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## ***State of the Arts Lecture***

***Jonathan Mills***

**6:30PM - 7:30PM, Tuesday 03 August 2010**

**at National Gallery of Victoria**

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Victoria

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For those of you who came here tonight expecting some kind of evaluation of the progress or an assessment of the position of the arts in Australia relative to other countries – some kind of artistic report card – I fear you are going to be disappointed.

I was allergic to pontificating, over opinionated expatriates filled with superiority when I lived in Melbourne, and I hope not to have changed my attitude and turned into a bit of a hypocrite, just because I now live some 17,000 kilometers to the North.

Whatever else is said of us, Australians like to think of themselves as people of action; direct to the point of bluntness, unpretentious and down to earth.

At the risk of contradicting myself, you are not going to hear me announce a series of actions, strategies or policies tonight that I believe are urgently needed in order to fulfill or even consummate a role for the arts in contemporary Australia.

As the inaugural lecture in what I am sure will become a most welcome addition to the public engagement with the arts in this city, tonight is an occasion for speculation. I want to explore the basis upon which we think about, plan and act on behalf of our culture. I want understand what motivates our intentions as well as our actions; what assumptions, premises even prejudices shape the way we think about the arts and the role it plays in our lives

A lecture entitled 'state of the arts' would seem to be asking for trouble or at the very least a modicum of controversy.

Hyperbole aside, I would like to suggest that any consideration of the arts, should reveal something more akin to a state of mind, a way of being, or a concept of existence to which the arts can contribute. In the process, I hope to allude to a role for the arts as an indivisible, intrinsic part of our lives rather than as some kind of desirable extravagance. I believe that the arts are necessary not peripheral. And as I hope to use the occasion of this lecture to probe, they should not be easily segregated or hived-off from other fields of human endeavour. In fact I would contend that the very process that encourages an extrinsic approach to different facets of human existence, is itself part of the challenge we all face in our attempts to make better sense of the world around us.

In this lecture I will be investigating several areas in which the arts conspire with some of our intellectual and sensory faculties and in both straightforward and unorthodox ways, to create and shape our future.

I am searching for ideas, which place the arts within a central if not exactly conventional position within society. What you are about to hear is in two parts; the first asks some questions about the ways in which we chose to define, measure and ultimately value the worth of any individual in our midst; it is a discourse about evolving definitions of intelligence, creativity and human capacity. The second part of this lecture relates to some basic assumptions we make about the nature and composition, the very fabric of our society; it seeks to draw connections between those designations of intelligence and creativity and society itself; how our concept of individual capacity is reflected, nurtured and supported in and by the institutions and organisations through which we express our collective values and ambitions.

For sheer technological accomplishment alone, the achievements of European civilisation have been staggering. Yet I am not the only one urging a modicum of caution and humility.

Consider the words of the philosopher and critic George Steiner. In his book *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), he says the following;

“Technical advances, superb in themselves, are operative in the ruin of primary living systems and ecologies. Our sense of historical motion is no longer linear, but as of a spiral. We can now conceive of a

technocratic, hygienic utopia functioning in the void of human possibilities.”

Our planet is shrinking – ecologically and metaphorically. The march of humankind is causing vast tracts of natural landscape, ecosystems teeming with diverse species, some of which we may never know, to disappear. Is it not the simultaneous tragedy of our times that every city, European, Australasian, American, is becoming a carbon copy of every other city? Polluted, congested, unsustainable.

When a rainforest is torn down, it is not just the ecology that is affected, the oxygen that is depleted; it is most particularly, the human relationships with specific environments and places that are destroyed; the poetry and songs, the stories and rituals, the intimate knowledge alongside the memory of unique locations that vanishes too.

We are both the beneficiaries and the victims of our actions and most especially our modes of thinking.

I want to get beneath the surface of this conundrum. I want to explore some of the ways in which we construct a shared sense of reality; to engage with the patterns of thinking, the very processes of our own minds; to delve into the ways we conceive of intelligence itself.

I suspect that if I asked everyone in this room for their immediate reaction to the word ‘intelligence’ most of us would conjure up memories of psychologists and IQ tests – tests which focus exclusively on linguistic and logical, that is to say, mathematical and analytical forms of intelligence; definitions which themselves reveal as much about the aptitudes of those in control of the process or experiment, those creating the models or asking the questions as those being assessed.

It is said that the medical discoveries of the next decades will focus upon a greater understanding of the brain, with the field of neuroscience set to be an exciting, expanding, new frontier for medical research.

By far the most interesting and provocative ideas I have encountered recently on the broad subject of neuroscience come from a psychiatrist and former literary scholar, Iain McGilchrist.

He has written a book with the rather forbidding title of *The Master and His Emissary; the Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*.

Dr McGilchrist has some pretty startling things to say about the human brain. He begins his *magnum opus* with a description of the difference between its right and left hemispheres; between the areas of this complex organ that to some extent control emotion and imagination that is the right hemisphere and the location of reason or rational thought, that is the left hemisphere.

Yet he goes to considerable lengths to assert that "every single brain function is carried out by both hemispheres. Reason and emotion and imagination depend on the coming together of what both hemispheres contribute."

Dr McGilchrist develops a powerful narrative about how each hemisphere of the brain produces a different 'version' or 'take' on the world.

*The Master and His Emissary* offers some powerful paradigms for how we might better begin to understand aspects of the most basic functions of the human brain.

It is also extremely relevant to the purpose of this lecture; for the first time in my limited experience, here is evidence from a leading medical scientist about the various ways in which we construct a mental image of the world and why it seems vital to achieve an equilibrium within the different components and great capacities of the brain that modern neuroscience is just beginning to understand as vastly more "plastic" than we ever imagined it to be.

In a world so dominated by scientific and technological innovation, it is important to assert that there is likely to be no single way of thinking that alone encapsulates the essence of human intelligence.

Beyond the world of medicine, the work of the educationalist Howard Gardner is especially illuminating. In his ground-breaking book *Frames of Mind* (1983), Gardner describes multiple forms of human intelligence;

not just linguistic and logical, but spatial, bodily kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal; forms of intelligence demonstrated by architects and sculptors, dancers, athletes and gymnasts, violinists, actors, business leaders and even politicians.

Courtesy of the work of Professor Gardner, the definitions of intelligence became vastly expanded. He argues persuasively that intelligence is not single-minded but multi-faceted. He describes the need for 'multiple intelligences' to navigate the complex challenges of the world around us.

Gardner's work has articulated the crucial importance of sensory stimulation and engagement as part of the development of neural pathways in early childhood.

What lies at the core of these remarks is a search for an understanding of intelligence as a crucible to unlock resources of human potential and insight.

It helps explain why I am an artist; and to propose a narrative, which I hope is a potent alternative to a prevailing wisdom, which relegates the arts, far too readily, to a subsidiary role in society.

I am a composer. Sound and music is the prism through which I experience and make meaning of the world. I am attempting to do so at a moment in history when one is overwhelmed by information; in an era where one's senses are deluged by an overload of visual and aural stimulation.

As an artist, my relationships are experiential rather than theoretical. I certainly share with scientists and philosophers a desire to make sense of my existence. It is just that my approach is poles apart. It is a fragile, highly intuitive process, in which sensory acuity and memory are subtly intertwined.

In his book *Material Thinking: the theory and practice of creative research* (2004), historian and artist Paul Carter explores the thought processes that he has observed, both as a critic and a collaborator as part of the practice of making art. He describes his ideas as follows;

“Material thinking occurs in the making of works of art. It happens when an artist dares to ask the simple but far-reaching questions; what matters? What is the material of thought? To ask these questions is to embark upon an intellectual adventure peculiar to the making process. Critics and theorists interested in communicating ideas about things cannot emulate it. They remain outsiders.”

My experiences as a composer closely resemble Paul Carter’s thesis. When I write music, my mind is constantly searching for sonic shapes, rhythmic fragments and melodic phrases, which begin to be conceived in isolation and then in ever increasing combinations and permutations, until textures and patterns emerge and evolve.

In my quest for ideas that brings the acoustic into some sort of equilibrium with the visual, the works of anthropologists Edmund Carpenter and Steve Feld have been a huge influence.

Carpenter and Feld undertake research in completely different places with one crucial similarity; the role of sound as the primary way of sensing and responding to their environments.

Edmund Carpenter is a Canadian anthropologist who has worked closely for many years with the Inuit peoples, the indigenous populations to be found across the Arctic Circle from Greenland to the far-Northern parts of Canada. For most of the year, this environment is snow-bound. Navigating across this isolated landscape, the horizon barely discernable requires a completely different set of skills to taking a stroll along Swanston Street. A highly developed sense of sound and touch are more important than sight. To the uninitiated, this environment looks like a confusing, white canvas. Only an acute sensitivity to the sound of the ever-changing direction of the wind, the constantly shifting texture of snow, offers any hope of accurate navigation.

Steve Feld is an ethnomusicologist who has lived amongst, recorded and written about the poetry and music of the Kaluli people, from Mt Bosavi in the central highlands of Papua New Guinea. The dense equatorial rainforest of this remote region of PNG does not reveal an horizon. One navigates through the landscape relying on other senses, especially

sound. In describing the way in which the Kaluli people relate to their world, Steve Feld invented a new word – acoustemology, meaning ‘knowledge of the world through sound’.

I make these observations, partly out of a deep concern that urban environments, which are increasingly, indistinguishable one from another, are proscribing our potential and even our ambitions and creativity. I fear that for reasons of information overload our ability to sense the world around us is somehow diminished. Indeed there is some emerging research that points to a relationship between certain types of physical and sensual stimuli which would suggest that our habits and behaviour can exert an influence on our neural pathways. Such claims are to some extent still speculations, however were they to be true they would radically shift our understanding of the importance of environment factors in relation to our cognitive existence.

The most enlightened attitude we can adopt in relation to a definition of intelligence is to treat it as an evolving entity.

I make the case for the arts, not merely as a reinforcement of a status quo, but a potential and ultimately essential enlargement of the circumstances in which we imagine our lives.

Our artistic capacity is unique to our species – to ignore or diminish its development undermines our whole being.

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We live in a world that faces huge challenges: exploding population growth, diminishing natural resources, vanishing indigenous cultures, increasing tribalism and bitter localised feuds, human dislocation of unprecedented dimensions, of large-scale suffering from easily preventable or treatable diseases.

When the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd stated a strongly held view that Australia should expand its population; to become a ‘big Australia’,

a nation of approximately 35 million people by 2050, he let the genie out of the bottle.

While I have no desire, particularly in the middle of a Federal election campaign, to wade into this particular debate about population and immigration, I do believe that the heat being generated by such issues at the moment needs a certain amount of perspective and clarity.

Australia is likely to achieve something close to a population of 35 million without too much change to prevailing conditions. So various statements by former, current or indeed future prime ministers will not change the fact that, short of a rather radical and highly contentious reversal of the broad thrust of 50 years of immigration policies, a 'bigger' Australia, if not a truly 'big Australia', will become a reality of some sort by the middle of the century.

This position is not without controversy. Critics rightly point to the fragility of our environment. Australia is the driest continent on earth; and Australians, it would seem, among the thirstiest.

Whereas Kevin Rudd was prepared to state a firm belief in a 'big Australia', Julia Gillard has signaled a more nuanced approach to these issues with a considerable shift in emphasis in the language she has used in what is becoming an increasingly destructive debate.

Notwithstanding one's political affiliations, the language used by all of our political leaders has been almost exclusively utilitarian. It has become a statistical narrative of GDP and CPIs, of economics and markets, of ageing and life expectancy, of productivity and competition; to be fair it recognises a series of challenges with descriptions of 'urban congestion', the 'adequacy of infrastructure', and the impact on 'housing supply'.

However, in preparing this lecture I read a number of official documents, as well as speeches, comments and interviews with a variety of government ministers, I struggled to find the slightest mention of culture.

So let's attempt to come to terms with a set of implications and effects that will not only be felt in politics or the economy; but in every other aspect of our life including our culture and its artistic expression.

How does one begin to describe a role for the arts in light of these circumstances? What will be the influence of these likely demographic shifts on our cultural institutions? To what extent will they need to be recast to represent or reflect the evolving interests, or aspirations of citizens? While English will remain the official language of the country, in what ways will we communicate with each other? What music will we play? What kinds of films or books will we create to describe or define ourselves? Where will we be able to find common cause?

And that all of this will be negotiated in an environment of rapidly expanding digital communications will only add to its layers of complexity and dislocation.

Let's take a moment to test some fairly basic assumptions.

Australia's cultural institutions, our orchestras, theatre companies, art galleries, libraries and museums, opera and dance ensembles are all modeled upon mainly British prototypes that have evolved over the part several centuries.

I have no wish to criticise these institutions or what they have achieved. I would not be the person I am today without decisions and sacrifices taken decades ago to assemble an orchestra in Sydney, found a festival in Adelaide, gather a gallery in Melbourne or open a library in Canberra.

I do however want to point out that every single one of these cultural institutions is a bequest from a European inheritance; a rich, extraordinary legacy, which deserves to be built upon and further, enhanced and developed.

Even as I proudly proclaim the advantages of these cultural opportunities, I foresee some immense challenges. Without question institutions, which remain static, are in danger of becoming decreasingly relevant. And no doubt, many of our long-standing cultural bodies have adapted with the times. It is just that in light of some of the truly

enormous shifts now being contemplated, a more far-reaching rethink might be appropriate.

Let me explain why.

The past millennium has been dominated by European science and technology, culture and philosophy. There is some plausible speculation that an era of European hegemony might possibly be drawing to a close.

We have already begun to enter of a period in history where no single culture, ideology, theocracy or politics will be all pervasive or dominant.

We are now living in world in which knowledge comes simultaneously from various, divergent technological, ethical, cultural and philosophical sources and locations.

I am not alone in detecting an unusual alignment of forces at work in the world at the moment, which has the capacity to disrupt and dislodge many of our perceptions and preconceptions.

What troubles me most about such a potentially radical recasting of society is the widespread myopia accompanying it.

If we are prepared to acknowledge the enormous impact of the economies of countries like China and India in the next decades, why are we so tentative and unconfident about discussing and engaging with their potential cultural influence?

I believe that it comes down to a reticence about that much abused word multiculturalism.

Most of us listening to this lecture would assume that we espoused the values of a pluralist, liberal democracy.

I find it hard not to become cynical about the way in which so much of the discourse on immigration and multiculturalism is framed. Quite frankly this particular multi-syllabic label is used to cover and cover up a multitude of shortcomings. For I think we are incredibly loose and lazy in the ways in which we define and apply this particular word.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not arguing against multiculturalism. In its current usage I simply don't think it goes far enough to connect to the present or future requirements of our society.

My concerns about the assumptions and generalisations of multiculturalism are echoed by the sociologist Ulrich Beck. He writes;

“For a long time now, we have been hearing a lot about cultural relativism, multiculturalism, tolerance, internationalism – and ad nauseum – globalisation . . .

. . . All of the above ideas are based on the premise of difference, of alienation, of the strangeness of the Other. Multiculturalism, for example, means that various ethnic groups live side by side within a single state. While tolerance means acceptance, even when it goes against the grain, putting up with difference as an unavoidable burden. Cosmopolitan tolerance on the other hand, is more than that. It is neither defensive nor passive, but instead active: it means opening oneself up to the world of the Other, perceiving difference as an enrichment, regarding the Other as fundamentally equal . . .

. . . Cosmopolitanism, then, absolutely does not mean uniformity or homogenisation. Individuals, groups, communities, political organisations, cultures and civilisations wish to and should remain diverse, perhaps even unique. But to put it metaphorically: the walls between them must be replaced by bridges.”

Here is a very direct challenge to which all facets of society should listen. A call to action, which, if accepted, requires a considerable shift in emphasis throughout our community; in political language and government policy; in the ways we chose to educate ourselves; in the shape and design of both our physical realities – our cities, suburbs, dwellings and public spaces – as well as our patterns of thought – our customs, belief systems and personal behaviour; and perhaps not least in the way individual artists and arts organisations perceive and define their roles in the future.

I would like to take a moment to consider carefully a course of action which Ulrich Beck urges; to take up his challenge to build bridges

between “minds, mentalities and imaginations” but also within “nations, localities . . . and institutions”; to contemplate how the cosmopolitanism which Professor Beck describes might find its way to influencing the shape of a discourse on the arts in Australia today.

I am going to be quite deliberately provocative and draw an example from an art form that many in this room would identify exclusively with a European heritage; an art form that has the additional difficulty of being elaborate and expensive. I am going to illustrate my point with specific reference to opera.

Furthermore I want to continue this provocation by referring to the ideas of two giants of European culture, Richard Wagner and Claudio Monteverdi.

In his famous essay *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849), Richard Wagner’s use of the word *gesamtkunstwerk* – the idea of a total, all embracing art work – is a restatement of an ancient idea. He was exploring not only relationships between words and music, dance and theatre, but much else besides; an intrinsic concept whereby the combination of various art forms were to be fused inextricably within a ceremony or ritual, language, custom, folklore and allegory, making a complete entity, an undilutable whole. He was of course, attempting to define the genre of opera itself.

Similar thoughts occupied the mind of Claudio Monteverdi almost 250 years earlier as he composed his very first opera, *Orfeo*, a work he described as a *favola in musica* .

Whereas Monteverdi’s or Wagner’s investigations lay in the crevices of their own European traditions, I would strongly suggest that in some form or other, opera is a universal phenomenon. There are very few cultures in which the most fundamental concept of a *gesamtkunstwerk* does not exist.

From the various forms of Chinese opera, Japanese Kabuki and Noh drama to *Taziyeh*, the musical and dramatic pageants of ancient Persia, or the sufi devotional ceremonies of the Whirling Dervishes from Turkey, the Voodoo rituals of Haiti or indeed the great Sanskrit epics of India, all encompass the attributes of a *gesamtkunstwerk*.

Closer to home, the elaborate ceremonies transacted through poetry and song of the Aranda people of the desert of Central Australia are in every way a total, all-encompassing art work. I could go on.

What is the point of all this?

Beyond offering a very tangible way of connecting to an artistic genre that is often seen as elitist or remote, I am trying to honour the very notion of history and tradition wherever it may be found; to acknowledge the presence of virtuosic skill and artistic rigour in a wide variety of cultures; and in the process to urge us all to consider through the remarkable artistic achievements of an array of cultures beyond those of Europe in order to insist on a level of respect and care for ideas and values that are very different from our own. And to suggest that the benefits of any expression of respect will be reciprocal; that they will enhance every side of any perceived cultural divide. I would suggest that it is in such places and through such experiences that one might find the building blocks, the arched contours and centre stones of the bridges we must build for our future.

I would also suggest that this argument is not arbitrary or optional. Without a proper engagement with the specific processes I have just described we will not achieve the kind of respect or understanding so necessary for a cosmopolitan society.

None of this is easy or straightforward and it cannot be achieved if culture is considered or treated in isolation; as nothing more than entertainment; an optional extra or a frivolous luxury.

To a great extent these ideas cannot take hold unless they are carefully and powerfully embedded in our learning or through our earliest contacts and experiences of one another; an elaborate, iterative process that requires patience and perseverance; a course of both thought and action that should begin at school.

Alas where there might be potential for learning about the *Mahabhartā* or understanding the subtleties of *kun* opera, or appreciating Shia religious ceremonies through exposure to a *Taziyeh* performance alongside the symphonies of Beethoven or cantatas of Bach, we rely instead

on a diet which is exclusively comprised of adolescent, self expressive rock eisteddfods. There is nothing wrong with fun and frivolity, unless it becomes an overwhelming controlling metaphor for absolutely everything that occurs in a classroom.

I have a deep-seated concern at the superficiality of the education of our children, especially, though not exclusively, in the arts.

We have regressed terribly in the level of achievement we demand of music teachers today compared with a century ago. Various distinguished Australian educationalists such as Margaret Sears and Richard Gill have told me that 'the average university graduate today would have enormous difficulty coping with the most basic prerequisites to gain a music teaching certificate in 1902'.

The situation in Australia has deteriorated in other ways. Compared to the 1960s and 70s, the range and nature of courses offered by Australian universities has been reduced to a point of absurdity. In addition to institutions offering a syllabus whose focus was European music, there were a number of departments who worked, taught and undertook research in the general area of ethnomusicology, and specifically in the music of Japan, China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Papua New Guinea. We have now reverted to a 'one size fits all', corporatised mind-set that seems to be so pervasive in Australia's institutions of higher education.

To loose these centres of diverse excellence at a time of continuing population change and ever increasing diversity in the broader Australian community seems unrepresentative, absurd and wasteful.

To restate the obvious, any expansion of Australia's population will continue to enhance the extremely varied ethnicity of our society. Let's acknowledge the importance of the word culture in that misused term. And let's expand our creative horizons to insist that any definition of multiculturalism becomes exactly what the word means; a curiosity kindled by and genuine support for the many different cultures that comprise a secular, liberal democracy and that are continuously reinforced throughout our education system.

Unless we urgently consider new ways to articulate, calibrate and modulate the mores of a rapidly shifting set of social conditions so as to be mindful of the needs to remain open-minded, generous-spirited, respectful and most of all inclusive, they could all so easily spin out of control.

To revisit the work of Iain McGilchrist for a moment, he makes a powerful point in describing those moments in our history when 'the flowering of the best of the right hemisphere and the best of the left hemisphere working together' converge for the immeasurable benefit and prosperity of humankind: as witnessed in Athens in the 6th century by activity in the humanities and in science working together and in ancient Rome during the *Augustan* era; or through an openness and energy that was regained during the Renaissance 1,000 years later which brought "sudden efflorescence of creative life in the sciences and the arts". To Dr McGilchrist's examples, I would add two of my own; that period of remarkable that existed during the height of the Caliphate of Cordoba in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century Spain in which Islam, Judaism and Christianity co-operated and collaborated so harmoniously; or to the extraordinary period of science, art and technology that flourished in China during the Song or Ming dynasties.

However, McGilchrist reminds us that these are sadly the exceptions rather than the norms and that as time passes, so the left hemisphere once again comes to dominate affairs and things slide back into "a more theoretical and conceptualised abstracted bureaucratic sort of view of the world." The kind of banal mindset, I would suggest, that too often dominates the way we frame agendas and priorities to this day.

I believe that the place occupied by the arts is a prism through which to perceive the equilibrium of any society.

The fullness of our understanding of the value of the arts will have an inestimable impact on the world we will create.

In a sense this lecture is not really about the State of the Arts at all – it's about the state of our world and the role that the arts can play in it and how imaginative and open-minded we wish that world to be.

If I might be so bold as to urge any kind of outcome from this presentation, I have a couple of simple suggestions.

Let's not opt the usual, expensive but ultimately easy option of proposing to build another edifice. Instead let's evaluate our existing institutions and insist that they become much more ambitious and better prepared to face some of the opportunities and challenges that I have spent the last 45 minutes describing.

We could start by undertaking a comprehensive, creative audit of the multitude of organisations through which the arts might discover new opportunities and lines of influence – quite literally the synapses and cortex of society itself. Such a process would, I am sure be an inspiring revelation.

To be genuinely effective, government must be much more aware of its own potential. We must insist on a greater level of ingenuity and entrepreneurship in our public institutions. And we must properly coordinate these efforts through the mechanisms of a cultural policy that relates directly to other aspects of government activity. Integrating and assimilating the work of schools and universities with that of professional ensembles is only the first step. It is sadly a step Australian governments have yet to take.

To do some of the work I envisage, it is not necessary to build another theatre, classroom or arts centre; nor to invent another quango or piece of bureaucracy. I work in a city, which for the month of August each year becomes an extraordinary centre for the arts without ever having given the slightest thought to constructing an arts centre. A "State of the Arts" should be a matter of encouraging or reinvigorating extremely powerful alliances, wherever they might exist, in order to assert with confidence and compassion our own commitment to the values and ideals that will foster a continuum of imagination to and in which our children and our community can all aspire and share.

***Jonathan Mills is the director of the Edinburgh International Festival.***

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