards the new Melbourne Museum – the idea that that institution would omit Phar Lap from its displays was a heresy. It was less about the horse than his history

If you find sense in Resilience Thinking then you will maintain your closer to the ground programs at all cost – the very things which are considered not the main game , and expendable in hard times, may be the very things which assure your stability , your resilience in the future.

If the idea of lightness and flexibility appeals to you, then you would take every opportunity to take advantage of those things which allow you to be so – that is the transitory and ephemeral activities which transform the image of any building which has had a solidly collecting /preserving past which appears solid, heavy, and slow.

Artist residencies do wonders to animate the collection (eg Jenny Holzer at MAK), participation in festivals, extension of the institution into the local environment for active engagement – all these things encourage lightness.

Now I'm a realist. I know that funding systems have been set up precisely for you to be the opposite - collecting, exhibiting, research and preservation are all very important to us and our cultural histories. In exactly what Resilience Thinking would consider to be the worst kind of balance , you struggle with your public program budgets as opposed to the resources for the more static aspects of your collections. I believe firmly that evidence of our cultural past ,giving us the ability to see whence our culture has sprung, is important, but *never at the expense of enabling the new.*

A million dollar blockbuster is probably easier in some ways to resource than a bunch of ongoing smaller programs. Blockbusters can be measured in bed-nights, so events and tourism are happy to gamble on them for reasons other than art . They are more about showbiz than building resilient cultures . If you don't get to move around the world the way I do, then it's great to be able to see significant old stuff brought to your home town, but it shouldn't be at the expense of the new. If Events corporations put a million into old masters, they should be obliged to come up with a million for new commissions as well.

I hope that I'm putting my own budgets where my mouth is – I think I am, and its worth concluding with a brief look at a couple of the things I'm currently doing .**The Light in Winter** , the midwinter event I created for Federation Square in Melbourne – provides an interesting combination of a transitory gallery for local and international artists working in light, but the section called The Gift of Light also offers a presence in the heart of that big city, to a growing number of Melbourne's diverse communities – some of them quite fragile , such as the Kiribati/Tuvaluans, the Afghan, and the sub-Sudanese/Ethiopian. [DESCRIBE THE EVENT] With 50,000 clocked through VOLUME in four weeks , this new event has some features of the blockbuster, but is also careful to balance this with links to community and the commissioning of local artists (13 of them this year).

In my newest role as Creative Director of the **Centenary of Canberra** I know that I'll be working with an aggregate of public galleries and museums which is unrivalled in Australia. In fashioning festivals and celebrations, I am always at pains to ensure that what we do is unique to that place, that's about building resilience, building cultural capital— I'm not content to work for years on an event which could happen anywhere and just comes and goes at great expense, with no lasting effect: it needs to be 'about' that place. I believe that this works to build Resilience – it feeds the roots and undergrowth rather than just polishing the canopy. I will be fashioning a series of projects and celebrations to build pride in the national capital. I came across a splendid quote from Nehru at the opening of Chandigar – the northern capital designed by Le Corbusier. He said the project 'expressed the nation's faith in its future' – and I think those who pitched the competition for a new capital for a newly Federated nation one hundred years ago clearly exhibited that kind of faith. I hope that what goes on in the lead-up and year of 2013 can re-awaken that sense of nation-building through the symbolism of its capital.

My materials are unique and/or rare – Canberra is one of only a handful of planned capitals in the world, and apart from its perfect geographical setting, a quintessential Australian landscape, still preserved as the Burley-Griffins intended it, it has not only eleven major national institutions – mostly of the collecting museum/gallery kind ...

...but the ACT has also created its own healthy cultural infrastructure – the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery, Craft ACT, the beautiful new Glassworks, and a brand new arts centre with a gallery at Belconnen etc,. There's a Botanic garden with some of the largest collections in the southern hemisphere, and the truly inspirational project – the national Arboretum: rising from the hillsides devastated by bushfires just a few years ago are one hundred forests of one hundred trees each, and one hundred gardens – an inspiring project which will last 100 -150 years, way beyond the bounds of terms of office , or even single lifetimes. So I will have ample opportunities to put my budget where my mouth is.

This aggregate offers a superb opportunity to build resilience against future disruptions – fires, economic downturns, governments who may care less in the future about culture than the current Federal and ACT governments are displaying. And it offers a chance to be light – as Glenn Murcutt said – to touch the earth lightly. The National Portrait Gallery has already offered me a terrific idea which is about as different from a blockbuster as you can get – an idea which will use Canberra itself, and its residents, as an extension of the Gallery.

While the National Archive has superb documentation of the process of the competition, which was advertised in 1911 – so we'll start in 2011 - my intention will be to run parallel to the history of the competition, a hypothetical for young planners, designers, environmentalists and architects (from each state) around how you would approach such a project now – what would you now take into account and how would you do it ? This is something light, flexible, provocative – and useful , as I'm sure it will throw up some good ideas for actual, rather than just hypothetical future planning. It will balance the new with the old and will enable connections between national institutions and those of the ACT such as the Craft Gallery which has already been hosting talks and projects about the city envisioned. And it seems we have the advantage of real-time comparison too – a new capital is being constructed as we speak inAbu Dhabi – for opening in 2030. Hmmmm....

So, this is a good opportunity for me to let you know that the Centenary of Canberra will happen on a local, national and international level- and we very much want awareness in each state and in those countries and cities we are close to – New Zealand especially around the Anzac connection and the War Museum, but also in aspects of art and craft and the centrality of their treaty with the Maori people (so eloquently at the heart of Te Papa),

the ancient Japanese capital of Nara , our sister city , which sort of embarrassingly for us celebrates its 1300th birthday next year – but with whom there is already a new work commissioned from a Japanese artist for Nara Park in Canberra, and Dili with whom we have a formal friendship and to whom I hope we will offer something beneficial in 2013 – this is to mention just a few. We will try to ensure that all states and territories can participate in many of our projects, and for any of you who have ideas about how an aspect of Canberra can surface in your place in 2013, then please let me know. I do know that there is an ambition to bring every Year 6 kid to the national capital in 2013 – about 140,000 more than the usual 120,000 – and they are now negotiating and building the extra hostelries to accommodate them.

So it's big, and I like that, but I hope I can keep my eye always on the future, beyond 2013, way beyond 2013 – and I know that the mantra of lightness, flexibility and resilience will help me do that. And I hope that it will also serve you too, in all of your important and often courageous endeavours.

Thankyou

Robyn Archer

Adelaide , September 2009