

The mirror-ball: reflections on a healthy society

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The great skill of the artists is to communicate what might be in a world obsessed with what is. Acknowledging the complexity and hybridity of contemporary arts practice, which includes what we have designated the Creative Industries, presents us with an image of a rotating mirror-ball, reflecting back what we are doing and occasionally, with erratic flashes, offering us a vision of what might be. A healthy society nurtures these visionaries. The question then is how do we foster a sustainable climate and generate the expanded field within which artists can thrive? If we are to achieve the full benefit this enterprise promises we must ensure we have a broad base with roots in education, strong support from the community, financial commitment from government and private enterprise and a general acknowledgment of the wide-ranging contribution to the economy made by creative practitioners across many fields of endeavour.

*Firstly I wish to acknowledge that we are on **Wulgurukabba Bindal** land and to recognize the **Wulgurukabba Bindal** people as the original owners and custodians of this country.*

In this paper I want to explore some thoughts on the contribution the arts make to the economic, social, cultural and environmental health and wealth of Australia. Robyn in her thought-provoking essay & paper 'Industry that pays, and art that doesn't'¹ raises a number of concerns and poses some important questions that we need to address if we are to achieve the full benefit the arts promise the community.

The complexity and hybridity of contemporary arts practice, which includes those designated under the rubric of Creative Industries, is like watching a rotating mirror-ball, reflecting back what we are doing and occasionally, with erratic flashes, offering us a vision of what might be. It is this panoply that makes for a healthy society, incorporating the full spectrum of activities that we call 'the arts'.

The question then is how do we foster a sustainable climate and generate the expanded field within which artists can thrive?

As a way of introduction to the images that will flicker up behind me, I've constructed a meta-narrative of the recent exhibition history of the John Curtin

¹ Robyn Archer 'Industry that pays, and art that doesn't', *Griffith REVIEW23: Essentially Creative*, 2009 pp147-159, ISSN 1448-2925

Gallery, where I worked until this year, and also of the Cultural Precinct at the University of Western Australia, where I now work.

Most often it will run along unaligned with my thoughts, occasionally it will collide and sometimes (hopefully) the images will illustrate and amplify my text. Now, if we are to achieve the full benefit the arts promise we must establish a Creative Economy that has a broad base with roots in education, strong support from the community, financial commitment from government and private enterprise and a general acknowledgment of the wide-ranging contribution to the community made by creative practitioners across many fields of endeavour. As well as the obvious - that it generates income through sales of items, content and services - a Creative Economy also has the potential to assign value to those aspects of our lives that we both desire and require, but that often get subsumed by 'the business of another day, another dollar' as Robyn succinctly puts it. This additional sense of valuing should inform and direct all forms of communal interaction.

Peter Higgs, Stuart Cunningham and Janet Pagan from the Centre for Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, cover the first part of my proposition in their statement that the creative economy can be defined as '... the human activities related with the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of creative goods and services'². A good start and we already have many examples of the ability of creative individuals to generate income. Australian artists, designers, performers, writers and musicians are working successfully in a national and more commonly an international arena.

I only have time to cite the fashion industry as an example and Western Australian designer Ruth Taryvdas, the focus of a major retrospective at the John Curtin Gallery last year, as a role model of what can be achieved over a sustained forty-year period of creative engagement. In tandem with that exhibition the Gallery also presented *Looking Out*, a survey of five young Western Australian designers who all operate globally from a local base; and

² Peter Higgs, Stuart Cunningham and Janet Pagan, *Australia's Creative Economy: Definition of the Segments and Sectors*, Brisbane, ARC Centre for Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, 2008, p20.

there are many other individuals in many fields doing the same thing. Another example is the show of Easton Pearson currently at GOMA.

At a time when distance has literally dissolved before our eyes Australian artists, designers and performers are providing content for the voracious entertainment platforms, visual artists are working side by side with scientist to create new ways of visualising and understanding the world (for example SymbioticA at the University of Western Australia) and many artists and designers are working in tandem with colleagues on the other side of the world to create work with a strong market presence; for example young Western Australian artist Shane McCarthy who is achieving international success in the extremely competitive field of comics and graphic novels.

All these artist are successful and there is the potential for greater success if appropriate support is forthcoming. This is where Government can play an important role in facilitating access to these markets by enhancing the capacity of our artists and designers to capitalise on these opportunities.

But what of the second part of my conceptualisation of the Creative Economy, how do we value those often intangible and ephemeral experiences whose impact is so indelible? It has something to do with the idea of creative communities as proposed by Richard Florida, amongst other commentators, that assign value to the arts because of the benefits they bring to the community. This is also the example provided by Singapore that Robyn mentions in her essay, a Global City of the Arts that now attracts Cultural Tourists and enriches the lives of its citizens.

Michael Chaney, former Wesfarmers CEO, asserts that for that company, involvement in culture was about '*... attracting good employees and boosting staff morale, enhancing the physical office environment and portraying the company as a progressive, sophisticated organisation*'. What he describes here are instrumental benefits that assist in achieving broader social, economic and political goals. But as he makes clear the benefits extend to gaining a deeper understanding of your own culture and having respect for the culture of others,

because that is the basis of all social interactions and the bedrock of all commercial partnerships.

This capacity to reach out to others and understand more about our shared humanity is an extremely important contribution to the health and well being of our communities.

But how does it work? Well let's look for a moment at empathy, the capacity to share and understand another's emotional response or feelings. The arts are one of the important ways in which we develop those skills of empathy and understanding and a major component of this is the ability to read visual cues. Empathy is at the heart of Lynette Wallworth's work *Invisible by Night*, made in 2004. It is almost gut wrenching in its impact. Confronted by a grieving woman behind a glass wall, made translucent through condensation, the viewer (you and me - because this is very personal) activates the work by slowly reaching out to make contact. It is an intuitive act of human compassion and with that touch the woman behind the glass membrane slowly wipes away the moisture to reveal her eyes, hollow with pain and sadness. The experience is so intensely moving that we immediately feel her sorrow by tapping into our own emotional reservoir. We know her pain and understand the strength and courage, the perseverance and commitment that under-pins her survival. It is impossible not to feel transported, to loose connection with the routine of living, when confronted with such raw, though restrained, emotion.

This is both the beauty and the extraordinary importance of the arts in shaping each individual consciousness.

As Michael Chabon explains:

Art increases the sense of our common humanity. The imagination of the artist is, therefore, a profoundly moral imagination: the easier it is for you to imagine walking in someone else's shoes, the more difficult it then becomes to do that person harm. If you want to make a torturer, first kill his imagination. If you want to create a nation that will stand by and allow torture to be practiced in

*its name, then go ahead and kill its imagination, too. You could start by cutting school funding for art, music, creative writing and the performing arts*³.

Great art has always had the capacity to move us, to shift our thinking and dig deep into our souls. It is most effective; however when the timeless space becomes charged with possibility and purpose. This is what Wallworth creates in her extraordinary works and it is at the core of what we understand to be the intrinsic benefit of the arts, the opportunity to engage with another human being at a level of deep and sincere and meaningful discourse. And this also includes the ‘quiet contemplation of beauty’⁴ Robyn describes, the unbridled joy we experience when we encounter something beautiful, whether it be a dancer transforming their body and exploring space in new and exciting ways, a performer opening up new opportunities for interpretation, a musician conjuring up new harmonies and sounds or a visual artist re-presenting the world to us in ways that confound, reveal and amaze.

A Creative Economy is one that understands this cultural value and builds it into its economic and social modelling. This is the notion of the quadruple bottom line where the economic, social, environmental and cultural are seen as integrated elements, each interdependent and together creating a sustainable and equitable environment that serves the entire community. The normal cost-benefit analysis model fails to capture the impact and value of the arts in this respect. As David Throsby points out an understanding of the cultural sector as an ‘... *ecosystem, and cultural diversity as essential to sustainable development*’⁵ is essential if we are to increase the profile of the arts in policy discussions.

For this to happen we can’t leave it to others to make our case. The arts community must take a lead and as the Rand Report, *Gifts of the Muse*, published in 2004 explains, it is essential that we ‘... *develop language to describe the various ways in which the arts create benefits at both the private*

³ Obama Arts Policy, 2008

⁴ Robyn Archer ‘Industry that pays, and art that doesn’t’, *Griffith REVIEW23: Essentially Creative*, 2009 p155, ISSN 1448-2925

⁵ David Throsby, ‘Determining the value of cultural goods: how much (or how little) does contingent valuation tell us’, unpublished paper, Cultural Policy Center, University of Chicago, 1-2 February, 2002, p15

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and the public level...'⁶. This will require artists and arts administrators to start talking outside their comfort zone and exclusively to colleagues and friends. We must all take on the responsibility of providing a convincing argument to those outside the arts and in speaking in fora where our message will be have to stand up against the cold, hard, reality of profit and loss statements, annual reports and accrual accounting.

Part of this process will then require changing the terminology we use to describe ourselves.

As Robyn explains, '... even if there is no profit, most civilised societies value the arts'. That's clearly true, but why are we so constrained by the idea of monetary profit? There are undeniable benefits that accrue to a community through it's support of the arts so why are we prepared to accept the back-hander of being called 'a subsidized sector' and a 'not for profit' sector any longer? This immediately puts us at a disadvantage. Perhaps the '**minimally assisted sector**' or the '**inappropriately funded for the benefit provided sector**' would be more accurate. With artists providing their labour at ridiculously low rates, and also providing most of the infrastructure for their work as well, it is the artist's that subsidize the sector and the community that reaps the rewards.

How do we quantify this reality in terms that acknowledge the real cost effectiveness of arts support?

For a start we should begin paying artists a reasonable salary for the work they do. One small contribution the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council has made is to insist that appropriate artist's fees are paid by any organisation receiving funding from the VAB. It's only a start but if the sector doesn't appropriately recompense our artists why should we expect others to do so?

There are many ways we need to work to build a Creative Economy and Education is fundamental to this entire project, not only in Pre-School were the arts do have a central role in learning, but also at Primary and Secondary levels and Post-Secondary, where the professional education of artists is undertaken.

⁶ Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, Rand Corporation, 2005, ISBN: 0-8330-3694-7

Inside the walls of the nation's art schools, music schools, theatre, creative writing and dance schools, students go about the important work of critiquing and undermining existing presumptions and preconceptions about art and life. They are given the opportunity to develop the essential skills and attitudes of flexibility, adaptability and boundary-hopping that is at the core of innovation so they can solve problems in creative ways and respond to changing conditions with a range of new and traditional skills.

In a period of change in which thirty percent of the population are employed in jobs that didn't exist thirty years ago, with the prediction that in the next twenty years seventy percent of people will be employed in jobs that don't exist today, those that are visually literate and trained in the arts will be well placed to move into these new professions, whatever they may be.

Or as Michael Chabon has described it, these students are reaching:

*... beyond received ideas and ready-made answers to some new place, some new way of seeing or hearing or moving through the world*⁷.

The importance of this way of thinking and operating in the world has not been lost on the leading American universities who have recently acknowledged the centrality of the arts in all human endeavour and reinforced the importance of the visual and performing arts in fostering every student's ability to think imaginatively, to be creative risk-takers and, as the Stanford University Report states, picking up from Chabon, '... to move gracefully through a world of rapid change'⁸.

The Stanford report continues:

The arts foster creativity. They encourage ways of knowing that complement skills in other fields, and enlarge students' overall vision of the world ... They provide students with a safe space, a place of exploration, where the risks they take can be more important than the results they achieve. Sometimes the most valuable lesson a student can learn is not how to succeed, but how to try—or even fail—with grace.

⁷ *IBID*

⁸ *A Case for the Arts at Stanford*, January, 2008, Stanford University

The arts, in short, occupy a vital place in a new educational environment. They train students at all levels—undergraduate and graduate—to respond with insight and imagination to a changing world. They teach students how to attend to their surroundings in unexpected ways. They allow them to see across cultures, around boundaries, beyond conventions. They prepare our students, as they complete their studies, to think creatively and compassionately when they step into the future⁹.

So all students should be exposed to the arts but for those whose focus is on the creative and performing arts there is another extremely important role, as Professor Christopher Frayling, Rector of the Royal College of Art in London, explains:

‘... it is the established practices of painting, sculpture, photography and crafts together with those of the moving image, new media and live art that drives the Creative Industries’¹⁰.

With the need for more and more creative content to feed the ever expanding delivery platforms, and with the requirement that all employees in every profession must now be creative and innovative thinkers, it is time for the creative & performing arts to reclaim the leadership and affirm the important role that artists play in generating the climate and the expanded field within which the Creative Industries can thrive.

New ideas are developed and hybrid forms of practice are generated at this raw edge of engagement with ideas and images in the nation’s art, design, theatre, creative writing and music schools, and this is just one example of the important contribution made by the arts sector to the Creative Industries; indeed the contemporary visual & performing arts are in many ways **the engine that drives the Creative Industries**.

Currently there are roughly 6,000 graduates from Visual Arts Schools each year. At a recent Australia Council meeting a colleague asked, ‘how are we expected to fund all these new artists on top of those already working in the field? That I suggest is not such a problem, because visual arts graduates and those

⁹ *IBID*

¹⁰ *Turning Point*, Arts Council of England: A strategy for the Contemporary Visual Arts in England, 2006, ISBN 0-7287-1229-6

from other arts disciplines are flexible, adaptable, innovative and able to boundary hop, as explained earlier. Once out in the professional world some will find ready employment, others will develop strategic partnerships with industry or other professional disciplines and still others will continue to work solo on projects that absorb and fulfil them. It is well to remember that a good proportion of art students never intend to participate in the Creative Industries. These individuals embrace the arts because they offer one of the last bastions of a true liberal education and on completion of their studies they then use these new skills to continue to pursue a personal exploration of ideas through making or, in some cases, they adapt them to entirely different fields of endeavour, often with great success.

But some do, and that is why the arts are so exciting, everyone creates their own practice as an artist and each negotiates their own relationship with the economy.

So what role should government play in reshaping the creative economy?

Governments are faced with a dichotomy when confronting policy decisions in the arts. While they have a moral duty to support the arts and culture they also has a duty to responsibly distribute taxpayer's money. What we cannot accept is a simplistic split that supports only one aspect of a highly complex and diverse field of practice.

Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that if the government can assist in building infrastructure to nurture local practice (through hubs and incubators amongst other strategies), if it can continue to advocate for a whole of government approach to supporting the arts and creative industries, and develop mutually beneficial partnerships with the private sector, if it can provide access to delivery platforms and if it can continue to provide quick response funding for marketing initiatives while reducing bureaucracy through simplifying applications and acquittals, and most importantly if it can continue to support the 'independent, small, ugly and unknown' as Robyn describes them, then it will indeed be making an important contribution to the wider arts community.

However, as I have previously explained, the Creative Economy is about more than finding markets for the work of artists, performers and designers, though this is extremely important. If the commitment to build a Creative Economy can succeed in doing that then we have moved a long way, but generating income and acknowledging cultural value must go forward in tandem. As David Throsby reminds us '*... it is essential that cultural value be admitted alongside economic value in the consideration of the overall value of cultural goods and services.*¹¹' This is the only way to guarantee a healthy and ultimately a wealthy twenty-first century community that embraces current concerns, identifies future issues and provides a perspective from which to view the past.

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¹¹ David Throsby, *Economics and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2001