

Life is more than a set of commodities: response to Robyn Archer

Jane Crawley

I have been asked to respond to Robyn Archer's keynote presentation, but given the range and density of her paper I'll restrict my response to a couple of areas. I would like first to acknowledge Robyn's work in breaking down some of what she has correctly referred to as the binary thinking inherent in our framing of the arts – the either/or of excellence and community, contemporary and worthy.

I first met Robyn in 2001 when she was coming on board to direct the 2002 Melbourne International Arts Festival. It was at a meeting she convened with Peter Sellers, who was then the Artistic Director of the 2002 Adelaide Festival. Peter was, and probably still is, a figure of great controversy in Australian arts circles in that he championed a lateral – or some might say 'blow it up' approach – which saw contemporary artists and curators commissioned to produce major community projects – thereby upsetting the community arts sector – and programming that neglected to profile key local performing arts companies and sufficient international companies – thereby upsetting everyone else. This meeting that Robyn convened involved the then Cultural Development Network Director Judy Spokes and me, and we were there to discuss *The Art of Dissent* – a conference focusing on the arts and social activism, which was conceived by Judy and which took place as part of both the Adelaide and Melbourne Festivals. Both Robyn and Peter championed *The Art of Dissent* and it was a rare confluence of interests that saw this particular project interact with the two festivals. Robyn championed several other projects – such as Big hArt's *Not at Home* – that brought long-term community cultural development projects into the Melbourne Festival in a new way. Rather than just putting on events, Robyn was interested in artistic processes that could invite interaction between audiences and people passing by with the producing communities.

However, I think it is also true, as Robyn said in her paper, that these efforts – that is, artistic directors being open to community-based work – are mostly driven by a very few individuals and in the majority of cases

community-based and -driven work is not seen as being of sufficient quality to be worthy of mainstream programming.

Working to a formula

To some extent I think the pressure to assure quality a furphy, if only because I think I have experienced at least as much bad non-community art as I have bad community art, possibly even more, which is really saying something. There is a sort of formula or pattern for international festivals that sees the program have its requisite international dance, music and theatre components (with visual arts generally towards the back of the program) and the percentage of each is determined by the individual artistic director. Then you get the usual 'local components'. In Melbourne it might be something like Chunky Move for contemporary dance, Back to Back for contemporary disability, Black Arm Band for Indigenous, and at least one compulsory marginal community outcome, often on a public housing estate. I am not inferring that any of these are either bad or boring; indeed I have been proudly involved in either funding or producing many of these programs, both community and non-community. However, I think this says something about festival programming; that it remains essentially consumerist. It is about global 'shopping' for best value product, and that there is now a sense that at least a small proportion of the goods needs to be from 'the community'.

On the other hand, the reality is that major international festivals are not necessarily the most appropriate vehicle for the bulk of the arts to be situated and the context needs to be questioned. Speaking very broadly I think one could argue – or perhaps I should say I believe – that abstraction and challenge are increasingly unpopular; that art is increasingly perceived as a form of global entertainment and that our culture (in the broadest sense of that word) is increasingly commodified as our values are increasingly materialistic. Given this, our major festivals, venues and companies are under increasing pressure to provide and produce desirable commodities with shrinking budgets.

The hankering of community-based artists and producers for mainstream recognition and the age-old pressure to justify the small resources committed to community-based work have led us to appropriate conceptual frameworks and language belonging to the powerful. Like migrants or refugees we feel inherently out of place, or not at home. We feel we are speaking a second language, that we are somehow trespassing and hoping we won't be thrown out. We want desperately to be accepted, but at the same time we only feel truly comfortable in the ghetto.

Working with borrowed language

As a local government bureaucrat I am intensely familiar with the borrowed language of the powerful. As in the rest of the world, in local government, money is power and economics is the dominant language. Adopting this

'second language', we learn quickly to speak of the multiplier effect of funding, of 'creative industries' and the 'creative class', of arts-led urban regeneration and economic sustainability. We know that for an idea to fly it needs to satisfy certain economic imperatives: it will not only employ artists, it will kick-start local cafes, clear up unwanted graffiti, provide career pathways for disaffected youths and have neighbours chatting happily to each other whilst their blood pressure goes down and their desire for cigarettes disappears. We also know that these too must be quantified. Everything has a cost, everything can be bought.

There is also the dominant, and equally opaque, language of the arts. We want our community arts projects to not only deliver economic outputs but also manage to 'interrogate prevailing cultural paradigms', preferably by engaging marginal communities in new technologies whilst delivering a culminating product that can be sold on to multiple other communities and other 'key buyers', replicated in other locations and festivals (hopefully internationally).

It is important to have a sense of international context for our work, if only to realise that on many levels it is almost impossible to compare cultures. I was in Germany a few years ago on a residency and was based for part of the time at the House of World Cultures, which focuses on non-German, non-Anglo artists and contemporary dance, with a clear and stated focus on the racial 'other'. Outside the House, Turkish families were barbecuing in the park and never the twain did meet. I also spent time with the Workshop of World Cultures and many other community-based, migrant and refugee cultural groups and the problems and dilemmas were much the same as here; worse in fact, if one takes into account the huge levels of funding directed to the arts in Germany and the dreadfully low amount directed at anything vaguely 'community'. However, I could not really reconcile Berlin with Melbourne in meaningful ways; in terms of the complexities of local government, funding environments, social realities, and so on. I recall having to give a talk when I returned, and to the audience's consternation I had to confess that I did not really understand anything and what I most appreciated was relinquishing the desire to establish parallels.

Questioning the basics

I think Robyn is absolutely correct to ask us to question our basics, and that includes words like 'community' and 'regeneration'; in fact any word that we find ourselves using repeatedly without much thought. It is important to stop and question anything we find ourselves doing or saying or believing automatically. I know for a fact that the economic and social benefits of the arts – and in this instance, community-based arts – are established, and I do not mind using the associated language when it is needed. I do not even mind spending money on economists to prove these outcomes if push comes to shove.

Yet it is important to remember that the economic framework is one among many and that in many ways the language is borrowed and the framework has at its heart nothing to do with the arts, the community, creativity or the power of expression and visibility. We need to understand, and perhaps internalise, multiple languages so we can operate in, and relate to, multiple worlds. Above all, we need to remember, as Robyn has reminded us today, that there is nothing wrong with art for arts sake. It is a human right to express oneself; it is important to create things for no purpose other than the act of creation; it is good to not understand; it is OK not to make sense to everyone; it is fabulous to be confused. It is, indeed, immensely liberating to let go of the either/or.

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