

Interview with Chris Baldwin by Maja Drobne (PINA - Koper, Slovenia)

WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

I would approach the notion of creativity from two directions. Firstly as a process, a way of thinking about the unknown and making it more known or familiar. In this respect it's a research approach - we are asking, 'what is it we need to understand or define in order to go on to potentially change?'. Perhaps we have a 'hunch' which comes from an instinctual place inside us, that something could be better or different or more useful or more efficient, more beautiful or provocative. To embrace this chaos is creativity for me, not be afraid of it but to walk towards it. Very often this is a counter intuitive process - to give something shape or form. In my job as an artistic director of shows and processes my principle aim is to find and share the story that's implicit in something; to find something that people can coalesce around. People are attracted to something because of the story that we give to explain it. And as an artistic director you aim to extend your own natural, personal, inquisitiveness about something by turning it 'outwards' - for it to become plural, shared.

But I said we approach creativity from two directions. And the second one is to do with ethics. I think creativity has an ethical dimension which involves various things. The first is that creativity is there to help us do good, in other words to understand the world, each other: Not, for me at least, in a religious or spiritual sense, but from the 'human commons' point of view. Ethics remind us that we share the planet we live on with one another and with the planet itself! Creativity acknowledges our essential humanity and interdependence on the planet, so that act of changing or making things different or better has to be for common good. We approach the unknown as a result of inquisitiveness - but it needs guiding by a sense of 'human and planetary commons'.

HOW IS CREATIVITY IMPORTANT IN YOUR WORK?

Inquisitiveness is what makes me delighted and eager to jump out of bed in the morning, especially when there's so much horror and trauma and pain being experienced by so many of us. Inquisitiveness is what drives me. It cleanses. It's a tool to remain positive and hopeful. For me there is a need to imbue optimism and hold on to hope and empathy in my small personal, private family life but also in my part I play in the universe. Creativity is the way that helps me remain human and conscious of my humanity. And it's infectious - when you set out to be the change you want to see you realise the world doesn't revolve around you. As a result of this global Covid pandemic I have lost dear friends. And the only way to respond to the consequent mourning is to reassert the sense that the value of our human experience is in the quality of the networks that we create between each other and the planet. That in itself is the most fundamental act of creativity. So the root of creativity is love.

WHAT ENABLES THIS?

I think it's inquisitiveness, combined with the active acknowledgement of the detrimental effects of fear. Fear is a perfectly human emotion and experience - I experience fear every day of my life; I understand it's value and also its limitations. Ageing, for example, makes you realise some parts of your body aren't working as before and as a result I experience a fear of the body being less strong; and that connects back to the fact that it is networks of people who can support you in your effort to sustain a good quality of life. Fear can be the greatest disabler. Fear makes us defensive, aggressive. That is why fear is such a potent element in our politics. And the agent most useful in managing fear is called solidarity. So, inquisitiveness, being conscious of the multiplicity of experiences when you experience love, leads you to deeper creativity.

WHAT KIND OF ATMOSPHERE IS REQUIRED TO SUPPORT CREATIVE SPACES?

Creative spaces are not all around us. Indeed they are often noticeable by their absence. One might think schools are designed as creative spaces. But the English playwright Edward Bond once pointed out that

secondary schools have failed in their primary mission if a child remains a creative force by the time they are 15 years old!

So one has to be diagnostic to understand what is required to create a creative space! The bid made by Piran (Slovenia) to become European Capital of Culture 2025 is a good example of how we attempted to create this creative space. Regretfully I was not able to spend enough time in the region because of the pandemic but we had Zoom and all the other contemporary digital tools to hand! So the first thing I did was to listen to as many voices as possible, in person when ever I could, online where necessary. That diagnostic process, which is very much related to Paulo Freire's approach to education, is a means by which you identify key aspects which hinder the presence of a creative space: Where is the fear? Where are the blocks? Where are the bullies or the hidden interests? One goes on to identify and create some kind of 'critical consciousness' about what has been discovered through dialogue. And then we to build the new paradigm, the new agreement, together.

As I mentioned, my practice is very much rooted in Paulo Freire's dialogical approach taken forward through Augusto Boal in theatre and other great practitioners in education and culture around the world. I had the enormous fortune to work with Boal when I was starting my career. And I became fascinated with what political and social realities stopped creativity from emerging. And out of that dialogical process we found the stories which identified the issues and would go on to generate positive energy and a desire to move forward... while acknowledging all the problems that have surfaced during all that dialogue. Later I discovered that this is also an approach psychotherapists, such as Dori Laub, have developed with patients suffering cataclysmic and traumatic events. Creating creative space is to learn to live without being held hostage by fear. With as little fear as possible, here is what I'm hearing - summarising and phrasing as a question - I then ask what stories might enable us to explore this further. Freire talks a lot about the word 'curriculum'. For him a curriculum is often simply a 'banking' approach to learning in which a curriculum is delivered 'from above', translating the demands of industry and the workplace into tasks children must address and gain quantifiable, sellable skills. The child is seen as an 'empty vessel' needing to be filled in order to make them valuable in the workplace. Freire rejects this. As a catholic and socialist his ethical approach to teaching and 'creative space making' was to say that we start from the premise that a child, indeed every human being, is a fully, multi-dimensional human being, which needs to be heard and respected and acknowledged. The teacher, or creative practitioner, enters into dialogue in order to co-create a curriculum, or co-create a work of art, out of a shared series of priorities. Freire's goal was to make as many people literate as possible to enable people to vote in their own interests. I take the same approach in cultural practice. When I begin working with an agenda of my own I declare it! But more often than not I bring a series of questions: What are your dreams? What would make life better? Who or what is stopping you? What processes or systems are working against you? How could we build a response to it? What is the curriculum, or cultural space, we need in order to build our way out of this?

Seeing the story as a curriculum or the curriculum as a story is useful as it helps us see that we can actively participate in its making. Referring back to something I said earlier, a leadership role is a balance between creating a space for people to work in, holding that space ethically, morally, financially, managerially, away from bullying and intimidation, danger, etc. and at the same time creating a reflective practice so people fill that vacuum through dialogue with something interesting and useful. It's a metaphor for leadership not just in the creative industries.

SO WHAT DOES CREATIVE LEADERSHIP MEAN?

Creating space, a safe space, for people to work in...an accountable space of course - free of threat and bullying, racism, sexism, violence, tyrannical behaviour, but at the same time in critical dialogue with the team you are working with. We must be honest. There's no such thing as leadership in a vacuum, as leadership always serves a purpose and you have to ask for who or what purpose. Let's take an example of a chemical company whose primary purpose is to increase the value of shares whatever the cost to the planet, our soil, the health of the rivers or villages, where everyone working in the organisation sees the ultimate signal of their

success as being indicated by the share price of that company. Then such management, where it is creative, is so under an extremely manipulative and coercive regime; coercive towards its employees and towards the planet. It's a structure not defined by love nor humanism. It's based on greed and loathing. So there's a kind of creativity that can, in theory, be used negatively to fulfil those purposes. And this is where ethics comes in crucial. I wouldn't call that kind of management or leadership creative, I would call it for what it is: anti-life. Creativity is not neutral, it has to have an ethical basis to it. If it's based on love, solidarity, humanity and inquisitiveness then you can't say it's an essential tool, it's an ethical approach.

WHAT CHALLENGES PREVENT CREATIVITY?

I've talked about this chemical company not acting in the public good but simply to extract share value. I'm not suggesting all companies act in contradiction to the public good but we do have an economic system where companies are hugely accountable to what they do primarily to their shareholders or stock markets. In recent times Covid and the defining issue of the climate emergency has shown how desperately we need ethical states to protect us. When you have an economy where companies exist primarily to generate maximum profit for shareholders then you need a third party acting on behalf of citizens to legislate against non-humanistic and anti-planetary interests. That's why a lot of creativity is also required in government and non-governmental services.

Creativity within a business setting is about inquisitiveness, about problem solving and finding solutions to problems that need giving form and shape, can be reimagined or changed. But it has to be done in an ethical and political framework cognisant of the common good, regulated by the force of the state which also must be working on behalf of citizens. To facilitate the interconnections between citizens, the state and private sector you need creative interlocutors - like Pina.

GIVE US SOME EXAMPLES ON COOPERATIONS BETWEEN BIZ AND ART

I'm now director of big events for Kaunas, European Capital of Culture Lithuania in 2022, and we are preparing four large shows, the opening, closing and two others. They will involve multiple contracts and relationships with many private providers of services. And there is such a thing as public procurement processes designed to moderate and monitor these financial relationships with the private sector. These projects can only be delivered through the power of creativity. And the necessity for a healthy relationships between the public and private sector is obvious. But they need to be predicated on law, transparency, planetary sustainability and ethics as well as value for money.

WHAT CAN ART BRING TO BUSINESS?

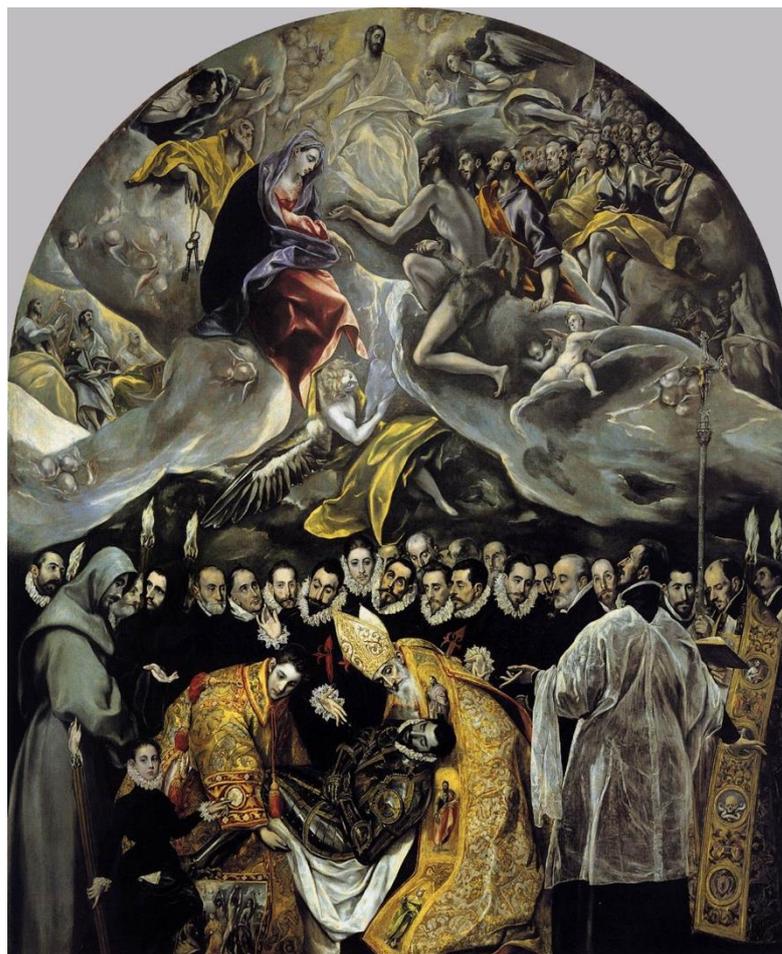
Let me start by saying that we shouldn't demonise the idea of profit margins. Profit can often indicate rationality, demand, efficiency, creativity. And It is obviously good when profit is reinvested into the company or into public good...where money is moving it's normally good.

The arts have one major function which almost no other activity in human society has; to produce perspectives and empathy for and about the other. In the arts we are always interested in understanding the other, bringing insights to an audience, often using ourselves as artists, as the conduit. That's the role of culture and art. Where a company needs to understand more clearly the nature of its shareholders or equally it's customers, or the nature of the community for whom it serves, then creating processes that are artistically led could lead to a greater empathetic understanding – that is, if a company really wants to hear. That is the role culture can play. Cultural artistic activity can be a hyper-combination of religion, therapy, education and even sports all put together. Cultural activity, of which art is one, does those things naturally. Nothing else puts such emphasis on empathy building than art does. It can help a management team understand its internal relationships and external stakeholders. Every organisation is dependent on stakeholders. I don't think culture is there to produce optimism or create joy or even beauty, but empathy always! And perspectives, always! Maybe no other human activity, except gardening, creates insights and empathy to such a degree.

IMPORTANCE OF ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND NEW WAYS OF SEEING

Let's remember three developmental steps. Before the 19th century the greatest commissioner and consumer of culture and the arts was the church. It was commissioning art and paintings and architecture from the beginning. Christianity, Islam, Judaism or Hinduism, and earlier spiritual traditions, it doesn't really matter which religion, were actively engaged in the commissioning of architects, designers, musicians, composers painters, poets, translators, printers, artifact designers. The greatest and undeniable contractor of culture and the arts was religion for 6000 years! Then very much more recently, as the nation and then nation-state grew, and the religious power started to decline, state started to demonstrate and celebrate their power and ambition through the commissioning of...yes...you guessed it...poets, architects, musicians, painters etc.

The painting, *The Burial of the Count Orgaz* (1586), by El Greco, today housed in Toledo, is apparently a religious painting. But look closely and you will see the really important features are the benefactors in the lower half of the painting. They are the ones who paid for the painting.



You see and feel the philosophical and political tension between the two halves of the painting! Although this is unconvincingly portrayed as a religious assumption scene.

Through the 19th and predominantly into the second half of 20th Century, we Europeans observe the state becoming the main benefactor of culture and the production of art. Shostakovich would have been impossible without the Communist state sponsoring his work. And in the post-World War Two west we also witnessed a huge increase in the purchasing and subsidising of artifacts and architecture paid for with public money. Business comes to this quite late, so we have to think carefully here. The US is the perfect example, e.g.

Guggenheim, Rockefeller Foundations. What have they been commissioning? And for what purpose? They own huge collectors of art so have built museums to hold them. While the US has not been great at commissioning symphonies the development of high-rise skyscrapers are the product of corporations commissioning architects and showing off just as the Church did in earlier centuries. There is enormous potential in business working with the arts but the surface has only just been scratched.

Let's return to the relationship between church and art to conclude. The early church wanted to define itself as a political power and also attempt to communicate as source for the power for good. Its power base and founding concepts were intellectual - the presence of God in your life makes your life more bearable. Something remarkably similar happened in the 19th century with the development of the nation-state. It wanted to define its role and place in the imagination of citizens as something benevolent and reassuring. So, nation-states turned to the arts and now, in the 21st century, when global corporations play such a fundamental role in all our lives, lets start by asking where Apple, Google, Netflix would be without artists? Yes, they are creative organisations but are they creating art for arts sake? Has any organisation commissioned arts for art's sake?