

Cultural Diversity as a Factor in Creative Development

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Introduction

The fundamental premise upon which this paper is based, is that the creative potential of any community may be enhanced by the presence of a diverse cultural mix among the population, enhancing opportunities for the interaction of ideas, the exchange of experience and the interplay of diverse forms of knowledge.

In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), Richard Florida argues that creative communities are the base cause of economic growth and that such communities are characterised by the presence of creative people, artists, gays, those imaginative groupings which originate and drive cultural industries; elsewhere in his book he identifies the 'Melting Pot Index' of ethnic diversity as an indicator of a community's creativity.¹ This paper reinforces this contention and argues that creative communities may also be characterised by the presence of populations which are culturally diverse in make up.

The recent UNESCO proposal for a World Report on Cultural Diversity, identifies cultural difference as a potential catalyst for creativity in a community. Reiterating the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by the General Conference in 2001 in the wake of September 11, it supports the principle cultural diversity is a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.² The Declaration contends that 'cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life'.³ It maintains that cultural heritage is the wellspring of creativity; while creation draws on the root of cultural tradition, this flourishes in contact with other cultures. For this reason, cultural heritage must be preserved in all its forms, enhanced and handed on to future generations as a record of human experience and aspirations. It is this cultural diversity which can foster creativity in all its forms and through it to inspire genuine dialogue among societies.

The importance of creativity in the project has gained support from various other international sources. The UNESCO International Summit on Arts Education (March, 2006) was attended by 1200 delegates from 97 countries, linked cultural diversity with the ability build creative capacities through arts education. The Vienna Conference on Cultural Policy Research (July, 2006), aligned creativity with the development of culture based industries, paralleling Florida's contentions, which

¹ Richard Florida (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic Books, p.x.

² Koichiro Matsuura (2001) 'UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity', Introduction.

³ UNESCO (2001) 'Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity', Article 2.

also have inspired some of the 'Creative Clusters' thinking behind the Policy for the Creative Economy Conference at Newcastle Gateshead later this year.

The relationship between creativity and cultural diversity is a topical issue but one which to the present has largely depended on speculations and generalities. This discussion is an attempt to draw out the basis of this association. It is grounded in research into creative processes and activities which are exemplified and demonstrated by the creative output of a myriad of artists over the last century.

Intellectual and Artistic Context

It is more than 40 years since the theoretical framework for creativity based on the intersection of diverse elements of knowledge was postulated in Arthur Koestler's book, *The Act of Creation*.⁴ The linking of disparate pieces of knowledge to build something which is independent of either, has become integral to our thinking about creativity; further our understanding of the role creativity plays has vastly diversified, extending from the arts into all aspects of knowledge development. From this perspective, multicultural societies provide a vast potential resource for creative development, in art and industry and across the intellectual spectrum, but we require strategies to harness the potential of this resource.

A highly persuasive account of how creative outcomes result from the crossing over of ideas from different sources is found in Koestler's writings. *The Act of Creation* presents a diverse range of examples in support of his case.⁵

He proceeds by extracting a basic pattern underlying these many examples characterised by what he calls 'bissociation', the coming together of two ideas not previously associated to combine and produce a third, distinct from either of its components. His characterisation is intriguing because of its simplicity and succinctness, derived in part from ideas put forward by other writers, and because of the diversity of its application.

The distinction between artistic creativity and scientific discovery is often perpetuated in popular and academic conception, limiting the range of creative activity to the arts, painting, writing, architecture, music and so on. Koestler argues against this by demonstrating how creativity, couched in the intersection of ideas, is the hallmark of progress in the technologies and sciences, a view reinforced by Sir Ken Robinson in his keynote address to the UNESCO World Summit on Arts Education, earlier this year. To demonstrate his contention, Koestler alludes to Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1450, which resulted from a chance observation made during a festive occasion.⁶ Gutenberg had wrestled for years with the problem of how to get an even impression on a sheet of paper from a box of moveable type, until he happened to reflect on the nature of wine, after attending a friend's wedding; his thoughts passed from wine to the winepress

⁴ Arthur Koestler (1970) *Act of Creation*, Pan Books.

⁵ Koestler *ibid*, p.35.

⁶ Koestler *ibid* p.170.

and how its force crushed the grapes. He applied this idea to the pressing of paper against his type. In this way moveable typeface and the wine press were combined to produce the letterpress.

Koestler cites a similar example with William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood.⁷ Harvey developed his theory after observing the pulsating action of the exposed heart of a live fish at London's Covent Garden market. It reminded him of the large water pump on the Thames embankment which drove water around the city. Linking his idea of the heart with the circulating water, Harvey hypothesised that the heart acted as a pump sending blood throughout the body. We may disagree with Koestler's description of how creativity works, but its relation to the intersection of diverse ideas has become integral to most thinking about creative outcomes. The presence of difference as a catalyst for developing the new, is also demonstrable throughout the history of modernism and can be argued as pivotal for the development of the avant-garde, as a few examples will confirm.

In 1907, Pablo Picasso started experimenting with the construction of representational images using abstract shapes, rather than describing the body in the usual organic descriptive terms; his best known early example of such work is *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* from 1907. Picasso had observed examples of tribal masks in the ethnographic museum at Trocadero and been struck by the intensity of these highly distorted interpretations of the human face. Picasso had been puzzling over how to reinvigorate painting conceptually. The stylised wooden masks gave him an idea for reconsidering the figure in space by focusing on generic aspects of identity, rather than those of specific individuation; it involved the viewer in reflecting on the interpretation and understanding of the image, effectively giving the work meaning.⁷ This led to the development of Cubism and the high level of pictorial abstraction which resulted in non representational innovations in the painting.⁸

In 1908, the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, then a resident of Bavaria, was returning to his studio from his after lunch walk. As he approached the door he saw a painting on the easel which was not the one he had been working on during the morning; it was alive with brilliant colour and expressive vitality and seemed to achieve what his paintings had not. As he drew closer he realised that the cleaner had been to the studio and replaced his painting upside down on the easel; the work was his but he saw it in terms only of colour and form, rather than the images of the landscape which he had been described by his shapes. Kandinsky recognised the emotive power of colour and imagined an art independent of representational meaning. He had been experimenting with colour since a trip to Tunisia where he discovered the vibrancy of saturated hues evident in the Islamic decorative arts, seen in the intense, liberating light of North Africa. The inspiration for abstract art was born. Abstraction shaped Kandinsky's art production for the rest of his life and he laid down the tenets and assumptions on which it was based in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.⁹

When Andre Breton formulated his 'Manifesto on Surrealism', he based the ideas on Freudian developments in psychoanalytic theory, which postulated the potential of an unconscious mind.

⁷ Koestler *ibid* p.182.

⁸ B.J. Hoffert et al., *Art in Diversity: Studies in the History of Art*, Longman, p.108.

⁹ B.J. Hoffert et al., *ibid* p.99. Wassily Kandinsky (1977) *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Dover Publications.

Breton and the Surrealists developed techniques which they hoped would allow them to tap the potential of the unconscious, and celebrated the stylised forms of tribal/primitive art, which they thought reflected a more direct access to the true self. This concept has spread with the movement of surrealist influence throughout the twentieth century, inspiring film, photography, media and animation and integrating its presence into the commercial imagery in all facets of popular culture.¹⁰

The Dutch painter, Piet Mondrian, took great inspiration from the Philosophical ideas of Theosophy. These teaching had been developed by the English mystic, Madame Blavatsky and her associates, including Annie Besant, built around their interpretations of Oriental philosophy, largely drawn from India. Their holistic concepts and purity of ideas was fundamental to the minimal formula like paintings Mondrian produced from around 1920 until his death in New York in 1944.¹¹

Examples are multiple, from changes in Indian fabrics to meet a European market, to the impact of Japanese woodblock prints on early modernism; again and again the crossing of cultures provides the stimulus and the sources for innovation.

Intellectual and Artistic Barriers

Ideas arise from diverse sources, but the presence of difference, be it intellectual or cultural, is integral to the evolution of concepts. In 1992, Dr Helen Andreoni published a report for National Association of the Visual Arts, titled *Outside the Gum Tree*.¹² The report detailed her research on the acceptance of immigrant artists into the Australian art scene. Andreoni found there was little integration of non-local traditions and the Australian art world showed an unwillingness to consider art which fell outside the standard European and American expectations. Immigrant artists, many of whom brought substantial, talents and reputations from their own cultures, usually had to abandon their traditional skills and seek to adopt local styles and approaches to art making, or relinquish their artistic aspirations entirely.

In the 15 years since Andreoni's report, there are indications that this situation has at least partially changed. The emphasis on multiculturalism and the networks of support which State galleries through their Access programs have provided, the Asian Art Triennial in Brisbane and the diversity of contemporary art production have facilitated non Western traditions finding a place in the art community. But this is set against the knowledge that East and West Art in Melbourne is still the only regular commercial venue for Asian style artists in the city. While there is a greater acceptance of 'non Australian' art, there are still limited opportunities for artists practicing in non-Western traditions. Celebrated icon painters from the traditions of Orthodox Christianity are retraining as 'Western-style' artists, traditional rug craftspeople are unable to find outlets for their work, master craftsmen with experience working on the restoration of European cathedrals are unable to establish demand for their figurative marbles and painters from decorative cultural traditions cannot find markets for their works. A well known Sri Lankan artist living in Melbourne has had limited

¹⁰ B.J. Hoffert et al., *ibid* p.129.

¹¹ B.J. Hoffert et al., *ibid* p.115.

¹² Helen Andreoni (1992) *Outside the Gum Tree*, Sydney: NAVA Publication.

success in obtaining a commercial gallery for his art, despite being one of the pioneers of Modernism in Sri Lanka and still able to command substantial prices for his paintings in Colombo.

These artists provide a wealth of talent and creative skill; they are able and willing to contribute to the broader Australian art world, but their abilities are often overlooked, or even ignored because their art does not conform to our expectations. Where artists have been able to make the transition, drawing on their own cultural traditions as the basis of their art, the results can be highly successful, not just in determining an oeuvre which is distinctive and which enriches the local art world, but in extending the definition of Australian visual identity. It is sometimes suggested that there is no defining identity of contemporary Australia, an issue of importance and concern in most postcolonial countries. This topic was explored by Nancy Barnard, Director of the National Gallery of the Caymans, in her paper to the 2006 INSEA congress, in which she identified the role of artists, aesthetic traditions and museums in establishing a post colonial identity in the Cayman Islands and posed a possible paradigm for other post colonial societies. This matched with the contention that it is the artists of a nation who shape its identity, from the ways they reflect their society. In a multicultural community it is how artists integrate their own cultural origins into the broader community which will be the vanguard in this regard. If we are to reject the cultural diversity which multiculturalism provides, we are undermining the identity and the cultural patrimony on which the nation's future depends.¹³

Creativity from Diversity

An interesting demonstration of the creative potential of cultural diversity is found in the art of Aloma Treister. Born in Baghdad into a Jewish family she moved to Iran in 1948, as a result of political pressures due to the formation of Israel, and stayed there until moving to Australia in 1973. Her family was part of a Sephardic (Middle Eastern) Jewish community and she lived in a Judaic island in an Islamic society, blending the rich and decorative visual culture of both into her distinctive visual style. Triester has made the leap into mainstream art, regularly showing at SPAN Gallery and, in 2005, showing at the Great Neck Arts centre in New York. The strength in Treister's art comes from its culturally diverse inspiration. As Kandinsky pointed out, all art is a product of its time¹⁴; all artists are the products of their society and culture. Treister's work takes this to an unusual, perhaps unique, extreme drawing inspiration from Jewish and Islamic sources. Both avoid the representation of the figure in their art, rather developing an elaborate decorative framework built around geometry and abstract symbols. Despite conceptual differences each religion offered a source of decorative splendour which fed Treister's imagination and shaped her aesthetic sensibilities. As she comments:

A Jewish marriage certificate could easily be mistaken for a Persian miniature as it is even written in the Persian language/ Arabic script. Our synagogue was intricately decorated with mosaic mirror tiles in recognisable local Islamic patterns. Silver platters embossed with these patterns carried our delicacies. Persian carpets adorned not only

¹³ Nancy Barnard (2006) 'Post-Colonialization and Art Education: Standards, Aesthetics and the Place of the Art Museum', INSEA World Congress catalogue, p.94.

¹⁴ Wassily Kandinsky (1977) *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Dover Publications, p.1.

our floors, but also covered our furniture. The finest silk carpets of Mashhad, rather than prints or paintings, were displayed in prominent positions on our lounge room walls. They were forms of investment in art. Their (Moslem art became our (Jewish) art).¹⁵

Cultural integration has shaped Treister's artistic development. It is as if she has carried youthful observations and perceptions of a society tolerant of conceptual diversity and sympathetic to visual similarity, to her new home in Australia; and also curiously, to her art years later at the beginning of the 21st Century. In the last decade she has drawn on her personal history, reawakened the memories of a distant and now geographically inaccessible past to reconfirm her personal identity and the cultural diversity of its aesthetic values. We all live with the shadows of our history, the features which individualise our past and directly, or indirectly, shape our present, but which because of their cultural distance seem not to have relevance to the present. These shadows are often obscured by the values and experiences of our immediate way of life, the daily routine which constitutes our everyday reality. But Treister has pushed past this immediate world to look through memory and sift the treasures from her past. Few can claim to have been born in the cradle of civilisation just kilometers from ancient Babylon, or to see with the eyes of cultures now locked in public conflict. Creativity often thrives in the context of social discourse or, even conflict, but Treister's art reconciles her cultural history into a peaceful coexistence. It transcends the potential for despair or disillusion and transforms her feelings and reflections into a contemporary force, establishing a body of interesting and engaging art. Its sources engage in social dialectic, East and West, Islamic and Jewish, old and new, public and personal and her images give this dialogue meaning.

There is a final dimension to Treister's art that asserts its significance, its expressive purpose resolved through cultural dialogue. All art distils the products of our sensibilities into objective form, our observations transformed into sympathetic structures which represent our perceptions; the ideas and the feelings become tangible. But for Treister this is the key to her world. The trammelling influence of the past has established its own identity, a world of depth and feeling in which the emotions of a diverse and rich life are realised. The peripheral vision of the ever-present outsider, the visitor in a transient existence, with the sharpened awareness of difference has crystallised her focus. Her identity is an emotion, a sense of belonging beyond the fractured journeys through location and time. It is the feeling which prevails outside of place. In this, Treister gives meaning both to self and art, a meaning which transcends culture, history and geographic awareness. It is the emotion which is in harmony with life, which looks for identity through universality and peace within the ever present certainty of change. The art which expresses this dissolves differences, expunges bias and eschews the shabby intrigues of self; it seeks to replace them with forbearance and toleration and through the harmony of self, identify with the kinship of humanity. Aloma Treister makes such a journey and looks for this emotion in the decorative images of her own origins.

Treister's diversity of cultural experience permeates her work, its content, its cultural references and its aesthetic language. Collages, paintings, computer manipulated photographs and mono-prints, all

¹⁵ Aloma Treister (2000) MA thesis, Monash University.

demonstrate her rich decorative sensibility. They speak, even shout, of a search for cultural harmony which must be read also as a metaphor for personal identity. The even symmetry of curves and sweeping lines mirror the dancing arabesques of mosque tiles or the decorative lace of a stone screens which guard a hidden world from prying eyes. There is the intensity of colour, the vivid, saturated hues of Persian rugs and block-print fabric, stirring the winds of memory and fanning the flames of feeling. Perhaps the most accessible references in her work are from family photographs, scanned and transformed into repetitive images framed in a matrix of decoration and bathed in a density of hue; a cousin and her children; grandparents on their wedding day dressed in the finery of their traditional attire; Judaic figures in Islamic garb.

One cannot survey Treister's works with indifference; there is memory, reflection, curiosity and wonder; the journeying of recollection through a lost and wondrous past where harmony comes from cultural respect and peace in the spirit of tolerance. This work communicates her history, beliefs and cultural tradition, but more than anything else it expresses a deep and personal dimension of her self. In the broader context, they demonstrate the creative power of cultural diversity and demonstrate a case for building our understanding of traditions beyond the immediate and learning to appreciate the expressive qualities they communicate.

Parallel discussions could surround numerous artists, both nationally and internationally: Bruno Leti's muted surfaces reflecting on the aged, textured plaster of historic frescoes, in his native Italy; Nam June Paik's technological installations, inspired by the shamanic traditions of Korean culture; the sources in Buddhist philosophy and Zen calligraphy behind the paintings of Pierre Soulage; the mystic sources which underpin Francesco Clemente's paintings sourced from living in India; the reflections on identity and exile in the beautiful installations of Mona Hatoum. These and countless other artists demonstrate the inspiration cultural diversity provides for contemporary art practice and the richness of aesthetic form which has resulted. Cultural diversity is arguably the strongest single source for the plethora of visual production we currently enjoy.

Conclusion

In summary, cultural diversity as a source of creative stimulation is explained by the account of the creative process outlined by Koestler, its loss is reported in the research of Andreoni and its potential is demonstrated in the art of Treister and others. There is a clear case to support the creative importance of recognising and supporting a diverse cultural mix in any community, but especially one with the vast resources of multiculturalism which Australian society enjoys. To not do so is to undermine the creative potential of our future. In a post industrial society where intellectual property is the new capital and creativity the basis of production, cultural diversity must be recognised as the raw material of innovation.