

ART AND THE ARC: SURVIVING THE FLOOD, AND FLOWING ROUND THE OBSTACLE

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This paper was prepared for the 3rd Art Research Conference, organised by the National Council of Heads of Schools of Art and Design, and held at the University of Wollongong, 15-16 April 1994. It was published in the Conference Papers. A year 2000 update is appended at the end.

Like many of us, I have been reflecting a good deal lately on the Australian Research Council, or ARC (which like any good acronym I will pronounce as "ark"). One finds contextual clues to its operation in strange places, and I would like to read you one. It is from Chapter 6, Book of Genesis, Australian Government approved version:

There were giants in the earth in those days, and their names were Sydney, Melbourne, Monash, Adelaide and others. And also after that, when sons of these came in unto the daughters of the land, they bare children unto them, and called them academics, and among the number of these were many of renown. But while they served their mentor Canberra well, he knew them not, resented their independence of him, and feared them as they were unpredictable. Verily some among them gave him much heat when he strayed from the paths of righteousness, which he did full often. And it repented Canberra that he had allowed these to prosper, and he said I will destroy them, in a great flood. And all shall perish who shall be found lacking in quality, in terms that I alone shall determine.

But there were among them a few who found grace in the eyes of Canberra, and they were known as researchers. For in them he placed his trust that they might, despite every setback he created for them, make for him the Clever Country for which his name would be blessed unto future generations. So he called their elders before him, and said unto them, "Make thee an ARC to sail in, and I will endow it with grants to keep it afloat. And thou shalt come into the ARC, and I will destroy all others but thee in a great flood." But he bare in mind that the country should not become too clever for his own good. So he charged them "Measure thee one another, and seek out only those that are like unto thee. And bring every clean one into the ARC, to keep seed alive in the land. And I will bring down upon all others in the land a flood of amalgamations, fiscal cutbacks, preferred study areas, enterprise bargaining, performance indicators, and quality reviews which will surely destroy them or make their hearts sick so they will yield unto my will absolutely."

And in the midst of the flood, some among the children of the land, who were artists and musicians and the like, understood not why they were so excluded, as they felt not themselves

to be wanting, and thought themselves good and righteous seekers after wisdom. So some did cling to the ARC, and plead to be let in. But those within repelled them, saying "There is no good in you, for your method and your product does not look like ours, and we shall exclude them, and you, from our ARC." And they taunted them, saying "Seek ye support in other vessels, like that called Australia Council." But these vessels were already sorely pressed, for Canberra had not provisioned them as he had the ARC. Indeed many believed he had pulled the bung out from them, or if not, that it was only a matter of time before he did. So some of the children attempted to reason with those inside the ARC, saying, "We are thy brethren and thy offspring, and indeed our methods and our products are akin to thine own even though their form is different." But those in the ARC closed their ears and hardened their hearts against them, for they loved their certainties and they feared lest they have to reconsider these. And above all they feared lest more should share of their goods in the ARC and they themselves should have less in these harsh times.

So many of the children cried out against Canberra, some saying that they knew him not and had never seen his face, while others who had some sanctuary spake of the flood as a cleansing and railed not against him. And they fought amongst themselves for the few sanctuaries that existed, and many sold of their services to kings of Orient and other lands, that they might buy stores against the famine that would surely follow the flood. And others dreamed only of early retirement and read eagerly of notices of redundancy packages. And the flood prevailed, and the ARC went upon the waters.

Here endeth the reading.

* * * *

I confess to being one of those whose thoughts drift frequently toward early retirement, but I have always thought that way, to buy myself more time to do the things which some don't believe is research. Until then, I am more inclined toward overcoming the obstacles than I am toward despairing.

One major obstacle standing in the way of our gaining access to the resources provided for legitimate research, is the ARC's stated policy that to be accepted as research, projects may not have a work of art or performance as their sole product. If one thinks about it, it is quite singular that out of the entire corpus of scholarship, the elders of the ARC have singled out the arts for such a restriction. No other discipline has its product so constrained. It is almost an honour to be so singularly recognised. Almost.

Those who have previously heard or read my thoughts on this matter will know that I am convinced that there has long existed in the arts an agenda of contributing to and advancing knowledge that is not in any respect less important than that which exists in the traditional research areas of the sciences and humanities. And at least the area of thought and practice in the arts which we have called the avantgarde had its roots in the Enlightenment, as did current research in the physical sciences, and even much of their methodology is broadly comparable. However the optimism of the Enlightenment thinkers about the potential for the mutual enhancement of the arts and sciences has dwindled as these have pursued autonomous agendas which have alienated each from the other and arguably both from society at large.(1)

Although both areas contributed to the schism, the sciences gained the high ground precisely because of what in the arts would generally appear as a great deficiency, their "laboriously observed impersonality". The systematic observation and testing involved in this have given the sciences the mantle and the authority of objectivity, ergo truth.(2) However it is impossible to conclusively prove much in the world's persistent belief systems, or in the social sciences, in history or in philosophy, and even in much that is most profound in scientific theory. These must therefore utilise, as do the arts, other methods and measures, among them those of contextual probability, pragmatism, and consensus. Here theories are seen not as providing final answers but rather as instruments to guide further action - which is also a valid way of defining the propositions of art research.

An important, perhaps the principal, agenda in the arts is toward advancing understanding, while in the positivist natural science approach the "understanding" of phenomena has tended to collapse into "explaining" them (3) - what has been called "the charismatic glorification of reason. . . based on the self-sufficiency of the intellect."(4) There are, however, many questions of meaning that cannot be answered by the intellect alone, and it is these questions that have traditionally been, and still are, addressed by the other areas of substantive reason in what Weber identified as the trilogy of science, morality and art.(5) Wittgenstein said "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said at all can be said clearly. But not everything that can be thought can be said." (6) Thus it is important that artists pursue their responsibilities as researchers not merely for the pragmatic reasons of surviving the flood. We have reached a position today where, rather than the tedious modernist compartmentalisation which has driven the debate for most of this century, we should stress the essential complementarity of approaches to thought, including those of the arts and sciences, none complete without the others. The history and the nature of artistic endeavour has positioned today's artists and art theoreticians to take their place confidently among contemporary thinkers employing such broad approaches to understanding. I baulk somewhat at presenting these issues within the inadequate and multivalent term "postmodernism", but I know of no better one.

The so-called postmodern condition is as a whole conducive to a breakdown of the self-assurance of conventional approaches to university research, based as they are so firmly in the positivist domain - indeed postmodernism threatens the traditional certainties of the university system itself.(7) To date, however, those who have the power to determine policy in the ARC seem to be less concerned with the great opportunities they now have to foster advances in knowledge through the arts as well as through the humanities and sciences, than they have been with their role as defenders of the boundaries of longstanding practice. I do not question that to deal with the expression of reason through works of art and performances poses many difficulties that the ARC has not had to deal with traditionally. But as treasurers of funds some of which have been drawn from the art-based sectors of the Universities, they have an implicit responsibility to try and find rather more imaginative solutions to these difficulties, than to merely rule them out of court. And more importantly, as those charged with facilitating the advancement of knowledge, their academic obligation to explore every approach appears absolutely imperative.

However at an interview I attended, with the Chairman of the ARC in 1993, attempting to employ reasoned debate rather than to argue responsibility, I pointed out that to exclude from

the definition of research the product of artistic activity, the work of art, was to focus on entirely the wrong aspect of the process. Of course not all that occurs within professional practice in the arts is research, any more than it is in other disciplines. To write a first-year textbook in Physics may be a significant work of scholarship, but insofar as it merely rehearses the existing corpus of knowledge, however differently or engagingly expressed, it probably does not involve anything the ARC would legitimate as research. On the other hand, to write a textbook expounding upon original and challenging new work in one area of Physics may involve research of the highest order. It is not the fact that the product is a textbook that is the yardstick, it is the originality of the endeavour, and its importance to the advancement of knowledge. Just so with art. While this point was graciously conceded by Professor Brennan, it has not resulted in the removal of the now very dead red herring from the ARC guidelines - only in a belated attempt to smoke it a little. It must be highlighted repeatedly, at every opportunity, as not merely discriminatory but also logically inconsistent.

The other important issue which was raised at that interview, this time by Professor Brennan, was the matter of distribution of information which would result from funded research, for the purposes of scrutiny and critique by the international body of scholars in the field. This has certainly been enshrined as a matter of greatest significance to traditional university researchers - there exist for publication not merely the distinction between refereed and unrefereed journals, but also graded strata of publications, with some regarded as much "better" than others. This can of course be related to the categories of exhibition, juried or otherwise and in events and/or venues of relative significance. What is far more difficult to overcome for the bulk of art exhibition is the difficulty of international circulation and critique. To exhibit in more than one place, particularly interstate and internationally, is difficult even for those of us that work on paper. Even to have photographs of one's work reproduced, or reviews of it published, in national art journals is very difficult and certainly could not be sustained throughout the creative careers of most art academics. To achieve it consistently in truly international art journals would be impossible. They are simply not set up to perform that function. Even those of us whose medium is the written word will find few if any art journals which are refereed, so will face difficulties in establishing the credibility of our publications.

University research has, however, defined its norms over a long period and this particular reading of "publication" is very close to the heart of them. I see it as one of the most serious obstacles with which we will be opposed, not only by the ARC but by the wider community of scholars in our own institutions, who will, understandably enough, unquestioningly accept the convention rather than explore avenues which might lead to the sharing of their resources. I think, therefore, that we must accept that they are unlikely to remove the obstacle. How are we to deal with it?

Edward de Bono, originator of the term "lateral thinking", more recently suggested another interesting way of explaining thought, in terms of the differences between what he calls "rock logic" and that which he calls "water logic".(8) Rock logic is that which is rigid and immobile, while water logic is dynamic, it flows around obstacles, and conforms to any shaped container. I can't help but view the intransigent stance of the ARC as a classic example of rock logic, and by corollary I think that the only response to it with any chance of success is to employ water logic. In other words, not to see our practices as locked into a rock of a different shape and size, which won't fit in the container along with the rock of ARC practice and prejudice, but

rather to regard our position as fluid, flow around and over it, occupy the space it can't, and submerge it.

In regard to the obstacle of publication defined above, I would like to propose one medium which may flow us around it. We have all heard the expression "Super Highway", referring to the international electronic information networks which are developing at an exponential rate and which allow the virtually instantaneous transmission of information from country to country, from one computer to thousands. I believe that we might look to travelling the Super Highway, using it as our "publication" avenue. Images of art (including video-inserts of performances), and works of music transmitted as digitised sound, can be combined with texts to contextualise and explicate the artists' intention. The images can be produced in colour by scanning photographs or from videos of pre-existing works, or the work can be created directly on the computer. They can be transmitted via bulletin boards and/or newsgroups created for the purpose, and response can be sought from those who receive them in just the way that newsgroups currently function. The vast outreach of electronic information dispersal means that far more would receive the information, and more easily and rapidly than if it were an exhibition in their own city. Indeed the circulation list could potentially make that of the best refereed journal look miniscule.

What about "refereeing"? The practice of refereeing journals developed to ensure that only work of quality was published in the limited number of journals available, and by the very selection process to ensure at least a minimum of evaluation from those qualified to make it. I would be interested in debating whether an unlimited flow of electronic information in both directions would not make such considerations irrelevant, but if considered necessary access to "publication" could be screened in some way, as could feedback if that too was considered necessary. Those more familiar than I am with the functioning of bulletin boards and newsgroups could, I am sure, devise mechanisms for these things to occur.

The proposal raises two immediate questions. The first relates to the capacity of networks to cope with files of the size that would be involved in transmitting colour images of say 30 paintings. The answer to that given to me by computing experts I have asked, has been that the technology will be generated when the demand exists, and the way to stimulate it is to start pushing the existing systems to their limits. Remember, the Super Highway is very young, yet it is already global. It is only a decade since the first 128Kilobyte Macintosh dazzled us with its flexibility and speed, and today 32 Megabyte Macs are standard fare. I truly don't think the agenda will be limited by technology.

The second relates to copyright. This is a complex area and I don't pretend to know all of the implications, but I think the notions of artists' rights as they relate to concrete, saleable works of art, are totally different from the intellectual rights which relate to published research. I am not sure that broadcasting a facsimile of one's work, and thus putting it into the hands of everyone, is terribly different from publishing the details of one's research in an international journal. It may be that artists will sometimes have to make some hard choices, about whether they intend to continue to function in the marketplace, or whether they intend to function as university researchers. It may be unrealistic to imagine one can always do both, in the arts any more than elsewhere. It also appears to me unrealistic to believe one should have access to research funding and at the same time be able to sell one's work and retain all the proceeds. The

institution may have something to say about that.

I find my own mind boggles a bit at the implications of the scenario I am depicting. The rate at which we may be able to disseminate information could grow quite staggeringly. Some of artefacts we may produce may come to be seen merely as initial stages in the process of publication (rather like draft-notes), and may thus be more like the models used in Hollywood than full-scale productions. The implications for sculptors and furniture-designers in particular could be very significant. One may be able to explore a dozen or more ideas, publish them and receive feedback, in less time than it would take to produce a single complete realisation. And if, as I would hope, this approach could break the log-jam in ARC and similar funding, the scale of funds which could be accessible to us, and the scope of projects, could move into the league which only scientists have been privileged to enjoy in the past.

Perhaps all this may sound like a pipe-dream. I put it forward not as necessarily the answer to the problem, but as an example of the way in which I think we should tackle the problem, and others which may present themselves. We like to define ourselves as creative people, and this is an area where I think we will need all our creativity. Those who presently control the resources have shown that they will not voluntarily yield to our pressure that they share some of them with us. About all we have on our side is that the very rigidity of their position might make them easier to flow around and over than if they too were fluid. It takes an awful lot of rocks to build a dam!

NOTES

1. Habermas, Jurgen. "Modernity versus postmodernity" in Alexander & Seidman, *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*. Cambridge, CUP. 1990. p.348
2. Bauman, Zygmunt. *Hermeneutics and Social Science*. London, Routledge. 1992. p.13. The results of natural science were seen. . . not just as universally accepted, but as true. . . This belief was based on the laboriously observed impersonality of the operations which led, in communally controllable fashion, to the formulation of results. However important the role of individual genius, insight, lucky accident or flash of inspiration in *articulating* the new idea, there must be a set of universal rules (which specifically did not hinge on the unique, personal factors) employed in *validating* the claim of the idea to the status of truth. . . Validation was. . . thoroughly impersonal.
3. *Ibid* p.11
4. Schluchter, Wolfgang. "The future of religion" in Alexander & Seidman, *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*. Cambridge, CUP. 1990. p.259
5. Cited in Habermas, Jurgen. 1990. p.348
6. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1971. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (preface). ed.B.F. McGuinness. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
7. Lyotard, Jean-François. "The Postmodern Condition" in Alexander & Seidman, *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*. Cambridge, CUP. 1990. p.330
8. de Bono, Edward. *I am right you are wrong*. London, Viking (Penguin). 1990. pp.290-292 and *Serious creativity*. New York, Harper Business (Harper Collins). 1992. pp.61-62

POSTSCRIPT 20 August 2000

It is interesting to re-read this paper a little over six years later. Under the conservative coalition government in power since it was written, the Australian university sector has continued the hostile neglect and downward spiral in funding initiated by Labor governments. Today tertiary education in this country is in a truly parlous state, reflected in low morale on the part of academics and general staff alike, disillusionment among the young about the value of a tertiary education. There is constant pressure from the government that universities espouse economic rationalism, rather than excellence in education and research, as core values. At a time when most developed countries are stepping up their financial commitment to knowledge as a social resource, in Australia over the past three years 3,300 research positions have been abolished nation-wide. The brain-drain from Australia is reaching epidemic proportions. These things are either being denied or ignored by the government, and disempowered and/or compliant academic administrators are too silent.

The other thing that is interesting to look back on is my remarks about the potential of using the internet in publishing art research. Even my expansive comments now seem very modest in light of what has since happened to the internet and the power of computer hardware and software. But at the time, while some colleagues thought my suggestions daring, most thought them improbable if not outlandish. I still know of no art academics seriously attempting to do what I suggested, despite the fact that art stands in a much more precarious position today, with regard to its acceptance and funding as a serious area of research (and thus of academic respectability within the university sector), than it did when I wrote this.

For myself, I took the early retirement I said I was thinking about, less than two years after writing this. My research today is almost exclusively self-funded, and in the area of the anthropology of art, rather than art practice or art administration. Despite the resolve I still felt when I wrote this, the obstacles I perceived in the climate described above finally seemed too obdurate to spend more of my life on, so, taking de Bono's advice, I flowed around them and moved on. Unfortunately, "rock logic" continues to dominate the university sector.

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