Art, Labour, Love

PAT HOFFIE

No, I don’t like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don’t like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means.

Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

Perhaps the experience of being involved in the making of art can best be described as happening somewhere in that space between labour and love. So it seems helpful to start off with the Conrad quote. It’s a good, sound, matter-of-fact description about the appeal of work. There’s been way too much ideology shackled to the term ‘labour’ to allow it to be even the tiniest bit free. And yet through the voice of Marlow, Conrad claims a space for labour that, later on in Heart of Darkness, manifests into a space of focused concentration that prepares a way for retrieval and even deliverance of the narrator. And it doesn’t carry with it the merest hint of altruism or betterment for all. It’s a deeply selfish space – a space for knowing ‘what no other man (sic) can ever know’. A bit like being in love.

All this seems continents away from the descriptions of creativity that abound in our present era. Instead of the inwardly focused gaze of Marlow’s search to find his ‘own reality’ we are presented in the contemporary world with a very much more public space – a place where ‘creativity’ is a fertiliser for industry and for commerce and for the outward trappings of success. In today’s parlance the term ‘creativity’ is often associated with gloss and money and ‘sexiness’. But the deeply sensual nature of making art and of participating in the reception and interpretation of art is as rare as it ever has been.

The seed for this article began as a reflection about the personal experiences of creativity. I originally wanted to write about the sell-out of the word – of how disenchanted the word has become, being touted around by sharp-suited executive types as something to be identified, then harnessed to the service of various outputs. It’s a word that seems to have dimly lit the imaginative powers of many politicians as well, who want the creative to be attached as an epithet to all undertakings, whether economic, sociological or cultural. There have been a number of sophisticated arguments made about the power of creativity to act as a multiplier effect on the value of end-products, and there is a sense now that creativity brings about better financial outcomes and healthier cities and more sane societies. But there has been little work done on arguing for the ineffable value of art to individuals; about how it is an intrinsic, essential part of human life.

Which might be quite proper. Art, like love, and like the true benefits of labour, is difficult to justify in public. Any attempts to do so often end up sounding like the emptiness of a resounding gong or clanging cymbal, as the writer of Corinthians well warned. And any such attempts make one seem like a kack-handed apologist for something that is better experienced than described. There’s a sense of
talking about something that is so essential that it doesn’t warrant the time taken to belabour the point. Better to get on with the job at hand.

As Marlow well knew, there is time enough for self-reflection and reflexiveness, but all too little time when the journey starts. And as everyone who has read the tale (and others in which Marlow appears) also well knows, Marlow’s patched and lurching steamer was the poorest of vessels to transport his crew of manager, pilgrims and cannibals up-river to Kurtz’s Station. It was a vessel that required all of the narrator’s focus, all his energy, all his attention to detail if it was to last him the journey.

Artists, by and large, are also well aware of the crummy, patched-up ineptitude of the vessel they have chosen to sail upstream, against the current of the time into which they are born. And they are often also well aware of the feebleness of their own particular skills and are constantly amazed at finding themselves in situations in which they least expected to be. This, despite their tendency to set their navigational instruments in line with courses that are sure to get them lost. For finding yourself in places where you didn’t expect to be is a strong part of the appeal...
of art making. It takes you into territories that are unfamiliar, and often into which you may not have wandered voluntarily. All of which may sound a little frightening. It is. But it’s also exhilarating. And if you’re vigilant watching out for the snags and the overhanging branches, it can be illuminating too. One of the many things that it can teach you is how little you know. Whenever you get out of your own comfort zone you have to let that current just drift you along upstream a bit further. You know that there are times you are well into deep water, and worse still, drifting towards shoals that are way too shallow. But sometimes, if you trust your instinct, work like a beggar with what you know, and focus on the small practicalities like the rivets, as Marlow did so unceasingly, you can find that your little vessel has made it around another reach.

All this can make you realise lots about the extent to which you’re just plain lucky. Many artists are blessed and plagued by this realisation. Despite the swagger and arrogance that some might assume as attitudes, many artists understand how little their own efforts have contributed to getting them where they are. They are aware that the making of art has a lot to do with serendipity and chance – and with a developed skill to recognise that and to run with it when it happens. Conrad was well aware of this. In his Author’s Notes, he writes:

I follow the instincts of vainglory and humility natural to all mankind. For it can hardly be denied that it is not their own deserts that men are most proud of, but rather of their prodigious luck, of their marvellous fortune: of that in their lives for which thanks and sacrifices must be offered on the altars of the inscrutable gods.2

So, like Marlow (and perhaps like Conrad), artists are often surprised at the way those around them treat them as though they already know who they are. As though they are ‘artists’. As though they have already been subscribed a role. So confounding, when so much of the practice of art is an attempt to find out what that role might be. The term ‘art practice’ is a strange one. It’s as though we’re in a state of perpetually trying out for something that you never really reach – much of which is probably true. When artists start behaving suspiciously like artists there’s a good chance they might have fallen into the trap of believing someone else’s (or worse yet, their own) publicity.

But Marlow was not a man like this. He was a man who understood his own calling, and who well understood pretence. And yet he also had enough artistry in him to understand when not to correct misinterpretations.

...Yes – I let him run on,' Marlow began again, 'and think what he pleased about the powers that were behind me! I did! And there was nothing behind me! There was nothing but that wretched, old, mangled steamboat I was leaning against, while he talked fluently about "the necessity for every man to get on."3

And so it is with artists – the little bit of space carved out ostentatiously and with much flourish by the society at large as ‘the role of the artist’ is often a little space that can be best used as a departure point from which to keep the rest guessing ... while the real work gets done elsewhere.
Because the real inner motivation for the role is often little more than the wretched, old, mangled mess of materials on which ideas and emotion and speculations and propositions might be able to become floated. One bangs away at the materials. One fidgets and adjusts and discards.

For it’s dealing with the stuff of making art that holds so much of the pull of art practice. Over and above the dreams of fame, success, influence, opportunity that might seem like such allure to the uninitiated, the day-by-day drudgery of facing the meagre materials has a pull as strong as a current. Marlow describes his turning away from the lure of making impact towards what was, for him, a far greater seduction:

It was a great comfort to turn from that chap to my influential friend, the battered, twisted, ruined tin-pot steamboat. I clambered on board. She rang under my feet like an empty Huntley & Palmer biscuit tin kicked along a gutter; she was nothing so solid in make, and rather less pretty in shape, but I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her.⁴

There are, of course, many artists who speak most fulsomely of their brushes with influence. Most of their narratives are taken up with recounting names and places, sale prices and the events they’ve participated in. It’s the sort of stuff that provides the main staple for the (more commercial) art magazines, and currently it’s arguably also one of the main aims of the bulk of young visual artists. When the auction houses hold sway, the tempo of the times picks up the beat and the crew dances. A slow, passionless dance it may often be, but it holds so many in its thrall.

Other artists (and sometimes the same artists, at different times) are plagued by the slow, persistent feeling that they are counterfeit – that they have no real core of skill or knowledge. Marlow, too, succumbed to this sensation immediately after embarking on his quest: ‘... I don’t know why – a queer feeling came to me that I was an impostor.’⁵ Such artists hold deep suspicions that they are little more than snake-oil salesmen and pretenders. That’s what happens when you’re taught the value of doubt and self-scrutiny as a fundamental first-base towards the possibility of creating art. Once you’ve embarked on a course of critical thinking, it becomes difficult not to turn it into a self-focused self-indulgence. Things are never good enough. Skills aren’t up to scratch. The end product is lacking. You look at work and only see those bits that fail. There’s a core to art practice that involves the creation of a perpetual malcontent: someone who can always see how things can be taken a little bit farther, that the next body of work is going to be better. Tip it one way, and you’re snagged into inaction.

But it was not a snag that held Marlow fast for too long. There was the task at hand that dragged him forward. In Marlow’s first enforced encampment at Central Station, brought about by the sinking of his beloved steamer, he comes across a breed of men he terms ‘the pilgrims’. Unlike himself, they do not seem to suffer from the nightmares of self-scrutiny. By and large they seem like overwhelmingly ordinary men who have been lured to the heart of darkness under the promise of fame and money. Marlow describes these ciphers in the most matter-of-fact terms: they are ‘civil’, they are ‘sociable’, ‘gentlemanship’, ‘reserved’. These descriptions seem to resonate with that same banality of evil Hannah Arendt perceived in Adolph Eichmann as he stood at his defence, describing with calm diffidence the necessity of performing his work in an orderly way.

Marlow’s ‘pilgrims’ perambulate aimlessly across a ‘cleared speck on the earth’ surrounded on all sides by the ‘silent wilderness’. They wander within their own feeble attempts at culture and control, within the futile fences that had been erected as tragic markers of territory. Marlow is aware that the Station is a place of pretence, and he is able to turn his back on it only for as long as he is able to concentrate on the welcome demands of his own work. But this, too, offered chinks of repose where his headlong facing of the reality in which he found himself became a necessity:

Still, one must look about sometimes: and then I saw this station, these men strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard. I asked myself sometimes what it all meant. They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse.⁶

It’s a marvellous description, this place of faithless pilgrims who have taken up their encampment under the thrill of straw promises. They wander around aimlessly and endlessly in their makeshift enclosure like somnambulists caught in the spell of unlikely futures. It’s all too easy to see contemporary counterparts in your own world, and that, I guess, is part of the genius of Conrad’s writing. And it would also be all too easy to exchange the word ‘ivory’ for ‘art’.

Not so long ago, during the national pandemic of the Equine influenza, there was an upsurge of first-rate writing about the importance of the horse industry in Australia.
During that time it occurred to me that artist-educators might perform a similar role to those that form the inner circle – an often invisible one – of the racing industry. Like the racing industry, the art ‘industry’ is one by name only – it refuses to be governed by the normal tenets and regulations of other industries. It warps and swells and retracts according to whim, conviction and fortune, and this is a great part of the appeal of both sectors. The trainers and stable-hands and jockeys are the ones who are up there every morning before sunrise because of one primary urge – to get that pony to perform its best. I read them described as a group with somewhat Dickensian characteristics – often eccentrics and misfits who spurn the outside world and turn to the warmth of horseflesh and each other’s company rather than march to the beat of an everyday reality. They operate in a universe that is parallel but separate to the world that surrounds the racetrack and the betting and the winnings and the blue ribbon celebrations of the owners. It struck me as a slightly odd, but above-average way of describing some of the artist-educators I’ve known – people who are driven not so much by the glamour and glitz of the openings but who fossick around the ‘stuff’ of art and who are driven by the potential of art to be rekindled in the heart of the next generation. Within that kind of cosmology there is also room for Marlow’s ‘pilgrims’ – as lackeys and followers who really understand very little about the central passions of the game, but who are all too willing to pick up on any chance morsels from the spoils.

They are men of inaction. They are men who fail when it comes to grappling with the small details necessary to the journey upstream. Some of them are men who have abandoned their vocation with ‘stuff’ for inexplicable, paltry reasons; in some ways, much like those artists who make choices that pass over the messy, inept business of dealing with matter and move on to more measurable enterprises. In Conrad’s tale, one of them, the assistant to the manager of the Central Station, had been assigned as a brick-maker. But, it becomes evident, he has abandoned his vocation with the stuff of bricks in favour of special privileges accorded to such emissaries of management. Like the others in the compound, he passed most of his time through waiting. Conrad describes the scenario:

They beguiled the time by backbiting and intriguing against each other in a foolish kind of way. There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work.7

Chilling stuff. And it might be funny if it didn’t mirror so much of the behaviour in those petty bureaucracies that make up the artworld so accurately.

But I digress. I set out to write a personal account of my own experience of ‘creativity’, and instead I have been musing about Marlow’s world. I didn’t want to write about the misuse of the term ‘creativity’ in my own time – too many others are doing that – and yet I have spent time enough wallowing in the fetid backwaters of Conrad’s descriptive territories catching glimpses of parallels; thinking about the kinds of spaces he found so repugnant. It wasn’t something I intended. It’s just that, for artists there is always the question, ‘How can I know what I think until I see (read) what I make (write)?’ It comes back to that original quote of Conrad’s where Marlow describes the work as taking you to a place where you might have a chance to find yourself. You can attempt to satisfy a brief, request or intention, but there’s every chance you’ll end up meandering down to it via a backwater you always wanted to explore anyway.


The second part of this essay will be published in AMA September 2010 Issue # 233.

Professor Pat Hoffie is Director, Sustainable Environment and Culture, Asia-Pacific (SECAP), and UNESCO Orbicom Chair in Communications at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.