

Title

Affirmation

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Abstract

In the midst of COVID, during a year in which artists and art educators were beset by an unsympathetic, even hostile, federal government this paper takes a deep history perspective to seek affirmation of our role in society. It charts an evolutionary approach to the question of what art does and suggests it as a means to work through the current anxieties that beset our species. A utopian vision of sorts, it is an approach that emphasises the significance of forms and traditions that exist beyond the academy: both pre-modern and contemporary. Drawing upon work from the intersection of sociology and philosophy, such as that of Ellen Dissayanake and Katja Mandoki, the paper emphasises the folk dimension of creative practice to reconsider our approach to aesthetic values and judgments. As a position it stresses a renewed modesty and localism in arts practice that plays against the global and spectacular trajectories that have characterised so much that has been celebrated in the age of the biennale. As such it seeks the empowerment of everyday artists to process challenges to our world and affirm our place within it.

Biography

Dominic Redfern is an artist and academic whose work addresses social and natural histories and the manner in which they are enmeshed: ecologies within urban environments; how geography impacts land use; the fuzzy boundary between the artificial and the natural; between the human and non-human. Dominic is always interested in origins and his key interests are evolution, geography and biology. He typically works with video in multi-screen installations, but also makes single channel and live screen works. Across his career his work has been supported by all three levels of government in Australia from various municipalities on up to the Australian Research Council as well the Australia Council for the Arts and state arts funding bodies. Dominic has undertaken residencies and site-responsive projects in Brazil, the USA, Japan, China, Korea, Thailand, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Scotland, Germany and France. He is an Associate Professor at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, where he teaches in the School of Art.

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Keywords

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Affirmation

I write to you today from the unceded lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung and Wurundjeri Peoples, a part of the federation of the Kulin Nation.

This paper emerges out of a short presentation I gave to my colleagues in RMIT's School of Art during lockdown in Melbourne, and shortly after the release of Dan Tehan's plans for the scaling of fees for university degrees. With academics not recognised by Jobseeker; the cultural warfare enacted by Tehan's assault on the humanities; the devastation wrought by COVID on the arts essentially unrecognised by the Morrison government; and the isolation and anxiety generated by lengthy lockdowns, I thought it was worth reminding colleagues of the significance of art's role in human society. I have dipped into evolutionary theory, anthropology and history to offer an account of the arts as central to our being, to affirm our worth when few others seemed prepared to. I appreciate that what follows offers what might be considered an instrumentalist account of art. To be clear, it is an argument designed to contest the political position that art is without use value. Personally, I am very comfortable with art's privilege being its uselessness, but this is a paper for a particular moment.

Since being introduced to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Yr.11 Home Science I have relied on it many times in many contexts (Maslow, 1943). For those who are unfamiliar with Maslow's hierarchy it can easily be found on the internet. The logic of it can be seen at a glance, it shows us how Maslow organises the world of the human in an escalating series of needs, from those required to sustain the physical basics of life through to the needs that complete our journey to fulfilment as individuals. Maslow places creativity right up at the top, a higher order need aligned with self-actualisation, the realisation of our unique selves. When all else is taken care of – food, shelter, procreation, love, security – we can express ourselves, it is the icing on the cake. This understanding of creativity's place in our lives is received wisdom, it's just common sense. Societies need artists least or last of all. If we needed any reminding, the COVID stimulus and income protection measures, taken along with the Tehan reforms recently passed through our parliament have reassured us of that fact (Department of Education, 2020).

Market based economies are primarily concerned with exchange value, in particular exchange value fully abstracted into monetary terms. Experience value has no value, it is completely overwhelmed by the more reliably quantitative exchange value upon which our markets are based (Varoufakis, 2017). But, whilst it may be a truism, it is worth reminding ourselves that some things simply cannot be bought.

Artists and arts teachers don't fit very well into the 'just plain common-sense' mythology of market fundamentalism. What we do challenges the value systems that attend the market in a variety of ways. In the market our work can only be understood in terms of the exchange value garnered by the commodification of culture and education. For many of us, this challenges our sense of education and art as fundamental human activities. Fundamental is not a simple rhetorical flourish here. I mean foundational, coming before and providing the base.

Leaving aside the fact that for some people the icing is the best part of the cake is the icing, this motif of icing on the cake, of something that is an expendable addition atop the main event of the cake, is actually key to some of the ways art has been maligned. Art's historical role has even been undermined by thinking within our own discipline. Modernism critiqued historical understandings of beauty as something that could be defined absolutely to rather become understood (starting with Hume and the birth of aesthetics as a discipline), as a matter of taste, a taste acquired through education or acknowledged as entirely subjective. We can see the thinking is sound (and the politics are great for those who are anti-establishment) (Babich, 2019). Taste is subjective and therefore provides no stable basis for judgement: there are no constants. Beauty is rejected, in word at least, partially in recognition of this instability and a desire for a rationalist account of art, and secondly as part of the drive towards something that might be understood as a dimension of socialism – an elevation and celebration of the everyday together with a rejection of the received cultural values of the elite (Bell 2005; Morton 1996). However, modernism did this by rejecting received forms and, in this way, we also eroded connections to our folk tradition (Barthes, 1977). In Wendy Wheeler's words, 'Hubristic modernity failed to understand the importance of evolved cultural forms and sought radically to brush them aside...' (Wheeler, 2010).

This has been exacerbated by the culture of specialism that makes art the province of the professional and marks out the ways art developed during modernism and beyond as, perversely in light of the earthly aims of many modernists, an elite activity. We are still stuck in the humanistic conception that emerged out of the Renaissance that sees art as an elite activity. Our mindset is largely Romantic, despite post-modernism's call to recognise the art experience as emerging out of a context rather than the solitary individual gifted with the sensitivity to see beyond as exemplified in the writing of Barthes seminal *Image, Music, Text* (1977). Indeed, post-modernist understandings became yet another elite understanding to perform as genii.

But Darwinian evolutionary theory, specifically the theory of sexual selection, tells us that our aesthetic sense is shared with many other creatures and pre-dates language by many aeons (Prum, 2012). Estimates and theories about the origin of human language vary widely, from as long ago as the emergence of sophisticated tools (2 000 000 years ago), to as recently as 50 000 years ago, with many settling on the emergence of Homo Sapiens 150 000 years ago (Balter, 2015). No matter which figure we choose we know that sexual dimorphism, which is considered to be either primarily (or partially depending on your theory) the result of sexual selection, is found deep in the fossil record, much earlier than 2 000 000 years ago – the first evidence for sexual dimorphism in the primate fossil record is in the Eocene (from 56 to 33.9 million years ago) (Krishtalka & Beard, 1990). This mean female choice, an attunement to the aesthetic dimension which has nothing to do with fitness for purpose. Prose proceeds from poetry if you like, not vice versa. That the practical or prosaic dimensions of culture must precede the aesthetic, is an attitude ingrained in us, we refer to the arts as the flowering of culture. But this mistakes the nature of aesthesis. Without the flower there is no tree.

It is important that we do not reduce aesthesis to the sexual, that is simply where Darwin began to get an inkling of its significance. That is to say whilst the origins of aesthetic judgement are in sexual selection, we have taken this capacity and run with it. In the words of Katya Mandoki, 'In our bodies we carry a legacy that includes not only organs for metabolism, breathing, and locomotion but also, and especially, sensory organs and neuro-cognitive processes that determine our modes of *aisthesis* and allow us to detect, select, and interpret the world, so as to remain in it as long as possible and pass on this gift to our offspring.' (Mandoki, 2017; Zlatev, 2014). In our attending to the world, our opening to it with our body, we feel it closely with all of our senses and affective facilities. This capacity to feel closely is greatly enhanced in our species through our ability to mirror what we experience.

A strong and current thread across both the humanities and biology is the idea that our use of spoken and symbolic language is born out of mimesis (Zlatev, 2014). Homo sapiens have the strongest capacity for mirroring, impersonating, copying of any of the primates (Zlatev, 2014). It is present in monkeys and apes, but even our closest relatives are left in the shade when compared to our own mirror neurone activity. Whether ear training or life drawing, attuning the senses was a foundational skill for training the aesthetic sensibility in art education historically. This close attending requires tuning in to our mirror neurones.

One of the most supported accounts for the emergence of language posits that it emerges out of a language of gesture, a language based in the human capacity for impersonation: mimesis (Armstrong 2008). According to the work of linguists the complexity of speech today can be reverse engineered to give us an approximate date for the origins of language. It began coincident with our push out of Africa and the creative explosion that swept humanity somewhere between 40 000 and 70 000 years ago (Perreault, et al, 2010).

Moving from the spoken word to the written, another gigantic leap for us, we know that it begins with mimesis and progresses thence to abstraction (Gross, 2012). We begin by attending and describing, abstraction grows from this concrete base. We begin with what we would now call art and thence to text, the one gives rise to the other.

To be clear, I am saying that language springs from capacities that we recognise as rooted in art, in the capacity to mirror which is deep in our speciation, deep in our biological pre-history. It is further enhanced by the aesthetic sense which pre-dates language. This understanding of art as rooted in mimesis is the second oldest theory of art we have in the western tradition, it is Aristotle's (Aristotle & Kenny, 2013). To represent experience, whether concrete or abstract, remains at the base of much of the activity we call 'the arts'.

I would like to turn to another originary account from Ellen Dissayanake which brings us closer to the present moment. Rituals historically attend all moments of transition in society, we can still see in orthodox religions the pagan echoes of these traditions, the Batmitzvah and the baptism, the rite of marriage, the last rites. Change causes anxiety; our brains work in patterns and jumping grooves is tough for us. Rituals mark and ease the transition from one state to another. All are couched in the arts: costume; formalised series of movements; song; poetic language; hallowed objects marked out by their crafting; iconic representations (Dissayanake, 1988). We can see that children maintain the centrality of the arts as a way of understanding and being in the world. For what is play? Play is nonsense songs, play is pre-verbal children taking delight in moving to music, play is copying and ritualising the gestures and movements they see in the world, whether they are a tree in the wind or mum driving a car; play is making your mark with crayon, mud or stone.

Dissayanake goes further to tell us that the foundations of ritual are learnt at the breast. From her book, *Art and Intimacy* we learn 'the ways in which mother and infant respond to each other are rhythmically patterned vocalizations and exaggerated face and body movements that Dissanayake calls rhythms and sensory modes. Rhythms and modes... give rise to the arts. Because humans are born predisposed to respond to and use rhythmic-modal signals, societies everywhere have elaborated them further as music, mime, dance, and display, in rituals which instil and reinforce valued cultural beliefs. Just as rhythms and modes coordinate and unify the mother-infant pair, in ceremonies they coordinate and unify members of a group.' (Dissayanake, 2012).

In these gestures of love, care and transition, we see the birth of the arts and their ongoing centrality to our species. I would argue these are not vestiges of the pre-modern that no longer

apply to the post medium, post concept moment we find ourselves in. Rather I believe art remains a key adaptive strategy at the heart of our species' life. These forms do not show us what we once were, but what we are. We do not need to separate out the art of pure aesthetic value nor the socially engaged art of the avant garde resistance, nor the folk traditions that are the life of our cultures.

To take an example of this capacity from modern history, Mark Dennis, academic, Holocaust researcher and artist has undertaken extensive research on the secret art made by inmates inside concentration camps. He says, 'Inmates of concentration camps made thousands of clandestine drawings and paintings... Though only a small number of inmates were indeed artists, many of them chose to make art in secrecy, even at the risk of getting caught, which was most often punishable by death.' (Dennis,, 2019). People lifted floorboards to scratch their mark on the underside, so deep was this drive to represent.

The Germans too, the most literate people in Europe at that time, were deeply wounded by the war. 'Everyone an artist', Beuys cried in challenge to modernism's cult of the lone genius (Beuys & Bodenmann-Ritter, 1972). However, his vision was not a new one but an old one, one that recognised art's traditional power and role in healing and transforming people, societies and cultures. He was working to process the experience of the war for the German people, to exorcise their grief and recover their dignity.

Moving into the present, we now face existential threats on several fronts and the great anxieties that attend them. Joëlle Gergis, as one of the Australian lead authors involved in writing the physical science basis of the 'IPCC Sixth Assessment Report' wrote in the July edition of the Monthly about her regular nightmares and deep anxiety. Her work shows that 2°C of global warming is likely to be reached sometime around 2040 based on our current high-emissions trajectory (Gergis, 2020). Just this year when at least 80 per cent of the Blue Mountains protected area and 53 per cent of the ancient Gondwana rainforests network were burned out, it seemed the majority of the Australian population woke up to something farmers, scientists and just plain folk had been observing for years. That it, it is already happening. 50% of the Great Barrier Reef is now dead (BBC News, 2020).

Yet climate change is all but forgotten as we cope with COVID and watch on as America implodes, reaping the whirlwind of its misplaced trust in a man who cares for nothing more than markets, and what they might profit him.

Now, more than ever we need art to speak to experience. So, even as it is galling, it is also dispiriting, it is demeaning, it is hurtful when our government, which represents our society, tells us so clearly that we don't matter. For art is originary for us as a species; art makes us, not the other way round.

What I have attempted in this article is a potted history of the aesthetic capacity and its role in human society and wellness. Admittedly it is scant and hardly scientific, but as something of a cook's tour it shows us that at all stages of human history, we have had the capacity for aesthetic judgement. The archaeological record for homo sapiens is rich with artistry from the decoration of tools to cave painting and ancient musical instruments. I hope that during a peak of Australia's decades long war on the arts and art education that it has provided my embattled peers with an affirmation of their role in the health of society.

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