

# **Do We Care About Craft?**

**Keynote Address for the Second Australian Print Triennial**

**by**

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Thankyou

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we gather on today, the Latji Latji and Barkingi people – and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and thank them for their continuing contribution to our shared culture. I also extend that respect to other First Nations people here today.

Let's be clear from the start – this is not about amateur hobbies, but you know that. I use the word craft to denote the development and acquisition of skill, and in this context where that skill is applied in the spheres of art and culture.

Nor is this in any way designed to pour water on the innate spirit of creativity. I will always advocate for a system whereby anyone can have a crack, and all have access to the tools for creative expression. Every now and then genuine originality springs from somewhere unexpected – and often from experiments with new tools, new technologies. But I suspect that most great new things in art proceed from those who are aware of what has gone before and are therefore not in danger of simply repeating what has been done before and done better – even when utilizing new tools. For those who develop a clear and authentic, individual and original voice, it more often than not proceeds from a knowledge of the past, and training in skills and forms that are gradually discarded as that individual voice, and technique develops. And I'd suggest that ignoring or dismissing the past, including forms and techniques of the past, is often not the best way to get there.

Yesterday's debate drew a dynamic picture of tensions between old and new technologies and suggested a generation of digital natives who will just use the tools they've grown up with (along with a few old farts experimenting), and simply appreciate the ease they bring to 'making'. They may feel as if they don't need to know or use the tools and techniques of the past. I suspect that it will always be a matter of *how* these tools are used, as Roger Butler said yesterday, and be more about concept and heart rather than particular technology. But in my opinion, the better the craft, the greater impact that conceptual aspect will have.

We can look at craft in all sorts of professions from traditional trades to the new skills the digital revolution demands, but here we're looking at craft in the arts and perhaps more widely in the broader sense of culture. These days it's hard in some places to draw a clear line between art and old fashioned skill – but furniture-making, fashion and cooking are good examples. Sometimes art surfaces in all three. Richard Sennett's 2009 *The Craftsman* is a great read. He writes about the innate desire in all of us to do things well, the compromises we often make when pressures outside that innate desire make us do things more quickly than we want – to meet certain deadlines, or sloppier than we want – because, for instance, of the need to make something cheaper, of inferior materials, than we know will do the job properly. And he also dares to mention the difference between skill, or craft – and art:

“Probably the most common question people ask about craft is how it differs from art. In terms of numbers this is a narrow question: professional artists form a mere speck of the population, whereas craftsmanship extends to all sorts of labours. In terms of practice, there is no art without craft; the idea for a painting is not a painting.”<sup>i</sup>

He also writes about the way craft was revered in traditional societies in a quite impersonal way. I know through my partner Dr Olivia Meehan’s studies in 16 and 17C Japanese screen painting that those remarkable works, now held as valuable museum treasures, were not attributed to individuals, but to family ‘schools’ – the famous Kano school for instance. And this is not unlike the traditional contexts, referred to yesterday by Brian Robinson, in which traditional Indigenous communities respected artists as *integral* to that community, like all other contributors.

Sennett attributes the success of contemporary Japanese craftsmanship, in the automotive and communication businesses for instance, to an unbroken tradition of impersonal collaborative practice.

And adds:

“All craftsmanship, indeed, has something of this impersonal character. That the quality of work is impersonal can make the practice of craftsmanship seem unforgiving: that you might have a neurotic relation to your father won’t excuse the fact that your amortise-and-tenon joint is loose”<sup>ii</sup>

And further, daring to define “skill” Sennett writes:

“The modern era is often described as a skills economy, but what exactly is a skill? The generic answer is that skill is a trained practice. In this, skill contrasts to the *coup de foudre*, the sudden inspiration. The lure of inspiration lies in part in the conviction that raw talent can take the place of training. Musical prodigies are often cited to support this conviction – and wrongly so. An infant musical prodigy like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart did indeed harbor the capacity to remember large swatches of notes, but from ages five to seven Mozart learned how to train his great innate musical memory when he improvised at the keyboard.”<sup>iii</sup>

Sennett explains that what seemed spontaneous in Mozart was actually the result of repeating things over and over and evolving methods to make things appear spontaneous. He uses this example as a springboard for the criticism of modern education:

“We should be suspicious of claims for innate, untrained talent. ‘I could write a good novel if only I had the time’ or ‘If only I could pull myself together’ is usually a narcissist’s fantasy. Going over an action again and again, by contrast, enables self-criticism. Modern education fears repetitive learning as mind-numbing. Afraid of boring children, avid to present ever-different stimulation, the enlightened teacher may avoid routine- but thus deprives children of the experience of studying their own ingrained practice and modulating it from within...”<sup>iv</sup>

He also claims that in art, just as in sport

“There are Eureka! Moments that turn the lock in a practice that has jammed, but they are embedded in routine”<sup>v</sup>

My focus today arises from a sense that many have fallen into the trap of thinking that genuine creativity is stifled by the arduous development of sheer skill. We know it's a good thing not to stifle creativity in kids: it's better to admire their weird little drawings and paintings. But it's even better to guide them sensitively towards the acquisition of technique and most importantly, for all skills development, many of which they will need through life's many challenges, the development of the critical faculty – first perhaps through being able to look critically at their own work, and strive for that ultimate satisfaction of doing things well – even though, let's face it, that could well put them at odds with what the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to want.

Going on to equate their juvenile enthusiasm for interpreting the world through various visual media with the best visual art in the world throughout time is naïve, but happens all the time. And I suppose my inference here is that throughout the twentieth century, and gaining strength all the time, is a similar application to adult creative output: not wishing to stifle adult creativity, enthusiasts are prone to heaping praise on work which, with more rigorous analysis, might be deemed not very good at all. We can still praise all creative efforts, providing we create the kind of framework that allows encouragement on the one hand, and rigorous analysis on the other.

In curating my many major festivals, I offered platforms to a very wide range of artistic skill – from the best in their field anywhere in the world, to the enthusiastic non-professional participant.

In my 2003 Melbourne Festival in the framework of BODY. I presented one of the great choreographers of our time, Anne Therese de Keersmaeker, with three programs including a solo – and at the same time used Federation Square for the first time ever in a participatory program called *Dancing in the Square* where 2-3,000 people turned up every night of 17 nights to learn a new dance. Both streams of programming worked, but I knew how to evaluate their different qualities, always hoping to inspire in the social dancing participants an awareness of how tricky it is to learn a routine and thus develop respect for the absolutely incredible skill of someone like Anne-Therese, both for her choreography (she really is one of the great mathematical brains of the genre) and her own skill as a dancer.

The twentieth century offered up some deceptive examples in the world of visual art. Attracted to his mature work in which the individual voice, or view, soared, many neglect the early work of Picasso. It's exhibited now in the new Picasso Museum in Paris, and it's obvious that he knew how to paint very well with traditional techniques he had learned in an informal apprenticeship to his father. Yesterday Sascha Grishin talked about , and illustrated, Baldessin's and Whitely's work proceeding from Humanist and figurative traditions.

Jackson Pollock's early work, while heavily influenced by Surrealism and other abstract artists, also shows a development of traditional technique way before he was introduced to liquid paint and started experimenting with the drip technique he became famous for. Pollock himself was aware that young artists might assume that this could be copied without the kind of development he had undergone. He wrote in a letter:

"I've had a period of drawing on canvas in black – with some of my early images coming thru -, think the non-objectivists will find them disturbing – and the kids who think it simple to splash a 'Pollock' out. " <sup>vi</sup>

There are countless examples of the 'I could do that' syndrome, from the non-artist punter at a popular outdoor sculpture exhibition, to the would-be serious artist who fails to perceive the years of craft-acquisition that goes into any great and enduring work of art.

There are many threads to the weave I am attempting here through the idea of craft – but let's go with a bit more of Richard Sennett:

"What do we mean by good-quality work? One answer is how something should be done, the other is getting it to work. This is a difference between correctness and functionality. Ideally there should be no conflict; in the real world, there is...

Often we subscribe to a standard of correctness that is rarely if ever reached. We might alternatively work according to the standard of what is possible, just good enough – but this can also be a recipe for frustration. The desire to do good work is seldom satisfied by just getting by" <sup>vii</sup>

Or as my partner's Cambridge History of Art PhD supervisor would regularly tell her:

“Your best is ju-u-u-u-u-st good enough”

And trying to explain what's good and what's best is one of the most difficult and testy challenges we face. We are no longer in the age of the Academy when the rules were hard and fast, and GMW Turner, now regarded as one of the greats and the father of Modernism, was spurned, once he started experimenting, by the Academy which once held him in such high regard.

Nor are we even in the aesthetic environment of just seventy years or so ago when Arthur Boyd left Australia to escape the judgment of those he referred to as 'the bully boys' of the Australian art scene at that time. But our government-funded arts grants schemes have been pedaling the idea of 'excellence' for decades now, and few are ever bold enough to define exactly what they mean by that word.

I have no hesitation in having a go at what I mean by 'excellence' – even though as a believer in a kind of dialectic approach to truths, I reserve my right to change my mind at any time when the circumstances change enough to warrant re-definition. For the moment, however, I would say that excellence is a combination of the highest level of skills acquisition, or craft, and originality.

And originality was challenged in yesterday's debate, but I think originality can be observed even in the new presentation of existing works – and I'll say a bit about that later. Judging something to be excellent or not, therefore is not a matter of taste, but of having enough knowledge of technique, both traditional and brand new, and also a knowledge of what has been done before.

The matter of judgment is now also a thorny one. As Roger said yesterday, what matters is whether a work is good or bad: but the question has now become 'who says?' in this age of endless and untutored social media commentary. What place the expert?

There is nothing to rule anyone out of having a go in any genre - go for your life - but not having care of craft, nor a knowledge of what has gone before, means an artist or would-be artist risks being told by someone who *does* have that knowledge that the work is sloppy and derivative – it's all been done before and done a whole lot better. The work is unlikely, therefore to be viewed in the long term as new and enduring.

Not that that matters in a world of faddism – become flavour of the month and you can avoid rigorous analysis, gain momentum through the channels of peer populism, and make a mozza while you remain in the stream of current fashion. Who will blame you for that? The pack will love you, your work will be admired, your confidence will be on the up, and you might even make a living – for a while.

Throughout history there have been the twists and turns of fashion and faddism, and equally those who have called for the kind of rigour that might give us the tools for sorting the dross from the valuable and possibly enduring. In fact, sorting is not even necessary. Not all art will endure, and no-one should be discouraged from having a go, but this is very different from asserting that everything is of the same value, everything worthy of the highest praise. In the cultural landscape we must ensure that everyone has the access to tools that allow them creative expression, but we do ourselves no favours by asserting that everything anyone produces is great and enduring. As in any field at all, if there are no benchmarks, how do we keep getting better, getting more inventive, truly original, how do we even summon up the anger to break away and create new horizons, if there is nothing to break from?

We cannot know what will last, but equally we are foolish to attempt to back winners – only time will tell. And yet what runs strongly through the contemporary art world in all genres is the constant claim from so many quarters that *'this is the next big thing'* and then a torrent of copiers come behind that claim in order to find favour by observing current trends. It's interesting to note how this works in the world of fashion. Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, wears a multi-thousand pound outfit one day, and next day thousands of cheap copies are whipped up and snapped by young women worldwide – and they wear the cheap copy proudly – the same as Louis Vitton bags or Rolex watches purchased on a Shanghai shopping street. As we know, 'fake' is everywhere, and few seem to mind.

As I said, there is a wide variety of commentators on the dangers both of faddism, and of avoiding the hard yards of developing your craft. Maria Popova, in her excellent look at the late Oliver Sacks quotes Hemmingway for instance:

“ ‘And don’t ever imitate anybody’, Hemmingway cautioned in his advice to aspiring writers. But in this particular sentiment, the otherwise insightful Nobel laureate seems to have been blind to his own admonition against the dangers of ego, for only the ego can blind an artist to recognition that all creative work begins with imitation before fermenting into originality under the dual forces of time and consecrating effort”<sup>viii</sup>

Popova follows with an invaluable observation of Sacks’ insights into creativity:

Imitation” she says, besides being the seedbed of empathy and our experience of time, is also, paradoxically enough, - not only a poetic truth but a cognitive fact”<sup>ix</sup>

She is commenting here on what she calls Sacks’ “posthumous treasure” *The River of Consciousness* In which he writes about the “buzzing blooming chaos” of the mind engaged in creative work. She goes on:

“But, contrary to the archetypal myth of the lone genius struck with a sudden *Eureka!* moment, this chaos doesn’t occur in a vacuum. Rather, it coalesces from a particulate cloud of influences and inspirations without which creativity – that is, birthing something meaningful that hadn’t existed before – cannot come about.”<sup>x</sup>

Sacks himself uses Susan Sontag as an example and what she said in a 2002 conference about her development as a writer: she read everything and borrowed/imitated all the time before evolving her own highly original voice. Popova writes that Sacks argues this reflects

“ the natural cycle of creative evolution – we learn our own minds by finding out what we love; these models integrate into a sensibility; out of that sensibility arises the initial impulse for imitation, which, aided by the gradual acquisition of technical mastery, eventually ripens into original creation.”<sup>xi</sup>

And she quotes Sacks:

“If imitation plays a central role in the performing arts, where incessant practice, repetition, and rehearsal are essential, it is equally important in painting or composing or writing, for example. All young artists seek models in their apprentice years, models whose style, technical mastery, and innovations can teach them. Young painters may haunt the galleries of the Met or the Louvre; young composers may go to concerts or study scores. All art, in this sense, starts out as “derivative,” highly influenced by, if not a direct imitation or paraphrase of, the admired and emulated models.”<sup>xii</sup>

This provokes an extremely rare moment of regret for me – in a life of virtually no regret whatsoever. And in any case, even in those rare moments of regret, I always have a balancing positive.

When I hear Marilyn Horne sing, and understand that if I had had training I might have aspired to sing like that, as my voice has an equivalent range, I regret that my parents had no knowledge of such formal voice training, to say nothing of the money it would have taken and which they definitely did not have. And the minute I think that, thank them for that omission since training would have inevitably smoothed the break between my chest and head voice and I would never have been able to yodel – oh what a loss to the world that might have been!

There's a similar regret around visual art, and it is also about a lack of training. I have three miniature watercolour paintings which are my copies of Cubists. When I was around thirteen, I discovered Mary Martin's Bookshop in Adelaide and one day roaming there I found a little book on the Cubists. I had been drawing and painting since I was around eight years old – and won my first prizes in this genre while being kicked out of the school choir for untunefulness. The little miniature copies I did from this treasured book, which I *also* still possess, are heavily layered watercolour in imitation of the Cubist oils. They are painstaking and quite accurate copies.

Exactly at this time, I went to high school and was forced into the top science stream, ultimately matriculating with Double Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Latin and English. But from that first year at Enfield High, I was banned from art, typing, domestic science, woodwork- note, all the training, all the craft. They clearly didn't understand that a logistic science/languages brain would benefit so much from some beautiful hands-on training too. Thus, I missed out on the next step in that latent career as a visual artist. I loved drawing and painting and had already started copying the masters, and winning prizes for my visual art endeavours. All I needed at that point was something or someone to set me on the path of developing technique – but I was denied it.

Then singing and performing and writing took over, and I never got back to picking up from the point when I was so rudely interrupted. The positive spin, of course, is that had I devoted all my energies to visual media, I may not have devoted the time I did in informally apprenticing myself to various singers, performers and writers, and *that* career would not have developed. As I said, really:

Non rien de rien – non je ne regrette rien !

But back to Sacks. Popova says he makes a distinction between copying or plagiarism/parody and the kind of assimilation which is an essential element of all original work. We all borrow and imitate, we are all derivative, but it's what we do with it, how deeply we assimilate it that allows new expression and makes it our own. Sacks believed that the key to this process is 'incubation':

“Creativity involves not only years of conscious preparation and training but unconscious preparation as well. This incubation period is essential to allow the subconscious assimilation and incorporation of one’s influences and sources, to reorganize and synthesize them into something of one’s own.... The essential element in these realms of retaining and appropriating versus assimilating and incorporating is one of depth, of meaning, of active and personal involvement.”<sup>xiii</sup>

I turn from the great neurologist Sacks, to the great poet WH Auden, who in his 1962 essay *The Poet and the City* proposed a perfect school for poets:

#### **“My Daydream College for Bards**

In my daydream College for Bards, the curriculum would be as follows:

1. In addition to English, at least one ancient language, probably Greek or Hebrew, and two modern languages would be required.
2. Thousands of lines of poetry in these languages would be learned by heart.
3. The library would contain no books of literary criticism, and the only critical exercise required of students would be the writing of parodies.
4. Courses in prosody, rhetoric and comparative philology would be required of all students, and every student would have to select three courses out of courses in mathematics, natural history, geology, meteorology, archaeology, mythology, liturgics, cooking.

5. Every student would be required to look after a domestic animal and cultivate a garden plot.”<sup>xiv</sup>

And he added:

“A poet has not only to educate himself as a poet; he has also to consider how he is going to earn his living. Ideally, he should have a job which does not in any way involve the manipulation of words, the best thing he could do is get into some craft.”<sup>xv</sup>

And I will invariably be labeled old-fashioned, but I lament the end of a broader teaching of things like his “prosody, rhetoric and comparative philology” and am eternally grateful for the old-school Honours degree I did at Adelaide Uni – with Old and Middle English, Latin, semantics and the deep dig into developing the critical faculty – though I don’t doubt these things are still being taught somewhere.

I lament the lack of a strong focus on grammar and structure in teaching basic English language and literature. The current reductions in spoken and written language are not disturbing to me because they break the rules- I’m quite French in my love of breaking rules - but because in breaking the rules, language becomes less clear, and in trying to decipher some semblance of truth amongst the welter of language, talk and image that daily threaten to drown us, clarity on the surface and the ability to read between the lines or behind the image has never been more important.

Melbourne accents are becoming harder to understand and their official presence means it may be a lost battle. When my recorded tram announcement tells me I am heading for Elbert Park, and ABC Melburnian TV announcers talk about Malcom Turnbull arriving in Melbourne, I know there's something about the presence of *e* or *a* near an *l* in any word, that heralds coming confusion. We have already lost the battle of the apostrophe and the Americanisation of our language will ultimately have an impact (please note I use impact as a noun NOT a verb) on our sense of identity. American linguistic hegemony is becoming as powerful as the cultural hegemony has been for a hundred years and more.

And this is not just about the nuts and bolts of language- it's about the poetics of language too. As Flaubert once wrote:

“Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance on, when all the time we are longing to move the stars to tears”<sup>xvi</sup>

I'm sad that art schools no longer think it's important for aspiring artists to study the history of art – not to know what has gone before seems to invite un-originality. And look at the number of wider spheres in which old traditional methodologies are proving invaluable in contemporary practice – for instance, fire-control through traditional Australian Indigenous practice, or fresh food growing and cooking by that new generation of makers choosing to reduce their carbon footprint by living and buying and growing local.

Why has the understanding of past technique, or craft, in the arts become so unfashionable? This is not a call for a return to traditional forms, not at all, but a call to be aware of them, take what's helpful, and move on.

Many of you will know I have been a devotee of the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht for more than forty years. I sing his lyrics, and use his book of collected poetry (in translation) like a bible – a bible that teaches me about contradiction, ethics, morality, irony, and the truth that lies between extremes – that there is always bad in the good, and good in the bad. His poem *The Doubter* is a splendid reminder of how alert we must be to self-satisfaction:

### **The Doubter**

Whenever we seemed  
To have found the answer to a question  
One of us untied the string of an old rolled-up  
Chinese scroll on the wall, so that it fell down and  
Revealed to us the man on the bench who  
Doubted so much

I, he said to us  
Am the doubter. I am doubtful whether  
The work was well done that devoured your days.  
Whether what you said would still have value for anyone if it  
Were less well said.

Whether you said it well but perhaps  
We're not convinced of the truth of what you said.  
Whether it is not ambiguous; each possible misunderstanding  
Is your responsibility. Or it can be ambiguous  
And take the contradictions out of things; is it too  
Unambiguous?

If so, what you say is useless. Your thing has no life in it.  
Are you truly in the stream of happening? Do you accept  
All that develops? Are you developing? Who are you? To whom  
Do you speak? Who finds what you say useful? And, by the way:  
Is everything verifiable?

By experience? By which one? But above all  
Always above all else: how does one act  
If one believes what you say? Above all: how does one act?

Reflectively, curiously, we studied the doubting  
Blue man on the scroll, looked at each other and  
Made a fresh start. <sup>xvii</sup>

Speaking of 'fresh starts', robots got a bit of a bashing from Robert yesterday. But Japanese roboticist Hiroshi Ishiguro looks one thousand years hence, to a time of transhumanism when there are only robots on earth because human life can no longer be sustained on a planet deprived of clean air and water etc – a planet devastated by climate change and our careless indifference to its outcomes.

By that time we will have placed in robots everything we know and do, all our abilities, including empathy, creativity and craft – and the ability to be everything we are and do and more. So I'm less inclined to diss robots as just 'evil machines'. Humans may well be living and thriving, and printing, elsewhere in the universe, but indeed perhaps not here.

And perhaps I should now turn specifically to print for a moment – so it bears some relevance to you at this Triennial, though I'm sure much of what I've said already is applicable to you and your craft.

One of the things I am most attracted to in the print medium is the fact that it always demands some level of craft. Even a kid making a potato print has to master more craft than the kid just picking up a crayon to make a scrawl. Many of you have toiled hard, I know, to master the craft of your chosen mode of printing, and much of your joy comes from the try try try again, fail, try again nature of this multi-faceted genre.

You are destined to an absence of the kind of immediate public approbation I get when I practice my art. It's often before large audiences, who applaud. There's no such applause for you when you at last achieve that perfect registration, nor for the furniture-maker who in his workshop achieves the perfect join. On the other hand, there's no applause for me when I'm practicing scales, or running through the repertoire again and again in preparation for the concert. The public only ever sees the final product, and can rarely imagine all the years then days of effort that final product has demanded.

However, that effort, in the eventuating performance, must not be on show. That master commentator, Diderot, is worth reading on this – and indeed he is worth reading and re-reading at any time:

“ A singer having difficulty executing a bravura aria, a violinist struggling and straining over his instrument vexes and annoys me. I require ease and freedom of a singer; I want an orchestral musician to move his fingers over the strings with such facility, such lightness of touch, that I’ve no idea of the difficulties he’s negotiating. I expect a pleasure that’s pure and painless; and I turn my back on any painter who proposes an emblem, a hieroglyph, for me to decipher...”

If the scene is unified, clear, simple, and coherent, I can absorb it in the blink of an eye; but this is not sufficient. It must also be various; and it will be, if the artist is a rigorous observer of nature.”<sup>xviii</sup>

This is of course, NOT a plea for realism – just clarity, as in language, and an attack on unnecessary ornamentation, a sin language. It evokes a couple of strands of my own practice - singing, and the stage.

I have often spoken of my ideal in singing is a voice which comes from deep in the well (as my voice teacher always instructed me to be breathing not from the lungs but from deep down in a relaxed gut) – deep down in the well, and never touching the sides as it glances over the vocal chords and produces sound.

It's that clarity and apparent effortlessnes that I love above all. Again, this is not to say the art of ornamentation itself, for instance, is not to be admired when skillfully handled, but that unnecessary ornaments are a hindrance for me to taking pleasure in a vocal performance.

Although Brecht was absolutely insistent that an actor 'show' that he is showing – that is never fooling the audience into thinking they are seeing the real thing- and doing this by deploying a certain distance in acting methodology (I do it all the time when delivering his material) , at the same time, he demanded authenticity – and the two are not incompatible. He expressed this forcefully in his poem *The Theatre, Home of Dreams*:

Many see the theatre as a place for  
 Generating dreams. You actors are seen as  
 Dealers in narcotic drugs. In your darkened houses  
 People are changed into kings, and perform  
 Heroic deeds without risk. Gripped by enthusiasm  
 For oneself or sympathy with oneself  
 One sits in happy distraction, forgetting  
 The difficulties of daily life – a fugitive.  
 All kinds of stories are stirred together by your skilled hands  
                   so as to  
 Arouse our emotions. To that end you use  
 Incidents from the real world. Anyone, it is true  
 Who came into all this with the sounds of the traffic still in  
                   His ears

And still sober, would hardly recognize  
Up there on your stage, the world he had just left.

And on stepping out of your houses after the end, moreover  
A lowly man once more and no longer a king  
He would no longer recognize the world, and would feel  
Displaced in real life.

Many, it is true, see this activity as harmless. Given the  
    Ignominy

And uniformity of our life, they say, we find  
Dreams welcome. How can life be borne without  
Dreams? But this, actors, makes your theatre  
A place where one learns how to  
Bear our ignominious and uniform  
Life, and to give up not only  
Great deeds but even sympathy with  
Oneself.

    You, however

Show a false world, heedlessly stirred together  
Just as dreams show it, transformed by wishes  
Or twisted by fears, you miserable  
Deceivers.<sup>xix</sup>

It also conjures for me the approach I was trained in by my mentor, the late John Willett, who translated that poem and my first director, the late Wal Cherry who always emphasized the importance of my performer's role in delivering the material – it was NOT all about me, but me using all my skills to communicate as clearly as possible the material, the words and music of writer and composer. How often do we witness this confusion when performers are on stage saying 'look at me' rather than 'look at the work. Not different from the art market when dealers are saying ' Look at the name, the brand' rather than the work and what it says. How jubilant people were to see Banksy's art shredder, and how the price of the shredded work has escalated! How funny our French friend Giles who created a currency copier. You put your banknote on the plate, as on a photocopier, close the lid and start – you then got a marvelous photocopy of your banknote, but little did you know that the real note than slipped away, never to be returned to you – and went straight into a fund for artist support.

This confusion of who does what and to what purpose crops up, as you know, very significantly when we consider craft. I look at David Lucas' engravings of John Constable's works. Lucas' detail, the mastery of craft, is every bit as admirable as Constable's of his. Yet Lucas is not as well known. Is this the added glow that originality offers – the painter is rated for both technique *and* an original view, the technician for technique alone. Within this gathering yesterday, Brian, and you, recognized Theo Tremblay's work, but this kind of recognition of the grunt behind the idea is rare in the wider public

The recent unveiling of a spectacular new leadlight in Westminster Abbey, dedicated to ERII as The Queen's Window, was promoted mostly as the creation of David Hockney. And indeed the design is terrific, and it probably *is* his name that will drive me to see it, or even to have paid attention to it in the first place. But what of the work of the artists and craftspersons who translated the design to glass and managed the delicate manufacture of putting together such an enormous and fragile structure? FYI they are Helen Whittaker and Keith Barley of Barley Studio, who constructed the window, and Lamberts Glass, Bavaria manufactured the amazingly coloured glass.

All praise to Hockney who had never designed a glass window before and, continuing to follow the adventurous route he chose when embarking on his series of tablet and i-phone drawings, attracts our admiration for being ever more keen to experiment with new forms, but the craft behind the work will be shadowed by his established profile and fame.

Incidentally his definition of contemporary is worth holding to our hearts too:

“All art is contemporary, if it's alive, and if it's not alive, what's the point of it? “

This wisdom gives us the opportunity to stop the divide between new and old art, and rate art in all genres from all eras via an equal measuring device. It rings true for me, for instance, in the world of so-called classical music. I'm disappointed when I hear an orchestral performance that does not have that liveliness; some popular favourite that's just been popped in the subscription season because it will sell tickets. I'm so happy when I hear something from the old canon played in a way that makes me feel as if I've never heard it before – something with such verve and intelligence that it actually deceives my ears and what my brain makes of it. This often happens with ACO performances, and almost invariably when Peter Sellars directs opera. The contemporary label cannot be attached to works made today alone. Yet, there's nothing quite so exciting as the commissioning of a new work – saying to an artist – come and work with us – we have the resources to allow you to do what you want.

I am delighted, for instance, that Patricia Piccinni gained so much public profile for the Skywhale I commissioned from her for the Centenary of Canberra, even though initially some of that media attention stirred a controversy. Patricia had never considered making a vast helium filled inflatable as a medium for her ongoing oeuvre, but she relished the challenge and created something marvelous. I saw in her recent and outstanding retrospective at Qagoma, that she had designed another huge inflatable. Great. But yet again, the technicians received less attention even though she was always at pains to acknowledge them, and Patricia is an artist who has so much craft within her grasp. She researched every aspect of the technical side of balloon making, as she

does her remarkable sculptures. The balloon was eventually fabricated in Bristol in the UK and flown by an Australian balloon pilot.

It seems that the originating artist, the idea behind the final image, is more a focus for praise than the technicians behind the total effort. This point is made at the very beginning of Paul Carter's excellent book *Material Thinking*, which I recommend to you. Coming as it does in his 'preliminary matters' I have always assumed that this concern is in many ways the impetus for the book, in which Paul describes several of his projects, and how his widely varied collaborations worked. He writes:

“ Media reviewers oversimplify the symbolic function of the work of art. Academic critics err in the opposite direction, treating the work (whether performance, painting, video or sound composition) as a cryptic panacea for a culture's ills. The net result is the same: under-interpreted, or over-interpreted, the meaning of the artwork is detached from the matrix of its production. In this context it's not surprising when scrupulous (and busy) artists tire of trying to explain what they do and fall back on the worn-out trope of letting the work speak for itself. This is doubly unfortunate, as it perpetrates a Romantic myth about the creative process – that it cannot stand up to rational enquiry – and (while admitting that the products of material thinking can 'talk') cedes the terms of the debate to outsiders. The 'creative process' is not in the least bit mystical. The decisions that characterise it are material ones, and a good *techne* or craft of shaping or combination, has to be open to criticism and correction.”<sup>xx</sup>

I suppose the various media that offer themselves under the banner of Print, celebrated in this Triennial, give its artists the opportunity to be both originating artist and technician as well. That seems to be the most secure way of assuring that the dedicated effort you have put into mastering your craft is in some way acknowledged as part of your output.

Still, we have to suppose that no matter how exquisite your mastery of your craft, no matter how conscientious you have been to develop those skills to the highest order, you may still be pipped on the post by the overpowering draw of content over craft, and thus the seemingly unjust variables of individual taste, the even more unjust dictates of fashion and faddism in an era when the voice of the genuine expert is drowned in a tsunami wave of often pretty ignorant social media commentary.

I had the good fortune to view one of Tacida Dean's three exhibitions in London in the middle of this year. The Royal Academy hosted her *Landscape* – and what a powerful manifestation of ideas and technique that was – in particular the vast entire wall rendering of a snowy mountain – all in white chalk on black, the monumental natural solid, portrayed in the most fragile of media. This work glorified the awesome in nature, and at the same time generated awe for the craft deployed.

I think my response honoured her as an artist in all its aspects– for her skill as a craftsperson, in an unusual medium, for her authentic and unadorned response to nature, for the ambition of the work, and for the effectiveness of all of that in conveying an important concern for the future of big nature.

I know full well that not all artistic output will have such comprehensively satisfying results. I am fiercely critical of my own work and have often said that if I achieve 75% in any of my output (including the speeches I write) I'm pretty happy, even when knowing I still have to keep working at it. John Willett's memorial service was at Kenwood House in Hampstead (the first place Arthur Boyd visited, straight off the plane, when he first traveled to England). I had a word there with the painter Nicolas Horsfield. Nicolas was eighty-five at the time. He told me he had just decided to stop painting. He attributed this 'sudden' decision to his recent viewing of a painting – I think of crows, maybe by van Gogh, but I think of Monet and the Magpie. He just felt that he would never paint anything as good as that and thought it was time to stop.

I'm not sure that any of us should be permanently discouraged from continuing to try to perfect our craft (though at 85 I guess you can do what you like) – but surely the point is that at least one ought to have some idea of what perfection looks like, and not flail through an attempted creative life believing that whatever we do is great and demanding of high praise and financial return. I personally think it would be good for teachers, students, artists and opinion influencers to keep that in mind.

Thankyou

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- <sup>i</sup> Sennett, Richard *The Craftsman* ( Penguin, London 2009)
- <sup>ii</sup> Ibid
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid
- <sup>vi</sup> letter to Alfonso Ossorio and Edward Dragon, 1951; as quoted in "Abstract Expressionism", David Anfam, Thames and Hudson Ltd London, 1990, p. 175
- <sup>vii</sup> Sennett, Richard *The Craftsman* ( Penguin, London 2009)
- <sup>viii</sup> Popova, Maria *Oliver Sacks on the Three Essential Elements of Creativity* at [brainpickings.org](http://brainpickings.org)
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid
- <sup>x</sup> Ibid
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid
- <sup>xii</sup> Sacks, Oliver quoted by Popova from his posthumous *The River Consciousness* in Popova, Maria *Oliver Sacks on the Three Essential Elements of Creativity* at [brainpickings.org](http://brainpickings.org)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid
- <sup>xiv</sup> Auden, Wystan Hugh in the essay *The Poet and the City* 1962
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid
- <sup>xvi</sup> Flaubert, Gustave from *Madame Bovary*
- <sup>xvii</sup> Brecht, Bertolt *The Doubter* trs John Willett in *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956* ed John Willett and Ralph Mannheim (Eyre Methuen, London, 1976)
- <sup>xviii</sup> Diderot, Denis *Diderot on Art -I* Notes on Painting, Section on Composition trs John Goodman ( Yale University Press, New Haven 1995)
- <sup>xix</sup> Brecht, Bertolt *The Theatre Home of Dreams* trs John Willett in *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956* ed John Willett and Ralph Mannheim (Eyre Methuen, London, 1976)
- <sup>xx</sup> Carter, Paul *Material Thinking* Preliminary Matters ( Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 2004)