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Studio Glass Sustainability – From The Microcosm

This paper reports on research prompted by arrival at a personal artistic crossroads signposted by both the continuing Art/craft schism and the socio-economic challenges that bulwark the imperative for sustainability. Hence a significant driver of the resulting journeying is the challenge implicit in fundamental dilemmas for today's artists which centre firstly on the nexus between the sustainability of artistic integrity whilst retaining economic viability and, secondly, on the potential engagement of the broader community's ability to link/re-establish/ via socio/symbolic bonds to current craft/art conceptions.

Probing the genesis and professional focus of this artist in the twenty first century resulted in the development of an economically feasible model which enables a synthesis between tradition and innovation based on arts tourism. Whilst not a new notion, cultural tourism specifically business tourism, represents an increasing growth area with both opportunities and difficult decision points for artists and craftspersons.

As an Australian artist living in far north Queensland in a centre populous but remote from the state's capital there are always likely to be potential problems of engagement. Over the last twenty years the economic climate, educational attitudes & directions as well as access to cultural institutions have changed dramatically since Studio 8 Glass was established in 1992. One thing that hasn't changed is the exposure to natural disasters in the form of tropical cyclones and flooding which affect all businesses. A major hurdle of establishing a sustainable arts business in a remote area, the tyranny of distance, has been bridged by the ever expanding and encompassing super highways of the internet and social networking allowing instant access to information, current trends and the ability to market arts and craft anywhere in the world at any time.

Within this environment, issues of financial security, collaboration, career path options and artistic direction essential for a small arts/craft business to remain sustainable and valued within society have been tackled. Initial research identified an industry and the individual artist standing at a crossroads where decisions had to be made and constructive pathways explored for a sustainable future. Outcomes include the identification of key new niche markets for artists such as in cultural tourism.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data (2003) indicating higher and broadened levels of education in Australian society, combined with entrepreneurial business directions of the last two decades, have seen a shift in awareness of and desire for participation in the arts from an enlightened and ever expanding audience. As well as an expanding arts audience within Australian society, the scope and nature of artistic practice has burgeoned from the specialized highway of an exhibition focused career path to encompass numerous collaborative alternatives.

The typical solution is to establish a small business of limited edition, commissions or production ware, either as a sole trader or in collaboration with other artists. This negates the need to find alternative employment and, in a cooperative environment, reduces costs and can provide an intersection of ideas from participants. Artists that pursue this avenue of sustainability believe (Jirasek 1997: 48) 'that it may not be the most talented designer-makers who succeed in the long run, but those that sustain their creative practice and integrity with the principles of small business operation.'

The advent of more contextual displays of art and craft, placing them in an environment that relates to the work rather than on a plinth in a sterile setting, has led to a reacceptance by the general public of art as integral to their everyday lives. This, in turn,

equates to opportunities for entrepreneurial artists to increase their business. Examples of art are now seen more often in public and private buildings, in Australia an outcome of the Art Built In policy of the government, although uptake of the initiative has been patchy and applied in an 'add on' rather than inclusive policy. (Kieniger 2006) Even so, this has resulted in many more opportunities for artists to expand the options available to them in their professional practice.

The other side of the equation of a small business is the market. Just as artists need to be aware of the importance of relevant output, so does the audience need to be aware of the value of the art produced. There may be no lack of appreciation, but this does need to be converted to a realistic return that reflects art's broad social value to enable increased quality and quantity of output by artists, and appropriate economic return for the investment of years of study and playing a crucial role in society. This search for a new identity and direction is not restricted to individual artists, but is symptomatic of the creative industries per se. As in all areas of our lives, change is always necessary for growth:

The creative industries are an important part of the emerging services economy in Australia, contributing more to the economy both in terms of output and employment than is commonly recognised. In 2006, the creative industries workforce totalled 486,700 people, representing a 5.3 per cent share of the Australian workforce and a 10 per cent growth across five years. In 2008–09, the creative industries were valued at more than \$31 billion in terms of industry gross product, representing an average growth rate of 3.9 per cent in real terms – a faster growth rate than the broader economy over the 10 years to 2008-09. Notably, this contribution to industry gross product is also larger than that of a number of other traditional industry groups, such as agriculture, forestry and fishing; electricity, gas and water supply; and accommodation and food services. (Department of the prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for the Arts 2011)

As a case model, in 1992 Studio 8 Glass was set up specifically as a production studio, with much thought going into the ramifications of such a venture. The desire to earn a sustainable income from glass, followed a frustrating period of three years post graduation trying to pursue the singular path of one-off exhibition work for which the income generated was far outstripped by the costs involved, and based on the combined experience of many years' business expertise in other areas. With the combination of diverse business and creative skills as a base, initial planning took place to realise the dream. Setting up for limited edition art production is, in a way, closely related to the idealistic world of the Arts and Craft Movement, initially a reaction against industrialization in the nineteenth century. Workshops are set up for the use of artists and craftspeople to create, from concept to fruition, high quality, affordably priced art pieces for the discerning public. The artist or studio is in full control of the entire process, even if some part of the procedure is outsourced. Most modern artists/craftspeople are forward thinking, rather than retrograde in embracing modern technology, and are aware that machines can take the drudgery from manual labor without destroying the soul of the artwork or the artistic integrity of the artist. Inspiration is also sourced from the community, environment and experiences of the artist, empowering socio-symbolic bonds. To relate the term *studio production line* to *factory production line* is like saying that a camel is a horse with two humps! Some aesthetic differences interpreted by my research between the two, are demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1 - An analysis of Major Differences between Studio and Factory Production

DIFFERENCES	STUDIO	FACTORY
Design	By artist Emphasis on form, function, aesthetics and material	By industrial designer Emphasis on machine tooling, material, production and unit costs
Making	Complete object Handmade by artist (with use of technology, i.e., kilns)	Mainly by machine, Human contact for a part of the object only, i.e. one person inserts screws in part A, another attaches part A to B
Market	Niche Adaptable to change at short notice to take advantage of changes in the market	Mass Long turn around of product
Output	Small, limited editions Individual pieces	Large, serial, multiple Identical pieces
Cost / Value	High unit cost/small turnover Collectable, treasured	Small unit cost/huge turnover due to numbers. Consumable, disposable, practical
Purpose	Affordable and functional art/crafted objects Unique, desirable, Enhancement of everyday life experience	Maximum sales and profit Consumerism-replace old with new (colour, model, attachment) Return sales

Underlying the obvious differences in approach is the fundamental purpose for each enterprise. Studio craft production is not merely concerned with the creation of art *per se*, but is a fully integrated way of life within a community. The bottom line for a factory is how much profit will be made? While the industrial designer may have people's welfare and comfort in mind when designing a commodity, this concern and human connectedness may well be over-ridden by issues of cost and efficiency in production.

In some ways the notions of social reform and welfare espoused by Morris and Ruskin are still relevant today and expressed as a desire to enrich people's lives with beauty rather than of mediocrity. Indeed this was one of the underpinning philosophies in establishing Studio 8, to bring art to the people (not people to the art), paralleling the belief of the Arts and Craft Movement "that the material environment affected the moral fibre of society." (Bowey 1997: 3) Unfortunately, material environments that are hand crafted come at a higher price than factory produced items. The value adding qualities are creativity and individualism in a world of plastic standardization and uniformity:

The craft object, such as a piece of jewellery, ceramics or glass are those objects that are "functional, decorative, ceremonial or ornamental – as well as those pieces that might be termed personally expressive". They are designed and fabricated as an object for aesthetic value and personal use. They have always been around, although some

people suggest that in this world of mass production and technology, the craft object has been lost. (Blyfield 1998: 11)

One of the options, the combination of artistic skills and small business resulting in the creation of successful aesthetic commercial product, has proved a difficult and problematic pathway for many. A range of philosophical, ethical, and economical issues, as seen from differing perspectives of the artist, peer-group and the market, need to be resolved to expedite an artist's success in a merging of small craft business and exhibition. The supposed artist's dilemma of sacrificing aesthetics when embarking on the path of studio production and the question of technology and craft practice is indeed a contentious one, but is not insurmountable. There is evidence of the growing number of enterprising artists who have had the vision and courage to turn the traditional notion of the artist on its head, and make a respectable living from the arts. I am in the minority in my decision to become a studio production artist, and to succeed in doing so. The possibility of merging art, commercial work, technology and financial security is attainable- and desirable.

A case study into the development of the market potential of the general tourism sector will be briefly discussed, before referring to the significance of business cultural tourism opportunities for the crafts.

Table 2 Artists own chart on a business-planning model for sustainability

VARIABLES	CONSIDERATIONS	ASPECTS
Motivations	Earn a living Lifestyle	No second job
Demography	Location Infrastructure Attractions	Holiday destination International airport Tropical world heritage
Audience	Local Domestic International	Galleries, resorts Constant turnover of visitors/customers
Product	Research Development Price ceilings Delivery Consistency Packaging	Markets New ranges Quality control Consistency On-time delivery
Marketing	Local (Cairns) State National Interstate	Galleries in FNQ Gift fairs Architectural work Private commissions Exhibitions
Cautions	Too big, too soon Not enough staff No time for development	

The factors affecting the sustainability of an art's based business are not that different from any other business. Location is paramount and Cairns was chosen as a popular holiday destination with both domestic and international tourists due to its natural attractions and surrounding world heritage reefs and rainforests. These factors, plus an international airport guaranteed a constant turnover of customer base for quality craft merchandise. As there were few locally made products that were available to tourists it was essential to do market research on the craft merchandise that would be suitable. Preconception by the artist of a new audience's acceptance of artwork (cultural tourism as opposed to one-off exhibition creations) is not a given and requires the artist to reappraise work presented. This would involve assessing the artworks appropriateness

through the eyes of this new audience in terms of aesthetics, function and economy. Said reassessment would not impinge on the artist's integrity or creative freedom.

Artists themselves and the broad community often misunderstand the concept of *total artistic and creative freedom*. Art cannot be created in a vacuum any more than an omelet can be made without cracking eggs. We are all encumbered (or blessed) with life's baggage from our pasts; we are all constantly adding to it with life's experiences. Hence no artist who seeks to be creative is able to check in past baggage (in the notion of artistic freedom), no artist can approach a new artwork with a mind as data free as the empty canvas. The assumption that 'artistic freedom' means freedom from coercion, pressure and influence on the subject matter of art is fundamental, but any rendering of subject matter is necessarily exercised within the framework of the individual artist's cultural baggage. Hence, when we talk of curtailing 'artistic freedom', as in the case of production versus exhibition, what do we really mean?

In the case of Studio 8 it resulted in a reality check from the singular path of one-off exhibition work and the beginning of thinking outside the square for creative solutions to sustainability. Research conducted at weekend markets provided valuable insight into what the community really wanted, which in turn led to a new direction of creation that did not comprise aesthetic or ethical values of the artist. It was just a matter of working within set parameters to meet this new market. Another valuable lesson was learned through association with the gallery that became our first customer after buying our complete new range of glass, created from research. Price bracketing, selling just below a perceived price ceiling, necessitated a further rethink of product development resulting in specific sizes and shapes to meet the market. This achieved a doubling and ultimately tripling of the gallery's order per month. Studio 8's business policy from the beginning was to never place art on consignment, to make product to order and have a firm credit policy on overdue payments, standard business practices.

From this firm stance the business grew and clientele soon encompassed up to twenty local outlets including galleries, resort shops, hotels and duty free outlets as well as architectural and private commission pieces. Expansion interstate was based on profit without incurring debt and radiated from our home base of Cairns to finally encompass over one hundred outlets throughout Australia. Three art workers accomplished this with the only outsourcing being accountancy and some laser cut glass components, obviously working crazy hours. But the full potential for crafts in the cultural tourism market was yet to be fully explored via the lucrative niche of business tourism.

Within arts/small business is a niche market within cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is a subset of the broader phenomenon of global tourism, negatively portrayed as mass or commodity tourism. Cultural tourism has two major inputs, the product and the industry. The product to be marketed, 'culture', is consumed or experienced by a tourist across a potentially broad range of services and venues. Hence, it is a vehicle, industry or an occupation that specialises in selling a niche market to the traveller given that culture can be a major marketing tool. To understand and position cultural tourism in relation to the arts, it is important to analyse the various definitions and to look at the commonalities, differences and omissions in order to derive a framework pertinent to the boundaries for specific research into the arts as cultural tourism in a known tropical location.

It is noteworthy that definitions repeatedly refer to terms such as experience, involvement, education, information, and interpretation. While these are key and common features across the definitions encompassed, the underlying assumed context would seem to be the leisure tourist. The 'functional' identifies what the cultural tourist does, the 'experiential' explores the value adding of the cultural tourist's experiences, while the 'conceptual' frames the nature, practice and intrinsic value of cultural tourism. Clearly leisure tourism covers the spectrum from an extended vacation to the business traveller's snatched couple of hours. However, it is the latter group that tends to be

ignored by the craft market sector. Yet the reality is that this time starved sector (of business tourists) tends to be relatively cash rich:

The potential presented to the cultural industry by visitors who travel to Australia for business or to attend a conference has been demonstrated in this chapter. While these visitors only make up five per cent of inbound visitors to cultural attractions, more than two out of three of those who did attend had their interest in cultural experiences further aroused. Such heightened awareness and interest in cultural experiences may inspire future attendance by these visitors (and others that may travel with them) on return visits to Australia possibly for purposes other than business. (Foo and Rossetto 1998: 52)

Australia's and Queensland's popularity as leisure destinations has had the onflow of also being recognised as an attractive incentive travel destination. Business travellers, with their generally higher education and interest in enriching activities and the capacity to achieve it through higher disposable incomes, may be characterized as time depleted cultural tourists, a niche previously unacknowledged in the tourism literature.

Culture and the arts/crafts play an integral and strategic role in any sustainable cultural tourism strategy, providing depth of experience and stability beyond the transience of man made attractions such as theme parks and the luxury of resort complexes. Indicators suggest tourists are less interested in the static entertainment of showpiece resorts and destinations and more interested in experiential encounters with the environment, cultural, heritage, ethnic and historic attractions. It can thus be seen that one role of the visual arts in cultural tourism is at the same time definitely a sustainably economic one. However, to probe this role, it is important to examine the motivation of cultural tourists, which are both numerous and diverse -- and vary for different cultures and various combinations of predilection, social, economic and demographic factors.

People may participate in travel for a primary reason unrelated to cultural tourism, such as business, but also include cultural attractions in their itinerary, often referred to as the push and pull factors. This is particularly the case of international convention delegates, who can spend up to 36.5 per cent of their entire expenditure on cultural tourism products where they are offered. (Coombes and Millar 1999) The demographics of the stereotype cultural patron and, by association, cultural tourist, place them near the top of the ladder of motivations. I would therefore propose that the role of the visual arts in cultural tourism, as well as economic, would also include education, interpretation and unique experience. I would add to this the role of preserving the local built and natural environment, probity of community cultural development with sustainability and indigenous cultural integrity. The challenge lies in achieving a balance within cultural tourism so it is a form of tourism that is both economically viable and culturally sustainable.

Hence, in the late 1990's, this was the avenue to sustainability that Studio 8 Glass embarked upon after establishing a successful business supplying galleries and resorts with quality reasonably priced genuine Australian mementos in glass. It was a natural progression into a market where the potential for cultural product already developed was huge, and waiting to be fully tapped.

Arguably, time and changing social and economic environments have modified many attitudes relating to industry/arts collaborative partnerships which have prompted the reintegration of arts, culture and social milieu. It is being mirrored by the implementation of government vision statements and policies, (The Arts Office 1997: 3) aimed at the integration of arts and tourism, generating a powerful marketing tool for economic development.

The increased emphasis on cultural tourism, with its strong links to the arts industry, has expanded the occupational avenues available to the visual artist beyond the traditional reliance on artist and gallery. The subject of arts as an industry is a vexed one with many artists, but a necessary synergy to be embraced if a career is to be fashioned as a full time practicing artist. Recognising the potential window offered through cultural tourism, some visual artists are spearheading the vanguard of this evolution of traditional arts practice into business culture. One of the essential tools of any business, -marketing, still produces an almost phobic cringe amongst some members of the arts fraternity.

This cringe has been exacerbated by the tacky and cheap reputation of the tourism and souvenir industry in general, and the lack of authentic products that are distinctly Australian. Tourists have become more refined in their tastes and needs, expecting quality experiences and products from a destination. The tourism industry and various government departments have recognised this problem and taken steps to rectify the lack of quality locally made merchandise by extending a cooperative hand of opportunity to the arts industry.

A new National Cultural Policy will aim to engage with the broadest possible range of Australians with an interest or varying degrees of involvement in arts and creativity. It will reflect the diversity of modern Australia; protect and support Indigenous languages and culture; make the most of emerging technologies and new ideas; strengthen the capacity of the arts to contribute to society and the economy; support excellence and strengthen the role arts and creativity play in telling Australian stories.

Through this policy we will recognise the intrinsic value of arts and creative activity in creating a strong Australian culture, and also the wider value of arts and creativity that flows from this – that is, the benefits they bring to society and the economy – because cultural policy is not just about supporting the arts. It is about supporting, enabling and strengthening communities and developing our creative culture so that we are ready to take on the challenges and opportunities of daily modern life. (Dept. of the Arts 2011: 12)

Through the increased presence of good quality craft product made available in local galleries, Studio 8 Glass received approaches from the local, state and national tourism bodies regarding availability of similar product aimed at marketing the destination of Cairns to international convention management firms. These requests coincided with a need to provide quality colour catalogues which showcased the now large range of glass, an expensive necessity if customers were to be able to view the range. In 1999 the decision was made to go on-line with a fully interactive website that showcased the glass, the artist and provided on-line buying. In hindsight, we went too early as there was not a strong uptake of internet marketing at the time, it was just beginning to gain acceptance. There was the added mistake of thinking that once it was up and running it looked after itself -- not so, it almost required a full time webmaster to keep updates, accept and process orders and answer enquiries. It did end up being an excellent marketing tool as a corporate client in Sydney could access the range and make a decision on product in one day without the need of communicating information by mail.

The downstream benefits are huge for the visual artist prepared to put in the hard work and research necessary for a successful arts business focused on cultural tourism. This involves proactive identification and development of new audiences, in this case cultural tourists, and the fostering of links between the arts sector and the tourism industry. It will also require attitudinal changes to existing relationships between the arts, society and government by abandoning “restrictive definitions of art and to think more broadly about cultural development.” (Stevenson 1999: 7) The challenge to present a new and better image for the Australian souvenir industry is one that can be readily accepted by

enterprising visual artists. In 2010, 23.2 million cultural and heritage visitors contributed approximately \$28 billion in tourism expenditure to the Australian economy.

(Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, office of the Arts (2010).

Studio 8 Glass was a pioneer in cultivating professional business networking within local tourist bodies such as Tropical Tourism North Queensland, Cairns and Region Convention Bureau and the Cairns Convention Centre as well as state and federal tourism bodies. These connections spawned the development of suitable craft merchandise made available initially as promotional material and later as purchased product gifted to conference delegates. This proactive approach initiated a series of collaborative marketing events between state and federal tourism organisations, Austrade and Studio 8 Glass, showcasing Australian cultural tourism in several overseas venues. The economic success of these ventures produced an annual turnover of a quarter of a million Australian dollars for Studio 8 Glass, prior Global Financial Crisis (GFC).

Prior to these ventures, the economic opportunity for artists to supply unique quality merchandise to the tourist industry had been largely untapped or ignored. Encouragement has more recently come from initiatives such as 'Memento', an arts' merchandising award initiated by Australian Arts Enterprise and Craft Queensland which assisted in the recognition of quality craft product pertinent to cultural tourism. Kuranda Cooperative is another example of proactive enterprise formed partly as a reaction "to the tackiness of a tourist-driven market in which art and craft sales suffered in competition with imported mass-produced souvenirs." (Hodgson 1999: 5) As well as offering a gallery type shop front for members to display and sell art and craft, the cooperative has been instrumental in the commissioning by the local council of several artists to beautify the street presence of Kuranda with handmade paving, benches and balustrades with built in photo opportunities for tourists. The commissioning of visual artists for public art, through Queensland's Public Art Policy -- Art Built In (1999) for interior design and landscape architecture provides other avenues for adaptive practice via cultural tourism. Restaurants, hotels and businesses are prepared to commission artists to design and create unique features and décor that appeal to visitors. Once again, business is increasingly recognising the value of creative input from artists in raising the quality of visitor experience and satisfaction.

Conference organisers and destination management companies for conventions, meetings, incentive rewards and product launches now source customised handmade gifts. The corporate market seeks art and craft for marketing and promotion gifts and sponsor awards. Cairns and Region Convention Bureau (CRCB) and the Cairns Convention Centre actively promote the region's cultural and natural attractions with handmade apropos craft pieces, along with excellent facilities, as drawcards for business visitors. All of these enterprises offer likely markets to artists. Opportunities and potential for the visual artist within cultural tourism are virtually unlimited. The market exists and collaborative associations and networks are taking shape between the arts and tourism industries and government bodies to produce frameworks of sustainability. Cultural tourism is both a dynamic and educational activity that combines the arts with natural and social experiences as a proud celebration by the community of all attractions and cultural activities that are unique and beautiful. It embraces the full range of experiences that visitors, both for leisure and/or business can undertake to learn and remember what makes a destination distinctive – its lifestyle, its people and its crafts. The business of providing and interpreting specific cultural experiences and portable artistic product to visitors offers enormous scope to artists.

As a full time professional practicing artist & resident of Far North Queensland for twenty years, I have demonstrated that cultural tourism is a viable and sustainable new market for the arts & crafts. From a desire in 1992 to become sustainable as an arts business, ethically, aesthetically and financially, Studio 8 Glass successfully negotiated interactions with the tourism industry and in particular, with the business sector whilst maintaining

an exhibition profile and knowing the venture has broadened society's appreciation and participation in crafts. Over the years the business has created by hand literally thousands of pieces of quality glass that happily reside in nearly every country in the world. I still get calls from clients to repair 10 -15 year old treasured broken pieces of Studio 8 Glass. Post GFC has seen a contraction of the leisure tourist market for crafts in FNQ but business is still being sustained through the corporate and business tourism markets because sustainability today is all about adaptability,

The apprehension of aesthetic betrayal when an artist works to a brief is a furphy. A commercial brief should be viewed no differently from the approach to creating for an exhibition. The client will most likely have initially approached the chosen artist because of empathy with the style and ethics of work created and expectations of something similar to existing aesthetics. An artist is requested to create to a theme which imparts the client's message to the chosen section of society via the medium of art/craft. I look on requests for art that lie outside the comfort zone as challenges to creativity, as opposed to ethical duplicity; if the case arises it is always possible say no to inappropriate petitions. The opportunity to work collaboratively with cultural tourism businesses offers an increased scope of audience and aesthetic problem solving whilst earning a viable income as an artist/craftsperson. Yes, you can be economically, ethically and financially sustainable as a craftsperson if you think outside the square, or - "A little bit south of north!"

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