Unconditional Love:

Industry that pays, and Art that doesn’t

The Wal Cherry Lecture by Robyn Archer
September 5 2008
Introduction

Thankyou, first I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we gather, the Kuarna people of the Adelaide plains, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I would also like to mention Wal’s elder daughter, Kate Cherry (currently Artistic Director of Black Swan Theatre in WA – her sister Anna also went into theatre as a designer- Kate wanted to be here tonight but her company schedule just wouldn’t allow it), and also Justin Macdonnell, both as director of ANZARTS, the new thinktank on the arts, and as a Flinders graduate who, as Administrator of New Opera South Australia, invited me to sing the role of Annie I in Brecht/Weill’s The Seven Deadly Sins. This was the production which opened the Space theatre, next door here, in 1974. It was directed by Wal Cherry, and it was the production which changed my life. I’ve often said that I don’t know whether I should be grateful to Justin for that introduction or whether I should send him the bill because that production introduced me to the Arts and I stayed with them ever after. Justin had remembered me from Adelaide Uni reviews and from cabaret, where I had been every bit my father’s daughter. He was a self-taught singer (a good one) and stand-up comedian. Through Dad, and then instinctively, through the last years of vaudeville (Keith Petersen whom I met at the Trocadero in Hindley St) and variety (Mick Lane and Ray McGeary at the Esplanade, Brighton), I was not at first in the arts – I was hard-wired into showbiz, and it’s all I knew. Justin saw the potential of my untutored voice and The Seven Deadly Sins shoved this ‘more arse than class’ performer for the first time into working with an orchestra and the discipline of theatre.

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Wal took that potential into more productions – Never the Twain, where I first met Michael Morley (with whom I am currently preparing two concerts for Canberra in November), Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris, and ultimately The Threepenny Opera to which Wal invited as dramaturg the great Brecht scholar, translator and editor, John Willett. And, in that series of blissful coincidences through which a trail of generous men gave me marvelous opportunities, John also saw the potential and in 1977 got me an audition for his new collage piece To Those Born Later. It was to coincide with the first publication (for Methuen) of the collected poems of Bertolt Brecht in translation, and it was at the National Theatre of Great Britain in London.

I walked onto that stage, the Cottesloe, in the company of Jane Asher, Tom Wilkinson, Glyn Grain, Gawn Grainger and Shane Connaughton – with musical direction by Dominic Muldowney, and my international career was born. I was 29 years old and I had never been out of Australia before. Indeed, apart from one year in the leagues and RSL clubs in Sydney, I had scarcely been outside Adelaide before. Yet I walked into splendid reviews and a new career, directly from Adelaide and had acquired almost everything I knew from Wal and from John.

I can recall now the intense conversations I had with that pair of serious intellects in the time we worked together. I had never before encountered the repertoire of Brecht, Weill, Eisler, Dessau et al. My stock in trade had been first Pat Boone,
then Bob Dylan and then Janis Joplin and then for the clubs a strange personally
devised journey through the songs sung by the great African American jazz
women such as Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, Lena Horne,
Ertha Kitt, Carmen McCrae, Pearl Bailey, Bessie Smith. My own time at Adelaide
University studying English language and literature (old and middle English and
Latin too) had stirred the analytical and critical, almost against my showbiz
blood, and secretly I knew I didn’t fit the club mould. Yet I railed against the
direction that Wal and John wanted to point me in – I recall the conversations in
which I said these songs were not entertaining, they were for an elite, that I knew
how to grab an audience and this wasn’t it. But Wal and John were real mentors.
John persuaded me through an appeal to the need for depth and enquiry: Wal
gave me the empowerment of tiny absolutely accurate detail on stage. Both of
them, John in the textual, musical and ethical, Wal in the practical and
mechanical, used their powers to drag this suburban would-be popular
entertainer, into a world of the mind. In one fell swoop my skills as an entertainer
(things Brecht would have loved) met for the first time with my still burgeoning
critical and analytical intellect and politics. I bade farewell to the sensational
dynamic artiste and walked into the arts.

Given that this was not a straightforward path, and involved giving up core
activities which may well have led to a much more lucrative ‘mainstream’ career,
I am often driven to the defense of the arts precisely because I turned my back
on commercial avenues and deliberately, with some kicking and screaming at

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Wal and John at the time, chose to take a more complex route, along which the investments you make are never guaranteed to return to you in material kind.

What they gave me instead was Bertolt Brecht, whose poems remain like a bible to me. They bristle with the kind of uncompromising clarity that Wal brought as a director (people don’t cry in the theatre because you fake crying on stage, they cry because you tell an important story with such skilled detail that it makes them cry) and John brought as translator and dramaturg (the text is all, you are a mere conduit for what the author wanted to say) and with the core philosophy that there is good in the bad, and bad in the good: that we strive to make the ordinary extraordinary and vice-versa.

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On the Critical Attitude by Bertolt Brecht (trs John Willett)

The critical attitude

Strikes many people as unfruitful.

That is because they find the state impervious to their criticism.

But what in this case is an unfruitful attitude

Is merely a feeble attitude. Give criticism arms

And states can be demolished by it.

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Canalising a river

Grafting a fruit tree

Educating a person

Transforming a state

These are instances of fruitful criticism

And at the same time

Instances of art.

This kind of attitude is the legacy that Justin, and through him Wal, and through him John left me, the suburban kid who just wanted to be famous, and gave up the orthodox path to showbiz fame in order to hone and express ‘the critical attitude’. In that spirit, then, and in deepest gratitude to Wal and the performative disciplines he gave me, and the moral and ethical mentor he delivered to me in the shape of John Willett... end introduction
I take this opportunity to take a critical attitude to what I see as something of a hoodwink in current language about the arts. And it’s not just semantics. It is an overarching brand which casually (and largely without protest) engulfs the arts and threatens to diminish their importance and wash over their points of difference. The consequence of which is that it will then be easy to starve them.

I am talking, of course, about ‘Creative Industries’. They are perfectly good and productive industries, often highly creative and certainly deserving of investment because they have the potential to make a return on that investment and be financially sustainable. But what do they have to do with art? This question is at the heart of what I have to say tonight.

There are certain articles that take pride of place in our museums. They might include a rare bowl from ancient Egypt, a fragment of tiled wall from Syria, a chair from the French palace of the Sun King, or a vase from Han Dynasty China. These things now so glorified, and so electronically guarded, in our state treasure troves were in their own time simply artisan products often made en masse. They were valued for their usefulness, not their art, and those who made them were either employed or enslaved to do so. If we now praise them for their beauty and speak of them as rare and valuable treasures it is because either they were produced with a certain lasting but almost coincidental aesthetic accomplishment, or because of their historical value in that there are few such pieces surviving.
While these are closer to what we may think of as creative industry they are scarcely even that, since the term industry implies some sense of work for profit of some kind: the word industry implies not just a one-off, but enterprise which sustains over a prolonged period. In these examples there may have been no profit (in the sense that the sale of goods would benefit the maker or producer with a wider margin of profitability than his competitor): they were professions the artisan was born into and had no choice but to stay in and reap no more reward than mere subsistence.

In the case of certain objects from, say, Japan’s past, many are tempted to surpass even ‘Creative Industry’ classification and start using the word ‘Art’ in relation to such beautiful works. They are exquisitely crafted or painted, and we, wrongly, think of such beauty proceeding only from the kind of individual and original inspiration associated with Art. Beautiful as they are undoubtedly are, what we see are almost exclusively the products of Artisan Schools. The works are rarely attributed to an individual artist and the skill was learned through years and years of slavishly copying the master until perfection was achieved.

These beautiful, very valuable, also highly guarded and cherished works which the public, when pressed, would be inclined to put in the Arts basket, are in fact also products of the Creative Industry of old Japan. And, as it happens, prior to European contact the Japanese had no tradition of valuing Art in museological terms. Now they share, and excel in, the global practice of museology, but that’s a borrowed concept.

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It’s perhaps easier to see the Pru Acton collection, for instance, having pride of place at the Melbourne Museum, in Creative Industry terms. And why is it easier? For a start we know the frocks are valuable, but not as valuable as a pair of sixteenth century Japanese six-fold screens. Product appears in the public mind to edge closer to ‘Art’ the more expensive it becomes. Product certainly makes claims to Art when it is one of a kind – and as such, the claims go, the product of individual genius and imagination, the maker then elevated beyond mass product status.

But the clearest difference is that the frocks were originally made for profit. Yes, they were fun and original, and in retrospect the collection as a whole turned out to be a great historical record of fashion design and trends in 1960s Australia. But we all recognise that fashion designers do not make frocks in order to hang them on walls. They are made for a market.

This is a useful clue to the way we might think about the difference between Creative Industry and Art. Of course there are always going to be fine and blurred lines in any attempt to classify – and frankly I would prefer not to have to think about a dividing line. [My own tastes tend to be extremely wide-ranging – in music from rock and pop to the most angular contemporary classical (it’s not in any way unusual for me to be listening to Abba or Amy Winehouse in the car on the way to hearing Lisa Gasteen sing Wagner and Strauss with the ASO)…
…in visual art from strewn lumps of fat at Documenta to a slow cruise of the Flemish galleries at the Louvre; and to tell you the truth I am probably more inclined just now to gasp with pleasure more at the ingenuity and aesthetics of Ikea’s packaging than at any piece of furniture denoted as Louis Quinze.]

Clarifying a difference between Creative Industries and Art has only become a necessity in my mind because the term Creative Industries is appearing everywhere and, in particular, in places where policies are starting to flow. Once policies flow, then funding and educational directives follow the stream, and then our daily lives and practice are all involved. So, we need to know what we are talking about. Currently Creative Industries is being used almost as a super-classification under which the Arts are supposed to sit. I think that’s problematic, and yet there seem to be very few voices yet challenging that trend.

Recently Professor Richard Maltby, from Flinders University proved to be one of the few. He wrote:

"In the 1940s, emigré German intellectuals Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote a famously scathing critique of the commercialised popular culture they found in America. Believing that industrial mass production destroyed culture and produced only banal artistic monstrosities, they deliberately gave the Frankenstein creature they described a name that was a contradiction in terms: the “Culture Industry.

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Fifty years later, Tony Blair’s “Cool Britannia” dug up this monster and renamed it the “Creative Industries.” The idea began as a way to regenerate the discarded inner cities of post-industrial hulks like Sheffield or Bradford: subsidise a few craft co-operatives in an old warehouse, open a gallery or two and the odd smart café-wine-bar, and next thing you knew you had your own creative precinct, full of the aspirational classes on a Friday night, imagining themselves on the Left Bank in Paris.

Like Britpop, the “Creative Industries” was an exercise in national branding, a marketing proposition for repositioning New Labour’s Britain. But over the last ten years, everyone has bought the idea. It’s come to operate as shorthand for a collection of commercial activities decorated or disguised by the notion that some form of “creativity” sits at their core”

Richard Maltby, *The Adelaide Independent*

I would add that creativity sits at the core of every profession, and that the most effective incubator for creativity is Art, whether it produces artists or not. A child effectively exposed to Art may equally become a scientist, sociologist, engineer or homemaker. But Art is the invaluable tool whereby we evolve a creative nation. This theme has recently been taken up by both Juliana Engberg, Artistic Director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, and by author Jeannette Winterson. More of them later.
Let’s stay with Creative Industry for a moment. Its products are far-ranging and many of them exciting. They include design from virtual on-screen web applications to graphic 2-D to three-dimensional furniture, tools and entertainment machinery; fashion sits well there, as does screen gaming, interactive display tools and projects, the film and television aspects of screen culture and some music – and this is just the start. But all of these things are made for a market. In the back of the minds of those who invest in these areas of activity and product, is always the desire to please an existing market or open up a new one. The motive is profit. I do not use this in a pejorative sense. This branch of industry can be fun, can be stimulating, and its profits in some instances may well be returned to the industry for the sake of a healthy ongoing sector. But implicit in the system is the understanding that what is being created has value in today’s society, that there are buyers for it and that the industry is financially sustainable: that is, the cost of training, creating and producing will be balanced by the sale of the product or the service.

It is entirely sensible for governments to invest in this, and indeed there may be arguments to say that investing in this kind of activity is more sensible than investing in other traditional industries which have not shown profitability for a very long time, and require increasing subsidies just to stay alive: industries of all kinds which continue to produce for markets already over-supplied by other countries with more efficient means of production. It is also eminently sensible
to start thinking about the kind of educational and training packages that will prepare an emerging workforce for careers in these industries. C R Archer

It is every bit as important to consider new packages and new incentives in these so-called Creative Industries areas as it is to reinvigorate the education and training packages that will stimulate careers in, for instance, the mining and resources heavy industries. As Australia experiences a boom in mining, it’s obvious that demand for all sorts of skilled workers is high and that we should train young people to supply that demand. So too in the Creative Industries. Why not?

However, these subsidies, incentives and packages for Creative Industries surely belong in the policy and funding area of Industry. They involve industries, jobs skills and systems which in combination can offer services and make products for sale – and they can make a profit. Why have they ended up in the area of Arts and Culture?

The first thing to be clear about is that in general, if a society wants to have Art in it, that is, it thinks that having artists amongst its varied peoples is a good thing and enjoying what they produce is a good thing, then this comes at a cost. Art, in general, is not something which is initially aimed at a market, nor is its prime motive to make a profit. I would almost venture that the most creative end of Art, by definition, has no market at all, no value, because it is so new, perhaps so shocking. The fact that it is not yet understood and has no substantial following in

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its infancy is precisely why it cannot be part of a commercial market and therefore requires subsidy.  

Some argue that this is in fact the only level of art that requires subsidy, since once art has found its market it enters into commercial transaction with devotees who want it – governments shouldn’t interfere in that healthy commercial transaction. But the Art that is new, experimental and at the heart of research and development of new ideas and new ways of expression (the things that eventually do get nicked and fetch up a few years later in commercial applications) are the very things that require ongoing subsidy. And why? Because that originality and daring feeds creativity in all professions and all sectors: those artists provide a way of seeing the world which none of us has seen or felt before. I will talk about Resilience Theory later, but this core and raw creative feed is no less than essential for our survival.

It’s obvious to all of us that, as in all endeavour, a handful of artists in all genres make an enormous amount of money (or in teacher-speak this is the mistaken justification for career-paths and skills training), and this is often about choices to enter early into avenues and systems which are market-directed. They make the break into industry: commercial theatre or musicals, mainstream cinema, pop and rock, advertising, the commercial visual art market. In all these and more one finds stars and celebrity (which have their equals these days in architecture, banking, stockbroking etc).
There is a second, larger, rung of workers in the arts who manage to make a good living through their practice – they are actors and musicians of long standing, some dancers or singers (though their careers are often curbed by the natural and effects of ageing), visual artists, writers, directors etc and arts administrators. And after that comes a horde in its hundreds of thousands over the years whose income over a lifetime never got much above the poverty line (like many great jazz musicians living and making some of the best music in Australia today), or those who abandoned their art to teach or take up entirely unrelated jobs in order to stay alive and to keep families fed.

All this is obvious. What is less obvious, though shouldn’t be, is that none of these artists, from the pinnacle of celebrity to the artist who just couldn’t starve any longer, would have been able even to consider a life in the arts were it not for successive societies who believed in the presence of art and artists, and governments which chose to subsidise that presence and activity. That is, there has always been a framework whose very existence shouts loud and clear that Art’s primary motive is not profit. It requires subsidy.

And why have successive governments not only provided money for the arts and other attendant resources and infrastructure (theatres, galleries, musea, training and education), but also constructed schemes whereby there is a tax deduction...

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for wealthy individuals and corporations who donate money and resources to the arts?

Because they understand that even though there is no profit here, most civilised societies seem to value the arts. In addition, that investment does also provide a vast number of attendant jobs – tech crews, caterers, administrators, manufacturers, builders, electricians, ushers, box office staff, exhibition crews, transport etc. The network of job creation through the Arts is massive. There is an industry employment aspect to those arts which are not in themselves profitable. Like Grand Prix events - which the taxpayer backs to the tune of fifty million, for the sake of the one hundred million that city businesses make from it.

And there is also a business side to arts individuals and organisations in that it is expected that in return for their government grants, they will at very best keep their books in order and conduct their business within the financial parameters they have committed to. It means that going broke and being bailed out time after time is no longer acceptable to any level of government. Better governance and business practice for the arts has been part of the long defence of an Arts Industry. But these are basics, and apart from tipping the balance too far in that direction over the last few years (too much emphasis on business as opposed to passion, way too many levels of bureaucracy as opposed to putting your money on winners) it’s fair enough. The main thing to note here stays the same – and I want to tease this out further a little later: what I call Art does not in the first
instance seek a market and it is rarely profitable. And this is what sets it apart from the Creative Industries.

We all have the benefit of seeing what happened in Singapore in our lifetimes. In the 70s and 80s, the pursuit of commercial success, a new modernism and the elevation of that island’s status as stopover and duty free shopping capital of the world, saw a great part of Singapore’s heritage architecture torn down and very little investment in the arts. It didn’t take long for that government to realise that they had created a city that was super shiny and commercially successful, but lacked a soul. Even the stopover shoppers started to trail off and the newly defined segment of cultural tourists was not attracted at all. Immediately the government began to invest on a large scale in the contemporary arts.

They started renovating their main gallery and museum, gave grants and spaces to smaller contemporary companies and to individual artists, and they began their International Festival of Arts. These days, the contemporary arts are thriving in Singapore, the new Esplanade Theatres on the Bay provide an intense focus of international, local and community arts activity and Singapore is an interesting place to stay for a few days. For the extremely commercially-minded and profit-aware Singapore, the non-profit sector of the Arts became vitally important to their future and they went out of their way to support it accordingly.
There is also a clear parallel in Australian sport. Our society believes that sport is good for us to participate in at all ages, for reasons of health, and also because it’s pleasurable and exciting to watch. It is part of our culture which we would not wish to do without. Therefore successive governments have made the decision to subsidise it. The level of sports activity, education (from the smallest primary school class to the National Institute of Sport), clubs, events and mega-events (such as Commonwealth Games or Olympics) would not exist without government subsidy. While some very popular sports can make money through broadcast revenue and, as in the Arts, a handful of sportspersons can become very wealthy, the greater ecology of sporting activity in our society is not profitable in financial terms.

Its education and training programs cover a very wide base in the knowledge that a few of the youngsters the sports-ed-net catches will become stars, others will continue to play, others will become engaged supporters. This is sensible and effective, and the money is thought to be well spent because, after all, all along the way, people are getting exercise and doing something that will perhaps keep them fitter, longer and healthier living, and therefore both better adjusted citizens as well as less dependent for the rest of their lives on the Health System. Well, that’s the theory…. Of course the cost of sports injuries to the health system and therefore to all of us is devastating – but that’s another speech for another day…

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My point is that there really ought to be no need to justify Arts subsidy when Sports subsidy acts in exactly the same way. These things are considered good for our society and we think that apportioning a certain amount of our taxes to them is a good thing. Well, at least that’s clear to some of us, but alas not so clear to others from time to time. Why would there be such a divide? Why would someone absolutely approve the subsidy for Sport and not for Art? This is not just the paranoid and defensive voice of Art. Governments of all kinds keep an eye on what’s popular and what’s not. Now and then they’ll make an unpopular choice which takes courage – more often they’ll back away from rocking the highly unstable boat of public opinion. So understanding public support, or not, for the Arts is extremely important.

Recently it was suggested that successful graduates from the National Institute of Sport might be obliged to return some of their wealth to their alma mater. It was suggested that elite sports trainees might have something akin to a HECS system: a student loan which they would be obliged to pay back. This was howled down in various quarters and one of the great arguments was that there were few stars of the Warnie variety, and the rest of the graduates would struggle to pay back the loan because their startout incomes would be so low and it would take a very long time. Hello ??? And why would that be any different from any arts graduate who has been obliged to take out a HECS loan? Most of those arts graduates never ever make enough money from their profession to be able to

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pay back that loan. I know people in their thirties who have been carrying a $20,000 debt – now mounting rapidly – for more than a decade.

Moments like these every now and then illustrate the age-old undercurrent in ours, and other societies, that the Arts are a soft choice and that we don’t really need them. A genuinely charming cab driver in Perth a couple of weeks ago talked proudly in one breath about his daughter’s piano lessons, and in the next breath called the Arts a hobby. A few years ago when the drought started to bite, a member of the National Party suggested that all money to the Arts be diverted to people in trouble on the land.

Yet every day, every person everywhere, encounters the products of either Art or the Creative Industries - which are often the commercial application of Art. It is scarcely possible to be alive today and not encounter these products. And in fact, once you point out that the product being used or experienced as part of daily life is the product of a creative industry then that user will be happy to admit – oh well, of course, not that (not music I hear on the radio, or fashion I buy, or things I read online or in books, or movies or chairs etc etc) they’re fine … and here’s the clincher that anchors the thrust of this paper.. but it’s the arty farty stuff I’m talking about – all that poofter snobby stuff. My taxes shouldn’t be going to that.
I found it interesting to hear the Prime Minister speaking so favourably about the UK's sports lottery and seriously considering it as a model for Australia. The profits from the national lottery in the UK were for almost two decades invested into the arts. It was what kept the arts buoyant in the UK all that time. It is only with the advent of the 2012 Olympics that the UK government has decided to pull that money away from the arts and give it to sport (hence the UK’s enhanced performance in Beijing, and many very worried arts companies). I think it might be appropriate, given that lottery's history and its current inspiration for an investment in sport, that we demand that if there is to be an Australian national lottery, then half the return goes to sport but the other half goes to the arts. That suggestion would likely be met with familiar outcries.

And it is in response to decades of discrimination and attacks on Art and its most innovative and challenging constellations, that a tendency arises for official channels, or holders of the public purse, not to defend the outer and inner limits of originality and daring, but to try to disguise them in the garb of an industry whose justification is not, ever, for its own sake or the ephemeral qualities of life it preserves and extends for its society, but because it can be seen to be the equal of other industries – which have the potential to compete in a market and make money. This lack of a genuine defence of Art is dangerous; the attempt to defend Art as something which can be valued in terms of

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investment and financial profitability weakens the real reasons for valuing Art.

We are in a time of change – turns of centuries are very good at that. I have been saying for some time that I believe people will look back on this first decade of the twentieth-first century and see that it was a time of profound, seismic change of the same order that governed the changes from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The charge that lit up Secession Vienna is electrifying us today as new technologies develop apace and are taken up by artists everywhere as a means of their expression. One recent and sudden aspect of these changes is the return of respect for ideas and the public intellectual. Following 2020, there’s a new show, Fora, on ABC TV, there’s a new interest in speakers and talkfests, and after a time of suppression and ridicule of the public intellectual, people are again encouraged to think and talk about issues of import and interest.

This means that there is support for one of the most important roles of the arts: this is the arena in which the toughest and most complex issues of individuals and society can be discussed, and more than just discussed, really felt. Of course, there is an obligation for artists to acknowledge that role too and stop working with trivial themes – that too is another speech for another day. But traditionally we haven’t been good at valuing the ephemeral. When it comes to the kind of massive event mentality that’s been encouraged in our societies, we allow emotion to be attached to the large and very expensive public display. The recent Pope-athon is a good example.

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For subtler questions of humanity (those that rarely make the television reality shows or soaps) – like the fine lines of ethical dilemma, the moment to raise your voice against injustice, the genuine inner debate about honesty, greed or materialism – all of which most people encounter in the run of their day to day lives – we are less enthusiastic and less forthcoming. Yet it is in these grey areas of doubt and decision, the place where all the immeasurables of life can be tossed and turned, that Art can be of greatest public service. And it’s not just in, for instance, the explicit play or novel or small budget film which overtly discusses such issues. Sometimes it is just in the quiet contemplation of beauty (wordless music, or non-figurative art), that thought and emotions have the space to stray into the dangerous human territories we so cleverly avoid in the busyness of another day another dollar.

I believe such qualities of introspection, debate and dialectic are vital if we are to fulfil our potential as human beings. A society devoid of such reflection and contemplation is held back – is not benefiting from the exercise of all those skills which humans at this stage of their evolution can deploy.

In a recent ABC interview, the writer Jeannette Winterson had this to say:

“I think that art is definitely on the side of the inner life… It’s helping us to express that unique human-ness, from the high end, really, to the very modest. It’s not just about going around museums or listening to great music, or reading fabulous literature…

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…It’s about a kind of independence of mind, an open-mindedness and above all a capacity to feel. We cannot give our feelings over to the values of cheap soap operas and media strap-lines. If you want to feel deeply and if you want to feel profoundly, then you go to the places where that feeling is deep and profound, and that’s in art…”

Jeannette Winterson, interviewed by Ramona Koval, ABC radio

When a society actively encourages and enables the highest of human development and provides the tools and pathways to stimulate it, it is surely capable of developing advantages in a competitive world. In such a way, the presence of Art is a vital tool for a hopeful and prosperous future. Bandaiding the arts away from criticism that it is too ephemeral for an increasingly tough world, and that it is not connected to the real world, disguising it in the short term garb of particular investment and profitability, actually threatens a society with the loss of the intellectual and emotional tools it desperately needs. These are the tools, the well exercised muscles for thought, debate, challenge, flexibility, compassion etc which test our metal in the safe environment of pretend and hypothetical in a way that moves us, makes us feel, gives us catharsis and then stimulus, knowledge and power to act. This is the potential of Art. Are we happy to neglect this treasure for the sake of jobs in video gaming?
Now you see I am also not confusing Art with Entertainment. Because entertainment also differs from Art in that it understands a market and plays to it. It wants to satisfy an existing market – and make money out of it. This is almost the definition of entertainment. I’m not decrying it – fun and entertainment also have their place, but there is no threat to entertainment. As they tend to be faddish, and they run with novelty, some traditional forms of entertainment are already being superceded by new attractors of the Creative Industries, especially screen-based applications. But entertainment as a whole is terrifyingly healthy. In skills training terms, there is a demonstrable demand for unending supply.

No, I am talking about those individuals who through certain gifts, usually called talent, usually coupled with energy and persistence, and the smart nurturing of those qualities through the home and education, emerge as adolescents with their sense of curiosity and originality in tact, and have the encouragement and the means to forge ahead along wholly original paths. Some remain loners, others meet those of like minds and form bands, companies, collectives, schools etc. But these are the ones who are not market driven – and to the despair of their families, their teachers etc, they simply do not have it in them to tread existing tracks. Existing markets do not provide a suitable platform for their new ideas and methodologies – there are no obvious career paths for those who are playing with elemental creativity.
Often what they do looks lazy, crazy and unacceptable. Many of them start acquiring skills for the manifest expression of what they are thinking and feeling. This is where arts education comes in – instruments, bodies, methodologies, histories, masters, apprenticeships, research, exposure to other art and ideas, these things are all grist to their urgent and hungry mill.

And for as long as it takes for them to develop their skill and their individual voice, as long as it takes to develop an audience or a market for their work – such activity does not make money. It requires subsidy. Along the way, those that encounter the new ideas and new forms of expression have the ephemeral benefit, and may be inspired in their own avenues of work or creativity. That’s already good for the society. Some of these artists in the pursuit of their own inner driven goal will make the leap to various creative industries and it’s good that those industries are there, working and healthy, ready to accept such creatives. In other cases the emerging ideas and new methodologies will in any case simply fetch up in the creative industries through stealth. An Ad executive from one of the major Australian agencies once said that his profession desperately needed the Arts to stay edgy and edgier, since that originality was the source of their inspiration. The very best new ideas in art, theatre and music would always fetch up a year or so later in a commercial application.
But unless a society can ensure that there is a framework in which art, its research and development, its newest and boldest ideas are supported in a raft of different ways – through education, through venues and materials, through the encouragement of audiences to be open to new ideas, then we simply stifle one of the richest seams of originality and experience, one of the most fertile avenues we possess for the exploration of what it means to be human.

Neuro-aesthetics has made even greater claims for the unique value of the arts: that there is nothing else which so effectively stimulates all areas of the brain and its multiple connectors than the unexpected in Art. Juliana Engberg, Artistic Director of ACCA, says this is echoed at ACCA corporate functions. A business man with scant knowledge of the arts might emerge from seeing anew and unclassifiable artist, saying “I don’t know what to say….but…it made me think”. He’s right. New and unknown arts experiences have the power to ‘make us think’. She also writes in her chapter of the book Dear Mr Rudd:

“While the Arts have always intuitively argued the case of intellectual and emotional benefit, we now have scientific evidence to support the theory. The emerging area of neuro-aesthetics is interesting in this context… cognition and the arts – the way the brain is activated when it encounters something extra ordinary, something that dislodges mundanity – a callisthenic workout for the mind. It is sometimes described as the third
culture – a bringing together of the arts and sciences that 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 for re-engaging the imagination: to enliven our senses and
intellect….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.

…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 per cent. As our population ages, this is surely going to
be one of the important tools to fight brain attrition. .....

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. ..

Art is great at
creating these moments of arresting, conflicted thoughts…

…Because the arts employ metaphor and abstraction, allegory and illusion, analogy and experimentation, they help us to think through our human situation. 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. “

Juliana Engberg, *Dear Mr Rudd* (Black Inc. ed Robert Manne 2008)

Art – not only the existing canon and collections of the past and their representation and re-interpretation, but every shade of the new - the ugly, the unloved and the unknown, as I call them - needs enthusiastic support. The unsuccessful endeavours, just like R & D in science and medicine, are every bit as important as the huge hits. Those who dare the newest weirdest stuff should be supported and encouraged every bit as much as those whose work immediately resonates, and becomes popular and therefore potentially profitable.

It is the entire environment that enables success and progress and there are more than a few these days who have adopted environmental terminology to describe the necessary steps to preserving a healthy eco-system in the arts.

I had been resisting the environmental vocabulary until I had the very good
fortune to meet Dr Brian Walker who is currently the science program director of the Resilience Alliance and was chief of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology. I was drawn to his explanations of Resilience Thinking and just how applicable it is to the Arts.

Resilience is defined as ‘the capacity of a system to avoid disturbance and still retain its basic function’. While this focus has arisen from environmental studies, it immediately struck me as applicable to all systems, ecological, human and sociological. It’s worth teasing out the connections in some detail as I believe it provides an unusually robust defense of how we might approach a resilient arts sector: “…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. They 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?”

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 [again the bells are ringing in Arts terms]. 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…

…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 the UK recently, and in a small way South Australia as it happens, this kind of chaotic event has been enabled in some parts of the Arts – mainly when it came to small to medium theatre companies, they announced 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. It may happen too via the Australia Council in its September Theatre Board meeting. No matter how good a company’s reputation, if it has ceased making inspirational work then the resources should be released for new energies to make use of them.

What this all means - and here I come to my argument at last - is that it is a good thing to pump more resources (money, infrastructure etc) into Creative Industries. In some ways it is helping to promote resilience in that it invests in and promotes the new (lighter and quicker 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.

But this cannot be at the expense of Art, that which requires subsidy and investment with no guarantee of return as in an industry; and I fear that the
current fad for Creative Industries - which are acceptable in that they are profitable is trying to supplant support for the Arts. This disguise of creativity is a potential thief.

Unless we also champion, preserve and support unprofitable art then we deprive Creative Industry of its prime source of inspiration and ideas. Failing to nurture the raw materials, yet unaffected by the need for profit, and concentrating only on the one part which is economically attractive, is fatal for the system as a whole. It would be healthier for the whole if potentially profitable Creative Industries were situated in the portfolio of Industry, and therefore no threat to any number of vital arms of art and culture.

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 again at presence, I think this would be ringing cathedral bells for educators. 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 the Creative Industry Training as the new frontier.

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. Arts in the TAFE system may be in peril. Yet 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 as in its human and environmental parallels.

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 [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], the more you diminish that system’s resilience. 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 social-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 social-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 – 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: I demand that for the sake of the society and I live in and the country I love.

A creative society, a creative workplace, will be one in which all branches of creativity, profitable or not, will be supported from the very start of education through all its levels, and into the period of apprenticeship, then R & D and ultimately productiveness whether that be in successful products of creativity or successful stimulation of the creative in all of us – the philosophical dimension. It will not be a society which has tried to hard to jump on a potentially profitable bandwagon (called at this time Creative Industry), but one which has instilled value and education for the general principles of creativity which will then have emerged in all careers and paths of life – whether that be teaching, art, engineering, science, medicine, transport, housing, caring etc.

A creative society is one which is flexible and generous and values all parts of its collective enterprise and activity – one which ultimately prizes resilience, and to
that end the positive and continuing support not only of the tallest and most
celebrated trees, or the sexy new ways in which one promotes, deploys their
strengths and profits from them, but also the small and vital but as yet largely un-
noticed new growth at the bottom of the forest. It is from this floor the future emerges. Neglect it, deprive it, render it less important and less worthy of investment, and despite your best efforts at the canopy, your forest is already
dying. *I hope that Wal, and John, would agree.*

Robyn Archer  Adelaide Sept 5 2008