# ART AND CREATIVITY – BEHIND THE MERE SHOW

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 with The Congo Diary)*[1]

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 quote from Conrad. 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, and so the word "work" might be more helpful. And yet through the voice of Marlow, Conrad claims a space for labour – or work – 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 has ever been.

Someone suggested to me recently that I write about the personal experiences of creativity. This suggestion was made partly in response to a discussion about 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; here it gets 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 cack-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 navvy 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 a great deal 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 many 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 to *Heart of Darkness*, he writes:

> I follow the instincts of vain-glory 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. As though it's something 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 a kind of perverse will to work on until the wretched, old, mangled mess of materials can be fashioned into something onto which ideas and emotions 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 an impact on his persuasive audience of one 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; 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 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; someone who can see 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," "gentlemanly," "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 thrall 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 counterpoints 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." Certainly there's a similar imbecile rapacity in that particular contemporary compound, and while it might be fun to draw out the point, describing in detail the travails of "the pilgrims" as they approach "proximity to a great human passion let loose"[7], and recounting their profound ineptitude in matters practical, and draw counterpoints with "the pilgrims" of the contemporary art world, it would surely be a cheap trick. For the jabbering and posturing and absolute ineffectuality of "the pilgrims" when it came to the practicalities of the journey would fit so neatly into a description of a multitude of others who willingly submit to the promises of missionaries from all kinds of other orders.

Not so long ago, during the national pandemic of the equine influenza virus, 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 race-track 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 the tale, one of them, the assistant to the manager of the Central Station, had been assigned as a brickmaker. 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.[8]

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 art world so accurately.

But I digress even though these fetid backwaters of Conrad's descriptive territories seem to reflect so many parallels with the contemporary world that is sometimes described as "the creative industries." And that kind of digression is surely also part and parcel of the nature of making art. Even though you may work or write to a particular brief, there are always those points where you steer away from the main course to discover more intriguing corners of the country you are traversing. For artists there is always the question, "How can I know what I think until I see (read) what I make (write)?" This is reflected in that initial quote from Conrad 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 the brief, or the request, but there's every chance you'll end up meandering down to it via a backwater you always wanted to explore anyway.

All of which makes the study of art so difficult within the structures of postgraduate candidature. In traditional disciplines, candidates are expected to postulate a thesis, and then to set course in order to trace the veracity of that thesis. For so many artists, if you knew exactly where you were going, you wouldn't bother setting out in the first place. And if you decide to embark anyway, and to perform your task according to the rules, there's every chance that you will end up with a very good illustration of an idea. But it probably won't be art. It will be tucked in at the edges and trimmed off by the ideas that have governed it for every turn of the journey. It may end up being cohesive and visually articulate and classifiable and understandable, but it may fail to fascinate and engage and perplex and trouble and bewitch in the long term. It's not much different in the commercial art world. Dealers and collectors often may want more of the same, but all ever so slightly different. Or curators might want more of this or that, but more compact, or in pink. Either way, if you hoist your flag to a particular mast, it may be successful in making you and your product more readily identifiable and categorisable and therefore more capable of being accommodated into other galleries/collections/curated shows/articles, etc.

But art won't come to heel. It's messier and more unkempt than assessment criteria forms can accommodate. Marlow describes his journey after two months of travel towards Kurtz's station:

> The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once – somewhere – far away – in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst all the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence.[9]

This enchanting passage seems a lot like being deep in the middle of a project – a project that involves the making of art. Or perhaps it's also a little like that state of being-in-love-ness. It's a description that seems to fit well with that time spent as an artist when you're well into the rhythm of the making, immersed in that time where you have to just keep your nose down, engrossed in the fabrication and solving the little practical problems of the project at hand. Every so often you surface, you look up from your obsession, and see that you're in a strange place. You recall the familiar all right, and can work with it, but it comes to you as an apparition hovering amidst that "unrestful and noisy dream," while the real work remains to be done in the strange bewitched world you've created yourself within. It strikes me as a good enough way of describing to potential postgraduate students of art where they might expect to find (or lose) themselves as they get immersed in the project at hand. It strikes me as a much better way of describing the creative process than I've read in more recent accounts in the creativity manuals.

In many ways, an important part of the job of the artist might be to warn of those shoals and stations where things might look suspiciously like art, but aren't. Conrad was a practical man – like that other marvellous writer Melville, he'd spent many years at sea before devoting his life to writing. He'd also spent enough time in the Congo, overland and upriver, to have developed a phlegmatic practicality that resisted any tendencies to present his experiences as exotic. There is a sense that the kind of practical skills he would have needed on such expeditions was deeply influential on his practice as a writer. Conrad has described his primary task as a writer as using "the power of the written word … before all, to make you *see*."[10] Conrad's respect for the power of words is evident especially in the powers he bestowed in Kurtz. Kurtz was, above all, a man of *words*. Before we meet him we are aware of the seduction of his words; he is a "special being," a "prodigy," "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress;" he displays "higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose"[11]; but beyond all this, he displays a "magnificent eloquence"[12]. The "problem," as it is revealed, is that he is also "hollow at the core"[13]. He is a man who does not test his gift against his own self-scrutiny, he uses his art for his own ends only and, in the final end, is forced to grapple with his own emptiness. This fight is, to the watching Marlow, more terrible yet than the "pure, uncomplicated savagery" of "the wilderness."

Conrad's own respect for the power and fundamental sacredness of words is evident through Marlow's vitriolic

dismissal of a spectre who would blaspheme through the power of "splendid monologues." He spits out, "Let us hope that the man who can talk so well of love in general will find some particular reason to spare us this time" [14]. And yet he, too, can find more solace in the magnificence of Kurtz's dark possession than he can in the dry measured darkness of the managers and "pilgrims." "It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief – positively for relief"[15].

Here it is evident that, although Marlow's horror at witnessing Kurtz's deposition and expulsion seems paramount, his greatest revulsion of all is finally reserved for those emissaries of order who diminish all passion to the deathly dryness of impartial analysis. For them, finally, in the moral and ethical desert of their imaginations, Kurtz can only ultimately be condemned on the basis of what they describe as his "unsound method." It is the best they can do, for they are already the living dead. And between that dry finality and the horrors of Kurtz, Marlow ultimately chooses the latter: "Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares"[16].

Young artists – and sometimes not-so-young artists, who begin their art practice later in life, are referred to in the sector as "emerging artists" in Australia. There is something of the imagery of the cocoon in this term, with all the greenness and wet-behind-the-ears-ness and naïvety that comes associated with it. If they've been through a tertiary institution, they will have already been warned of the statistics about how few will be exhibiting in a few year's time, how little they will be able to make from their work in terms of cash, and how they'll have to find other forms of income to support their habit.

By the time they've been at it a few years, they're dubbed as "mid-career artists." In a country with as small a population as Australia, it's fair to say that most of these mid-career artists have floated to that point on pontoons filled with conviction and hope and commitment. There will have been the odd highlights in sales and critical attention, but by that time most of them will have had to grapple with the "why am I doing this?" question a number of times, and have come up with a range of answers depending on the particular time and conditions in which they asked it of themselves. They will no doubt also be armed with a more fully developed sense of how their sector "works," and most will have collected a ballast of wryness through which to deal with disappointments, setbacks and general apathy. If they're unlucky some of that ballast might have rotted in the hull and turned into cynicism. And if that happens, there's no telling what might develop during their next "phase." There's no clear description in the sector really for what that is anyway … "mature artists?" (an oxymoron?) or maybe "really old artists?" or perhaps "really hardened artists?"

It's apparent that, if the character Marlow had been an artist, he'd be well into his mid-career phase by the end of the book. In a sense the journey upstream is a coming-of-age for his realisations about what's important, what's permissible, and what's taboo. It's interesting that through him, Conrad can address several evils, and especially, as I've argued, the evil of using the talent of wordsmithery to the wrong ends. Kurtz is, finally, a pretender. Yet it is the dry dead nothingness of the administrators that Conrad chooses to represent the ultimate nightmare of the tale. (Again, the hark-back to Hannah Arendt.) And although it might seem a hugely romantic stretch to argue that, like Marlow, many artists would choose magnificent, misdirected failure over commonplace work-a-day pretence, there's a sense that it still may be so.

There's no statistical analysis that will ascertain why that drive runs so deep in artists and there are no criteria that I know of that can measure the sticking-power of an artist either. Or the passion, or the extent to which that passion can survive as a long, slow-burner. And even in this age of accountability, measurement, apportionment, indicators that evaluate responsibility and audience development and social and cultural engineering (couched in other terms, of course); even in this era that is so committed to holding and preserving and conserving, art still so often finds a way of slinking back off downstream again. In the end, Marlow discovers he has more similarities with the dead Kurtz than he does with the reality of the world in which he has been employed; he shares with Kurtz the role of "a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe".[17] In so many ways, the "methods" of art or dedicated, slow-burn passion may never readily march to the tempo of the time in which they are played out. It may be that art will never, should never fit seamlessly with that work-a-day world.

This tale set its course speaking about love, as well as of labour, as the other pole defining that space in which it might be possible to foster art. Love is another one of those things, like labour and art, that squirms uncomfortably when addressed directly. The result is, more often than not, reductively corny or claustrophobic or just plain boring. And that's one of the good reasons we still need contemporary art: it's a way of alluding to, rather than describing, those amorphous voids that have to be tended to again and again as they mutate into new forms that are relevant to *this* time and *this* place.

Conrad glances against that big subject of "love" here and there in the novel, but there are very few signs of it in relation to the female characters he seems to drop in simply for effect. Enough has been written about Marlow's (and Conrad's) patriarchy, and from this point in post-feminist history the final irony lies at the point when Marlow makes the decision to lie to Kurtz's "Intended" when she demands to know his last words. (Marlow tells her what he knows she wants to hear: that the last words he uttered were her name, instead of the truth: Kurtz's ultimate "The horror! The horror!")

Rather, one of the more true-to-character currents of love in the novel seems to lie in the quote detailing Marlow's relationship with the broken-down, tin-pot steamer where he describes how "he had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her"[18]. This passage describing Marlow's love for his work is telling. It may seem like a different tempo of passion to the romantic *Sturm und Drang* that govern other aspects of the novel, but it remains undiminished throughout the tale. Even during the times of greatest duress, it's that dedication to and love of the work at hand that drives Marlow on and through a succession of horrors. In the face of such immensity of passion of other kinds, this kind of love seems such a little thing – almost as something incidental or minor.

One of the fundamental aspects of training in visual art practice hinges on an understanding about something that also often seems to be incidental or minor; it emphasises the importance of a very slim, very underrated four-letter word: care. You are taught to care about the space of the page, and care about how you might arrange shapes within that space. You are taught about colour, its tone, its hue, its intensity; about edges and overlays and transparencies and opacities. You are taught about weight and gravity and the lack of it. You are taught that every time you alter your point of view, *everything* in that picture-plane changes – everything. You are taught that colours behave differently according to what other colours they sit beside. You are taught that everything matters – your choice of materials, your choice of ground, your choice of subject matter. And beyond that, the context in which you will be presenting your work, and your audience. You are taught that everything makes a difference to the final product, and that if you alter just one small thing at a certain point, then you may have to change every other aspect of that image in accordance with that decision. You are taught that everything hinges on relationships *between* things, and that the best things are those you must leave out, but hint at. You are taught, ultimately, that you have to *care* about every single aspect of what you do.

And once you make the mistake of caring, you're gone. You're up-to-your-neck in it. More: you realise you are part of it. And worse yet, it matters.

I guess this might be a little bit like love. Some aspects of love, anyway. There's a point at which the incremental shifts in caring might swell into that bigger tide that carries one along and in which, at times, one may realise one has become immersed. There's that sense of dissolution, of not being able to determine the specific boundaries between the you and the it. Or the "ich" and the "du," as Martin Buber pointed out. Or maybe between the dancer and the dance. Or maybe between the land and the custodianship of it, as indigenous Australians have tried to show us. There's a custodianship to being involved in art, too, I think. Maybe that's part of what Conrad was on about.

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1 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness with the Congo Diary*, (London: Penguin Classics, 200/1995), 52.
2 Ibid., 10.
3 Ibid., 51.
4 Ibid., 52.
5 Ibid., 29.
6 Ibid., 44.
7 Ibid., 73.
8 Ibid., 46.
9 Ibid., 59.
10 Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, quoted in Ibid., Introduction, s.p.
11 Ibid., 47.
12 Ibid., 95.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 97.
15 Ibid., 101.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 52.