

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this time. SALA Week is very important to this community of artists. It gives recognition to what we do and clearly shows the public, our audience, is interested too. Congratulations to Annette Bezor, I wish you every success.

My address to you is short and rather informal. It is by way of explanation, observations and some invention – an account of my experience in the past few months of this year. I owe credit to Barry Lopez, John McPhee, Lisa Jardine, Mark Kingwell and others to the substance of the conversations ahead.

Introduction:

Most of last year, as an artist I spent making proposals for public art – seven in total, including a federation proposal for Mosman City Council (Sydney) and several others for the new Adelaide freeway. I found each proposal took a great deal of effort (both creatively and in time, particularly with interviews etc).

It had been at least six years since I had any measure of success in the public art field in South Australia – I had some work in Parramatta but not here, where I live. When the freeway briefing and bus tour day came, I met up with Leith Elder – we saw the freshly gouged freeway and all the stuff – in chatting we agreed that if he got the project he would employ me, and vice versa. Months went past; the freeway project seemed to become a tangled web. My enthusiasm for public art was at an especially low ebb and I took it as a message only to continue to work in the studio and give public art away.

The day before Christmas 1999 (last year) I simultaneously received a phone call and couriered letter approving in principle my proposal for the “Show case” sculptural wall at Glen Osmond and Portrush Roads. Joy of joys! The work is called the Fossil Forest of eleven six-metre high pine shaped trees to be made from aerated concrete (Hebel). They would I hope bring some focus to the Ediacaran Fossils – 560 Million years ago (pre Cambrian Period) and as well to SALA, Living South Australian artists (practicing). The work is now installed and almost complete and should be unveiled or whatever fairly soon.

For months and months (at least four) I worked with the artists George Aldridge and Leith Elder on the mammoth task of constructing the monumental work. We worked under the most arduous conditions imaginable, rain, hail, wind, snow, and sleet. It was freezing mostly – occasionally it was sunny (and cold).

We made the work with similarly primitive tools: axes, files and chisels – the saws and electrical/air tools wore out too quickly and were unreliable. All this was happening at the road workers depot at Crafers.

Conversations with artists:

For me it was the conversations we had, over lunch sometimes when we needed to recoup and revive from an exhausting period of chopping ‘Hebel’ (we chopped five or six truck loads away). The conversations related sometimes to the work we were doing, other times about experiences one or several of us had had, or what we were reading... For me their conversations were significant. They both were trying to practice as living artists. It seemed the conversations were about what we truly believed, it got away from the familiar – it was interesting to hear of their concerns, passions and their strength of personal integrity to overcome problems.

So here goes – the gist of a few of these talks:

### 1. On Living

We all agreed that the signs of the time were upside down. That Administrators were guaranteed of a regular income and the artists / creators weren't. It was as if artists were parked on a slippery slope (risky) and the others were parked on the flat and even, and that's what society preferred. Leith mentioned that he'd worked for Telstra, got good money – a lot of country work – but away from his family. He got out from Telstra but finds it tough to live; he prefers the life of an artist.

Some opinions:

- Its curious how for twenty years now, artists have been promised a larger slice of the art cake.
- Another foundation is launched this time to do with arts and business.
- Funny how only 1% of business invests in the arts in Australia.
- The average income for artists in Australia is \$11,000 today.
- Business says we'll call it a "partnership", rather than sponsorship.
- The conversation moves on – who had grants or awards or what...
- It does really make one think what value does our society really have for a continuous creative process? If artists are the dreamers, who nurtures society's conscience – who offers valuable insights!
- Then where's the difficulty in supporting artists. Artists do have something to offer.
- Australia, have the self- confidence to reach for a more intelligent future: use your artists.

### 2. Smoothness and Roughness

Axing away at our fossil forest we liked the roughness we made...

Smoothness is simple

Roughness is complex

How easy it is to ingest the smoothness

How seductive is smooth.... Smoooooth

How seductive is the blue or orange bonnet on an iMac

How speedy is the Olympic torch?

Somehow the function, the efficiency, the usefulness of things is driven further from nature toward a consuming smoothness.

That is only initially exciting, try rough!

Nature is about difference, the idiosyncratic, the rough or chewed edge, stoppages and interruptions.

Yankee Doodle Dandee!

Its Leith's cell phone – Craig needs help to make more Shop Fronts (= work)

### 3. The Environment

You know the United States throws away two hundred and fifty million car and truck tyres a year. So on that count, Australia's growing tyre population is more than 15 million tyres per year.

What happens to Adelaide's tyres – (like the U.S.) they're usually shredded into small pieces and dumped at Wingfield. – A small proportion are used for children's playground mats and similar things. Brisbane used to have a waste-to-energy power system. Tyres produce two or three times as many B.T.V's as refuse fuel (old oil)...

Artists are good at imaginative problem solving and no subject is off limits to the artist.

If we are all part of the one community then artists should have a place within this fabric.

Artists are not limited to an "aesthetic engagement" as some would have it.

To return to the tyres – or maybe we never left – There is no easy solution...

Artists may offer through their work something that may unsettle, that will in effect contribute towards individuals making up their minds what their responsible action is now and for the future... It might be to do with tyres or some other matter that is the subject of the artist.

#### 4. George discovers his muscles

After a few weeks chopping and shaping we had all lost some body flab and had developed aches and pains to be soothed by Radox and hot baths on returning home. 'Georges' pain persisted – pointing to his muscle in his left lower arm. He showed his local doctor who proclaimed.... "George, you're growing a muscle"

George Aldridge has lived until recently at Hawker painting and drawing and travelling about the country. He worked, like many graduates of the South Australian School Of Art, at the SA Museum. It was George that invited me as a Museum volunteer to my first fossil dig 50km's east of Lake Eyre.

For me, it brought together the arts and natural sciences and ultimately to my solution for the 'Fossil Forest'. George is presently in Portugal, the recipient of second prize at an International Cartoon Conference – the prize included his airfare and accommodation. George, you're flexing your muscles!

#### 5. Fossils for the Future

It seems to me that with any human endeavour its visually initiated by imagination – time and memory are often the stepping stones ... However for me, and I expect for you, fossils are timeless, beyond any comprehension of time, yet they still spark our curiosity and speculation... in our minds – and that's what counts.

If the Fossil Forest is to fulfil its task or for that matter any work of art, then the audience will need to share what they are, and why they were made, and to give a real experience the collaborative artists that participated in this project were from diverse fields, they sensed the spirit of the intention, they worked in an unprecedented way – they were wonderful.

We are a community of artists who need to understand each other and what our purpose is with each other to make sense of our lives.

Leith spoke about his reading, that the future by 2040 will be totally unpredictable, beyond science fiction to zoom right out of the picture.

They say the past determines the future. Might this old fossil who can still look back twenty years suggest to others here today who can reveal 20 years of what it was like and how different it is – you may be the best experienced to help younger artists as well as yourselves to develop a vision for the future.

That's (20 20)

Thank you

Tony Bishop