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2020 Ballarat Summit- The Arts

The Ballarat 2020 summit gives us a chance to stand back and view the existing world from a different perspective. At these moments we have an opportunity to understand new connections and to move forward. The role of arts is one of the topics under discussion at this summit.

I've been thinking a lot about the role of an artist in social, political and corporate activities and reflecting on how an artist can bring their creativity to the work place and to our community work. In my own work place I have engaged in making a series of DVDs on Australian playwrights – going to their plays, reading their plays and interviewing them. In my own community work I have been engaged in the Creative Clunes project, a rural renewal project with Back to Booktown (3-4 May 2008) as its major public face.

Although both of these projects are somehow related to books and writing- my profession - in neither of them do I utilise, except in the most perfunctory sense, my skills as a writer. In both cases I am using my creativity in a different way than if I was to write a book or a play.

My reflection on the different ways I am using my creative skills has generated some radical, or at least contentious ideas.

The Arts as an innovation agent:

When I looked carefully at my role as an artist in my corporate and community work I realised that I bring to the table two main skills.

Artist, in any genre, be they a film maker, a writer, a choreographer, a sculptor or whatever, have at their core an affinity with change. Change is our currency. We thrive on it, we know it, we employ it daily. We shrivel up when it is taken away. We live it and breathe it.

This might not sound like much, but many people are nervous of 'Change'. Mostly this is because it opens up the totally unknown. Change breaks down our safe ideas and worlds. It throws us into a place we know nothing about - a wild place which is unexplored and dangerous. Not too many of us want to don the pith helmet and chart new territory. Artists are the explorers of the land of 'Change', they enjoy the journey.

In social or business innovation that old axiom: 'you can't make an omelette without breaking the egg' remains true. By its nature innovative developments results in change. It is not the only ingredient but it is a core one. Why not then turn to the artists who are change agents?

Like in the late night ads, there is more here - it's not just a case of appointing an artist onto your committee and expecting life to go on as before or innovation to miraculously occur. When bringing the change agent into the group what also needs to open up is the way the group operates. The group needs to genuinely welcome change – and hold your breath - it needs to be prepared to trust those change process to the point of being prepared to hand over the keys to the Grange Hermitage wine cellar. In other words, it needs to accept that the very processes employed by the group, no matter how deeply entrenched, are up for renewal. The artist doesn't just draw pretty pictures over old walls, the artist can help with changing the processes.

The other main attribute an artist in any field can bring to the table is a willingness to address seemingly impossible problems. How do we float a rock in mid air without any visible means of support? Many people will turn away from such a problem but the artist will, more often than not, pull up their sleeves and say, “Mmm, interesting idea.”

How many times have we been at a meeting where fledgling ideas are killed at conception on the grounds that they are impossible? Of course they might be - but the way forward is to explore them, to give them a go - and in the exploration other solutions, other directions, other questions emerge.

What can be achieved

I am not saying that the artist is the only one with these change agent skills, its just that it tends to be part of their skill set. The artist, in any field, brings to a group the following:

- An excitement, love and understanding of change – it is their currency.
- A willingness to address the impossible and try to find a solution

These two qualities of *willingness to tackle the impossible* and a *free and easy attitude to change* are potent ingredients.

If these skills are employed and joined with other knowledges – and here it is useful to think that there is more than one kind of knowledge - they can become extremely powerful. Add to the table someone who understands finance and budgets, someone who manages time lines, someone who has strong links to the market or community, someone with managerial skills, media skills, theoretical skills, political savvy- and you have a team that can, and does, take on the world.

In short, creativity when combined with other knowledges provides solutions.

Ten years ago who would have thought the little town of Talbot could turn itself around and run such a huge and successfully monthly market? Who would have thought that Clunes with all its empty shops and closed old buildings could turn itself around and run the hugely successful annual Back to Booktown? Significantly both of these innovations involve the whole town, not a single street, an oval or a building, but the town itself. On the face of it these were impossible tasks chiefly because they involved vision *and* a town working together - they are now a reality.

Building a team

For our society to engage with innovative practices the artist needs to be allowed out of the box of *you paint the mural on the east wall* and into the decision and planning meetings as a core and integral part and member in their own right. They are not at the table to talk about the mural (art work/film/multi-media game etc) but to provide a willingness to tackle the impossible and contribute a free and easy attitude to change.

Many administrators find this a terrifying concept - it might feel safer to keep the artist corralled in their mural-making/book-writing/music-making pen. But this is old thinking.

I'm not saying here that the individual artists should give up making their art. Of course the potter should keep making her pots and the banker should keep attending to the stock exchange rates. But surely there is a place where the two can come together. If we as a society can find the space at the table, the openness and the willingness to listen and work with each other's skills, we will prove to be a force to recon with.

We can do something here in our region. We can address the way we go about valuing the skills of our artists. We can address what we mean by art in the community, by art in commerce. We can address the quality and capacity for encouraging change in our art administrators and their training. We can set up, in a small way at first, models and case studies for others to view and evaluate. As Ian Plowman says, in his 2003 Queensland study on why some small rural communities thrive and other's do not - it's time to value the weirdo!

The 2020 Ballarat Summit gives us the window to explore new ways of working together. Let's take that challenge.

Tess Brady is the presenter for the *What I Wrote* DVD series on Australian playwrights www.whatiwrote.com.au and is a foundation member of the Creative Clunes Working Party and the Booktown committee www.clunes.org/booktown