Chapter Nine

Culture and the Biosphere

In January 1995 the Australian press reported the discovery of a living 8,000 year-old tree in Tasmania. An analysis of its structure revealed, according to scientists, that the years since 1960 have been the hottest in that entire period. More circumstantial evidence for the greenhouse effect.

Murray Gell-Mann observes that through our technology we now have the power to destroy the biosphere, whether deliberately or as a side effect of other activities. The evolution of the means to do this has proceeded exponentially faster than the pace of biological evolution.The rate of change in the biosphere is too rapid to be accommodated by biological adaptation. There is a serious prospect of catastrophe, whether in chaos and collapse of societies, or exhaustion of the biosphere and massive extinction of life. Since biological evolution cannot cope, and since the problem originates with humanity, the only hope lies in a benign cultural evolution.

There is some question as to whether this is possible. Gell-Mann suggests the prospect that a lot of the aggressive human behaviour contributing to this emergency may be hard-wired: genetically inherited attributes which once were important to species survival but are now maladaptive. We need only to look around us to see people enmeshed in their obsession for immediate advantage and unwilling to consider seriously the disasters that may await their children as a result. Most of us - the author included - continue to contribute to the problem, even though we know better, by driving our cars, taking plane rides, using up resources that can never be available again.

What are artists contributing? The notion that artists as a class embody the noblest traits can easily be found wanting. The political world of the artists is as savage as any. (Timothy Pascoe, a former head of the Australia Council, says that it was such a relief to return to the business world: people are so *nice* to each other!) It's not dentists and accountants, or even generals, who construct the daily fare of violence that we see on the TV. Whatever the apologists might say, it is pretty difficult to believe that the normal processes of cause and effect are set aside and that this continuing diet has no effect on behaviour. It is artists who are making this material.

And it cannot be said that these are not true artists, or that they are different from true artists in their willingness to present the various human uglinesses. There is comparable ghastliness in non-commercial art.

Artists as a group are not inherently virtuous. Perhaps what could be said is that artists as a group have the greatest ability to articulate a set of values or a vision. An artist of noble values (whatever *they* are!) could give them a form which will inspire.

It can be argued that none of us can justify walking away from the issue of species and planetary survival, whether individually or in our collective activities. If, as Gell-Mann says, the only hope lies in cultural evolution, then at the governmental level no-one has a greater responsibility than the policy bodies involved with cultural development, with the cultural forms through which cultural change is reflected, articulated, and to a degree initiated. What is more, their responsibility is matched by a double opportunity. As policy bodies they are brought together precisely to get below the surface of things, to consider

competing priorities, make decisions, initiate action. Further, because they are dealing with artists, they have access to those people with the greatest ability to articulate our situation and put the arguments for change in a way which can reach people deeply.

It seems to this writer that this responsibility is simply unarguable. How it is to be exercised is another matter. In terms of the usual artistic agenda, the arguments in this book generally are aligned with bottom-up development, artistic freedom, the disadvantages and therefore avoidance of heavy top-down prescription by policy bodies. A bottom-up approach will produce a warts-and-all outcome. But the psychologist Fritz Perls posed a paradoxical theory of change: we can change only by experiencing completely who we are. (See Arnold R. Beisser: "The Paradoxical Theory of Change", in *Gestalt Therapy Now*. Harper Colophon, New York 1971. pp. 77-80. Deals with theory at individual and societal levels) We need to know who we are, and artists can help to show us that. Some of it is ugly. But it cannot on that account be forbidden or unsupported by policy bodies.

Having suggested the great moment of this issue and the irrefutable responsibility of cultural policy bodies, it feels wimpish and inadequate to be unable to suggest a proportionately strong line of action. There are practical questions about what actions are possible or are likely to be effective. But the even greater stumbling block - which probably has readers almost out of their chairs before it is even admitted - is the proposition that arts policy bodies should be advocating any values whatever.

Most people will not take much notice if a policy body somehow promotes their own values. Indeed, most of us would be thoughtlessly pleased by that. But what if it advocates values that are abhorrent to us? Once it is allowed to advocate values, who will choose them and how is it to be confined to any particular set of values?

Some particular problems arise out of one set of values that we have adopted officially: multiculturalism. Having pleaded for humanity to sustain biological diversity for all the wisdom captured genetically over millions of years of evolution, Gell-Mann makes a comparable argument for sustaining cultural diversity. Indigenous societies also have accumulated customs and knowledge over millennia, and are a storehouse of alternative ways of adaptation to the environment, of constructing social systems, of thinking and conceptualising and communicating.

Two sorts of difficulties emerge. One is that some of any society's beliefs and values are destructive, if not of its own welfare, then of that of its neighbour. Often they may be based on superstition or magical thinking, where a desire to make the world comprehensible and controllable leads to perceptions of phenomena or causal sequences which are not there in reality. So for instance: if we dance in a particular way, it will rain, or: if people don't buy cigarettes I won't be rich, therefore it has never been proven that cigarettes cause cancer. The other difficulty may be a product of the hard-wiring referred to already: the smallest differences in belief between two cultures can lead to physical conflict and destruction.

So in maintaining cultural diversity we also sustain beliefs and practices which conflict with the urgent need for the species-wide values that will support a sustainable, quality life on the planet. Some means of mutual accommodation must be found.

There can be conflict about whether cultural policy body should have the power to promulgate a set of values, and about what they should be. If it is given that power, there is the risk that it will promote values other than the ones we thought we had agreed upon. But in the West, policy bodies are committed in any case to a particular set of values stated in their enabling legislation. These are not necessarily uncontroversial - take the pursuit of excellence as a case in point. Beyond those explicit values there are others that are tacit. On this account, many funding bodies would be more likely, for example, to support mediocre orchestral music than excellent rock music. One of the most important values, whether implicit or explicit, is to support the right to free expression by artists. If a policy body supports the bottom-up articulation of values held by many groups and artists, then while some of those may be obnoxious to us at least they are not endorsed per se by government.

The author proposes that policy and funding bodies should continue to protect that freedom of values and expression in the great majority of their activities, but that a small part of their resources might be addressed to the matters in question here. If there then are difficulties, they have to be resolved by a political process. There is precedent in the various affirmative action programs of some funding bodies, for instance in support of multicultural arts.

Are there values then upon which we can agree. Is there a basis for the reconciliation of values between the actual maladaptive local customs and those needed for species survival? One possibility lies in a formulation of the American psychologist, Abraham Maslow.

Maslow identified a number of "highly evolved" individuals who he believed were able to function especially well in the world and their personal affairs, and looked into various aspects of their lives and personalities. At the time - the 1950's and early 60's - it was generally believed that normal people were differentiated, roughly speaking, by the degree of their neurosis. At best, one might lack neurosis. Maslow claimed that there is something beyond the absence of neurosis. (Abraham Maslow: *Towards a Psychology of Being*. D. Van Nostrand Company Inc., 1962) When basic needs for safety, physiological well-being, a conviction of "belongingness", self-esteem and the esteem of others, and love, are met in large measure, the person becomes "self-actualizing". There is a set of personal qualities displayed by self-actualising people which is quite different from that of "normal" people; they are no longer driven primarily to fill the "deficiency" needs and their energy goes instead into self-expression. (This has always been an interesting theory for the arts world because it gives the lie to that prevalent assumption that great art must arise out of neurosis. (See also, for instance, Kubie, Lawrence S: *The Neurotic Distortion of the Creative Process*. University of Kansas Press, 1958))

These qualities include clearer, more efficient perception of reality; more openness to experience; increased spontaneity, expressiveness; ability to fuse concreteness and abstractness; and so on.

These people are more likely than others to have "peak experiences". The peak experience is a special experience of heightened awareness and joy and the unity of all things, called by Freud the oceanic experience, and by various other names indicating enlightenment, in Eastern religions. Maslow said that the most common triggers in Western society for peak experience are sexual orgasm, experiences of nature, and music - especially classical music. When involved in peak experiences - during or in the aftermath, presumably - people seemed to agree on a set of values. These values did not seem to be culturally based - i.e. they did

not seem to vary from one culture to another. They are values displayed by anyone, self-actualised or not, during peak experience, and as a more continuous aspect of the self-actualising personality. They therefore seem to be naturally based.

So at one point Maslow lists "serenity, kindness, courage, honesty, love, unselfishness, and goodness." (Ibid. p 147). He says elsewhere "...such people, when they feel strong, if really free choice is possible, tend spontaneously to choose the true rather than the false, good rather than evil, beauty rather than ugliness, integration rather than dissociation, joy rather than sorrow, aliveness rather than deadness, uniqueness rather than stereotypy, and so on...(Ibid p. 158) "Finally, I hypothesize that these ...values...are to some degree the same as the values which describe the "good"work of art, or Nature in general, or the good external world. That is, I think that the values within the person are to some extent isomorphic with the same values perceived in the world, and that there is a mutually enhancing and strengthening dynamic relationship between these inner and outer values." (Ibid. pp.159-60). Of course, he has much more to say on the subject.

It is not proposed here that the Maslow formulations should be the basis of a policy or plan of action, although there is good reason to suppose that the right sort of participatory activity in the arts would tend to move people towards self-actualisation. However, they do give some hope that at a fundamental level there may be sufficient agreement among peoples of disparate cultures to solve our problem.

The Maslow values are a context for action, but something more specific to the problem of sustainability is needed. Here, the values might be instrumental, derived from some wise assessment of the specific actions needed to achieve a sustainable planet and culture. Gell-Mann actually proposes a set of cultural transitions: to limit population, contain the negative environmental impact of technology, and enhance its benefit to the poor; change the basis of economics and finance so that it costs money to destroy the environment; stop charging our wealth against the poverty of the future; foster an ideological transition towards values that support a sustainable quality of life, even if there is some cost to cultural diversity; and present comprehensible, reliable information that enlightens the general populace about the circumstances. Values could be built around these actions, or perhaps they underly them.

If we have agreed in principle that something could be done, then we have to deal with what that might be. Perhaps the first step is to find ways to go beyond the usual detail of arts production to ensure that the issue is alive and a part of the consciousness of the policy bodies. What ways are appropriate? It cannot be treated simply as an intellectual issue, for the practical reason that it would soon be forgotten as the smaller urgencies nudge it off the agenda. It cannot be the basis of broad policy prescriptions. It does need to be incorporated as a recurring aspect of the program. Perhaps with modest funds and maximal publicity, awards could be given over and above normal funding for the art works which most successfully depict these issues and lead us towards better ways of dealing with them.

There is another possibility. Something that is missing in Australian society is meaningful ritual. The church offers ritual, but a shrinking portion of the population benefits because of the decline of belief. For most, what remains of meaningful ritual is largely confined to weddings and funerals, slim pickings over a lifetime. Perhaps some of the protocols of sports or performing arts attendance

could be perceived as a sort of low level ritual, but they might better be characterised as customs.

There is an added difficulty in Australia that with the high level and disparate sources of immigration, the bonds of a common past and belief system, which might have been a basis for ritual, have been weakened. On the other hand, this brings a special freedom and opportunity to discover new, commonly held bases for positive belief and action. Observers such as Hugh McKay could be helpful in identifying them.

By meaningful ritual, the author is thinking of some sort of collective experience, bringing to life an important past event in community life or refreshing the meaning of commonly held belief. The ritual should be involving, engaging, and have a form and content that can bring some profundity of experience to the participants. It should confirm the most positive values and somhow encourage people to recall them and live by them.

I believe that many people, lacking the ritual of the church, miss this sort of collective, profound, affirmative experience - if not consciously (because they have never really had it), unconsciously, as a spiritual emptiness.

Accepting this hypothesis for the moment, how can we create rituals which would be effective in playing this role for substantial numbers in our society? They could be created whole and then promoted to the relevant populace, in a top-down scenario. This has the advantage that the entire arrangement can be thought through without the limitations imposed by any particular history of existing events. It has the obvious disadvantages that it grows out of nothing more than the protagonists' minds, may not resonate with anyone else's needs, and is potentially obnoxious because imposed. A more promising scenario, conceptually at least, is to take and enhance some existing customs or events that are popular with the populace, and to build onto them in some acceptable and suitable way. The difficulty with this approach might be the identification of such existing platforms and the limitations they impose.

The actual creation of these rituals is a natural province of artists. The rituals themselves can be designed to include the familiar and the participatory, and the unfettered flight of artistic imagination. Arts policy bodies could offer appropriate inducements and assistance for such projects. Through them, there could be some impact - even a powerful impact - on the enormous moral and survival issues of our time. At the least, they might go some way further towards bringing artists out of their more narrow preoccupations and into a valued and more central role with the community.

These ideas have not been taken to any depth or detail. They are in any case better subjected to some contention among intelligent people than left to the unchallenged musing of an individual. Having finished my task, I pass this one to the readers and their friends.

-000-