

The Right to Participate

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When I agreed to make this speech, I thought it would be a fairly simple task. 'The Right to Participate' doesn't seem like a particularly divisive or confrontational issue, and I thought I'd be able deliver a pretty simple exposition and depart feeling satisfied that I had helped the cause along a bit.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that talking about anything within a context of disability is hugely challenging. Certainly, it seems to me at least, using the term difference puts a new and more positive spin on things, but even so, there is an edge, an abyss even.

So much of our ideology is actually about saying that we are the same – that we all bleed the same colour blood, we all get hungry, we all want love and respect, we are all human. If we can reduce everything to a set of basic 'universal' human rights, then perhaps difference will become invisible, we can behave as if we are all the same.

But we aren't, thank God. Certainly we should all have the same rights, and as important, the same capacity to exercise those rights. But nevertheless, we are different, and those differences should be a source of celebration and joy, not of fear and loathing.

Because, in experiencing these differences, we can find insight, we can see the world anew, we can understand more.

I guess it's worth you knowing that a significant part of my creative background is circus-based – a culture in which the weird, the freakish, the strange, the bizarre are common, normal even.

And perhaps I should nail my colours to the mast before going any further – when I think about Art, with a capital 'A' and Artists with a capital 'A', 'difference' immediately comes to the very front. The Art to which I respond most is Art which takes me to places that I could never have imagined, that is profoundly different. As a theatre practitioner, the Artist who said more to me than any other was Antonin Artaud – a man who spent most of his life horrifically institutionalised. Of today's Artists, the one to whom I respond most emotionally is Mike Parr, the man who sewed his lips together – hardly the act of a 'normal' person.

When it comes to Art, I believe that difference, and possibly disability, goes with the territory.

The press is having a lot of fun at the moment with the carry on about the new Geoffrey Rush / Peter Sellers movie. Sellers's son is calling for a boycott of the film because, he

says, it is based on a book that claims that Sellers was clinically insane. I'd have to say that, in my experience at least, you couldn't be as spectacular a creative genius as Sellers without being in a very weird head space – a space so different from the average as to be, quite honourably, called mad. And I'm sure Spike Milligan would have agreed.

As far as I'm aware, there's absolutely no evidence to demonstrate an inverse or negative relationship between creativity and disability. Indeed, most evidence would appear to tend in the opposite direction. Certainly, it's very difficult to find any great Artist that isn't profoundly disturbed in some way or other.

And the corollary to that is that there is nothing that can lead us to believe that disabled people are any less creative than the abled.

So far, what I've been talking about is big 'A' Art and big 'A' Artists – that end of the spectrum that is made up of those individuals, disabled or otherwise, who are compelled, for whatever reason, to obsessively engage in making Art.

And I have implied, I think, that the concept 'the disabled artist' may be a tautology, in that perhaps, all artists are disabled; or at least it's an irrelevancy, in that the concept 'ability' has no consequence in relation to the concept 'artistry'. An even more positive way of thinking about this appears in the idea that the most spectacular creativity emerges in the overcoming of obstacles, in the transcendence of limitations – the more difficult the hurdles, the more profound the result. Two of my favorite guitarists, Django Reinhardt and Jerry Garcia had disabled hands that caused them to re-invent playing techniques. Sam Shepard's long term theatre partner and the contemporary theatre director I most respect, Joe Chaikin has successfully combatted aphasia for the last twenty years. One of the most exciting acrobatic performers in Circus Oz in recent years had only one leg.

A list like this is both endless and ultimately, pointless. All it tells us is something we already know: some of us, no matter how steep the mountain, just have to keep climbing. The climb engenders insight, joy, respect, fear, amazement, shock, tenderness, solidarity and a host of other profoundly moving responses in those of us privileged to witness such commitment. In the end, the limitations become irrelevant – what's made of, rather than despite, them becomes the focus.

But what of the rest of the spectrum, those of us who wish to pursue less obsessive lives, but nevertheless feel the fundamentally human need to exercise our creativity, to be a part of making meaning, to tell our own stories, to celebrate our lives, our history, our culture, our community, to live fully?

And this is the context in which the right to participate really bites. I seem to have spent most of my life arguing not only that we are ALL creative but that we all have the right

–the inalienable human right – to exercise that creativity AND that it is the duty of government to ensure that EVERY citizen is enabled to exercise that right.

This argument has not been based on an idea of creativity as being some sort of idle play, far less important than health, security, education, shelter or sustenance but of creativity being the very essence of our humanity, it being what makes us human. To deny a person this part of themselves is to make them less than human.

In our society, most of us are effectively denied the exercise of this right. We have been turned into passive consumers of the artefacts made by an elite body of professional creatives – we are receivers of culture, not the producers of culture. And what's more, we have allowed ourselves to be beguiled by rhetoric that glorifies this relationship to cultural production.

But, before I expound on the ways that this has happened, it must be said that stultification of creativity is directly related to power. The less control one has over one's own existence, the less one is allowed to be creative. The link is absolutely direct. Consequently, those in care, institutional or otherwise, are the most creatively disempowered. And therefore, the most deserving of immediate affirmative action.

How did we get to such a sorry state of affairs? Let me illustrate by examining some recent government policy.

A week ago, the state government launched its new arts policy, 'Creative Capacity+'.

The Age, reporting on the policy the following day, appended 37 column centimetres of editorial to a photo twice the size of the copy. Fair enough, a picture can often tell the story much more effectively than words. And in this case, The Age editors got it exactly right: the picture is of 11 schoolgirls looking, across a fence, at 3 very old skeletons.

This, to announce a policy that's first goal is 'Arts for all Victorians: A Culture of Participation'. In a brochure entitled 'Arts Count' that accompanies the policy document, we are told that 68.3% of Victorians have been to the movies, 37.5% have been to a library and so on. It turns out that statistics like this are the measure of participation.

One wonders whether the number of people who attend AFL games would be seriously accepted as a measure of participation in sport. Yet this is exactly what's happening in the arts. What's more, even before the Premier launched the policy proper, he took time out to tell us that the admission price to the Melbourne Museum was to be reduced – and that this was an absolute indication of the government's commitment to participation.

Let's imagine for a moment Justin Madden proclaiming the cornerstone of Victoria's new sports policy as being a reduced admission price to the Museum of Sport. It wouldn't

happen. Yet this is exactly what's happened in the arts, and there has been not one breath of criticism.

Why not? I think because, despite the government's confusion about the real meaning of participation (which is what this address is actually about), 'Creative Capacity+' is a document that puts into words the vision of a government that really does want to lead the way towards an inclusive, engaged, healthy and creative society. In their message at the beginning of the document, Bracks and Delahunty write: 'We are committed to community. We know a democratic society is a place where everyone can express themselves and feel a sense of belonging'.

Clearly, their hearts are in the right place and it would be churlish, and silly, to alienate them when they are saying things that most of us would agree with.

But how have they got it so wrong when it comes to translating these good intentions into action? How has a rhetoric that appears to be based on an understanding that democratic expression is the key to cultural vitality turned into a policy that's goals will be achieved through maximising mere access to cultural products?

I think it's because the advice the government is receiving is heavily influenced by individuals and organisations that are both extremely powerful in cultural circles and that have a strong interest in maintaining their position as the dominant providers of cultural product.

This is perfectly understandable. The products and services provided by the mainstream cultural institutions are indisputably valuable and it's reasonable that they be widely accessible.

What is not reasonable is that the justification for public support of these activities be achieved through appropriating and redefining concepts and language that were originally developed to describe a view of the world and our place in it that is fundamentally different from, if not opposed to, a philosophy that sees art and culture primarily delivered through the activities of entrenched, undemocratic institutions.

Participation, used as a word to describe active, hands-on engagement, has a long history as part of a philosophy that one would have expected a Labor government to be in complete sympathy with. For that matter, it's a view one could reasonably expect any democratically focused government to take for granted.

But a weird sort of slippage has occurred. Participation has come to mean something entirely different in the arts than it does in any other aspect of human activity.

In the eighties, before public policy was completely taken over by the ayatollahs of economic fundamentalism, one of the rubrics of public policy was 'access and

participation'. Now that the Bracks government has returned a semblance of humanity to the corridors of power, this concept is making a comeback. The problem appears to be that it's been such a long time since ideas like this have had any public currency that a lot has been lost while they've languished in the cellar.

In the government's arts policy, access and participation have been rolled into one. To demonstrate this one needs to go no further than the first sentence describing Goal One: A Culture of Participation. It reads: 'All Victorians should have access to arts and cultural activities'. An utterly worthy sentiment, BUT access and participation are different ideas; related yes, but fundamentally different.

The next sentence talks of the right to 'experience a rich cultural life' and 'to develop their own creative, intellectual and expressive capacities'. This is fabulous stuff. BUT, it then goes on to talk about Victorian's high level of involvement and engagement with the arts in terms of attendances and volunteers. We have slipped from being speakers and participants to being listeners and servants.

Now, along with most of you, I believe that reading a book, watching a play, listening to music or looking at a painting can change one's life, one's mind, one's world view. Of course it can. And it is imperative that all citizens and their offspring have a right to access to these potentially mind-altering artefacts.

Nor am I saying that voluntarism is a woosy thing. Helping others to witness art is an honourable task.

But none of this is participation. It is consumption, or if one wants to emphasise the engagement that is taking place, it is reception, even 'creative reception'.

But because participation has become such a powerful buzz word in the rhetoric of government, those in whose interests it is to maintain control over the delivery of cultural products to the consumer have had to find a way to subvert, or at least re-define, the meaning of participation to fit their agendas.

They have done this by claiming that observing art is as much an act of participation as making it. The complete absurdity of this argument (watching a football match is participating in it – get real) has been cloaked in sociology-speak: the experts talk of 'creative' participation and 'receptive' participation and go on to argue about how important each is.

I think a more realistic way of demonstrating the difference is to call one 'active' and the other 'passive'. Then the silliness becomes really obvious: passive participation is an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms. Active participation is a tautology – participation is, by definition, active.

Better then to return to calling producing culture, 'participation' and calling creatively responding to cultural artefacts, 'reception'. Both important, but the former much more so than the latter. In the Fourth Pillar, I say:

'No longer can we be content to leave the creation of meaning to the 'experts'. Yes, it is wonderful to live in a society in which those who choose to devote their entire lives to art are cherished and respected. But this should not diminish our own confidence in making meaning, it should not allow us to become lazy, embarrassed, passive witnesses, silent consumers, mere customers. The new rhetoric is 'engagement' – the first engagement we should have is with arts practice'.

Hiring experts is OK for getting the plumbing fixed but not for establishing one's identity.

I'm running out of time (and it was very late last night when I got to this point in the speech notes), so I'll just say the rest of what's on my mind as very bald, unsubstantiated claims:

- Not only has the idea of participation been subverted, but so has the idea of access. Access should not simply mean cheap tickets, books in braille, ramps and lifts and low floored public transport. It should also encompass access to the tools and resources required to enable participation. People in care are particularly disadvantaged in this matter, both physically and attitudinally.
- While a group like Back to Back demonstrates that artists who share a common experience can show the world a vision that can impact on all of us, so does a phenomenon like Club Wild demonstrate that there is a unique, special and enormously vital culture that is specific to those who share a particular experience in the world. One day that culture will name itself (like Queer culture did), but even without a public name, it is clearly proud, strong and growing every day.
- The results of arts practice (the public benefit) lie as much, if not more, in the effect that practice has on the participants as in the artefacts that are produced. Which is to that defining what is good art is a waste of time (artistic quality, or excellence, being ultimately a matter of taste). Defining good arts practice, particularly community based and publicly supported arts practice, is imperative.
- All facilitation of creative expression should have independence as its primary goal.
- Finally, creativity is utterly independent of ability; we all have an inalienable right to exercise that creativity, to participate both in making our own specific micro-cultures AND in contributing in a meaningful way to making the macro-culture.

Thank you.

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