

## **Creativity in an Ageing World**

### **Author**

Haebich, Anna

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# creativity in an ageing world

anna haebich

**Am I to die now?  
And I have just begun  
to understand  
the wind instruments.**

Composer Joseph Hayden,  
age 80.

Around the world governments fearful of multitudes of unwanted doddering baby boomers are throwing money at bright young things to put a new positive spin on ageing. But no matter what snazzy bits they add – *Vital Ageing, Active Ageing, Creative Ageing, Strategic Ageing, Healthy Ageing, Life-long Ageing* – ageing still means getting old, and in our narcissistic world of metrosexual youthfulness we do not want to be reminded of this inevitability. But we look away at our peril. Our world is ageing rapidly. Futurists warn of a global demographic revolution as proportions of young and old undergo an historic crossover. In both more and less developed nations sustained low levels of fertility and increasing life expectancy are slowing the growth of the workforce to zero while the ageing population escalates in size. Futurists predict that within three generations the world as we know it will be transformed as the reduced percentage of workers globally strive to support billions of dependent elderly people, who may live to the age of 120+. In this scenario, baby boomers expecting to become the new generation of kindly well-loved grandparents appear as the diabolical harbingers of global disaster.

Jittery planners responding to futurists' urgent calls to act now are looking increasingly to creativity as a circuit breaker in the projected disaster scenarios. Creativity has two broad meanings in this context. One is as a long-term approach to lifestyle that incorporates creativity in ways that make for healthy ageing populations. An example is the model of 'slow living' with its attention to the 'creative and ethical potential' of daily life and 'practices that invest the everyday with meaning and pleasure through a mindful use of time.' The other meaning is of creativity as a process of innovation for generating ideas and concepts to create a positive vision of an ageing society with innovative services, infrastructure, living environments and design elements. This is a cross-over domain of visionary planners, community workers, educators, artists, designers, architects, IT experts and others whose creative solutions will promote better health and quality of life into old age. Here again are the agents of spin. In their hopeful visions prediction of a dangerously unbalanced workforce are transformed into the more benign problem of 'underemployment of the over 50s' with practical solutions such as scrapping mandatory retirement and preventing age discrimination.<sup>2</sup>



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Integral to arguments for the 'creativity cure' is research demonstrating the beneficial links between creativity and healthy ageing. Gerontologists recognise that involvement in creative activities contributes to well-being across the life span by providing new skills, social engagement and a sense of competence, purpose and personal growth. Psychologists note a growing focus with age on the inner life, withdrawal from the tensions of life and an increasing urgency, intensity and energy that stimulates creativity. They argue that there is a particular synergy between the 'crystallised intelligence' of old age (the accumulated knowledge that comes with age and experience) and the complex interplay in the creative arts of visual, conceptual, imaginative, emotional, spiritual and personal elements.<sup>3</sup>

Art history also provides insights into links between creativity and ageing through its studies of the creative output of major artists across the life span. The research provides no simple conclusions, except that artists may differ in the timing of their creative peaks. Some *enfants terribles* get there before the age of 30, others reach it in mid-life. The aged masters such as Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, Matisse and Picasso continue to work with vitality and produce masterpieces into their old age. There are others still who emerge from earlier obscurity to carve out successful new careers in their final decades.

There is a general agreement amongst art historians that, given physical health and material security, old age can be conducive to profound artistic creativity. With age comes time and freedom for contemplating the richness of experiences, mysteries and contradictions that life throws up and the mastery of skills to represent these contemplations.

John Olsen suggested this in relation to his winning entry in the 2005 Archibald Prize, *Self Portrait Janus Faced* when he commented, 'Janus [the Greek God of doors, passageways and bridges] had the ability to look backwards and forwards and when you get to my age you have a hell of a lot to think about'.<sup>4</sup> This looking backwards and forwards in old age also suggests the theory of Janusian thinking, which posits the capacity to hold contradictory thoughts concurrently as an essential part of human creative thinking.<sup>5</sup> Some argue that the approaching end stimulates an urgent intense inner life – whether harmonious à la Matisse or the angst-ridden visions of Goya.

Art historians distinguish a set of stylistic and conceptual elements in works created by masters in old age that they refer to generically as 'Altersstil' or 'old age' style. David Rosand<sup>6</sup> distinguishes the stylistic features of the aged masters as 'a certain impatience with the rules of the craft, a rugged freedom of execution earned after long years of practice and total familiarity with the medium, and a resulting simplicity that we know is misleading.' This reflects the limitless potential that comes with mastery of the medium wedded to the restraints of physical old age. The result Rosand concludes is 'a transcendence of the

material' and an 'unembarrassed reductiveness that the literary critic Barbara Herrnstein has called 'the senile sublime'. Kenneth Clark has identified as the conceptual elements of *Altersstil* 'a sense of isolation, a feeling of holy rage, developing into... transcendental pessimism, a mistrust of reason, a belief in instinct... the feeling that the crimes and follies of mankind must be accepted with resignation ... [and] a craving for complete unity of treatment.'<sup>7</sup>

These conclusions concerning the ongoing power of the creative impulse in the visual arts also hold for aged masters in music, dance and theatre and for scholars in the humanities and sciences. Levels of quantity and quality in their work continue into old age with some masters producing their most memorable works in their later years. Consider the creative output of dancer Martha Graham who performed to age 75 and continued to choreograph into her mid-90s; pianist Arthur Rubenstein who gave recitals in his late 80s; Antonio Stradivari who made several of his most famous violins at the age of 92; and 'Dr. Seuss' who was still publishing in his early 80s. Even in popular culture today with its devotion to the young and the beautiful there are older performers such as Australia's Barry Humphries and Rolf Harris who continue to produce to wide popular acclaim.

There is a terrible irony that despite the breadth of research endorsing the power of creativity in old age, the popular belief is that creativity is lost to the elderly due to a combination of intellectual decrement and motivational loss. This misguided assumption is typical of the widespread ageism that permeates Australian society. For many Australians ageing remains shrouded in myth, prejudice and fear. Old age is viewed as little more than a final miserable stage that is only relieved by death. The prospect of life-long creative learning is considered impossible. Typifying collective ignorance, a comment from a recent ABC interview blamed Australia's lacklustre rural leadership on the ageing men at the helm suggesting that 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks'. How often have you heard someone remark: 'What's the use of old people?' 'They should all be put in a Home' or 'Press my off-button when I get like that'. Not only do we deem the aged useless, but we rob them of desire and mask their appeal – mention sexuality and the aged in the same sentence and you'll be greeted with incredulity and derisive laughter.

Ageism is a serious stumbling block in the drive to create new visions and solutions to ageing. Like the other serious 'isms' – racism and sexism - ageism reduces the life choices and quality of life of many Australians. As a society we urgently need to rethink our attitudes to ageing. This means discarding elements that also typify practices of racism and sexism - generalisation, stereotypes, discrimination and tolerance of inferior treatment and living conditions. Like racism and sexism, ageist assumptions make popular stereotypes into self-fulfilling prophecies. Consider the drab, mind-numbing institutional environments considered good enough for the elderly and how they could turn any spirited individual into an ageist stereotype of a dreary old person.

Generalisations abound in ageism. It is as if the infinite diversity of humanity is leached away with age, leaving behind an undifferentiated silver-haired faceless mass.

Participants in Britain's recent *Ageing Debates* (2005-6)<sup>8</sup> argued that the generalised chronological categories used in age-based government planning such as 'Third Age' (65 to 85), 'Fourth Age' or 'Older Old' (85-100) and the 'Extreme Elderly' (100+) are not useful indicators of the diverse patterns of individual lives. While ageing connotes an identifiable process of physical and mental change that affects all human beings, its individual manifestations are innumerable. Nor is there a level playing field in old age as inequalities of class, gender, sexuality and race continue to impact on quality of life and life expectancy to the very end. This is starkly evident in the Australian statistics for Aboriginal life expectancy, which dismally forecasts the age of 59 for Aboriginal men compared with 77 for non-Indigenous males. There are also significant differences across cultural attitudes to ageing. While old age is recognised as a life stage in all cultures, it is imbued with wisdom and respect in some and reviled as infantile and useless in others. Americans conflate old age with 'social obsolescence' claims the advocacy group the Gray Panthers and they coined the term the 'Detroit Syndrome' to describe how the elderly there were treated like 'old cars, traded for new, [and] became a scrap heap'.<sup>9</sup>

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The stereotypical view that creativity stops as we age severely restricts the quality of life for older Australians. Consider their needs as consumers in the context of today's design culture. In its blind devotion to the youth market the industry has until recently failed to acknowledge this expanding niche market with its high levels of leisure time and disposable income or to cater for its requirements and tastes. A consequence is that commodity choices for older Australians are restricted and their quality of life is thereby reduced. This is especially evident in the many ways that design elements for new technology act to limit access for older people. That this trend may be changing is suggested by a recent publication from the Faculty of Design at Swinburne



University of Technology, *The new design nexus: ICT, changing demographics and sustainability*. Editors Lyndon Anderson and Simon Jackson advocate age responsive design as a central responsibility for today's designers.

Consider also representations of the elderly in Australian film and television. Even though they constitute one of TV's largest viewing audiences the elderly are rarely shown on screen and when they are portrayed it is generally in terms of negative stereotypes. In America the Gray Panthers, an organisation modelled on of the earlier Black Power movement, conduct media watches to document evidence of ageism which they then use to sensitise TV network officials to the issue. Some broadcasting companies have developed their own guidelines for creating positive representations of older persons and groups.

In the 1950s the United Nations led the international campaign against racism. Today the UN is opposing ageism and actively promoting human rights for the aged. Through its global networks of government and community organizations the UN is putting the mix of human rights, gender equality, racial and ethnic diversity, intergenerational solidarity and adequate service support for the aged on the international agenda. The UN's Principles for Older Persons provides policy guidelines for member nations to ensure independence, self-fulfilment and dignity. The publication *Ageing Implications in an Ageing Society*<sup>9</sup> is organised around the following topics: 'Dissolving the boundaries of age', 'A call for revolutionary thinking', 'Ageing is lifelong', 'Ageing is society-wide', 'Meanings and images in an ageing society', and 'Policy considerations'.

In terms of practical reform in our region, Singapore, which has the second fastest ageing population in Asia, is setting the pace with its mix of legislative change to ensure movement and access for the aged and to halt elder abuse and public education programs to promote healthy ageing through lifestyle and positive attitudes to the elderly.<sup>10</sup> In Australia Professor Hal Kendig (appointed Research Professor of Ageing and Health at the University of Sydney in 2005) claims that we can avoid the 'demographic time-bomb' if governments begin now to make the necessary society-wide adjustments for an ageing society. Government planning must incorporate diversity, foster positive attitudes, set

achievable goals for older people, ensure adequate incomes, encourage social participation and value contributions in 'age-friendly' communities. He warns that plans must be in place before the predicted age 'spike' between 2015 and 2030.<sup>12</sup>

To meet predicted needs a complex aged sector involving federal and state governments, businesses, and community organisations is billowing out in Australia. Also expanding are government-funded projects linking creative activities and well-being for the elderly along with calls for research to devise strategies to optimise this connection. This means employment for artists working with community projects or as members of interdisciplinary research teams. Art schools and universities can support artists in these roles. This is happening through the *Creative for Life* project at Griffith University's Centre for Public Culture and Ideas and the University of Newcastle's ArtsHealth Centre. To inspire new thinking and approaches we need to be strategically creative. We need visions that are cost effective to implement and that have outcomes that are imaginative, humane and inspiring. This means working across the generations and the disciplines in a myriad of combinations, collaborations and sites. There's plenty for all of us to do in this new ageing world. ☺

1 Wendy Parkins and Craig Geoffrey *Slow living*, UNSW Press, Sydney 2006 p7.

2 Helen Scott, 'Books received' in *Australian Journal on Ageing*, Vol. 23, No. 2, June, Bookshelf 2004 p104.

3 Martin S Lindauer *Ageing creativity and art*, Kluwer Academic, New York 2003 p226.

4 [http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/artmail/media/Archibald\\_Winner\\_05](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/artmail/media/Archibald_Winner_05)

5 Albert Rothenberg coined the term 'Janusian thinking' in 1979.

6 David Rosand, 'Style and the aging artist' in *Art Journal* vol. 46, No. 2, 1987 p92.

7 Kenneth Clarke cited in Hugo Munsterburg, *The crown of life: artistic creativity in old age*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego 1983 p8.

8 Hosted by the Economic and Social Research Council <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/index.aspx>

9 Cynthia L. Taylor, 'Art and the needs of the older adult' in *Art Education*, vol. 40, no. 4, July, 1987 p9.

10 United Nations DESA Gateway to Social Policy and developments *Ageing Implications in an Ageing Society* <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/ageimpl.htm>

11 Nancy A. Pachana, 'Review article' in *Australian Journal on Ageing*, Vol. 23, No. 2, June, Bookshelf 2004 p104.

12 <http://www.usyd.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=2345/7/2004>

Professor Anna Haebich is Co-Director, Centre for Public Culture and Ideas, Griffith University, Australia Research Council QEII Fellow, UNESCO Orbicom Chair. Her multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural approaches to research include leading the *Creative for Life* project at Griffith University.

All cartoons by Bart.