

Beauty as the Beast: Creativity, the Exotic and the Dark Side of Desirability

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Desiring 'the Other'

The avant-garde groups to emerge during the spiritual crisis of the early twentieth century... challenged the Eurocentric ideology of 'progress' and looked for alternative forms of existence beyond the boundaries of 'civilisation.' They sought in primitive cultures an escape from bourgeois restrictions and the spiritual lassitude of the west, witnessed for example with the life of Gauguin in Tahiti. The Western phenomenon of modernist primitivism was thus predicated on a certain dissatisfaction, loss, nostalgia and an image of a utopian form of existence... (Wilhide & Copestick, 1999:50)



Figure 1



Figure 2

'Tahiti looks nice' was once the catch-phrase for a soap advert. The scene was of a wealthy, blonde family flying around in their private plane, whilst bathing in their individual bubble baths. Daddy exclaimed, 'Tahiti looks nice!' and so - clicking on their seatbelts (not forgetting to secure their bar of soap) - they banked to the left and headed off to paradise. Combining hygiene, wealth and luxury with an easily accessed utopia proved an irresistible and powerful metonym. However the soap brand name – *Imperial Leather* - signaled a more subtle if not sinister side to 'looking nice', as it referred simultaneously to a desire stimulated by appearances and the concomitant diaspora of Empire.

Creativity is the new Tahiti. Just about everyone wants to go there and experience its riches, pleasures and possibilities, and just about everyone alters the character of the place in coming. Tahiti used to look really nice; now it looks like every other tourist resort, existing more as a marketable version of its former, exotic self,¹ where you can

Hear the island winds beckoning you to relax in [a] tropical bedding collection,

[where] Leafy botanical wovens are paired with custom made trimmings in a myriad of vibrant colors. Warm brown, bright pomegranate and verdant hues merge in starfish and palm themed prints; raffia and exotic beaded fringe highlight Tahitian style...²



Figure 3

Phile or Phobe?

My educated guess is that many of you have experienced being asked at a social function: 'so what do you do?' and you reply, 'I am an artist' or 'I work for an art school' and more often than not you get more questions. Curiosity is stimulated by the possibility that you are doing something that isn't just about making money, something possibly romantic, rebellious if not exotic. You become a novelty of sorts... (if there are any accountants out there perhaps you have experienced the opposite?) Depending on the timing, your situation and/or the chemistry, you milk this for all it's worth, or try to engineer an escape. Sometimes an inquisitor pops that same question and on hearing your response perceives that your chosen vocation somehow threatens them.

...the Western view saw nature as a dangerous, brutish force to be civilized and subdued. Humans perceived natural forces as hostile, so they attacked back to exert control. In the United States (*but this happened all over the place*), taming the frontier took on the power of a defining myth, and 'conquering' wild, natural places was recognized as a cultural-even spiritual-imperative... (McDonough & Braungart, 2002:25-26)



Figure 4

My recent experience was with a builder, contracted to repair a toilet in my studio, who felt the need to take the piss out of art, and me as an artist, in order to make himself feel better about his place in the world. In another situation, on having a proposed feature of an accepted public art commission rejected by a committee I questioned the client, the manager of Coles New World, Tasmania:

'Hi...it's John Vella here...'

'Who?'

'John Vella the artist working on your public artwork...'

'Oh'

'Well I was just checking in to try and get some feedback about the additional feature to try...'

'Listen, we didn't want this public artwork thing anyway...'

Council forced us into this situation...'

and if the shit hits the fan we are the ones who are going to cop it.'³

(One wonders why on completing the project, I renamed the artwork *Coles Old World*.)



Figure 5

It was fear of 'the Other' that motivated these protagonists; the same fear that shoots first and asks questions later; the same fear that sees a colonising mentality (a form of global franchise) as a way of reducing or controlling that fear. Exploit, conquer, belittle, own or otherwise destroy the 'great unknown' and you'll get to know it in your own way, and so it won't be a problem.

a xenophobe is one who holds that the humanly foreign, the Other, the culturally unseen and unknown – perhaps some vaguely reported and misunderstood tribe across the sea – is really a bit sus, and definitely not what we want at home in our living room... A xenophile, on the other hand, holds that the foreign, the remote, the exotically other, precisely because it is only vaguely apprehended, and just because it radically differs from ourselves, is something wholesome and admirable and should be warmly embraced... (Sandall, 2006:19)



Figure 6

The source of creativity's unprecedented attention is caught somewhere between the xenophile and the xenophobe; where certain characteristics of things 'culturally unseen and unknown' are sifted out and often stage-managed so as to be 'what [everyone] want[s] at home in [their] living rooms.' The warm embrace of this xenophile is simultaneously supportive and intimate, yet potentially suffocating.

What distinguishes the *xenophile* from the *phobe* is the emotional driver; the fear, as opposed to the naïve romanticisation, that drives their actions. Ironically what has united them throughout history, is that the consequences of what they often perceive to be good intentions⁴ are the tragic outcomes of falling for appearances, neglecting the complexities of people, culture or place.⁵ Maybe as a direct consequence of *globalImperialLeatherization*, humanity has so nearly erased the geographic and primitive exotic that it is now searching for it's experiential equivalent (the creative / artistic exotic); that which can at least evoke and provoke the imagination, and an experience of other worlds. In this context we often encounter *phile* as *phobe*:



Figure 7

The patterns and motifs characteristic of Australian Aboriginal art are at once simple and exotic. Their rich muddy tones combine the colours of earth, sand and rock in a palette that is both soothing and easy to live with...The *pointilliste* painting technique used to frame this window is not difficult to achieve, nor does it take long to do as it covers a relatively small area. The technique would work equally well applied along a dado rail or as a paint lined panel. Before embarking on the painting, it is a good idea to rough out your design on paper first, using images

from books on Aboriginal art or exhibition catalogues as reference. Better still, go and view some originals... (Wilhide & Copestick, 1999:39)⁶

There are ostensibly good intentions and (believe it or not) creativity here. Art marketeers could claim this as some sort of victory; an attempt to celebrate the indigenous and afford their art a level of, perhaps unprecedented attention. Yet it is plain to see that it is also a tragic appropriation and a skim reading of a creative culture, the literal epitome of surface over substance.⁷

Florida looks nice

We've been to Tahiti, now let's go to Florida:

Creativity has become the global gold standard for economic growth... Richard Florida's new book should be required reading for elected officials, policy makers, educators, business leaders—and every citizen who's concerned about the future of this country.⁸

Just who are Richard Florida's Creative Class? They are '...employed in fields ranging from science and engineering to architecture and design and from arts, [finally] music and entertainment to the creative professions of law business and finance, health care and related fields.'⁹ It's clear that Dick likes to think laterally about creativity, but as artists/art educators, the keepers of creativity with a capital C (creativity that targets cultural engagement) we have a responsibility to ensure that it flourishes both within and without the context of wealth generation.¹⁰ Florida, as a kind of all conquering creative capitalist, rapes and pillages (again with all the good intentions) seeing the potential for a buck to be made, and yet in his 404-page book *The Rise of Creative Class* his index refers to Art/ artists like this:

Art: appearance as, 179-180 (1 page); vs. mass marketing of culture, 201(1 page);
See also Bohemians.¹¹

In his other 326-page book, *The Flight of the Creative Class*, his index refers once to artistic creativity (a single line on page 73) and arts only once, listed as: 'arts, investing in'. (Florida, 2005:250-51)

I know these books aren't about art but as key texts pushing creativity, it's clear that whilst the dictionary definition of creativity emphasizes its relationship to the production of an artistic work,¹² the contemporary usage of the term (post-Florida) is diluting *our* role within it. I am not talking here about a paranoid defence of who has the right to be an artist or be creative. My concern lies more with the fact that Florida's 'creativity' (the creativity that is giving us all this attention) waters down the role of the arts, and in so doing incorrectly assumes (and proclaims) that what is good for his version of creativity, is by default good for us.

This not just about semantics as there is a very real danger of people misreading, misinterpreting and misunderstanding artistic creativity filtered through policies / strategies

mediated through Florida's vision. The fear factor rises when Florida himself claims to be '... amazed by how quickly city and regional leaders began to use [his] measures and indicators to shape their development strategies.'¹³ According to Florida '... the rise of the creative economy is drawing... technological creativity,... economic creativity and artistic and cultural creativity into one another, in more intimate and more powerful combinations than ever.' (Florida, 2002:201) In this context of our creativity getting intimate with an economically determined beast (and quickly at that) I suggest we be alert, aware and alarmed.¹⁴

To be wild...

Traditional tales of encountering wildness and beasts, (Tarzan, King Kong et. Al.) usually begin with fear followed by a love affair of sorts born more out of a fascination with 'the Other'. What follows is often an increase in fame / attention, a struggle to adapt, a time of frustration, a break down of trust and eventually 'wildness' is translated into gimmick.



Figure 8



Figure 9

The once wild one then tries to regain their wildness but remains forever displaced and/or otherwise discombobulated. Wildness is compromised in captivity as it does best when left to its own devices. Wildness in general, is now a trope in decline (unilaterally a casualty of the population boom and globalization), and so has to be identified and understood, if not marketed (ironically), as something worth saving before it is relegated to the ever increasing list of things endangered. Wildness enslaved by the state risks becoming a sideshow, however, (especially now) it needs to be supported through government and otherwise to enable it to survive in the context of a deteriorating habitat. Irrespective of intent (think back to *xenophile phobe*), desiring and discovering 'wildness' is the first step towards its transformation (or destruction) for whether by disease or default we somehow destroy it by coming into contact with it.¹⁵ At the risk of sounding pessimistic, I believe we (artist and art educators) are, courtesy of Florida and co., at the love affair, if not the fame stage.

Markets have their place, but theatres, galleries or concert halls also need intelligent public subsidy if complex culture is to take place... public subsidy produces what the market may not sustain – it is almost a bulwark against globalised commercialism (*Floridaland*) that might not be sensitive or responsive to local and national cultural expression. It makes possible what might otherwise be available, and it makes available the best.' (Jowell, 2004:7)



Figure 10



Figure 11

'The best' animals, 'the best' exotic and I would argue 'the best' arts educators / artists, aren't determined by a just add Florida mentality, they are a consequence of an attunement with the complexities of habitat. I am not proposing we bite the hand that feeds for opposing the conditions that have created this supportive context (where we are desired) would be ridiculous (if not impossible). However in striving for a *real* experience, a substance over surface, we need to communicate and preserve what constitutes our habitat, a *real* experience for us; what environment enables us as an artist / art educator species to flourish and evolve.¹⁶ The Surrealists 'developed relationships with prominent indigenous people... It was as a result of such contacts that [they] critically reframed their early...representations of the 'primitive'. (Tythacott, 2003:12) Contextualised as a creative, contemporary exotic, we need to reverse the roles, take the initiative and work harder at encouraging the powers that be to critically reframe their understanding of what we constitute.

'In [this] world increasingly reliant on visual communication, the role of artist and artist/educator are receiving unprecedented attention around the globe' but we should not forget that Shane Warne receives as much if not more attention for his SMSing antics than his bowling. Yes some could argue here that all publicity is good publicity but really it isn't especially when you are in the business of trying to raise the bar. In this context, without reflecting on and actively critiquing our predicament, we risk becoming commentators as opposed to main players of the game... sidelined, aging and growing gradually obese, we would remain naively content and condemned to reliving our heroic past.

Conclusion



Figure 12

The arts as we know them need to determine (or at the very least participate in) a new rubric for measuring the generation of positive social and economic value that sits outside of traditional understandings. Applying existing economic formulae to the arts is destined to take it into a slow decline where we risk sacrificing the substance of creativity for the look of it. Ironically, (again), ‘...marketing materialism has given art more visibility and prestige than it had when it served religion and the aristocracy,’ (Kuspit, 2001:3) however despite the attention (or perhaps because of it) the danger is that we become complicit in a system within which the briefs are already written; where our role remains predetermined as incidental, as opposed to central, within the creative matrix.

Maybe we all know we aren’t actually as exotic as some in society would like to believe but then that’s no reason to completely throw the baby out with the bath water. What set us in this direction in the first place was a sense of adventure, of risk, of rebellion perhaps. Most of us are here today because we made choices that our parents and friends thought were pretty dumb. I am sure we didn’t make those decisions lightly or for the money.



Figure 13

Florida’s problem is that he can’t conceive of creativity without thinking about the money. Our problem is in having to deal with the bureaucrats and sycophants who have fallen for his version of the truth. In dealing with a *post-Floridic* world in which we, and our creative skills / input are desired, we need to heighten our understanding of where this desire arises and to what end, ulterior or otherwise, it is designed to achieve. In addition ‘ we need to find a way to

demonstrate the personal value added which comes from engagement with complex art...'
(Jowell, 2004:3) Creativity with a capital C.



Figure 14

Whilst as a lover as opposed to a fighter (especially on account of my wimpishness), I never intended this paper to be a call to arms. I think it's worth reflecting on how in the context of being colonised, faced with the threat of relinquishing your identity/culture or having it challenged, spirited and aggressive defense historically has proven successful. I know I am drawing a relatively long bow here, but it's a bow and arrow as opposed to a bow tie; the aggression of the Zulu as opposed to the passivity of the Incas; the aggression of the Maori as opposed to the Aboriginal predicament. If we agree that we are in the process of being desired, if not colonised, as a consequence of 'receiving unprecedented attention around the globe,' then we need to develop a strategy and action plan for dealing with it; not just working out ways to ride the wave but how to best direct it.



Figure 15

'It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.'¹⁷ But I am not talking about pure survival as rats, foxes and seagulls survive very well. Nor am I talking about being 'responsive' via simply adapting to formulae orchestrated by *phile* or *phobe*.

We have to be thinking about the calibre of our survival and to this end we are capable right now of determining what 'change' and our response to it constitutes. Ultimately, it's time to acknowledge that Florida will only look nice if we can manage to hold onto a bit of our Tahiti.

Illustrations

- Figure 1 Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892). Oil on burlap mounted on canvas, 72.4 x 92.4 cm; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.
www.images.google.com/images?q=gauguin
- Figure 2 William Hodges, *Tahiti Revisited* (1776). Oil on canvas, 98 x 138 cm, National Maritime Museum, London.
- Figure 3 Tahiti Intercontinental Resort with advertisement for *Ile de Gauguin Bed Linens*.
www.poshliving.com
- Figure 4 *The Hunters*, www.kumeyaay.info/pictures/historic/manuelai/mountainlion.jpg
- Figure 5 Coles Old World, (2004) public art commission by John Vella. Sandy Bay, Hobart Tasmania.
- Figure 6 *Phile or Phobe?* www.painetworks.com/photos/fg/fg2888.JPG
- Figure 7 *Aboriginal Painted Window Frame*, Wilhide, E. & Copestick, J. (1999) *modern EXOTIC*, (London: Conran Octopus).
- Figure 8 *King Kong*, www.shillpages.com/faywray/wrayfp35.jpg
- Figure 9 *Tarzan*, www.suspense-movies.com/stars/tarzan-jane/Jane3.jpg
- Figure 10 *Lion Tamer*, www.mantenostatehospital.com/images_img/liont6667.jpg
- Figure 11 *Payback*, www.nyfilmvideo.com/2003/losangeles/devilandaureliofernandez/Trai001
- Figure 12 *To Be Wild...* www.petaindia.com/images/zoos/lg-monkey1.jpg
- Figure 13 'Today you will be safe' www.wwf.be/heartofafrica/img/visuals/wallpapers/poster-king-kong
- Figure 14 *Haka*, www.newzealand-infocenter.com/grafix/haka.jpg
- Figure 15 *Future perfect?* www.daemery.com/images/85Australia/85%2520Tahiti

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[www.poshliving.com/ common/ assets/product images/88_9515_PD1.jpg](http://www.poshliving.com/common/assets/product_images/88_9515_PD1.jpg)

www.wollemipine.com

End Notes

¹ 'All rooms are decorated in colonial Polynesian style with bamboo floors and include modern amenities of international standard...' Tahiti Intercontinental Resorts and Spas
www.ichotelsgroup.com/h/d/ic/1/en/hd/mozpf

² Advertisement for *Ile de Gauvain Bed Linens*
www.poshliving.com/common/assets/product_images/88_9515_PD1.jpg

³ I am talking about creativity, art and artists being thrust into situations because someone thinks it's a good idea but doesn't understand what it means, or worse still is forced to accept 'art' as a quid pro quo for not having enough parking or going over a height threshold etc.

⁴ Slaughtering innocents for example can be justified (or seen as a good outcome) if you believe in a cause enough, as in terrorism.

⁵ History is unfortunately riddled with anecdotes and events that describe the mostly terrible outcomes of 'good intentions' as they relate to the exotic 'other'. Whether by war/invasion, disease, isolation, destruction of habitat, e.g. 'In 1833 the remnants of the Tasmanian Aboriginal population (a mere 160 people) were exiled to live at Settlement Point (named by the Aboriginals as *Wybalenna* - black man's houses) on Flinders Island, with the misguided belief that they would be protected from the rape and abuses of the white settlers in Tasmania. By 1847, the settlement had been deemed a failure and was abandoned. The remaining 45 Aborigines were sent to Oyster Cove on the east coast of Tasmania.'
www.focusonflinders.com.au/about.htm.

⁶ 'When French architect Jean Nouvel invited Aboriginal artists from Australia to decorate sections of the eagerly awaited Musee du Quai Branly,... it was not because he attached a particular weight to their ancient cultural traditions.' To be absolutely sincere,' the museum's president Stephane Martin, told *Inquirer* earlier this year, 'it was just a question of colour. He wanted colour.' (Cosic, 2006:19).

⁷ Unfortunately this approach has a history. Perhaps unsurprisingly, early curators of the exotic where ' No attempt was made to recover an emic, or inside...' a sense of what primitive esthetics really were or are. All the curators want us to know about these tribal objects is where they came from, what they look like, who owns them, and how they fit the (perceived) needs of the exhibition... or the society.' Thomas McEvilley quoted in Tythacott, 2003:9-10.

⁸ Alan M. Webber, founding editor, *Fast Company*. See also 'Richard Florida sounds a wake-up call for companies that thrive on the creativity of their employees, customers, and communities.' 'The Flight of the Creative Class' challenges everyone - business, community, and political leaders alike - to engage and support education, technology, R&D, and community building in an effort to create a better future.' Jim Goodnight, founder and CEO of SAS, www.harrywalker.com

⁹ 'Bohemian Index: calculated in the same fashion as the gay Index, ...is a measure of artistically creative people...' (Florida: 2002:7).

¹⁰ So why all this attention in the first place? What attracted people to 'the Other'? Curiosity, power, knowledge and of course money. Spice trade, art trade, world trade where '...paradigm busting creative industries could single handedly change the way cities flourish while driving dynamic and widespread economic change' (Florida, 2005:1-2).

¹¹ Artists: computers and, 209; front-loaded careers, 155; performance, 156-159 (as in marketing), 176-177 (The Body as Art...and this is worth quoting: noting the toned bodies on many young members of the Creative Class, my brother Robert, himself a fellow who likes to stay fit, says that 'college students today look like they major in staying in shape.' Much is true of another Creative Class subgroup: performing artists. A number of middle-aged rock stars, such as Bruce Springsteen and Madonna, now appear much fitter...' So 'the body as art here has nothing to do with art or performance art it's about a metaphor for fitness. Florida, 2002:176-177).

¹² creativity [kr - __ tivit_] [krie __ t_v_dil], noun the use of the imagination or original ideas, esp. in the production of an artistic work.

¹³ Florida's books are bestsellers and very much in demand. I could only get them on a 3 day loan. '...millions sold'.

¹⁴ 'Materialism has increased exponentially in art and society... Business materialism is evident in the eagerness for corporate sponsorship of art – one may say corporate legitimization of its significance. Business materialism is also evident in the implicit belief that the work of art is a commodity before it is anything else,... that its marketplace value is its primary value.' (Kuspit, 2001:3).

¹⁵ Think Wollemi pine (in order to protect and preserve it we keep its indigenous location secret. The Wollemi Pine is one of the world's oldest and rarest plants dating back to the time of the dinosaurs. With less than 100 adult trees known to exist in the wild, the Wollemi Pine is now the focus of extensive research to safeguard its survival. Assist in the conservation effort by growing your own Wollemi Pine and becoming part of one of the most dramatic comebacks in natural history. www.wollemipine.com

¹⁶ ...The Surrealists wished to destroy artificial contradictions created by modern rationalism and technology; they believed that industrialization...had alienated humankind from a *real* experience of the world... (The following excerpt from an interview is about 'the tension between the museum's position as an educational forum and an entertainment form'. Look what happens when I exchange the word 'museum' with 'the arts'. Reflecting on the museum / gallery as a public to art interface, a litmus test of how the public is engaged...) 'In 1990...you commented: I'm interested in the tension between the art's position as an educational forum and an entertainment form...' Dion: As sites of learning and knowledge, 'the arts' has traditionally been a place of extraordinary seriousness that shut out popular culture. But now there are very concrete pressures for the arts to appeal to popular taste because of dire funding situations...In many countries, the arts are trying to find news ways to remain economically viable as business. The explosion of gift shops, restaurants, entertainment programs and public outreach projects are testimony to the art's redirection towards becoming more popular. But a disturbing thing about these shifts is that as the arts has become more 'educational' as part of its popularization efforts, it's also become dumber... Rather than a place where one might go to explore some complex questions, the arts now simplifies the questions and gives you reductive answers for them. It does all the work, so the viewer is passive...' Miwon Kwon interview with Mark Dion in *pressPLAY* (2005:126-127).

¹⁷ Charles Darwin in *The Origin of the Species*.