

Evan Woodruffe: my thoughts on Philanthropy, as given to Art Lovers at Walker & Hall, for the Waiheke Art Gallery Fundraiser, Auckland Tamaki Makaurau, 22nd May 2025.

My parents immigrated from the UK 60 years ago, and when mum stepped off the boat she cried "what have we done?" New Zealand (certainly not Aotearoa) in 1964 was a totally foreign culture. Thankfully, there existed the Auckland War Memorial Museum, Auckland Libraries, and Auckland Art Gallery to take their six children to, and all for free.

As a teenager growing up in the suburbs through the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, there was very little to do that didn't involve getting into trouble. Again, I thank my parents for taking us to see Limbs Dance Company, the musical duo From Scratch, and enrolling me in the Auckland Theatre Company. Through these experiences, I decided music would allow me to make something happen in Dullsville.

With the early 1980s came the Punk DIY attitude. Nothing would continue to happen unless you made it happen yourself. The Arts provide focus for bringing people together, so we can converse, look, laugh, argue, love – commune, and hence community.

The 1980s were a crucible of dramatic change for New Zealand society: the subplot of Springbok protests that rugby isn't our only culture; the popularisation of Toi Maori through the landmark Te Maori exhibition which toured the USA and here; the rise of women politicians and cultural commentators, such as Marilyn Waring, Helen Clarke, and Anne Salmond; the decriminalisation of homosexuality; and the introduction of real espresso by Millers Coffee in 1988 – finally our brains could work properly!

Music allowed me to create performance in the community for the community, even if they didn't like it! The ethos transmitted from Radio BFM to "Freak the Sheep" encouraged artists to shake things up. Music remained my way of expressing the world until the late 1990s, when I wanted to be a different kind of artist.

Fortunately, the venues for Visual Arts these days are similar to those for music, from the humming commercial spaces of international Art Fairs to the intimate setting of Community Art Galleries. And Visual Art, like music, operates on many levels. It can be spectacular, modest, participatory, ambient. An opening brings people together, everyone talking and drinking with their backs to the work. This is not a bad thing – art can handle being the catalyst for social interaction while only offering itself up a little at a time between conversations. The one-on-one intimacy comes best in the quieter time that follows. The gallery brings us back time and again so we can experience art at different tempos. American artist Brice Marden said "every time we stand in front of a painting, it is the same, yet we have changed"; and New Zealanders have examined themselves through the Arts to grow out of the cultural struggles of 1980s to become the sophisticated, complex art ecology we are today.

Look at how we have changed communities! There are flourishing provincial galleries where there were none. Our Auckland Art Gallery has expanded architecturally and conceptually. From a single art school in Auckland, we now have four that send artists to invigorate us across the motu and internationally: Mata Aho won the coveted Gold Lion at the 60th Venice Biennale. Our culture is no longer solely represented by rugby, racing, and beer; and this has been achieved by us – the people who actively promote the Arts.

Philanthropy is from the Greek, literally the "love of Humanity". Philanthropy is about strengthening our community with the best of being Human. People supporting the Arts create positive impact on society. Art really does save lives – it saved mine – and it is needed now as much as it was in the 1980s.

In 2016, Australian philanthropist Dick Quan told me that art collaborating with other industries was the future. Partnering was a way to increase awareness and relevance for art, which here tends to be viewed as separate from daily life; and this problem is partly caused by artists who think art as something pure and apart, on a lofty peak above our routines. This is a mistake – almost everyone has a car, not everyone has an original piece of art. A year later, I partnered with BMW to create a VIP vehicle for Sydney Contemporary, which was driven around the city for a couple of weeks, showcasing both my work and BMW innovation. In 2018, I was invited to do the same for Jaguar Singapore. My practice now includes many industry partnerships, including with art stores Gordon Harris, German manufacturers Schmincke Artist Colours and da Vinci Artist Brushes, and Cretacolor of Austria. I collaborate with Strangely Normal Menswear, and with designers and performers for their costumes.

Contrary to a comment from one of my colleagues that these partnerships are a “sell out”, I’m doing with my art what I’ve always done: trying to uplift the community through inclusion in my artform, whether music or Visual Art, on the walls of a gallery or the buzz of a classroom. I love partnering with industry to bring art to the people.

Sometimes it’s not possible to find a partner to help with funding a project. New Zealand has too few philanthropists. In 2023, I had my exhibition *No Straight Lines* at Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga Hastings City Art Gallery. I had almost completed the work when the devastating floods hit Hawkes Bay Mataua-Maui. The intent of my show needed to acknowledge this catastrophe, so I developed my central painting into a gargantuan 3m x 11m piece, creating a vista that encompassed one’s whole vision when standing in front of it. I wanted to make a new environment where people could escape their daily struggle of shovelling silt and mourning lost ones, to be surrounded, if only for some precious moments, in a more wonderful world.

A Public Gallery is there for the people, and the artist performs for their benefit. The material cost of that giant painting was \$6000.00, while the Artist’s Fee for the three-month exhibition was \$1500.00. This is how important the health of the community is for me – and to philanthropists – I will make positive actions, even if it costs me. It costs every artist. Recent surveys by MBIE put the art maker (writers, performers, musicians, artists) at the bottom of income levels, earning an average of \$35,000 per year; yet making art is a compulsion first, maybe a business after.

The compulsion of artists to make work, and the passion of galleries to promote art to the people needs the natural partnership of you who share a love for Humanity, a belief that when times are tough, as author Toni Morrison said, is exactly the time when the Arts need to get to work. When our newsfeed says things are bleak, the Arts provide a beautiful vision of the best in us, a sustaining arc across the millennia, from the 70,000 year old rock paintings to the work you see here tonight.

Art and Arts patronage is our belief in the fascinating resilience of Humanity.

Kia ora tatau.