

Thanks. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we gather tonight and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I will take the opportunity sadly to note the passing today of the artist Ruby Hunter – her great voice and presence will be sorely missed.

I thank you too for letting an outsider in to this august group. I'm not a scientist or an economist or an environmentalist. I come from the arts – I guess that's why I'm the dinner speaker.

I hope you'll excuse me if I don't come up with the expected quota of gags and anecdotes which dinner speakers are meant to come up with. For me the arts are a serious business – even though that may seem ironic or amusing coming from someone who once wrote a song called

“ You're an insect on the windscreen of my heart”

And indeed, my next book is called *Detritus* – and it too is a serious collection of my keynote addresses to be published by UWA Press this June.

What I want to do is start tonight with some little distinctions about what it means to be 'in the arts'.

You can be an **artist - a creator**, like many of you, dealing largely in ideas, experimenting all the time, researching a lot of the time.

You can be an **artist – an interpreter** which requires training, constant training and intense mental and physical pressure.

The best interpreters sometimes end up on a par with creators because of energy and originality which goes beyond mere skill.

And there are so many other artswriters. I'll use a play as an example to illustrate e.g. my last play.

- a. I had an idea to write a play about architecture. Through research over many years, and putting the antennae up in that direction, I found the perfect subject. It was a woman whom I met in her mid-nineties. She was Vienna's first woman architect and she had a remarkable story to tell. From the time I became familiar with her work I kept picking up bits and pieces of information about her and her work and the eras she worked through. An offer some fifteen years later from the State Theatre South Australia to produce something of mine meant I could focus my research, take it further, start experimenting with form and then start writing. The writing continued all the way till the first performance and will probably continue again with further productions
- b. Then we needed interpreters – a director, designer, actors, composer etc
- c. But then there are all the other ancillary roles that a play needs to get up and in front of an audience. If it's a company then they will have a manager, publicist, financial manager, sponsorship person, a Chair and Board, technical and operations manager etc. If the play is to be presented in a theatre then there are ticket-sellers, ushers, parking attendants, food and drink sellers, cleaners, transport, food production etc.

Or possibly we could be talking about an artist who seems to be more self-sustaining. We imagine a writer – alone, thinking, inventing: or a painter alone in the studio, or a young kid tucked away in their bedroom and creating on-screen art or music in virtual space.

But then even writers might still want publishers ( on or off screen), perhaps an agent and then all the army behind a ‘book’ – paper-makers, forests, designers, printers, ink-makers, machinists and again publicists, launches, transport, fuel etc. Even in the emerging world of digital books there are always systems and many people whose employment depends on that *initial idea* from the creator.

We also make a distinction between:

Individual artists

Companies – small and large

Institutions – such as galleries, small and large

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In this complex arena my plea for a long time has been basically *for* the support of the new and the not-well-known in the face of enormous support for the traditional, the well-known and the much-loved.

And it was only when I met Brian Walker, through Jane Dixon, and was introduced to Resilience Thinking, that I found the perfect model for arguing my case. I invited Brian into a number of the Deakin Lecture series I curated in 2008, and was completely hooked on a theory and way of thinking which stemmed from economics and the environment but in its explanation of the cyclical life of *any* system, made perfect sense for the arts.

I've been using *Resilience Thinking* in my addresses about the arts ever since, and I'm very happy to hear the word 'resilience' being used more and more in connection with the arts and am hoping it will actively influence future funding decisions.

There are many aspects to this connection between Resilience and the arts, and tonight I can touch on just a few.

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What would Resilience mean in the life of an individual artist ?

If the basic tenet holds around its definition that Resilience is 'the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function', then I suppose we start thinking initially about all the ways in which an artist needs to be *trained* to be aware – that change will come, and often unexpectedly.

*Tastes* for a certain kind of art will evolve and change, there will be generational change, the ability of an artist will change: the power of the mind and quality of ideas may increase, the capability of the body will gradually decrease. This is particularly true of dancers, for instance, who need to be trained like sportspeople: make the most of it while your body can still deliver... but after 10 or 15 years, what then ?

How do you cope with a sudden accident, or an economic crisis which decimates the quantum of dance companies and audiences who can pay to see your work ? How can you go on retaining your basic function – as an artist ?

Unfortunately much initial training in the arts simply takes up kids with stars in their eyes and doesn't take long-term resilience into account.

In my own case diversity has been the key to resilience and this came about not by design, but by accident. In the dusty northern suburbs of Adelaide, I grew up totally unaware that you could take up formal training for the arts. I simply apprenticed myself to my father who was a stand-up comedian, singer and compere – weddings, parties, anything, as they say. I watched him invent routines, practice and test them and then take them to audiences. Dad bought me a ukelele when I was 8, my scoundrel of a great-grandfather bought me a guitar when I was twelve and from then on in I just sang whatever I thought would make me famous – pop, folk, rock, heavy metal. If there had been an Australian Idol in the 1950s then I would have been in like Flynn. In fact, I did enter the equivalent of the time , Bandstand Starlight International. I made the grand final and in my last year of high school was making regular trips to Sydney, staying alone at the Chevron Hilton in Kings Cross and singing on Bandstand. I see now that I was instinctively creating a diversity of opportunity and pathways which were not available to the kids who surrounded me in our neighbourhood.

A scholarship to university allowed me to create a parallel path – not that I knew that at the time. I wanted to go off on the road, to take up the offers to be a full time singer – but I resisted out of duty to my parents who made sacrifices for my education. What I ended up with, via Latin and English Lit, was discipline, the ability to meet deadlines, a facility with words.

My first job out of university came through an offer from a nightclub owner, Bill Boyle, and resulted in two shows a night six night a week at the Trocadero in Hindley Street. And from then, forever lacking a five, or even one year plan, my career proceeded according to the opportunities offered me by a series of generous men. All I did was respond, from nightclubs and leagues clubs to an offer out of the blue to sing in an opera company and a transfer from entertainment to art. I was encouraged by one woman to start writing my own songs and shows and twenty years of productivity flowed. Just at the time when women's voices may weaken, around menopause, another offer out of the blue started a career in festival direction. I could take the heat off the voice and by not having to sing for my supper all the time, could sing when I wanted to. Paradoxically this course has allowed my voice to remain strong and me to go on singing as well as remaining productive in all the other streams as well– writing, speaking, festival direction etc.

Nobody taught me this. This readiness to pursue opportunity and to work in a diverse range of the arts arose from a simple instinct to survive. The instinct, I now see, was to build resilience in a highly risky and changeable environment.

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But my more recent pleas have been much more about the whole system of the arts, rather than the individual. These days many more people are talking about an *ecology* of the arts: it's a word I had resisted as it seemed a kind of convenient evangelical approach to speaking about the arts. But having met Brian I understood that it was entirely appropriate, and that *Resilience Thinking* offers an unusually robust defence of how we might approach a *resilient* arts sector

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You see, in pragmatic, largely English-speaking countries, it became increasingly difficult through the second half of the twentieth century to persuade the case for support for the arts. The arts became more and more considered as what I call 'a frill on the frock of life' rather than its very fabric.

Do I need to explain that ? Art is not just entertainment. Art is not just creative industry. Art is that thing that sits *between* black and white, the place of debate and dialectic, the imaginative and often sublimely pleasurable safe place where you can have a dangerous conversation. It is primarily a philosophical and ethical platform sorely needed in today's world. It differs from sport – which is measurable. We can tell who jumped highest, who ran fastest, who kicked the most goals: in sport there are clear winners and losers.

In the arts, by comparison, everything is contestable and therefore confusing and difficult – you don't know which side you are on. But it is precisely that contestable, arguable, ever-changing dimension which distinguishes us as human beings, not just animals or even just members of opposing tribes.

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 the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, says this is echoed at ACCA corporate functions. A business man with scant knowledge of the arts might emerge from seeing a new 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 :

"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. “

Art - not only the existing canon and collections of the past and their re-presentation and re-interpretation ( and these can be books, operas, ballets, symphonies all known and loved) 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.

From the 1970s onwards, and particularly in that icy economic bubble of the 80s , our societies starting mounting rhetoric around the idea of an arts ‘industry’. This rhetoric demonstrated to funders, especially governments, that the arts constitute a vast source of employment.

That's true, we are an important part of any economy. Boards and management became professionalized as the bottom line became as important in the arts as in any industry, to the point where artists and commentators started to feel as if the bottom line had become *all* important. No bums on seats ? No more funding ! Hence the increasing need for people like me to argue for more funding and support for R & D in the arts, and for those things which are not yet popular, do not yet have a paying audience, but which still contribute ( as in science) to the system as a whole.

The financial/industry arguments *did* help in the USA in the most recent financial downturn. US\$50 million was given to the arts, as a small but significant part of the multi-billion stimulus package. The inclusion of the arts in this package meant a degree of dignity for the arts in the USA, and admission that they were an important element in that society, and on many occasions FDR's Works Progress Administration was invoked. During the Great Depression the WPA employed artists, in many cases precisely to *document* the various realities of that moment in history. Large numbers of story-tellers, writers, playwrights, photographers and film-makers were gainfully employed in the harshest of times.

But in terms of Resilience, the US response to this most recent and powerful disturbance was mainly not a good one. At one point it was reported that 100,000 arts institutions of all kinds had closed their doors. This had enormous repercussions amongst arts-workers, their families and all the myriad services and producers who supplied them.

The majority of those institutions which managed to stay afloat did so by shoring up the mainstream program and chipping away at the peripheral and ancillary activity.

It's the very kind of short-sighted 'efficiency' which *Resilience Thinking* claims as an enemy. We would have to imagine that these institutions, while still functioning and showing an efficient bottom line, are now increasingly unstable: the audience they catered to is ageing, dying off, and they have abandoned the young strong and future audience. What I take away from *Resilience Thinking* is that in a crisis it would be far better judiciously to prune the main program in order to continue to support the education, youth, participatory and community programs. It is the latter which will maintain resilience in the future.

Let me explain the connection with the arts, as I understand it, a little further.

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 cycle 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, efficiencies are put in place and the future seems assured. 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'.

But as *Resilience Thinking* says “Such a system is increasingly stable – but over a decreasing range of conditions” . According to the 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...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” .

And indeed in the UK recently, in a small way South Australia and in the Theatre and Music Boards of the Australia Council , this kind of chaotic event has been provoked in some parts of the Arts. For small to medium 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 – and not just to small and medium companies.

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 is that it is a good thing to pump more resources( money, infrastructure etc) into Creative Industries, the sexy new Queensland -driven arena which I'm sure will figure large in the next arts budget. In some ways such support 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 my argument is that *this cannot be at the expense of Art* , that which requires subsidy and investment with no guarantee of return as in an industry. I fear that the current fad for Creative Industries, which are acceptable in that they are profitable, may be about to disadvantage support for less profitable, but equally essential branches of the Arts.

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. Feeding the top or end-product only, thereby neglecting the root system or start-up activity, reduces the resilience of the system.

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...

... 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”

Audiences aren't concerned whether an arts company keeps good books and a healthy bottom line: what audiences want, what our society needs, is inspiring art . Clearly if financial and general management goes astray then it will be harder for artists to have their work produced, but the public emphasis needs re-wiring.

We might relate the efficiency argument to formal education too. 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 *Resilience Thinking* 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* again:

“the more you optimise elements of a complex system of humans and nature for some specific goal, the more you diminish that system’s resilience. “

Sustainability is also a word much bandied about in Arts and Culture these days and *Resilience Thinking* says :

“that any proposal for sustainable development that does not explicitly acknowledge a system’s resilience is simply not going to keep delivering the goods...

the key to sustainability lies in enhancing the resilience of social-ecological systems, not in optimising isolated components of the system”

So 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 right now at 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.

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.

That's the language and force of argument that *Resilience Thinking* has given me, as artist, creator, interpreter, director, arts-worker and advocate. I thank you all very sincerely for this powerful tool

**Robyn Archer**

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