

## Let Them Eat Culture or Here Comes Another Bandwagon

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This presentation has a title. I've called it 'Let Them Eat Culture or Here Comes Another Bandwagon'. By which, you'll realise that I'm not happy. I should warn you right now that I'm going to be curmudgeonly. It's been a while since I could claim to be an angry young man - this talk will expose me as a grumpy old fart. As usual, I will overstate my case, but only so as to balance the hyperbole on the other side of the scales. I hope that my spleen venting will help you to look both ways.

I'm not happy because, at least to this point, we, the agents of the pleasure principle, have failed. Elections here and in the USA have demonstrated that the forces of gray fundamentalism have mustered their polemics much more effectively than those of us that wish for a world inspired by joy, hope, love, trust and all those other mushy ideas.

Still, one election does not the apocalypse bring, and we mustn't discount the value or the power of the mushy ideas just because of one or two setbacks.

But how is it that the values we promote - values that seem so obvious, so simple, so incontrovertible, so uncontentious - turn out to be none of these things?

Apart from the fact that, by promoting them, we are threatening the control of a gang who are control obsessives, I think we consistently make a tactical error. This is the error of debating from **within** the conceptual frameworks of the structures that are the cause of the problem.

I hope that over the next half hour I'll be able to demonstrate some of the consequences of this error.

It's three and a half years since The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability was released.

Have things changed much since March 2001?

- Cultural policies have proliferated;
- governments of all hues and levels have begun to recognise the importance of this culture thing;
- there's something approaching full employment for cultural development workers;
- more people are singing and dancing together than since the advent of television;
- there is a growing recognition of the power of art to address social problems ...

Sounds like things are moving along quite nicely. But in quite a different direction than the one proposed in my slim volume. Let me remind you what I was suggesting:

Just as the social, environmental and economic impacts of initiatives that affect society need to be evaluated, so too do their **cultural** impacts. Not taking into account the relationship between planning and values is both silly and dangerous. We need normalised methods of dealing with this problem.

Developing a cultural 'lens' through which ALL initiatives can be viewed is a way to achieve this.

- Levels of **participation** in the development of an initiative,
- its **authenticity** in relation to the values of those upon whom it will impact; and,
- the likely effect on the **vitality** of affected communities

are the key issues that a cultural perspective could address.

That's the kernel of what I argued for in the Fourth Pillar of Sustainability.

I'm not aware of this approach to culture having being taken up anywhere.

Instead, the major development in the last few years has been the growing awareness that art can be used as a tool of social policy. That is, art as instrument, as a medium for the achievement of government policies in areas as diverse as (to quote from the subtitle of the recent publication, 'Art and Wellbeing') Health, Ecologically Sustainable Development, Public Housing and Place, Rural Revitalisation, Community Strengthening, Active Citizenship, Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity.

Sounds like a miracle cure, a universal panacea.

Twenty years ago the 'arts industry' was claiming for itself similar capacities in relation to wealth creation – cities would be transformed through the arts, 'arts led recoveries' were the flavour of the decade.

That brand of rhetoric proved unsustainable, so now a new wave of hyperbole is upon us. And likely, may I say, to be equally unsustainable.

Please don't assume that I'm suggesting that artistic practice is not an essential ingredient in the mix that achieves social change. I cling, somewhat desperately these days, to the belief that artistic engagement offers insights and experiences that can be life changing.

But art in the hands of the Social Engineer is another matter entirely, and apart from anything else, begs an enormous number of really important questions.

What are these questions? Here are a dozen:

- What's the difference between cultural policy and arts policy?
- Why do we persist in using the 'arts and culture' phrase?
- Does riding a bandwagon always end in a fall?
- What's happened to community art?
- How do we break the commodity consumption cycle?
- Is art becoming the new age opium?
- Must we persist with the project model?
- Can the words 'access' and 'participation' be un-weaseled?
- Is sustainability all it's cracked up to be?
- What's happening to our children?
- Is art a pathway to happiness?
- Can bureaucracies change their ways?

I'm sure that many of these questions will be addressed directly or indirectly throughout this conference. But this is my chance to get in first, so I'm not going to miss the opportunity.

### **What's the difference between cultural policy and arts policy?**

At the moment, absolutely none. Which is terrible because we badly need both – **and** heritage, library, education, communications, sports, recreation and public space policies. That is, policies that focus on the main areas of values maintenance and production in our society. The fact that the policies that go under the title of 'cultural' don't address the most significant areas of cultural production, namely education and communications, inevitably renders incoherent any claim about the important function of culture in our society.

As unfortunate, is the fact that most of what goes under the name of cultural policy is arts (and heritage) policy – and bad policy at that.

Bad because, by and large, it focuses on supporting the activities of professional artists, developing audiences/markets for their products RATHER THAN recognising, valorising and nurturing the productive and creative capacities of ordinary people.

That is, it reinforces the notion of cultural production as a specialist function to be undertaken by professional cultural producers while relegating the rest of us to being consumers of their products.

As well as being bad arts policy, the documents that go under the name of cultural policy undermine the potential to get culture on to the agenda in a meaningful way.

Naming this stuff cultural policy removes our capacity to interrogate ALL public actions from a cultural perspective: to ask how all policy impacts on participation, authenticity and vitality.

### **Why do we persist in using the 'arts and culture' phrase?**

I have absolutely no idea. What I do know is that it is enormously confusing. Are they two separate concepts? Are they different names for the same thing? Are they equal or is one subordinate to the other? Does putting them together offer some sense of a discrete concept that can be distinguished from other concepts?

In the current usage of the phrase, none of these questions is answerable. It's a nonsense concept and needs to be thrown out now.

And now the mix is becoming even more confused with the introduction of 'creativity'. Foreign pundits are being imported to expound on their theories of the 'creativity led recovery' and policy makers are having to grapple with yet another fuzzy buzz word that promises much more than it can possibly deliver.

Can these words be given useful meanings? I think so, and so here's an attempt:

- **Creativity:** the universal human capacity to explore the 'non-logical' areas of our existence and experience and to make intuitive, imaginative, connections.
- **Art:** the processes and results of transforming these 'illuminations' into tangible and intangible forms.
- **Culture:** the social production of meaning.

Described like this, it would seem reasonable to link 'art' and 'creativity' as a suitcase concept, but clearly 'culture' is an idea that encompasses far more processes than those covered by the first two.

I've called culture, 'making sense'. In this context, art describes the processes of making sense through non-logical means, that is, of making connections (the key aspect of making sense) through modes that are imaginative, intuitive, surreal – and no less likely to be useful despite their irrational source.

Looked at in this way, one can see that the processes we describe as art are an essential counterfoil to those we think of as rational. Without a healthy balance between imagination and plod, we'll be caught in the web of the engineers and the accountants forever.

### **Does riding a bandwagon always end in a fall?**

Yes. Opportunism may provide short-term victories but it always buggers you up because, ultimately, the truth will prevail: art-making has its own momentum, and its results are just as likely to be destructive as they are constructive. Many of the connections that art will make are pessimistic, nihilistic even (and no less valuable for that).

Nurturing a society's capacity to universally engage in art-making guarantees nothing except insight. What will probably emerge is a society of beings with the capacity to see better; what they see and how they choose to act on the basis of that sight are unknowables.

There's no doubt that the 'social' bandwagon is a better bandwagon than the economic one, BUT we're still caught in the mire of trying to justify art from the perspective of a set of objectives that are fundamentally foreign to the actual practice of art-making.

The impetus for art is neither financial (art will make us rich) nor social (art will make us powerful, or, according to the new age version of 'social', art will make us happy). Rather its impetus may be something as banal (and as important) as curiosity, or as mysterious as obsession or compulsion – it is simply just something we have to do.

Under the rationalist rubric, we persist in trying to justify art as an instrument for the achievement of some aspect of the business plan developed by the accountants.

We MUST develop our own expression of the value of this fundamental human attribute that demonstrates why a decent society is obligated to nurture the creative expression of all its members because, to do so, is to facilitate their fulfilment as human beings – they may not become rich or happy as a result, but they will be alive, in the fullest sense.

### **What's happened to community art?**

It continues to be ignored.

We persist in believing that art is made only by experts. This attitude is almost as prevalent in the world of community cultural development as it is anywhere else.

We also persist in believing that art is the result of individual enterprise.

Community art questions both these claims. Everyday people making art **together**.

Arts policies persist, despite the recent introduction of lashings of community rhetoric, in focusing on professional artists and the sales of their products. Professionalisation and commodification continue unabated.

Only when every local government supports the communal arts activities of all their constituents - as automatically as they do keeping the roads waterproof and the refuse recycled - will they be properly fulfilling their governance obligations.

The fact that it wouldn't be all that difficult to do this makes it even more depressing that it's not happening. What's so hard about having a place where people can come together to sing, dance, paint, write and where there's a team of facilitators whose job it is to make welcome, to give confidence, to inspire, to suggest different ways? How is it that we've reached such a pass that this sort of activity isn't seen as both essential and normal?

Arts policies that focus on professionals and their products look at only half the picture - and the least important half.

Until the art of ordinary people is respected and nurtured ...

Until **making** art becomes more important the **consuming** art ...

Until the creative capacities of ALL people are recognised, respected and nurtured ...

Until the MAIN focus of public arts policy is on the support of UNIVERSAL creativity ...

NOTHING WILL CHANGE

### How do we break the commodity consumption cycle?

I don't know. Perhaps only when we run out of stuff to consume, or of the means to purchase the stuff. And in the meantime promoting art, and culture, as **activities**: things one **does**, not things one consumes.

Citizens continue to be viewed as fundamentally **passive** subjects of the democratic process. Their function is merely consume the commodities manufactured by the various industries engaged in making stuff for the market.

This view of the role of the citizen **has** to be overturned.

Recognition must be given to the fact that it is in the **making** of art that the primary sites for personal and social development occur - NOT in the presentation of art.

Because we are in thrall to an ideology that believes that ALL human transactions can (and should) be subject to market processes, we have accepted as a given that the key to art is the transaction that takes place between the maker (or her agent) and the consumer. This is a nonsense.

The key exchanges are between the makers.

Our culture remains PASSIVE, and will continue to be so unless CONFIDENCE can be generated.

- CONFIDENCE in the intrinsic value of art
- CONFIDENCE in the capacities of communities to make their own culture
- CONFIDENCE in our capacity to argue the case for what we believe, IN OUR OWN TERMS
- CONFIDENCE in the 'internal' outcomes of active participation (that is, in the process effects, in distinction from the product effects)
- CONFIDENCE in the fact that, if communities have the tools, they can make their own way

- CONFIDENCE that creativity doesn't need another bandwagon
- CONFIDENCE in the value of working together.

If we had these confidences, we'd be sweet. And as we all know already, confidence comes through practice. So let's get to it.

### **Is art becoming the new age opium?**

Yes. And the main purveyors of this drug are the middle people. Those that make a living selling art product. Constantly on the look out for another market, another opportunity to justify their existence by mediating between the product and the consumer.

And the new set of mediations is about convincing governments that if they let artists loose on the marginalised, the poor, the infirm, the disabled, the unemployed, the alienated, the angry, the depressed, the dispossessed, the isolated, the illiterate they'll become more manageable, less strident, in fact, even more invisible and certainly less of a drain on the taxpayer.

Ignore the problem, just cover it up. Culture as band-aid.

Of course I'm overstating the intent, but I don't think I'm overstating the likely response.

### **We are in danger of becoming complicit in a 'let them eat culture' conspiracy.**

Culture both as something to be consumed AND as a universal panacea for all ills. Whacking in an arts project will become a way of avoiding the need for systemic change, of not putting in tangible resources, of avoiding confronting root causes, of giving a voice without having to listen...

Of course it won't work, because if communities do start to recognise that they can express their own values, make their own meanings - who knows where that will lead. We need to make sure however that when the shit does hit the fan, that we're on the right side.

Which means embracing community cultural development as community expression rather than as a means of achieving government objectives.

### **Must we persist with the project model?**

Please no. The only people who consistently benefit from projects are bureaucrats. All their requirements are fulfilled: a predicted outcome within the prescribed accounting period, a short, sharp intervention capable of being described in whatever are the buzz words of the day, a beginning, a middle and an end, instant gratification.

Apart from the extraordinary pressures this form of support puts on artswokers, let's consider some of the possible 'field' effects:

- Working to other peoples agendas: how much time do community groups spend trawling for grant opportunities and then twisting their dreams to fit the convoluted eligibility criteria of whatever this week's opportunity is? An enormous amount of community resource is spent, often with no result.

- Scraping off scabs: communities have to live with their divisions. This isn't great but it is life. Outsiders come in, stir the pot, expose semi-healed wounds and then leave. What's the benefit? They have a more profound understanding of the issue? They are better able to appreciate the perspective of the other? They are better able to negotiate a settlement? Are these qualities achievable through a three month arts project? I don't think so.
- The candy man: most lives are hard yakker, full of frustration and disappointment. Outsiders come in, engineer a profoundly joyful and cathartic experience and then leave. What's the community left with? An unreplicable memory of heaven? A feeling of dependence for joy on external agency?

It's quite reasonable to argue that these effects are negative – more harm is done than good.

No initiative should be implemented without considering its impact on the long-term capacities of its participants to continue.

### **Can the words 'access' and 'participation' be un-weaseled?**

It will be very difficult.

Access in current usage means 'there's a shop near you' and participation means 'buying something at it'.

There was a time when these were honourable words. They described ready availability of resources and active engagement. No longer.

But, if 'building community capacity' is ever going to be more than empty rhetoric, we have to rediscover and reactivate the original usages of these two words.

If communities are to have the opportunity to make their own culture, to have power over their own visions, and in particular, the power to make their own culture independent of state intervention, they will need access to a range of empowering resources.

Many of these resources are already held within communities – they just need uncovering. The capacities are there; what's needed is confidence, training, recognition, networking.

What this implies is a complete reversal of the current methods of supporting arts practice. No longer a focus on the Artist on the pedestal but on the artist in all of us; a focus on locally-based arts making, not on 'excellent' product; support through meeting ongoing needs rather than through one-off innovations; perhaps even leaving the flagships to fend for themselves while concentrating instead on nurturing everyday art.

I can't imagine this proposal being taken seriously, but that makes it even more important that it be stated – too often do we bite our tongues.

### **Is sustainability all it's cracked up to be?**

Absolutely not.

What's the point of sustaining something that's destroying the planet? Or, for that matter, even engaging with it.

Many artists have certainly felt that way.

Perhaps our society is so decadent that disengagement is a legitimate, or at least understandable, response. Which is to say that the problem lies with the way our society is organised, rather than with its disengaged members. Pondering on how to get people to become more engaged is missing the point.

But of course, it's me that's missing the point, isn't it? The entire subtext of the sustainability push is that if we wish to continue, we have to change. But I'm increasingly sure that it's this subtext that's going missing. Sustainability is becoming interchangeable with conservatism. How do we maintain our standards (moral, economic or whatever)? is becoming, - perhaps, already has become, - the question.

I'm not (necessarily) suggesting that you lot are thinking this way. I'm just suggesting that you bear in mind that many on the sustainability bandwagon are.

In the matter of culture, the same issue emerges. 'Cultural sustainability' means very different things to different people. There's a school of thought that uses it to mean 'preserving the canon'.

Which is why my focus has been on 'cultural vitality' even though this phrase is, in grammatical terms, a redundancy. If culture is not alive, it isn't.

We make and re-make culture every day: how we do it, and who does it - particularly public culture - is what's important.

Are there eternal values? Ones which we should sustain, no matter what? Probably, but even these won't be, unless they are regularly and democratically debated and tested.

A vital (and sustainable) society has a vital culture - one in which all members actively contribute to the constant to-ing and fro-ing that affect the way we think and behave.

### **What's happening to our children?**

How can someone who doesn't truly believe that they are creative be expected to believe that other people, just like them, are?

It is entirely 'normal' that adults who have spent their whole lives having their own creativity trivialised and denied, will then do exactly the same thing to the next generation.

**WE HAVE TO BREAK THIS CYCLE!!**

This is particularly difficult within an education system that is increasingly focussed on preparing the young to join the 'work force' rather than to examine and enjoy life.

So, by age 13, art in schools is no longer an exploration and celebration of a group of children's creativity. Instead it's an elective focussed on skill acquisition accompanied by the occasional and terribly serious public performance/exhibition, a semi-academic examination/appreciation of historical technique and/or an extra-curricular activity.

The fun, the joy, the creativity, the improvisation have been abandoned in favour of 'preparation'.

We simply must ensure that the creativity of our children is not enveloped (the opposite of developed) the minute they become teenagers. Continuing to perpetuate this crime would be the worst of obscenities.

But how to break the cycle?

First, by demonstrating long and loudly that it exists and that is doing harm.

Second, through local initiative: every parent is ultimately responsible for their own children's creativity; every school claims to encourage parent input into school policy - there's work to do.

Third, through public action: every level of government has a finger in the child-rearing pie; we must remind the authorities that we expect our children to emerge from their clutches not just as people able to earn a living but as people with the capacity to love life, to engage, to build relationships and who had a lot of fun while learning all this.

Perhaps the key to this is the sort of TRAINING that those responsible for nurturing the creative activities of children receive.

### **Is art a pathway to happiness?**

Sometimes, but it's hardly the be all and end all, and it's certainly not guaranteed.

Getting into art because you think it will cure your ills (or those of your constituents) is a tricky business. What's a safe dose? Can it be self-administered or should one call in an expert? Are the experts registered? Should there be a prescription? Who's to say which brands work and which are snake oil? How does one determine which brand is suitable for one's particular illness? How long does the course need to be? And what about side effects?

What vile questions to apply to an activity that, as children, we did, just because.

Surely, we should be encouraging ourselves and others to get into art because its exciting, moving, challenging, risky, scary and often even painful - like bungy jumping.

Fact is, much of the 'best' art is terrifying, disturbing and disorienting - the very opposite of well-making.

AND, much of the most affecting art does not inspire generalised cohesion, but the opposite.

AND, much art is inspired by alienation, an inability to make one's way in an inhuman world, a failure to adapt to the pressures of daily life, anger with the way things are, pain and loss.

I doubt that clinical research would reveal that Artists are a happier than average sector of our society. In fact, I'd be very surprised if it didn't reveal the opposite.

Why then wish art upon everyone? Because happiness isn't everything, or to put it another way, there's a lot more to happiness than being well.

We don't live in a perfect world, and we never will. Art offers us a way of coming to terms with this fact. The moments of illumination, of connectedness, of catharsis that we achieve with others help us through the night. Making art can give us insight, not necessarily communicable, but often sufficient, within oneself, to struggle on - to cope for another day. In these times, that's worth a lot.

### **Can bureaucracies change their ways?**

While institutions continue to operate in the ways that deny both the creativity of their own staff and the creativity of the people they're meant to serve, they will continue to be millstones around our necks.

No-one can take seriously the rhetoric of an institution that operates at odds with the ideas it is propagating. Unless the institution itself embraces and operates according to culturally active principles, its attempts to encourage others to do so will inevitably fail.

Officials need to rediscover the power and effectiveness of the non-rational, the imaginative, the intuitive, the creative; to rediscover modes of relationship development and communications that go beyond the exchange of officially sanctioned language.

Then perhaps they will be heard, then perhaps they will become able to hear.

What I'm saying, is practice what you preach.

This evening, Fay White, one of my colleagues at Community Music Victoria, will be facilitating an hour of participatory singing. I urge you to join in this gathering, not just because I know you'll have fun, not just because I know that, like I have, you will discover that you can make nice sounds, but mainly because theory don't mean shit unless it co-exists with practice - and not other people's practice but your own. I'll see you there.

Thank you for listening.

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