Queensland
a state of creation

Let's be clear – there are many fine and extremely creative 'home-grown' and 'blow-in' talents in Queensland. Some of the best artists, designers, musicians, architects, writers, photographers and filmmakers in the land live and work here. But contrary to postulations, Richard Florida, the doyen of the creative economy, says they do not form a 'class' (creative or otherwise). Yet they do have the potential to become a 'community in difference.'
Tony Fry reports.

THE CLAIM BY the Queensland State Government is that its creative industries are growing at a faster rate here than any other state (this is from a base where the sector was half the size of its counterparts in NSW and Victoria). This would suggest that more 'creatives' are staying in, and coming to, Queensland than are leaving. On the basis that the population of SE Queensland (where most of the creatives in the State live and work) is slated to grow from three to four million by 2026 this tendency could be expected to continue. Added to this demographic trend is also the fact that the creative sector is being heavily developed and promoted.

As far as economic performance is concerned, as signified by statistics (of which there are volumes), the picture is impressive. But in actuality things are not as clear cut, or as unproblematic, as they statistically are made out to appear.

Much turns on an acceptance of a proposition that 'creativity' is a source of economic growth. This proposition is inherent in the ideas espoused by Richard Florida, but as many of his critics have pointed out the causal factors of economic growth tend to be plural and more complex than he suggests. Likewise Florida's act of turning something qualitative (creativity) into something quantitative (an industry with a measurable economic output) is also challenged. This is
because the shift he makes is not only a semantic act of violence but conceptual transformation of the very notion of creativity. Effectively making the move imposes an instrumental and economically functionalist model of the creative subject, via undercooked theory, which negates the essence of the socio-historical complexity of imagination. Put another way: Florida constructs a divide between an economically classified and reductive notion of creativity (vested with an expressive individual) and the complexity of the formation of the psycho-cultural phenomena of creativity itself. His disjunctural thought maps onto another and more prosaic division: that between self-identities and class formation.

Creative people generally see themselves in relation to their practice and their cultural community. They do not view themselves as a class. In fact, sociologically they cannot be deemed to be a class—they lack a commonality. The ‘professionalisation’ of creativity, as it: (i) excludes people whose choice not to commodify their creative activities; and (ii) includes people whose relation to a cultural commodity is purely functional belies this lack as a fact. Class, so employed, thus simply stands in for an imposed economic classification.

Of course the economic valorisation of culture started a long time before Florida came to prominence—the greatest impetus coming from the ascendent of the popular culture, the hegemony of entertainment post World War Two, and from the rise of what Jean Baudrillard called the ‘political economy of the sign’ (the economic power of the symbolic).

Other exclusions and misperceptions have ‘flowed’ from the keyboards of Florids et al: like the urbocentric linkage wherein the agency of the ‘creative class’ is bonded to urban regeneration and ‘inner city’ lifestyles. For instance, the rendered invisibility of a great deal of indigenous culture not only supports this critical observation but also undercuts assumptions about the creative subject (by exposing modes of cultural production which arrive by dint of the collective and mediated traditions). Likewise, while a certain amount of ‘lip-service’ is paid to ‘multiculturalism’ by Florids influenced economists, cultural theorists...
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and politicians, the depth and complexity of cultural diversity (including in Queensland and the rest of Australia) hardly registers within culture industry theory and practice (unless rendered superficial and put in the bag of tourism). It follows that the cultural production of the nation’s many migrant communities does not figure in at all ‘on the cultural scene.’ Certainly, what is produced hardly ever arrives in urban cultural institutions valorised with real exchange value. In this respect, the professionalisation of art, and the cultural industries in general, are structured to exclude fundamental difference. As estimated, the Florida inspired discourse of culture industry development centred on the notion of a creative class powering urban (and economic) regeneration by moving into run-down inner-city properties, becoming creatively productive and acting as attractors for the proliferation of ‘trendy’ cafes, bars, galleries, boutiques etc. But this is not how the sector was established in Brisbane and in its other scatterings in Queensland. Here its rise was fragmented and partial.

**BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS**

Expo 88 is often cited as a ‘trigger’ event in the modern cultural history of Brisbane – it was used to ‘clean-up’ the South Bank area (which had been a run-down area of warehouses and hostels with a significant aboriginal population). The event had lasting consequences: it transformed the perception of the city from ‘a big country town’ to a modern metropolis (this perception was as much local as it was national); it brought together a whole cluster of existing and new mainstream cultural institutions in a substantial cultural precinct prompting adjacent area gentrification; and it further marginalised the marginal. Importantly, the event also brought many creatives to Brisbane to work on the Expo.

There are three other factors to add that have increased employment in Queensland’s creative service sector: the enormous expansion of Brisbane as a regional business and financial centre (in part supporting the development of Queensland’s natural resources); various forms of direct and indirect help from government to arts/creative industry organisations, individual and academic institutions; and the rise of the State as an international tourist destination (which has generated pockets of ‘creatives’ in places like Noosa, Minderly and Carre). While definitions of creativity should not be confused with its economic classification neither should it be taken to be the property of just one discourse.
The profile and opportunism of the 'patronocracy' of Florida and his followers has acted to obscure the recognition of creativity as an object of philosophical inquiry (which makes clear that creation is indivisible from destruction and thus is always 'on the line' ethically). It has to be said that the instrumentalised academy has been complicit in corporative led processes of cultural diminution. But now it's time to reclaim the spaces, practices and languages of cultural production for the 'common good.' Sustainability demands a sustainable culture, and this culture requires much more than 'creative commons.' It needs new ideas, minds, practices, businesses and institutions.

What this cursory critique leads to is an observation that places how one views Queensland in a position between its contemporary circumstances and the need for a higher level of creativity that goes beyond what Cornelius Castoriadis called the 'ontological gratuitous.' Put bluntly, the imperative is for creative people of every ilk to rise to the challenges that underscore our age, which includes confronting those determined forces that seem to be increasingly sealing our fate. In these circumstances the need for innovation, creative solutions and a culture of creativity exists like never before. Thus, creativity in the service of the economic status quo is now just not enough (not that it ever was).

If Queensland actually was a 'Smart State' its leadership would realise that continuing to follow half-baked trends and trend-setters was a fated path. It would align itself with insightful thinkers in Queensland and elsewhere, who are now recognising that there are actually enormous opportunities awaiting truly creative people. Australia, the world, needs such people like never before. There can be no 'culture of sustainment,' no viable future, without them. All this is to say that much of the creative industries themselves now need to be unmade, regenerated and made to be 'creative in their actual substance.' The economy of unsustainability is dying — we can now smell the corpse. Serving it may still bring short term gains, but long term loss is certain. In this context 'sustainment' is the emergent realm of necessity and an imperative of cultural production. There is no change without risk! ©

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