

## JUST DO IT AND BE CONFUSED: RESPONSE TO ROBYN ARCHER

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I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on Aboriginal land, the traditional land of the Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to Elders past and present. Given the range and density of Robyn's paper I'll restrict my response to a couple of areas. I would like first to acknowledge Robyn's work in breaking down some 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 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 - he championed a lateral, or some might say blow-it-up approach, that 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 involved the then Cultural Development Network Director, Judy Spokes, and me, and we were there to discuss *The Art of Dissent* – a conference focussing on the arts and social activism, conceived by Judy, that 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 these festivals. Robyn championed several other projects, such as Big hArt's Not at Home, that brought long term community cultural development projects into the Festival in a new way. I mention these in particular because they were not events as such but more ongoing artistic processes that invited passersby and festival participants to interact with the producing communities.

However I think it's also true, as Robyn said in her paper, that these efforts - that is artistic directors being open to community based work - are 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.

To some extent I think this is a sort of furphy – if only because I think I've experienced at least as much bad non-community art as I have bad community art, possibly even more, which is really saying something. There's a sort of formula or pattern for international festivals that sees the program have its requisite international dance, music and theatre components (visual arts generally towards the back of the program) – the percentage of each of these determined by the individual artistic director; and then the usual local components.

In Melbourne it might be something like: Chunky Move for contemporary dance, Back to Back for contemporary disability arts, Black Arm Band for Indigenous, and at least one compulsory marginal community outcome, often involving a public housing estate. I'm not inferring that any of these are either bad or boring (I have been proudly involved in either funding or producing many of these programs, both community and non-community), but I think this says something about festival programming – that it remains essentially consumerist – globally shopping for best value product - and that there is now a sense that at least a small proportion of the goods needs to be “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 and the desire to be situated within that context needs to be questioned also. Speaking very broadly I think one could argue, or perhaps I should say that '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.

Within 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 any conceptual framework (and its language) belonging to the powerful. Like migrants or refugees we feel inherently out of place/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.

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, creative industries, the creative class, 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. Because while we need to talk of health and wellbeing imperatives, especially if we work in community-based arts, 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 the above but also manage to interrogate prevailing cultural paradigms, preferably by engaging marginal communities in new technologies whilst delivering a culminating product that can be replicated in other locations, sold on to multiple other communities, and to key buyers: festivals – hopefully internationally.

It's important to have a sense of international context for our work if only to realise that on many levels it's almost impossible to compare cultures – one can at best appreciate the complexity of the differences. 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 and has essentially 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 dreadful resourcing and cuts to anything vaguely 'community'.

However, in all meaningful ways I could not really reconcile Berlin with Melbourne in terms of the complexities of local government, funding, community-based arts, social reality and so on. I recall having to give a talk when I returned and to the audience's consternation, I'm sure, confessing that I didn't really understand anything and what I most appreciated was relinquishing the desire to establish parallels.

I think Robyn is absolutely correct to ask us to question the basics – words like 'community' and 'regeneration' – in fact any word that we find ourselves using repeatedly without much thought..... mainly because I think it's 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 true, and I don't mind using the associated language when it's needed or spending money on economists to prove these outcomes when push comes to shove.

But it's important to remember that this is one framework among many and that in many ways the language is borrowed and the framework has at its heart an economic imperative that on an essential level has 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.

But critically we need to remember, as Robyn has reminded us today, that there's nothing wrong with art for arts sake – it's a human right to express oneself; it's important to create things for no purpose other than the act of creation; it's good to not understand; it's ok not to make sense to everyone; it's fabulous to be confused. It's immensely liberating to let go of the either/or.

And life is more than a set of commodities.

**Biography:** *Jane Crawley is Acting Manager, Arts and Culture, City of Melbourne. Jane has worked in arts and cultural development for around twenty years and has specialised in producing contemporary arts projects that address issues of visibility and power and that involve collaborations between artists and communities across the range of artforms and practices. Jane's work spans the community sector, local government, arts companies and festivals and community media and she has published numerous articles relating to the arts and community development. Jane.crawley@melbourne.vic.gov.au*