



*Arts & Entertainment Management Program
Bowater School of Management & Marketing*

Deakin University

The Art of the Possible

By

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At Deakin University's Toorak Campus
On Thursday 13 May 1999

Edited
By
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The Art of the Possible

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Preface

The George Fairfax Fellowship in Arts & Entertainment Management at Deakin University enables visiting practitioners and scholars in the cultural arena to enrich our understanding of international issues in cultural management. The Fellowship was made possible by the generous support of important donors, including the Myer Foundation, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch and the Faculty of Business & Law at Deakin University.

This volume presents the Kenneth Myer public lecture by Mr Stephen Armstrong from the Queensland Theatre Company, on the subsidised arts and funding. He declares his hand early: he is an ardent advocate of arts funding for the nonprofit arts.

The aim of this publication is to place on record the important arts management issues chosen for debate by the George Fairfax Fellow, and to raise questions about the translation of rhetoric into arts management policy and practice. This initiates a process of balancing scholarly and practical inputs for future inquiry. In addition, the volume places key issues of arts management—funding, government and the arts—into discussion and debate, in order to emphasise their importance to the cultural context.

People who have assisted in the preparation of the manuscript and deserve thanks are Fiona Gunn and Richard Lewis. Their hard work is greatly appreciated.

Ruth Rentschler
Melbourne
May 1999

Abstract

As government's increasingly diminish their responsibility for public institutions, who is taking responsibility for creativity? The moral rights and patent challenge to collective ownership begs the question: what will 'artistic heritage' mean when the public domain has been reduced to an empty vessel? How should arts managers navigate their way through and what is their contract with creative freedom, the government and the community? How well are artists being advocated for on the side?

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE, OR ART ON THE MAKE?

I am overtaken by a sense of wonder to have been invited here to address you, let alone to do so in honour of George Fairfax and Kenneth Myer. To the staff and Faculty of Business and Law at Deakin University, my thanks for your welcome and hospitality. And to the Fellowship Committee and its sponsors, the Myer Foundation and Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, for this privilege I extend true gratitude.

In the course of imagining this lecture, I threw out the net, trawled my memory for illumination and revealing accounts, and gathered in my anxieties. I read widely across topics you might reasonably (or even unreasonably) expect me to be learned about. I have no relevant academic training so I hoped, through the cleverness of others, that my instincts and observations would join together in argument to persuade you of the eloquence of my anxieties. But when it comes to making sense of our own experience, how incomplete they always seem. As a David Williamson character puts it, I feel like I'm still stuck at the Table of Contents.

This is my first disclaimer. Here is my second: my professional life has almost exclusively been in the employ of subsidised performing arts companies. I declare myself.

I want us to imagine a number of possibilities. One possibility - which frightens me - is that contemporary governments have actually forgotten why it is that public administrations fund artists and their work. This is supported by the lack of any government discourse about the arts beyond the simplistic outcomes of patriotism, marginalism, tourism and the market place. Another possibility, looking at the issue in a broader historical context, is that recent decades represent some kind of chimera, that the problem is not that governments have forgotten why they support the arts but that they've remembered.

I am not suggesting that governments and the people who work for them do not struggle, at a practical level, with the encumbrance of the arts. And it is still possible to debate the complexities of cultural subsidy with passionate individuals at all levels of government. But there is much to feel anxious, even urgent about.

Perhaps what I am imagining is that the governments of our time have found themselves inheritors of arts portfolios, and the social capital they signify, in spite of themselves. Is it truly imaginable that forgetting the precedent, recent governments would actually *found* arts ministries? The new corporatised and globalised governance and management ethic demands expedience and expendability in all things. And the weight of this new morality is immense.

Frances Fukiyama, in *The Great Disruption*, argues that diminished social capital is less the result of a particular ideology but rather accompanies all periods of transition from one economic order to another. In the current Western transition, from an industrial to an information age, this may prove academic in our lifetime.

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Even without these pressures, state support of the arts has always courted paradox. The 70's call to action for support of a 'unique Australian culture', particularly through the establishment of the federal government's Australia Council, nonetheless entrenched much of the art form rigidity and mono-culturalism of its British counterpart. The legacy of this still regularly ransoms Council's psyche at critical moments. The States' response to support for artists and major companies was to develop bricks and mortar infra-structure, also heavily informed by a provincial repertory model which neither the commercial producers, subsidised state nor 'national companies' can readily afford to present in, and which are overly large and unsympathetic playing spaces. [If only this zeal had peaked in the 30's and not the 70's!]

Government being at arms length and peer review are founding principals of the Australia Council. But new agendas (of all persuasions) have varying success rates in challenging old assumptions, eg. Council's funds are increasingly tagged to "special initiatives" by Canberra particularly the positioning of emerging artists, youth and regional arts with shrinking resources for established groups working these areas; in the Major Organisations Fund, peer review no longer means assessment by directors, choreographers or designers but producers, managers and marketeers; New Media Arts successfully won recognition of hybrid arts practise across art forms.

State supported or owned cultural facilities of physical mass like museums, libraries and galleries may yet be understood as necessary, as historically privileged 'heritage' institutions, but while some had their concrete cancer patched and depreciation requirements allowed for in the recent Federal 'accrual accounting' budget, even they are faced with functional challenges within a new economic discourse. These institutions are traditionally valued as keepers of knowledge, and therefore contested truth, but even heritage institutions must increasingly account for themselves as sites of commodified experience, most fundamentally, as sites of national prestige or, synonymously, as sites of tourism.

If museums are about storing 'knowledge', and major galleries succeed brilliantly in internationalising a 'contemporary culture', literature, the performing and performative arts, and the cinematic arts have ever more powerfully revealed the heritage and psychology of contemporary Australian culture to itself. [A first thought recollects: *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith, The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, The Removalist, My Brilliant Career, Evil Angels, Loaded, Working Hot, The Morality of Gentlemen, Diving for Pearls, Circus Oz*. The Australian accent revealing itself, discovering its tongue attached.]

I remember being told that it was the performing arts and cinema that paved the way for the unprecedented success of block-buster Australian art retrospectives. What a great prompt for public galleries to exhibit and grow their contemporary Australian collections which precluded the 'safe' contact and deepeningly understood fascination of non-Indigenous Australia with Aboriginal art and culture.

Often it is the ephemeral experience which makes us notice the permanent, like the tree needs the wind to be seen or the axe to be heard.

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Notwithstanding the yet to be published findings of the Nugent Inquiry into the fragile economies of the 'major performing arts' sector, neither the media's take on it, nor the terms of reference or membership of the Inquiry so far suggest that government's intention is a re-visioning of cultural and artistic values. Just as the information age better describes the sudden, share booming convergence of technology brand names than it does an imminent epoch of informed citizenry, governments are easily convinced that delivery and distribution lie at the heart of "access". The making of art is increasingly secondary.

The industrialisation of the arts was undoubtedly necessary to protect the working conditions of 'employed' artists in an industrialised era - even if, in crude terms, the majority of Australian artists are rarely 'employed' and barely succeed in keeping pace with the working poor. At the same time, it has spawned a host of sectional industries either directly or indirectly dependent on subsidy. Just as the half million in subsidy received in a famous poet's lifetime allows the poet's devotion and minimises the publisher's losses, now the back-list is found in international airports and every school syllabus - the web of subsidy is inextricable from the weave of commerce. [As it is genetic research, elite sport and privatisation].

The industrialisation of the arts has also made it incredibly vulnerable. A new economic order, with new questions to the answer of 'the public good', has discovered an industry of organisations increasingly accommodating in the vocabulary of rationalism. As an industry, perhaps we have been too eager to learn but often failed to teach.

Certainly in the broad sweep of arts support in Australia since the 40's, we have seen major directional changes. Lianne Gibson documents the relationship between art, citizenship and government in post-war Australia [*Art for the People*, Culture and Policy vol. 8 no.3 1997] as "formulated not as a right of citizenship, but as a tool in the formation of good citizens" The will for creative diversity, distinctiveness and innovation since the 70's is newly challenged by this utilitarian model of "cultural access". The latest wind change is well and truly here, only the windsock has no direction and the licked finger feels it from nowhere and everywhere.

In the revolutionary, globalized world which increasingly describes our time, the purpose which links government to the arts is increasingly dominated by expedience and expendability. The very language of economic reform demands it. Competition is the impetus for success, and where there are no losers there are no winners. [An aside, I do try and make sense of this in the commercial world but if deregulating the banks means there is greater competition, how come one major bank just declared an annual return to its shareholders of 20% when inflation is less than 2%?]

There is a daily trade in efficiencies, user-pays, profits, product, outputs, rationalisation, out-sourcing, and so on. Government no longer supports cultural organisations, it purchases outputs from them. If these outputs can be provided more cost-effectively from non-subsidised commercial organisations, government's responsibility to the tax payer is to look elsewhere.

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The idiosyncratic narrative which traditionally described the artistic vision within a process of peer review and prescribed guidelines of viability and governance is giving way. A major consequence has been in the devaluation of dialogue.

Now, many governments buy outputs. Outputs are services which governments buy to realise outcomes. Outcomes are the promises governments make to the community. Outcomes are often very generalised, covering a vast spectrum of cultural services. Regular reporting of critical issues against these outcomes and the standardised, quarterly morphing of statistical information into Treasury's Managing for Outcomes are disjointed. Frustratingly banal questions fill the manager's days, de-synchronised and inexplicable conclusions are reached.

This standardising process for major government bodies clearly has its legitimacy – massive amounts of information obviously need to be tabulated. The risk, however, is that simplistic reductions of delivery and distribution become cloaked informants while narrative is reduced to bullet points devoid of meaning or cultural significance.

In Western Australia, a commercial management will now provide an alternative to the defunct state authority of the Perth Theatre Trust. The Western Australian government will purchase this management using subsidy previously allocated to the Trust. I understand that the commercial management involved has already secured additional subsidy. And given the success of private enterprise in securing subsidies, tax breaks, government loans, renegotiated performance agreements and latter day amendments perhaps commercial tendering for the arts is one way of guaranteeing healthy government support.

The tension is that commercial providers aim to maximise profits. Subsidised arts organisations do not – they would be ineligible for subsidy if they did. The commercial providers responsibility to risk and innovation, if it is seen to threaten viability, is surely unenforceable. What government could contractually require a commercial organisation to accept an unquantifiable risk. But this is exactly what publicly funded arts organisations are, in measure, required to do. In fact it is the best arts manager's job to maximise the potential for risk.

The so-called real costs of performing arts production have long been skewed because the reach of subsidised activity over many years extends through a range of services and resources. These same resources are also accessed by the commercial sector. The commercial sector is vital to the health of whole, and accordingly benefits in turn – accessing the major performing arts venues are a classic case of indirect subsidy to commercial producers.

Intensification of competition between performing arts centres and sports and entertainment centres for mass spectacles, and portable touring venues has caused a major shift in gravity. Some publicly owned venues have been forced to increasingly commercialise, distorting again the traditional infrastructure costs for subsidised companies. For large scale subsidised producers with no choice but to hire them year in and year out, their own production and presentation costs are effectively at the mercy of the venue's fortunes. Supply and demand. Market forces.

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Some of these venues are managed with ingenuity and foresight but many suffer for their size and their cost. They have also radically altered their programming and co-producing policies, minimising their effectiveness as an agent of possibility for independent artists and small companies. The cumulative effect of these changes affects most of us in the matrix in radical ways.

Similarly, new technologies have increasingly altered the relationship between the audience and the presenters. Concessions and charges through computerised ticketing outlets provide major revenue sources, the cost for which is passed directly on to both the management as well as the consumer. The systems are rigid, expensive, use loyalty-neutral casual labour forces and alienate audiences through under-staffing, high charges, credit card dependence and an exclusively up-front charge.

As governments increasingly contemplate the purchase of outputs away from the public sector there has been an outbreak of “commercially confident” contracts across the country. This means that the fine print of government’s deals is effectively closed to parliament as well as the public. There has been a mass shut down in public access to information about how prisons, hospitals and water suppliers operate. What was once public knowledge, and developed over years with public funds, is now privately owned. Not only does this make genuine scrutiny of efficiencies and savings impossible, it is also difficult to assess government’s claims for the success of privatisation.

Radio National’s Background Briefing recently revealed that out-sourcing by State and Federal governments now runs into billions in Australia and that Government Auditors in South Australia and New South Wales were speaking out about the diminished accountability of governments under the privatisation regime, bluntly pointing out the threat this poses to democratic government.

In his recent Reith Lecture Anthony Giddens suggests: “The sceptics argue that globalization is an ideology put about by free-marketeers who wish to dismantle welfare systems and cut back state expenditures”. The radicals, with whom Giddens sides, describe a world order of nation states forfeiting their sovereignty and run by politicians increasingly incapable of influencing events. On occasion it does seem a convenient new order for the mean spirited. But on balance, the forfeiting of government influence is because economic reforms and the language of the market economy disarms dialogue.

Results speak – therefore, do not speak of results.

The wind-change I spoke of earlier is in response to this new order. A set of values, an ideology, has been almost universally adopted before we’ve had a chance to think or to speak. And because first world governments of all persuasions have accepted the absolutism of a free market and deregulated system without challenge, we risk accepting these change in the moral order without challenge, as if it were a *force majeure*.

Meanwhile, we remind ourselves that the shared disinterest, the common good, is precisely what we charge our governments to be responsible for.

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John Ralston Saul, in *Unconscious Civilisation*, puts the view that: “People become so obsessed by hating government that they forget its *meant to be their* government and it’s the only powerful public force they have purchase on.”

By placing highly misleading and antagonistic advertisements against the arts at the last national election, the current federal government deflected the public’s distrust of government generally, in this case via Paul Keating and his instigated Fellowships for elite artists, and thereby onto the Fellowship recipients. [These advertisements were not shown in Victoria - presumably because Jeff would have let them have it.]

Another profiled sense of the value of the arts is through the branding of city, country, nation. This fits perfectly with Giddens globalization discussion about the challenged identity of the nation state in the globalized world. In the competition to control the arts dollar, governments are increasingly selective about how they invest to distinguish their cultural identity.

The results can be impressive, Brisbane’s Biennial International Music Festival (recently reinstated) and the Queensland Art Gallery’s Asia Pacific Triennial are enormously important events regionally, nationally and locally. In Victoria, the state government’s major commissions program, tender for a major contemporary dance company and major renovations to cultural infrastructure have clearly had an impact but there is a sense that core (ie. artist driven art making) projects struggle to rein in the support.

And yet it was the thriving theatre and music scene of the 80’s which made Melbourne such a vital cultural centre. Funding was limited but the sense of focus and commitment from a cross-section of the city always felt apparent. Melbourne embraced its medium sized companies and gave them a profile worthy of their reputation – it was a genuinely symbiotic relationship.

Most of the companies I’ve been associated with have made a virtue of homelessness. Imagining is easier, schedules bend more readily, management is reduced to a core, and budgets are fixed by ideas not overheads. The idea seeks itself out in warehouses and garages, in playhouses and churches, in clubs and spaces for lease. Audiences over time must chase their art; an alter for a box office; the ghost of a mechanic steals the greasepaint. The places where we make art are our collaborators.

Presenting productions in new spaces also brings management closer to the work. Creating a space means that nothing can be presumed, nothing simply “is”, everything is a question. And every decision grows out of the production, is answerable to the place and the idea that drew itself there. Even when you trudge back to the office to calculate the group tax there is a sense of the elemental still with you, of being charged with its source.

When we make work in an established venue, we still hope for ghosts. In Melbourne they are there at La Mama, and the old Anthill, Russell Street and the Athenaeum. They are more readily found where the paint is thick and where there is no air-conditioning.

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More recently I have worked with a company which is cursed with homelessness. Queensland's State Theatre Company has presented between 7 and 11 productions annually for 30 years. The 500 seat theatre built in 1970 which served the Company well for 28 years was decommissioned by its owner, a recently privatised state insurance company – with new responsibilities to its shareholders!

As part of Brisbane's major performing arts complex, the State have built an 865 seat Playhouse which the State Theatre Company has little choice but to hire as its principal venue. The new theatre is a homage to modernism - the building itself is highly dramatic with a vast stage and two perfectly sound-proofed, floating rehearsal rooms. It is also unsympathetic to the majority of the works we want to program. The Playhouse has electronically designed acoustics (which means it's a dead space if you don't turn it on and actors can't hear what the audience hears if you do), it's too big, our audience base can't fill it, and we cannot afford it. Our audience come because of word-of-mouth (we don't have huge promotional budgets) which means our seasons must play for long enough to attract them. With the additional capacity, however, we are now playing to 40% houses compared with 70% houses in the old venue. This inspires a sense of failure which of course then affects word-of-mouth. Because venue charges are determined by capacity, we must also pay more to use it and spend around 30% more on productions to fill it. To do that we must seek additional subsidy and become more government dependent or reduce our program.

It is fantastic to have access to this kind of facility for the right production, and we have had some major successes, but the difficulty is that the venue itself is determining what we can do. The company's vision is to produce works from the classic repertoire as well as the new and evolving. To do this we need our own self-managed 500 seat theatre where the space is sympathetic to the performers and the modes of work our artists want to do.

The government that built the venue it is not an insensitive one. Funding for arts and culture in Queensland generally compares well on a per capita basis and the state theatre has been well supported during its thirty year life. But the commercial demands of one (commercially oriented) organisation ultimately won priority over the artistic and self-sustaining demands of another.

John Frow points out in his recent article *Res Publica* (Australian Book Review, March 1999) that "our remembrance of the Victorian period as the heyday of laissez faire capital doesn't square". Massive investment in the public sphere, he reminds us, exerted control over but also enabled the formation of citizenry. The amassing of wealth at least met its purpose halfway in the common good. The steady process of contemporary commercialisation winds back the general interest and intensifies claims of individual or corporate ownership. Witness the extraordinary compilation of images now owned by Bill Gates and the copyright extension which has progressed from 28 years to 50 years and now, under GATT, may reach 70 years. The possibility for ownership of ideas and cultural product has given a small few the bargaining power to corporatise forms of knowledge once held in the public domain.

Frow argues that the doctrine of ownership and creation upon which these claims are based have been construed from a late romantic notion of genius which has nothing to do with profit motives of music, television, software and communications

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corporations. It is another powerful quotation of the “arts” as a simplistic model which government will readily negotiate.

Notions of genius and absolute originality would seem to have little to do with the vastly profitable genetically modified food industry. Uniquely useful seed stock is sourced for paltry sums in third world countries after generations of community managed and owned hybridisation and is then sold back as an expensive commodity.

The beneficiaries of the income from copyright laws are secondarily artists and authors, while: “The danger of cultural material receding from the public domain is that it ultimately deprives the artist of the raw material which makes authorship possible.” (Jessica Litman, *The Public Domain*, Emory Law Journal, 1990)

The possibility that we most need to assert is that in a civilised and democratic society, creative intelligence itself is a safeguard.

Notes on the Author

Mr Stephen Armstrong

In 1983, Stephen Armstrong graduated from the University of Melbourne with a first class BA in History & Philosophy of Science and English Literature. Immediately on graduating, he worked for three years as a Financial Counsellor at the University of Melbourne's Financial Aid Office with Carol Butters.

From 1986 to 1989 he was Administrator, and later General Manager, of the puppetry based visual theatre company, Handspan Theatre under Artistic Director, Trina Parker. From 1989 to 93, he was the inaugural General Manager of the contemporary opera and music theatre company, Chamber Made Opera under founding Artistic Director, Douglas Horton. In addition to presenting seasons of new Australian work in every Australian capital, during this period Stephen negotiated international tours to Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore, Wellington, Auckland, Washington, Caracas, Lubjienko, Edinburgh and London. At times of temporary insanity, Stephen also competed and performed in Writer Sports for the Melbourne Writers' Festival, St.Kilda Writers' Festival and Melbourne Fringe Festival.

In 1994, Stephen relocated to Brisbane where he worked toward an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland. In 1996 he briefly returned to Melbourne at the invitation of Lindy Davies to be the Interim Administrator at the VCA Drama School. On returning to Brisbane in 1996 he was appointed General Manager of **queensland theatre company** under Artistic Director Robyn Nevin, a position he currently holds.

Stephen has been a guest speaker at many forums and conferences and has undertaken management and programming consultancies for Elision Contemporary Music Ensemble, the Brisbane Biennial International Music Festival, the Next Wave Festival, Performing Lines, the Australia Council, and the Australia/New Zealand Choreographic Workshop.

From 1993 to 1998, Stephen variously served on the Australia Council's Drama Committee, Performing Arts Board, Hybrid Arts Committee and New Media Arts Fund (co-founding and Chairing the latter two). He has also been a member of the Brisbane Writers' Festival Programming Committee and served on the Boards of Melbourne Fringe Network, the Contemporary Music Events Company, and Queensland University of Technology's Centre for Innovation in the Arts.

Stephen is currently a Board Director of Melbourne based Chunky Move and is a member of the Brisbane Lord Mayor's Performing Arts Fellowship Committee.

Notes on the Editor

Dr Ruth Rentschler

Ruth Rentschler, PhD (Monash), BA(Hons) Melb.; GradDip Vic. Coll., is the Course Co-ordinator. She has just completed her doctorate in Creative Management in Art Museums at Monash University. Ruth has a background in visual arts and human resource management, and has acted as a consultant to arts organisations and general industry. Her current research interests include arts marketing and local government participation in the arts. Ruth has published widely in the cultural field.