

## About Us

**Shona Erskine** and **Katt Osborne** share a deep commitment to the sustainability of healthy systems and communities. Our Boorloo/Perth-based systems thinking consultancy **AFOCAL** was created out of a shared interest in how the arts and sciences can provide complementary ideas and processes that enable a new way of imagining and creating better futures for our social systems. Katt and Shona are human-focused facilitators who thrive on the opportunity to provide bespoke processes that are methodical, creative, and optimistic.

**Shona Erskine** is registered Psychologist, coach, facilitator and dancer. Shona is dedicated to understanding the complexity inherent in creativity and innovation, and the challenges of expertise and elite performance. She coaches senior leaders in the skills of creative leadership, and leads workshops on the neuroscience of creative practice, spanning corporate, not-for-profit and creative sectors. Shona delivers psychology for performing and visual artists, as well as production and crew, through professional companies, universities, and in private practice. She has developed curriculum in areas of performance and wellbeing for performing artists, teachers, and directors using best practice models. Shona has a contemporary dance background spanning 20 years as a professional performer.

**Katt Osborne** is an arts leader, company founder, creative producer and performance director and maker. As well as a currently practicing independent artist Katt has held numerous leadership positions, most recently as the Executive Director of The Blue Room Theatre (Boorloo/Perth). Previously she was the Artistic Director of Riptide Youth Performance Company (Mandjoooordap/Mandurah) and a co-founding artist and the inaugural General Manager of The Last Great Hunt (Boorloo/Perth). In 2023, Katt was awarded a prestigious '40under40' at the Business News awards – WA's leading awards program that recognises and celebrates the state's leading entrepreneurs, innovators, and future business leaders.

## Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

### AFOCAL Response

In 2024-25, we undertook a research project that applied systems thinking to five arts and cultural organisations in Western Australia.

The research project was co-funded by Creative Australia and WA's Department of Creative Industries, Tourism and Sport. The full findings of our research have been shared through our sector networks in our report "Resilience-Based Stewardship: A systems thinking framework for arts and cultural organisations".

### Executive Summary

We sought to investigate the relevance and utility of systems thinking to frame, understand, and respond to complex and persistent challenges articulated by the organisations. Our ambition was to deepen our understanding of how arts organisations might work with a systems framework, and to examine the value of systems thinking in guiding governance and decision-making.

Five insights emerged from this work.

First, systems thinking gave leaders a perspective to 'see the whole'. This perspective provided a better understanding of their pressures and where meaningful intervention was possible.

Second, governance emerged as a critical factor. A desire for more adaptive and participatory governance structures was evident.

Third, adaptive strategy that embraces real-time learning and iterative action offers better options to move forward than traditional strategic planning.

Fourth, the importance of understanding the diverse perspectives, knowledge frames, and lived experience within systems should not be underestimated.

Finally, learning about systems is transformative in itself. We saw this in real-world terms when some of the organisations acted and changed their systems upon immediate participation in the process, even before we presented them with their report. Notably, one organisation used the knowledge gained from applying systems thinking to mobilise significant new funding. We have included a case study of this organisation in the next section.

The implications of this work are significant. For arts organisations, systems thinking offers a means of making sense of complexity and designing more resilient futures. For policymakers and funders, it's a lens through which to build better, more responsive support systems. For CEOs and Boards, it's a strategy and management tool. And for the sector as a whole, it opens up conversations about more adaptive leadership and governance styles, characterised by a willingness to sit with complexity rather than rush to resolution.

### A Multi-Organisational View

A cross-comparison of the five organisations within our research project allowed us to see both the commonality and the differences between organisations.

Here are our observations from a comparison across the five organisations.

#### Each organisation is unique

The social-ecological systems thinking framework we applied, noticeably differentiated between organisations by creating a picture of their unique systems. It made the complexity of each organisation easier to understand and gave structure to what can often feel messy.

It was able to account for, and organise, all the different parts of each organisation's work, and show how these parts fitted together and interacted.

#### Scales matter

The five organisations sat in different focal scales in relation to each other. This provided us with a view of scales from the individual level up to the government level.

Understanding these different scales helped us see how change and stability work together.

Larger scales like governments are meant to provide support, structure, and resilience when the focal scale wants to change. The focal scale is likewise energised by the individual people in the smaller scale who provide new ideas and energy for change.

In social systems, the individual is the smallest scale, and it's important to remember that while people can drive change, it's not sustainable to rely on individuals to carry the weight of sustaining the system.

Larger scale institutions and organisations need to take responsibility for providing support, so people don't burn out trying to fix problems or deliver outcomes.

### Looking after people

Systems thinking creates space to care for people by making visible the pressures they face within complex environments.

By mapping patterns across the system, we were able to see exactly where people were fatiguing and why. The data didn't just highlight general stress: it gave us a shared language to talk about specific mechanisms and variables that were causing strain.

This enabled organisations to take concrete steps to address the parts of the system that were overloading individuals. In this way, people's wellbeing is looked after as part of system health.

### Existing capacity to embed systems thinking

Different types of organisations were able to more quickly apply systems thinking into practice.

Service organisations that were in touch with their membership and communities were already using many of the systems thinking methodologies, and were more flexible and practiced in mobilising new ways of thinking.

Producing and presenting organisations appeared to be more tightly bound by existing structures and ways of doing things that were most likely related to production cycles.

### Common ground

Through a cross-comparison of the five organisations we were able to identify the common patterns. Specifically, organisations shared:

1. A lack of general resilience affecting their capacity to adapt to disturbances, disruptions, and change.
  - a. On the whole, the organisations appeared to have very low general resilience. This is a significant issue.
  - b. General resilience was often traded away for specific resilience, with organisations putting their resources into delivering high-quality projects and programs rather than into general resilience factors.
  - c. Leaders were aware of the importance of their slow variables and feedbacks and their importance to governance and strategic planning and could clearly articulate what

they wanted to be focused on. But they were constantly putting out fires, dealing with the urgent rather than the important.

- d. High connectivity and low modularity was a trend in the sector and a combination that could lead to vulnerabilities. Four of the five organisations in our pilot had low modularity.
  - e. Reserves (social, physical and financial) were greatly variable across the five organisations based on their individual identities, contexts, and length of operations.
    - i. Social capital was high and appeared to move around each system in a functional and dynamic fashion. However, individuals have finite capacity, and this can often be depleted through the work of the organisation. Some organisations could rebuild these social and energetic reserves, but other smaller teams struggled to do this.
    - ii. Physical assets were the most variable reserve across organisations and appear to be dependent on the type of service each provided.
    - iii. Financial reserves tended to be low for the organisations except for the heritage artform organisation. Pursuing financial reserves took considerable resources from the organisations and occupied much of the leadership's time and energy.
2. Common disturbances to their systems including:
    - a. Government funding and policy.
    - b. The economic, environmental, and social context.
    - c. Societal values towards cultural expression and use of technology.
  3. Thresholds:
    - a. Audience/participant numbers and engagement dropping below a critical level.
    - b. Critical shortage\* (number and diversity) of suitable workers.
    - c. Activities/output drops below a critical level.
    - d. Organisation ceases to provide system services.
    - e. Financial reserves/cash flow drops below critical level.
    - f. No access to suitable space.
  4. Slow variables of:
    - a. Governance: the way in which each organisational system was led, managed, and operated was relatively slow to change.
    - b. Relationships: developing and maintaining relationships, networks, and connections needed for the system to function was slow changing (i.e. it took time and investment to build/alter).
    - c. Value/Relevance of the Arts: society's attitudes to the arts overall are slow to change.