

SOCIAL STRESS, ART AND COMMUNITY

Rod Ewins

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Rod Ewins started making prints in 1963, and has been a member of the Print Council since 1967, making both member and patron prints for them. He established the printmaking section of the Tasmanian School of art in 1967, and retired in early 1997 as Head of the School. Among extensive representation in public collections, his life-work archive is in the National Gallery of Australia. Since 1979 he has also been researching and writing on the anthropology of Fijian art.

Issues like function and meaning, artistic motivation and purpose, social relevance and artistic responsibility are pretty unfashionable in art theory, although seventy-five years ago they embroiled Kandinsky in heated debates with the Constructivists, underpinned the manifestos the Futurists, Surrealists, and Dadaists. But every now and then they still manage to cause some artists to pause and think about why they what they do. This essay is the result of such a pause on my part.

Social stress is something we all know something about - it is impossible to look at a newspaper or watch television for any one evening without confronting it. The pace of change in the world today makes everything we have seen before seem sluggish by comparison, and social values are so contested that it would be difficult to define any of them as standards. Even "stable" societies like our own here in Australia are displaying rifts which threaten to turn us into a bunch of warring tribes, in a political climate encouraging self-interest rather than compassion or responsibility for our neighbours, as the Australian community unravels around us. Accounts of the strain of holding together the Roman Empire in the latter days could seem like yesterday's news if the names were changed.

It should be of interest to artists today, then, to know what effect such periods of social stress have historically had on art. In the 1960s a Cornell anthropologist called Kavolis came up with some answers, as usual while looking for something else (1). Thinking about the periods of heightened artistic activity and achievement that crop up throughout Western history, he was looking for common denominators. The answer that consistently emerged was - social stress. Not social upheaval such as warfare, which thoroughly disrupts everything including art, but stress - times when society seems to be creaking at the seams.

He concluded that humans make the most, and the best, art at such times. He interpreted this efflorescence of artistic activity as a cultural device to buffer or mitigate the effects of the stress that provokes it. I would suggest an analogy of an antibody reaction, caused by an infection with the purpose of destroying that infection. Though cultural not biological, it is arguably also an automatic response rather than a conscious strategy. As stress eases off, so does the artistic activity, and the lowest levels of creative activity and achievement occur during periods

of prolonged social stability. Significant art, it seems, is not made by the comfortable, which perhaps explains why so little has been produced by wealthy élites, and why in popular mythology starving in a garret has become so associated with artists.

But does it actually work in buffering stress? Kavolis said yes, on two conditions. First, its form and content must be congruent with the prevailing mythologies of the society - the stories it tells itself about itself, or in his flowery phrase, its "fantasy dispositions." Second, in a rapidly changing world, art must express the emergent value orientations of the society - it must be in tune with what the society *currently* believes, values and aspires to. The converse is that art may actually *add* to social stress, if the community strongly rejects it as being unrelated or antagonistic to its myths or current values.

Kavolis advanced no explanation of why exactly people felt so driven to produce art at such times, or how art works in buffering social stress. I have thought about the issue a lot, because for nearly twenty years I have been doing research in the country of my birth, Fiji. Modern Fijians have recognisably been under great stress, subject to all of the instability of the postmodern era, the difficulties of a small island developing state in the global economic system, and finally, strong ethnic rivalries within their country. My research has shown that there *has* been the sort of efflorescence Kavolis would predict, but only of some, not all, Fijian artforms. Those which *have* flowered are the ones that Fijians hold to be most critical to who they are - those through which they represent their self-image, their "Fijianness," to themselves and to others. I detected a connection between Kavolis's artistic efflorescence and stress, and identity processes. After all, a reasonable definition of what constitutes a stable society is one secure in its identity, whereas a society experiencing stress might reasonably be defined as one in which that identity is perceived to have become, or to be under threat of being, fractured, fragmented, or deformed.

Interestingly, another anthropologist, Peter Burke of Washington State University, a few years ago came up with an abstract theoretical model (2) in which stress was seen to trigger identity processes which reinforce, or if necessary modify, identity, whereas a lack of stress coincides with a lack of such processes. Superimposing Burke's theory on Kavolis's, they appear virtually congruent. Artistic efflorescence appears to fill the bill of an identity process very satisfactorily - though as Kavolis pointed out, and as my research in Fiji confirms, only *SOME* art.

I should pause to clarify just what I mean by "identity," since it is an over-used but rather vague term. Perhaps the simplest definition is to do with image - an individual's identity is their self-image, and the image others have of them. But it means a lot of other things, many of them not to do with individuals at all, but with groups, communities, institutions and organisations, even inanimate objects that humans have merely assigned some significance to, like Uluru. In an ABC television interview during his first week after arriving from Dublin, the newly-appointed Director of the Australian National Gallery, Brian Kennedy, stated that a priority was to define the role of a national gallery in Australia, and in order to do that it was necessary to "define the Australian national identity." I'm sure we all wish him luck - and he will indeed need the luck of the Irish to achieve that goal during his term of office!

So how does all this relate to art? Identity to social scientists is about boundaries and differences, but also about "belonging together." Both are relevant to a consideration of art. It

can either define boundaries, distinguishing the artist as individual, or dissolve them, because it is about transmitting *meaning* between initiator and respondent. Art theorists of the recent past have adopted various positions between the extremes of Greenberg's insistence on the privilege of the individual artist in defining or legislating meaning in the art they produce, and Barthes's insistence on the "death of the author" which detaches that privilege from the artist and hands it to the respondent. Each accepts meaning as a defining quality of art, but each misses the point that meaning results from a *negotiation* between initiator and respondent - it is neither imparted nor interpreted in isolation. The work of art is the instrument of negotiation.

Therefore, while all artists know very well that they embed meaning in their products, the circuit is only closed when someone else perceives meaning in it - until that happens, the object, performance or whatever is not art, it is only *potentially* art. In Zen terms, it is one hand clapping. I stress that I am not restricting "meaning" to the literal communication of information - that is the bind that a lot of semioticians have got into when they have attempted to explain art. Actually, art is generally nowhere near as good at transmitting factual data or conducting a debate as words are - the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words can sometimes be very misleading.

Art's strength lies in its capacity to create strong *impact*, very economically with imprecise but powerfully affective signs or symbols. It can embed in a single work meanings of many sorts - ideas, sensations, emotions, and so on, often several of these simultaneously - for subsequent scanning by diverse respondents who can form mental boundaries to clarify their commonalities or differences relative to it. Art is a quite extraordinary tool for projecting multiple dimensions of individual and/or group identity into the public domain, through what Barthes described as "a *galaxy* of signifiers permitting an indefinite number of readings." (3)

Kavolis insisted that to be socially effective in buffering stress, art had to embed not merely the identity of the individual artist, but of the larger group at that particular stage. Daumier understood this - when asked what epitaph he wanted, he said "Write that I was a man of my time." I believe he had it right. If one wishes to be an artist, to be socially *relevant* appears to me to be important. I am certainly not suggesting that artists should be restricted to social comment or the sloganising of posters, or to extolling the values of the State as the Soviets and China attempted to require. For a start, the values of the State are seldom the values of the wider community, which may be why politicians are so widely disliked!

Society's needs, identity myths and values are constantly evolving and changing, and cover the full gamut of human experience and aspiration. So there is no shortage of things to make art about, which will have relevance to the lives and values of the wider community, and if Kavolis was correct, thereby contribute to the community's ability to deal with the stresses and strains we face at the end of the millennium. But of course there are undoubtedly equally many things an artist can do and remain totally, one might say sublimely, irrelevant. I would suggest that a very great proportion of what is produced as art today undoubtedly *is* socially irrelevant, if only because many artists are so poor at, indifferent to, or out of some perverse vanity actually *opposed* to, transmitting meaning that none is able to be perceived by respondents.

The reason, I suggest, is the self-absorption of the artist. The contemporary Western cult of the individual as the pinnacle of social importance is a recent imagining, its roots in the romanticism

of the Renaissance and reaching its fullest flowering in the Nineteenth Century, perhaps with Nietzsche. While some may hold it responsible for much of the social fragmentation we see today, in art this has resulted in the view that the route to personal fulfilment lies in an exploration of the self *as an end in itself*, with the answers to life "lying within the vast untapped potential of the irrational human soul." (4) That's fine, but unless the meaning of life and the universe, once discovered, is transmitted in intelligible form to others, it remains socially useless. Declarations as inscrutable as that of Douglas Adams's robot in *Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* that the answer is "42" is not a hell of a lot of use to us!

Where do we as printmakers fit into this picture? Well the print as an artform has shown itself to be a remarkably effective transmitter of meaning in relation to social stress and for tackling society's ills head-on. Frank and Dorothy Getlein wrote that "From the beginning of European printmaking in the fifteenth century until the present, the printmaker, in his work, has looked askance and askew at all the powers that govern man, at Church and State, at science and art, at justice and war." (5) The great printmakers have all been concerned with the human life of which they have been part.

I would suggest also that leanness and terseness are common attributes of prints, so they are able to transmit meaning very economically and with great impact, much as one-liners can often be far more telling than elaborate stories. Printmaking will continue to evolve and incorporate new technologies, but as I see it, making prints was never more potentially socially relevant, and I believe potentially fulfilling, than it is in the current period of social stress.

References:

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