Am I An Ethical Arts Worker?

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Art-making, decision-making, ethics, morals, social change

Abstract
A few years ago whilst undertaking some research on decision-making in the arts sector, I developed a 3D matrix that plotted the diversity of my own cultural practice. The X axis was context. The Y axis was the mode. The Z axis was the intention. Since that time, I have found myself coming back repeatedly to asking myself what is the intention of my ‘art making’? Exploring philosophy to try to answer this question has brought me to consider the notion of good and bad and therefore to ask… Is there a difference between Ethics and Morals? If ethics is the aim to “do no harm” and morals guide our intention “to do good”, then how do our social decision-makers use an ethical philosophy and moral approach to influencing the construction of culture? And as arts workers, what role do we play in this chaos?

This paper was first developed as a presentation with video projection. As a written paper I would encourage people to read it aloud.

Biography
Lisa Philip-Harbutt has spent thirty years as an artist exploring the overlaps between visual, performing and community arts. Her passion is initiating cultural development and social change through arts practice. She has a Masters in Business (Research) from the University of South Australia. She has been the Director of Community Arts Network (SA) for six years.
Introduction

I have learnt from years of working cross-culturally that a kind of formal introduction and openness to explain where you are from, is crucial. For many indigenous peoples it gives an opportunity for them to locate you. To do this well, we must learn to open up and tell our stories.

Many of you may look at me and say well she is not that different. How is this cross-cultural? But let me answer that in a slightly cheeky way by retorting that as the dominant culture in the room, that is easy for you to say. I have an unusual background. I am not an academic and I have different colored hair. I may also think in a very different way. I may see the world from a different direction; or maybe not.

So to help overcome any differences that we may have, let me introduce myself.

My name is Lisa Philip-Harbutt. I was brought up travelling the outback of Australia. My parents were prospector/miners and my sisters and I spent a lot of time sleeping in swags and travelling on the back of trucks. I go right back to my childhood for this introduction as it gives insight into my connection to the land and it also lets me introduce you to my parents. Those that have come before are very important. My mother liked to make things and my father liked to blow things up (this was ok as he could legitimately play with explosives in his line of work). These construct / destruct influences are very evident in my approach to life. I am into both art making and critical analysis. I was brought up outside the mainstream, connected in very conscious way to the land. If we didn’t pay attention to nature, the conditions in which we travelled could easily have taken our lives. So I learnt to notice what was happening around me. But I was also a keen to find out more about what occurred in the places that I was not. So I was always aware of “others” and being “other”. My upbringing encouraged me to be an active citizen interested in our society’s organisational structures.

I have spent 30 years as an artist exploring the overlaps between visual, performing and community arts. My passion is initiating cultural development and social change through arts practice. What does that mean? What do I actually do? Well I have worked in rural and urban contexts, in schools, workplaces and community settings. I have designed sets and costumes, painted murals, made sculptures, puppets and temporary installations, created plays and short films, taken photos and edited videos. I use the most appropriate art form for the concept of the project and the people I am collaborating with.

I have been the Director of Community Arts Network of South Australia for 6 years now. CAN SA which is our acronym is a membership based organization that is working toward robust and diverse community arts and cultural practices. We do that by information sharing, training and support to both artists and communities.

So I juggle three hats; the citizen, the artist and the arts manager.
Why art and ethics?

So why am I here to talk art and ethics? Well I want to contribute to make the world a better place and to do that well, I need to understand more fully what I think and I need to learn to communicate these thoughts in creative and interesting ways, so that people will listen.

So today I ask you to come on a bit of a journey with me; both aurally and visually. When I present I tend to project a slightly abstract and a bit hypnotic video in the background. Why, mainly because then you look at the screen and not at me. And I am shy so this makes it easier. But also I believe strongly that to engage the brain on multiple levels leads to more possibilities for creative understanding. Here's hoping it works for you. I ask you to consider two things as you watch and listen today.

First : what is the thing that you have seen or heard in this presentation that relates most closely to what is going on in your work or study? And the other is: what is the thing that you have seen or heard in this presentation that relates most closely to you personally? Jot them down if you get a chance, otherwise just try to remember. These two questions formed part of a method of engagement that I developed when I undertook some action research on decision-making in the arts sector a few years ago.

As part of the ensuing thesis I developed a 3D matrix that plotted the diversity of my own cultural practice. I started plotting things by their art form. There were too many of them. I needed some new categories. I discovered that sometimes my work occurred within a specialised context (e.g. in theatres or galleries) and sometimes it occurred within a community or public context. This became my X axis. Sometimes the work occurred individually and sometimes collectively. This ‘mode of working’ became my Y axis. I then realised that I needed to introduce a 3D quality to this matrix for although the X and Y axis described the where and the who, it missed out the very important why do I do this? So I introduced a Z axis which indicated the intention of the work. For me sometimes the intention is to make art and sometimes it is to make change.

This 3D matrix allowed me to understand that different spots within the grid are heavily influenced by different schools of thought and that this in turn affects my planning and evaluating of the work and therefore my decision-making. So when I am being a painter working in mainstream gallery, on the 3D matrix I am at the individual end of the Y axis, at the specialised end of the X axis and at the making art end of the Z axis. (a1) My decision-making would draw on the study of aesthetics and I would be influenced by visual art theory. However my decision-making would be very different if I was working collectively, with change as our intention and in a community context. (c2) It would then be guided by community development principles and community cultural development philosophy.

I also came to realise that projects can also change during their life. This 3D matrix allows for a plotting of the movements to inform the changes which may need to occur to the decision-making processes. For example a project I have been involved with started life as collective work, in a community setting, making change. (c2) It was a
bunch of "kids at risk" working out of a women's health centre looking at youth issues of substance dependency and violence. The project went through a series of cycles using drama as a format. Over time it moved on the 3D matrix and although change was still the primary intention, making art became more important too. The last round of this project was performed in a theatre and although the work always remained in the collective mode of working, many decisions were being made from an art context. (d1)

Since that time of exploring within the matrix, I have found myself coming back repeatedly to the why do I do this? What is the intention of my art making? And what are our intentions when we make decisions? How do we check that our decision-making is actually achieving what we are setting out to do? And when there are unforeseen consequences, how do we judge them? Can we plan for the unknown? How do we cope if what we want to do is risky? If we intend to be “good” can our outcomes ever be “bad”?

The notions of good and bad were very foreign for me in my art making. Do I ever set out to make bad art? No! But it may be good but unpalatable art? And some of my art has not worked. Does this make it bad or just not working, yet?

Using philosophy to guide these adventures took me on a journey of exploring the criteria we use to judge good and bad. This led to what influences our decision-making which in turn led to the study of “ethics” and “morals”. These words seemed to be used interchangeably but to me they felt different. When I closed my eyes they seemed to be different colours and textures. I use this exercise when I am trying to really understand all the meaning of a word. But then I also resort to a dictionary and the literature.

Definitions of moral and ethical
The definitions for ethics and morals are as far reaching as the definitions of art. But we will get back to art in a minute.
Baggini in Making Sense writes,

> Ethics is the study of human conduct - not what people actually do, but what they should do……Morality is seen as a subset of ethics. A moral code is a set of rules that prescribes how we should act with the implication that to act otherwise is to do something wrong, perhaps harmful to ourselves or others. Baggini 2003 Pg58

I set about trying out this and other definitions on the unsuspecting people around me to see how it related to their lives. You could see their eyes glaze over before I got toward the end. I decided that I needed a plain English version. So often we can get caught up in the language of the definition rather than getting on with testing the definition in our own decision-making.

So I started to play around with the notion that ‘ethics’ is the aim to “do no harm” and ‘morals’ guide our intention “to do good”. This makes ‘ethics’ in our heads – our philosophy- what we think. And ‘morals’ in our bodies – what we do. This sat well with me so I looked at people around me and I was impressed that they stayed awake….they seemed interested in making their own sense of ethics and morals.

I needed these plain English definitions because I want to explore ethics and morality in decision-making processes with each of my hats on: as a citizen, as an artist and as an arts manager. In each of my settings I stopped when I had a decision to make for a minute or two and asked myself: is my aim to do good? Will I achieve it? (my moral approach) and then I backed it up with: will it also do no harm? (my philosophical underpinning). Wow what a head spin that was! So often we don’t stop to think before we make a decision. We trust in our judgment and believe that our sub-conscious has
already done the work and has guided our intuitive response to things. But let me say that sometimes it is good to go back to basics and test out your own decision making process with your own moral and ethical filter.

I tried it out with each of my hats on. So here are some simple examples:

As a citizen…I live in a block of strata-titled small flats. We are a very mixed bag of owner occupiers and tenants. One owner wanted to upgrade the block and make it a gated community. I asked: what good would it do? It would raise the financial value of each of the flats and increase the level of safety around our block. And what harm could occur? We would spend all our major maintenance budget. The financial commitment would be very great on a couple of owners on small fixed incomes. And the raise in value would raise rents for a number of tenants - which would price them out of the area.

As an arts manager….Funding for not for profits is extremely difficult over the past 3 years. We need a new source to maintain our current program. A new avenue for sponsorship opened up through the local mining boom. A multi-national corporation is offering community grants. What good could it do? It could give us a new income stream for a number of projects that currently can’t occur and a new and very different partner in our cross sector work. What harm could it do? The multi-national corporation’s track record is not squeaky clean in relation to work in third world countries and there have been complaints about their environmental practices. This could mean our good reputation could be tarnished by association. A number of our members are activists and it could compromise us in their eyes.

As an artist…..I am interested in undertaking a work that is about a location that I passed through many times as a child. It has a checkered history that can be told in a variety of different ways. I have no idea of how the art will be explored and who the audience will be. Will it do any good? It will feel great to undertake such an open and risky adventure as an artist. There are a number of people interested in the multiplicity of history and therefore it could be a commercially rewarding project. Could it do harm? There are a lot of locals that feel “blow ins” like me use the history of their place as voyeuristic sensationalism. They feel threatened and upset. So the answers are not always ‘yes’ or ‘no’. But the examples above show that it can be an easy enough process.

And for those of you that make the “…but I don’t have time for all of that…” excuse. Let me hand on to you a great little bit of advice that a wise women once gave to me. She said

“…there is only one thing in life that can’t wait 3 minutes and that is death. If someone is dying – you react immediately and do something about it, but for anything else, give yourself your 3 minutes…”

ethics = to do not harm

your 3 minutes

morals = to do good
There is three minutes for good decision-making and I reckon your own definition of both ethics and morals are good criteria to influence those decisions.

In searching for my own definitions I also got caught up in searching for the answer to that great question: what is art?

About 15 years ago I started answering that question with ‘art is a verb’. My intention was to make people think. What I am trying to do is paint the picture of what ‘art’ is. What I am alluding to is that ‘art’ is a “doing word”. For me it is not just about the artefacts that fall out of the process. In my practice these could be as diverse as performances, sculptures, images or poetry - the art is the creative activity which occurred that allowed these artefacts to manifest.

Knowing that my cheeky definition worked for me but not for everyone, I turned to the philosophers to guide me with an alternative definition of art. I read about the need for the definition to outline the elements that are both necessary and sufficient to describe the thing seeking a definition. In Philosophy Gym Stephen Law has a chapter called But is it Art? where he seeks a feature (or a combination of features), possession of which is both necessary and sufficient to qualify something as a work of art. He explores this in many ways but by the end of the chapter he suggests that,

“Perhaps we are hunting for what doesn’t exist.” Law 2003 page 102

This set me thinking what does art ‘need’ and ‘not need to be’....

Art needs to be a creative activity of some sort and it needs to be seen as art.

It doesn’t need:
- physical form
- skill level
- technique
- recognized creator

So necessarily something is ‘art’, if and only if, its creator’s intention was to make ‘art’ and it is received as such. But as I utter my new definition I see peoples eyes glaze over once again. I fall back on my easier answer that art is a verb.

Art and censorship

But back to the subject of ‘art and ethics’. The law of the land and social trends influence what can and can not be seen within the public domain. Within Australia over the last few years we have had many people wade into the debate over the portrayal of young people in art. The question is: if these young people happen to be unclothed, does this constitute the making of pedophilic pornography? The mass media had a field day. Talk back radio and the shock jocks have very reactionary views which they feel more than willing to share. In fact they came out vehemently with their opinions of the
artistic value of the work and felt compelled to criticize the censor, the artist and in some cases the subjects. I think in a free society everyone is entitled to their opinions including shock jocks but surely they can only be giving a personal view of their own interpretation of the content of the work. So forms of official and also populist censorship are alive and well in Australia.

Self Censorship
Many artists are not so keen to explore the social action end of practice the way I do. On my matrix their Z axis may well be ‘making art’ and ‘making a living’ rather than ‘making art’ and ‘making change’. Their major questions may be around the level they are willing to “sell out” to make a living. Commercial reality often bites artists as we live in a world were the intrinsic value of artwork does not equate well within consumerism. In many situations the strings attached to funding and sponsorship influence the art that is being made. A trend has been noted of work that fits neatly into grant categories or that are tailored to the needs of partners. Is this just another form of censorship? Maybe it is self-censorship? Or is it creative collaboration?

Being a citizen/society structures
As an active citizen I am always looking at ways that I can understand better and then influence those around me. Societies naturally develop. Contrary to popular thinking it actually takes a fair amount of energy to make something stay still - to not develop. Margaret Wheatley (2006) suggests that our organizational structures need to be connected to the science of the day. She laments that many of our decision-making structures are still based on the science of the industrial revolution. So they are based on cause and effect. This has led me to ask: how does my ethical/moral decision-making and my art making fit within Chaos Theory? What would our social decision-making system look like if it was influenced by Quantum Physics?

I have been reading some interesting work that looks at both Simplicity and Complexity theories. To me the cyclic nature of the simplicity /complexity model takes me back to the construct/destroy of my childhood. As a race we humans tend to work toward better understanding. We break things down into smaller, simpler elements to gain knowledge and once we think we get there, we suddenly realise that we know nothing and we break through to the new complex world where we start again, order things and start to pull them apart, trying to make sense of them.

What does art do in this process? Well it often describes or illustrates the stages in our understanding of the complex world. And it makes me want to contribute … to help to make the world a better place.

And what roles do ‘I’ the construct–destroy child, or ‘I’ the citizen, the artist and the arts manager play? A hope that they are moral ones that grows from an ethical starting place. Do I get it right? Who knows, but it is one hell of a journey - I hope you have enjoyed this small section of it....
Bibliography

