

## Talk by Robin Archer delivered at the National Review of Live Art 2010

I was asked by Nikki, literally years ago now, to deliver an oration for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary - and this is *not* a performed oration. I had been wondering since then, and continue to wonder to this exact present moment ... should I be sage and serious, summarising 30 years of achievement – or should I try to stop making sense? In any case Rob (La Frenais) and Lois (Keidan) and others have done that expert summation during the week far better than I could. I feel like I shouldn't even be speaking this, I feel as if I should have at least perhaps taken off my clothes, or put more on, or that I should have perhaps brought my ukulele and I keep on thinking, well wouldn't that be burlesque? and therefore inappropriate ... but Neil Bartlett's in high heels again, come on, it's burlesque heaven.

To thank Nikki and the NRLA for my invitation here, I do feel compelled however, even keen, to offer a few things that may be of use in the New Territories of the future. There are 3 things really

Detritus  
The Ephemeral  
and  
Resilience

And as this feels like an 11am or 6pm at the very latest, kind of oration, rather than a 9.30pm pre-party Saturday night piece of stand-up, if it becomes just too much then do just ask for something else – I have a little list of songs for impromptu unaccompanied performance – I might even need them to stop boring myself

So, first of all... **Detritus.**

I am having a book published in June this year called Detritus. It's a collection of what's left over from the performative act of public speaking. The foreword in part says this:

“After hearing me use the word Detritus to describe what's left over from the act of any art, the Australian theatre director Wesley Enoch suggested that I might better talk about ‘memory’ or ‘artefact’. This kind of response is common in those who find the word ‘detritus’ a natural pejorative. All waste has its purpose and should never be undervalued. Indeed there is a whole newly contested field relating to the point at which we put a price on our own human ‘waste’. If it is to be recycled and turned into electricity available for resale on the grid, what price do we put on the one thing we are most naturally built to manufacture – we buy the raw material to feed it, we process it, and up until now we've been happy to give it away – perhaps no more. So detritus is worth considering and worth valuing.

When I use the word in relation to artistic process I don't use it as a pejorative. What is left over from the artistic (perhaps *any*) process is not necessarily to be despised, even if it smells. It may indeed be a source of great pride and achievement. Nevertheless, it may also be possible for the creator to let it go.

In some instances it is *necessary* for the creator to let it go in order to move forward with the artistic process. Sometimes it's simply a matter of letting it go to someone who is happy to pay for the waste-product. That payment allows the artist to get on with the next artistic process. Sometimes the artist cannot let it go. It may have to stay in order to provoke the next phase of work.

In offering detritus theory I am mainly attempting to get largely consumer-minded audiences and funders of all kinds to view the process of artistic production in a different light. The word 'creativity' is bandied about everywhere these days, but concern for the real conditions of creativity is lacking. A consumer society looks more at what can be consumed, less at how the product is created.

Interestingly this customary focus and its inherent value-system is experiencing strong challenges from the camp of the eco-warriors. Environmentalists *do* want us to look at where our food comes from – how far – how much power was expended to get it to us.

For most consumers the end product is all, but the custom has been to apply that to the artist as well, and I know that it's not the case with all artists, perhaps not even the majority of them. There's a fanciful romanticised image of the artist, impossible, dedicated and driven.

I can hear the Hollywood voice now, Heston as Leonardo, Grainger as Paganini, coupled with the grimace of visionary ambition '*This ... will be my greatest work!*'

But we know it's a false image. Most artists know very well that they have no idea what their 'greatest work' is. That's a matter of time. From their oeuvre it will be others who make judgments about the quality of one work over another."

(Robyn Archer **Detritus** UWA Press, June 2010)

It's core to what we witnessed this morning as Lois paced through recollections of NRLA past. You could hear and sense people remembering the long ago and sometimes forgotten work. The *main* concern for the artists is that apparently simple but in fact always complex one of ensuring they secure the ongoing conditions that make an oeuvre possible. It is splendid to see how many of the artists who have passed through the NRLA have managed just to keep on doing the work they needed to do.

“Of course it’s possible to love one’s past work and be proud of a particular work or series – as much for a composer, songwriter, writer, choreographer, film-maker as for a visual or performance artist. But surely *more* important is to ensure that the artist can keep on doing that work, letting it develop in practice, creating the large body of work.” (ibid)

For many it *is* the commercial transaction, the sale of a work, that makes this possible, but I’d love to see greater acknowledgement of the long career, the process of development, the action and moments of creativity, which are all the vital contexts for any product. This reflective NRLA, this re-inviting of those who have been here before represents an important statement of that kind. For many artists it is the ongoing context that is way more important than any individual work.

It is this focus on the difference between the act and what remains of the act that sits at the heart of my current pleas for support for the arts – R&D – as in other valued professions, no strings attached, research for its own sake without the need for a final product. And I’ll say a bit more about that when I get to Resilience – the best tool we have in the armoury of argument at present.

Perhaps it’s because I’m singer that I think of creativity in this way. The thing I do perhaps best is wholly ephemeral. I have no choice but to value the ephemeral, because my song is gone the minute I sing it.

[**Verfehltes Leben** – Heinrich Heine/Hanns Eisler

"Zuweilen dünkt es mich, als trübe  
Geheime Sehnsucht deinen Blick –  
Ich kenn es wohl, dein Mißgeschick:  
Verfehltes Leben, verfehlte Liebe!

Du nichst so traurig! Wiedergeben  
Kann ich dir nicht die Jugendzeit –  
Unheilbar ist dein Herzeleid:  
Verfehlte Liebe, verfehltes Leben!"]

A recording, no matter how well made, is simply not the same thing. When I sing in this room in this city at this time with precisely you who are with me in the room, then we have what amounts to a fluid exchange. Air, some of which you breathed out, comes in to the vacuum created by my breathing out, fills up my lungs and I then pass it knowingly past those tiny pieces of gristle called vocal chords and the sound waves thus created charge back into your skulls and bounce around. It’s fluid. You just don’t get that with a DVD or a download – even if having the record is a *good* thing. It’s just not the *same* thing.

Similarly I have never cared much for publishing books, even though I write a lot, because most of my writing has been a thing of the moment – even the songs and plays I’ve written have been part of an ongoing line. I do it for myself, for what I will learn by doing it, not to create a finished thing.

It was interesting to hear Lois refer this morning to the huge debates that have arisen about documentation and archiving. I don’t have the detail of these debates, I don’t know what they are, but I *was* worried at first when I read the NRLA archived piece by Thomas Mulready when he said:

‘So we presented all this great work, and now we have all this stuff, and its sitting in boxes, and you’ve got to wonder: what are our options?’

and he said

‘Many artists already have the definitive version of their work’

I was screaming... but it’s NOT their work. Their work is done, it vanished in the moment – all you have is the detritus...so was relieved to read later on in his piece...

“In fact performance art rose up in opposition to the creation of objects with value, and the commodification of art. It is antithetical to the spirit of performance art to place any emphasis at all on the remnants, the detritus, the documentation of the performance art act”

It’s the problem with archives – like the notebooks I always carry- notes on artists and shows and conversations – hundreds of them. And in almost 20 years of programming I have rarely re-visited any of them. What eventually takes shape as a program usually does so on the back of an envelope or a napkin – it comes unbidden when I’m not trying so hard to work it out. It arises from what has remained in my mind – no turning back to a note I wrote on something I had forgotten will benefit that immediate and unbidden process.

The process of programming, of curating, of selecting artists, of giving them a gig, is alive, organic and mysterious – it is not a business or a cultural industry. It is an art, a living breathing skill, and people like Nikki Milican possess it. This year’s NRLA has been alive and organic and ongoing – not merely reflective.

It makes me think that though I come from a different place we share many similarities. I come first from pure showbiz. I never studied any arts discipline. I early apprenticed myself to my father who was a stand-up comic and a singer. I learned my *first* songs from my great-grandmother when we lived in her pub, The

British Hotel in Adelaide, Australia. She was born in Clapton – she would have watched Marie Lloyd at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East where I eventually performed a show.

I noticed that everything I saw here yesterday was very personal – it was contained in and also about the body of the performer. I come from a different place – my first serious encounter with art was Brechtian. I was 27, and John Willett was the man I considered to be my mentor for the rest of his life. He was the only person I have ever had who was not afraid to pull me up by my moral bootstraps as well as be critical of my acquired skills. The Brechtians taught me to be a mere conduit of the material – to be self-effacing, to act as a pure stream between content and audience. Performance art, live art, has not been an immediate part of my world, but in fact when this task lay before me I realised I've bumped into something like performance quite a few times – the distance is not nearly as far as I sometimes imagine.

I *nearly* worked on a show with Neil Bartlett. Now, tonight, I have.

I *nearly* made a film with Derek Jarman. He wanted to do a screen version of my one-woman show *A Star is Torn*. This collaboration led to bizarre conversations with the BBC and ABC – *you* want to do it? Yes? *You* want to do it? Yes? Good, could we do it then? Because the director is dying. The film never happened.

I became a 'distinguished owner' of one of Maria Ribot's works the minute I saw it. I paid a good price for it and have never seen it again – but it is indelible in my mind and I'm proud of the transaction and of the sense of ownership of that piece.

Even earlier, before I had any experiences of 'art' – I was just about to enter my first post-university job as a nightclub singer in The Trocadero in Adelaide - I had a genuine experience of the shock of the new. I was walking down the main drag in Adelaide at night and saw a naked woman, playing a cello and being lowered slowly over the Festival Centre plaza by a crane. I had no idea what I was observing. I just knew I'd never seen anything like it before. I didn't know then that this was an already famous performance artist called Charlotte Moorman. I just felt her effect for a long time afterwards.

In 2000 as Artistic Director of the Adelaide Festival I not only collaborated with Nikki on the International Choreographic Lab but also invited La Ribot and Jerome Bel to perform in Australia for the first time.

But none of the above marginal contact of mine with Performance or Live Art is the reason I am here tonight. I assume that I have been given the honour of making this address because of that collaboration on the Choreographic Lab, and thus my small role in these extraordinary 30 years of enabling the work of artists many of whom, while perhaps no longer outside the mainstream, were certainly so at the time that Nikki extended that most blessed of invitations to them.

Come and do something with us, something for us. The offer of a gig. This festival has remained **resilient**, and it's **Resilience** I want to conclude with.

[PUB with no BEER – Slim Dusty]

Oh it's lonesome away from your kindred and all  
By the campfire at night where the wild dingoes call  
But there's nothing so lonesome morbid or drear  
Than to stand in the bar of the pub with no beer

Now the publican's waitin' for his quota to come  
And there's a faraway look on the face of the bum!  
The maid's gone all cranky and the cook's actin' queer  
It's a terrible place is the pub with no beer]

So... **Resilience Thinking**...

The recent financial crisis, the so-called GFD, has caused an alarming sequence of events which has probably reduced the resilience of many arts organisations in the USA. This could be fatal. **Resilience** is described as 'the ability of a system to absorb disturbance without having wholly to change its nature and function. It is a systems theory which shows that all systems have distinct phases – **growth, conservation, release** and, depending on how resilient they are, **chaos**, out of which nutrients and energies are released for a new start. If you don't want to enter into chaos, then maintaining resilience is imperative. You maintain resilience by looking after every bit of the system – the little wildfires, the annoying raggy bits, the unknown and unloved every bit as much as the beautiful canopy.

It reminds me of the Brecht Poem (and song set by Eisler) *Sprinkling the Garden* which sings the need for offering water not only to the flowers and fruit trees but to the naked earth and weeds as well.

The enemy of resilience is **efficiency** – the very thing that arts funders tell you, as responsible managers, to aim for.

In terms of Resilience, the USA's response to this most recent and powerful financial disturbance was mainly not a good one. At one point it was reported that 100,000 arts institutions of all kinds had closed their doors. This had enormous repercussions amongst arts-workers, their families and all the myriad services and producers who supplied them. The majority of those institutions that managed to stay afloat did so by shoring up the mainstream programme and chipping away at the peripheral and ancillary activity. It's the very kind of short-sighted 'efficiency' which *Resilience Thinking* claims as an enemy. We would have to imagine that these institutions, while still functioning and showing an efficient bottom line, are now increasingly unstable: the audience they catered to is ageing, dying off, and they have abandoned the young strong and future audience. What I take away from *Resilience Thinking* is that in a crisis it would be far better judiciously to prune the main program in order to continue to support the education, youth, participatory and community programmes. It is the latter that will maintain resilience in the future.

By attempting to maintain your return to key current stakeholders you may appear to be more efficient for a while, but over a decreasing footprint – and should an unexpected disturbance come, then you are more easily toppled.

This applies to economic systems (indeed the theory began in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with an Austrian economist) as well as eco-systems, and I've found Resilience Thinking to be a powerful tool in arguing for the urgent need to take care of the health and stability of the ground-cover, to encourage the little wildfires and local disturbances every bit as much as the beautiful canopy. This metaphor for the arts means that the unknown, the ugly and the unloved are every bit as important in the eco-system as are the tallest grandest most beautiful, well-known and beloved entities in the system.

This tool can be found in detail in a little book called **Resilience Thinking** by the Australian scientist Brian Walker and his collaborator David Salt. It is published by Island Press and you can buy it online. It's like a bible to me now, and it's my gift to you Nikki (not here of course, I'll send it) as a great tool for battling any continuing ignorance about the value of what the NRLA has done in 30 years and where New Territories will take us in the future

So, I have just one more thing to add... I met Brian at the series of 19 Deakin Lectures, which I curated for Melbourne in 2008. In that series I also met a man named Warren Canning. He worked for the Australian Defence Force in Melbourne. I came across Warren by accident when I was looking for someone to talk about spaceships – the series travelled day after day from the innermost fabric of the mind and body (DNA scientists) to the outermost extents of the infinite universe – philosophers and ethicists were along for the whole journey.

It turned out that Warren and his dad had once built an aircraft designed by Burt Rutan, the man who has been working on Richard Branson's space programme. One day Warren rang me and proposed a hypothetical. He said that Australia was leading the world in the development of unmanned vehicle technology. It made me think that soon war may be a chess game again – that no human will be involved and it will simply be a matter of who contests the conflict with the unbeatable strategy...

In this instance Warren talked about the need to colonise another planet for humans to live on. We've stuffed this one, the population is increasing massively, we need a new territory. He said that any habitable planet is going to be at least 200 human years travel away. *How* do we colonise?

The hypothetical was one of impregnating foetuses and then freezing them. The spaceship itself would be enabled to thaw the foetuses twenty years out from arrival, and raise them in that time to be the new colonisers.

The panel debated the ethics and the outcome. Warren says we can't do it just yet, but in about 50 years it could well be possible. I felt as if it were just as it must have been in the 15<sup>th</sup> century – 1490 perhaps – when someone like Christophe Colomb said something equally alarming and everyone thought him simply mad.

There really is New Territory out there – both in the universe, and in the scientific and medical imagination. It's our duty as artists and as those who seek and manage support for artists to enable their work, that the new territories *we* explore are as challenging and as exhilarating, as mind-blowing, as those which are the daily focus of other disciplines. It's not just a matter of not being *nostalgic* about 30 years of NRLA – it's a matter of ensuring that we all work to maintain a supremely resilient system which supports artists – in all disciplines, but perhaps most crucially here at the frontier – to do that important work.

If anyone can do it, New Territories can.

And anyway, damn the ban on nostalgia...

**Que reste-t-il ?**(Charles TRENET / Léo CHAULIAC)

Que reste-t-il de nos amours?

Que reste-t-il de ces beaux jours?

Une photo, vieille photo de ma jeunesse

Que reste-t-il des billets doux

Des mois d'avril, des rendez-vous?

Un souvenir qui me poursuit sans cesse

Bonheurs fanés, cheveux au vent

Baiser volés, rêves émouvants

Que reste-t-il de tout cela?

Dites-le moi

Un petit village un vieux clocher

Un paysage si bien caché

Et dans un nuage le cher visage

De mon passé



**Robyn Archer**

Canberra, London, Glasgow February/March 2010

Robyn Archer AO is a singer, performer, writer, artistic director and public advocate of the Arts and is often referred to as a national treasure. She is known to many for her one-woman shows in the 1970s and 80s, by others for her original songs and recordings, and now by thousands more for her memorable arts festivals in Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide and Tasmania. These days Robyn is very much in demand, combining artistic direction with concert performance, strategic advice, mentoring younger artists and artistic directors, speaking and writing about the arts across Australia and the world.