Dirty Hands and Soaring Hearts

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Certificate of Authenticity

The work presented in this exegesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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WITH DIRTY HANDS AND SOARING HEARTS

Joseph Beuys believed that art should facilitate change, individually and socially and that spectator could become creator by tapping into the creative impulses dormant in all of us.¹ This concept encompassing democratisation, increased availability and extension of creative practice to the many rather than the elitist and insular protection of the status of artist as special informs the investigation of the benefits and drawbacks of community based public art in this exegesis. The idea that all have creative capacity is not new. The belief that all should have access to the creative experience and the understanding of the potential for positive community development as a result of ethical, well-considered and well executed projects is growing. This exegesis investigates notions of, and analyses examples of best practice in this growing field as well as describing and evaluating personal experiences in the field of community based public art.

The traditional role of the artist as independent originator and creator bringing to life their sole vision as a work of art is broadened and enhanced by community based arts practice. Good community based practice demands that artist and community develop a relationship based on trust and communication. This forms the basis for working collaboratively to produce an outcome that is relevant and reflects ownership by the community.

In the last 30 years Community Based Arts has developed into a strong field of practice with many high profile artists now choosing to work within communities and producing significant works. A major challenge for artists working within communities is to ensure that community participants have every chance to develop the skills and knowledge base to enable a work

¹ Claire Bishop (Ed), 2006. Participation Documents of Contemporary Art, Whitechapel and MIT Press, p 125
of high standard to develop. A plethora of regulations surround the management of public/community art projects and this can often result in compromise which subsequently affects the quality of the work:

There is obviously bad community art: there is, after all, no shortage of bad art, (or bad education, medicine or government, if it comes to that). The argument that community art debases standards raises questions … Who defines quality, value, meaning?²

Matarasso touches on vitally important points in the above quote:

- Who is this work for?
- What is the desired impact of the artwork?

Community based art is relevant to the community that produces it and often has other beneficial outcomes which are not considered in critical analysis of the artwork. Neither are these factors given much consideration by developers or public housing authorities who are the instigators of many suburban precincts which are aimed at attracting new home buyers. This results in the creation of an artificial community whose members are isolated and who have no sense of social or cultural history.

In this exegesis I explore the notion that involvement in community based projects has the potential to begin the development of networks within fledgling and established communities and provide a sense of pride and belonging. Investigation and analysis of examples of community based work will establish factors inherent in successful projects and identify elements that contribute to failure as well as assessing the relative success or failure of a selection of projects.

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INTRODUCTION

Identity, belonging and some sense of connection to place are increasingly being seen as important to individuals and to group cohesion. When we think about places of importance to us we often do so in terms of the stories told and of the people that inhabit that place. If it is the stories about a place that fix it within our community consciousness as being of significance then the process of exploring and understanding these connections, of placemaking, are of immense importance. Can collaborative Community Arts projects be instrumental in melding personal and public histories and contributing to a sense of commonality and connectedness? In this exegesis I am exploring this notion and arguing that by identifying and exploring ideas and experiences, new pathways can be created that lead to the recognition of shared history and purpose, as well as in the making of a genuine expression of community creativity through art making.

What is community based arts practice? This seems to be a simple enough question. The answer, however, will be dependent on who asks the question or where the question is asked. The responses will range from passionate validations to equally zealous dismissals. The underlying principles of community based practice relate directly to communities either working with artist/practitioners to produce outcomes that are mutually agreed, or communities determining what will be commissioned via a selected artist or in making their own artwork/s. Community based practice can result in very varied outcomes, ranging from cutting edge contemporary art, to activities where the end product is of little importance and the process is the point.

The use of the term community is yet another minefield. Within a community arts context it is a group of people that come together and work actively to carry out a common purpose. For example it may refer to a group who reside in a specific town, a small group of migrant women or a thousand school students. It could also mean a group of people with a
common interest. In a sense the community is transient, but bonded by shared experience. Work that is generated by a community provides participants and audience with the opportunity to examine and reflect on ‘their place’. Whether detractors of community based artwork or of the concepts underpinning the importance of place in peoples’ lives like it or not, every town city and suburb has its own history and is also a reflection of its own culture. For example the people living in outback Australia will most certainly have a different perspective and history to those living alongside the ocean. Similarly the Aborigines will have a different view of Australian history than the Europeans who migrated at the end of the Second World War.

Personal experience has led to the conclusion that Community based arts projects are creative activities that provide a means of engaging a community in creative explorations of their own connection to place and their own sense of identity. The themes and historic references uncovered during a project become more accessible, not only to those involved but also to the broader community. This promotes understanding and awareness of cultural history and ones own links to a place, in other words cultural pluralism. Communities are able to tell their own stories and it is not uncommon for community based projects to act as springboards that lead to other projects and ultimately to social benefits such as community engagement and capacity building. This is what makes community based work attractive to organisations such as Vic Health, not for profit organisations and to local government bodies. Positive outcomes seem more likely to occur when projects have adequate timeframes and are appropriately resourced. More often than not projects are seen as a quick fix, a way of doing something now rather than engaging with a community in a meaningful dialogue.

Artists who work within the community based arts model are not social workers; they are artists willing to explore new ways of working and non competitive ways to approach arts practice. There are artists and communities who enter into long term relationships, often taking years to
produce and complete works that are highly successful and of significance both to the participants and broader community. Like any form of arts practice, community based arts are continually changing and challenging the ideas and boundaries of art as artists and communities come together. British artist Stephen Willats consistently works with public housing communities to produce works that examine the personalisation of private space as a form of resistance to dominant ideologies. These collaborations reaffirm identity, and call into question the stigmatisation and stereotyping of people who reside in public housing. The projects also bring together residents, who in some cases have never met, thereby creating community links and social networks that work to counteract feelings of isolation that are a direct result of being moved from single story dwellings in traditional neighbourhoods into high-rise apartment complexes.

Social inclusion and an acknowledgement of the role of cultural minorities within America is at the heart of The Great Wall Of Los Angeles, a large-scale mural project, led by American artist Judy Baca and involving a diverse participant group made up of youth, artists, community members and support staff. The project began in 1976 and is ongoing. This work is internationally recognised, not only as an artwork, but also as a best practice model for its use as a training program for educators interested in working across cultures. Willats and Baca, through their use of traditional and non-traditional media as a platform to communicate with a diverse audience about issues and situations that are often ignored or overlooked, challenge perceptions of reality. In this way the projects have the potential to contribute to positive social change. Social change requires more than raising awareness. Those who are socially disadvantaged are usually very aware of their situation. Social change, however, requires the socially disadvantaged to be empowered and the advantaged to be made aware.

It would appear that community based arts practice both nationally and internationally are either at the forefront of cultural debate, praised and
financially supported by the various national arts funding institutions, or totally ignored\(^3\). This dichotomy has certainly been in evidence in the Australia Council and its over thirty year history of involvement with community based arts practice. The most recent crisis in Australia, the disbanding of the Community Cultural Development Unit of the Australia Council, has resulted in funding losses and prompted strong and effective lobbying. This led to influential reports that have had a far reaching impact. As a practice its popularity has ebbed and flowed like any number of styles and art forms that have surfaced throughout the twentieth century. It has strong links to the practices of the Situationists, Avant Guard and to the *Happenings*\(^4\) of the late 1950s and 60s. The common links include the placement of art outside of, and away from, the control of the recognized ‘art institution’ systems, the rejection of art as a saleable commodity and the involvement of non artists as collaborators and makers of art, thereby calling into question the elite nature of art as a whole.

Community based arts practice is recognised as a springboard for emergent arts practices that ultimately influence mainstream creativity and artistic expression. Unquestionably, there is a need for increased resources for research and development in this field of practice. Identification of the critical contribution that experimentation and alternate methodologies contribute to nurturing the evolution of vibrant arts and cultural practices is vital. This exegesis further contributes to this process of identification and the ongoing debate.

The nature of arts and cultural development work requires active engagement with issues and cultural practices outside the dominant focus and involves risk and experimentation. The work of Willats and Baca, and many other practitioners in the field of community art, offer an alternate model of engagement for those working within community development,

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\(^3\) Whilst it is not the intention of this exegesis to undertake a detailed analysis of Community Arts policies in the international arena, further information on policies, and reviews and reports are available at http://www.ifacca.org

\(^4\) Claire Bishop (Ed); 2006. *Participation Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel and MIT Press, pp12-17
health, environmental sustainability, cultural development, place making and other related fields of practice. Their practice questions the existing models of art production and presents a strong argument for the process of democratisation of art through collaboration involving non artists. These artists focus on “social relatedness and ecological healing, (they) gravitate towards different activities, attitudes and roles than those that operated under the aesthetics of modernism”.5

Chapter One presents an outline of community arts practice in relation to its history within the Australia Council. Various methodologies that are used by artists, communities and organisations to work collaboratively to achieve mutually desirable and beneficial goals are examined to highlight the diverse nature of the process.

The focus of Chapter Two is an exploration of the critical and ethical questions often raised in relation to community based arts practice. Exploration of the work of artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Mark Dion, big hART, KOS and the Artful Dodgers6 studio establishes a benchmark for exemplary practice. This analysis also acts as a catalyst for the exposure of, and the initiation of meaningful dialogue about pressing social issues. Terminology, evaluation, art as commodity, issues of exploitation of the community and the benefits of the practice are also discussed.

Issues surrounding the relevance of individual art practice and the commercial nature of art are compared to cultural democracy and concepts of mutual respect, ownership and collaboration in Chapter Three. A germinal experience (the Star Riots) with the power of community based

6 Suzanne Lacy is an internationally known artist whose work includes installations, video, and large-scale performances that examine and explore social themes and urban living. American artist Mark Dion uses archaeological and other scientific methodologies to draw attention to and question the validity of the scientific voice in contemporary society. KOS and the Artful Dodgers Studio are artist run organizations that work with marginalised youth.
art is investigated. Further exposure to practitioners is examined in recounting personal experiences that have consolidated my own commitment to working with and in communities. Notions of place and its relevance to our everyday lives as part of a community are examined.

Within the context of public space young people are more often than not seen as confrontational and destructive. This situation is usually dealt with by authority figures whose prime aim is to control or remove the problem. Chapter Four analyses a project that was specifically developed to proactively engage children and young people. The project involved the creation of artworks by young people that were to be permanently installed in a public space that was perceived as having a youth problem.

Chapter Five will evaluate a project undertaken in a small community to the north of Newcastle. The community was in decline economically and socially. An ephemeral work combined with a permanent work resulted in the re-establishment of a sense of the historical and social significance of the chosen site. Workshops were an effective means of facilitation of the project and acted as a conduit to unite the disparate groups within the town.

At the end of 2005 Wyong Shire Council employed two Community Artists. Once the artists had completed several projects additional possibilities were recognized by various departments. Chapter Six critically evaluates a number of the projects undertaken and the future potential for the role of the artist within Councils’ framework.
CHAPTER ONE

COMMUNITY ARTS – IN, OUT, OUT AND IN AGAIN?!!

Where is art going? How will it be different in the future? Of all the myriad forces at work unmaking and remaking art today, none may ultimately be more momentous than the democratisation of art through participation.7

Community based arts practice has a long and distinguished history both nationally and internationally. The practice offers a diverse range of activities that bring together professional artists and the broader community to work in collaboration. The diversity of practice and changes in terminology used to describe exactly what the practice is has been vigorously debated since the Australia Council established the first Community Arts Committee in 1977.

The establishment of the Community Arts Committee not only allowed the Australia Council to tick the box in relation to access and participation in the arts, it challenged the status quo of arts funding, bringing with it a range of new ideas and methodologies for making art. In short, the Australia Council put in place a Committee that would break down the barriers that had previously excluded a vast number of projects and artists from being considered worthy or appropriate to be funded, based on the criteria of high art. This did not sit well with the other Boards of the Australia Council. It was a new contender for the limited funds available and the Community Arts Committee was continually under pressure to justify its existence. After all, this was a Committee that funded projects

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from any artform, not based on excellence, but on access and participation.

It is not surprising that the Committee believed that it would be doomed when the Australia Council was forced to undertake a review of its operations in 1975. The McKinsey Report, coupled with a change in government, saw the Council slash funds to the Community Arts Committee in favour of increasing the funds of the other artform based Boards. With the future of the Community Arts Committee under threat its survival became the hot topic for the 1977 National Community Arts Conference. By the conclusion of the conference a new organization had formed, the National Community Arts Co-operative or NCAC. The NCAC fully supported the Community Arts Committee and lobbied hard to secure its future but more importantly it was a clear indication that as a sector they were not going to go away and that they expected equal support. The culmination of a well thought out and strategic battle fought by both the NCAC and the Community Arts Committee was the establishment of the Community Arts Board in 1978.

One of the major achievements of the Community Arts Boards was its ability to join with other Boards to fund projects. This led to increased funding for specific projects and over time it saw the various Boards incorporating community based projects and principles. This was a major change in thinking and allowed community based practice to expand with more artists open to the idea of working within a community context. Community based practice flourished and a number of new initiatives such as The Multi Cultural Arts incentive, put in place by the Community Arts Board, not only expanded the practice but prompted the Community Arts Board to undertake a review of itself. The review process resulted in an affirmation of the work already undertaken under the banner of community based arts practice. It also highlighted the need for a greater emphasis on cultural pluralism and the right for communities to participate in and make their own ‘art’. This, coupled with yet another review of the Australia Council, saw the Community Arts Board become the Community Cultural
Development Unit in 1987. Along with the name change came an expanded brief, with an emphasis towards cultural diversity, allowing community groups to apply for and administer funds as opposed to the funding being reliant on a particular artist or arts company. This was also the beginning of a concerted effort to have cultural development on the agenda of all three tiers of government. This shift in focus led to the brokering of strategic partnerships and alliances with a broad range of ‘non art focused’ government and private sector organisations.8

The announcement by the Australia Council, in December 2004, that the Community Cultural Development Unit was to be axed and that funding for community cultural development would be added to all artform boards, resulted in widespread protest from both individuals and organisations that worked in the sector. As a result of the Australia Council’s decision, a national coalition that became the National Arts and Cultural Alliance (NACA) was formed, to become a central platform for lobbying against the decision. This action resulted in a number of background reports that informed the Community Partnerships Scoping Study.9 This provided opportunities for a diverse range of stakeholders to critically review the complexities of what is community arts practice. This study was presented to the Australia Council in 2006. It was received enthusiastically.

Recommendations from the Community Partnerships Scoping Study have been adopted by the Australia Council, securing Community Partnerships’ position within the Australia Council for the foreseeable future. Part of this study, the Creative Communities Strategy, was adopted as an innovation worthy of implementation across all boards of the Australia Council. Whilst this is a positive action there is still much to be done in order to rectify the disparities that exist between community based and mainstream arts practice. As community based arts practice relates to concepts that can be

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8 Gay Hawkins, 1993. From Nimbin to Mardi Gras, Constructing Community Arts; Allen and Unwin Pty Ltd., St Leonards, pp 1-83
applied to all art forms, it covers a diverse range of arts practice from visual to performing, music to writing or dance through to circus. It differs from art produced by individual artists in that it involves collaboration between practitioners, interested individuals and groups who come together to create within the context of their community. “Community is the starting point for new modes of relatedness, in which the paradigm of social conscience replaces that of the individual genius.”

The broad conceptual basis of community based arts practice encourages a plethora of ways in which artists and communities may choose to work together. The methodology facilitates such things as skills development and exchange between professional artists and members of a community, the creation of new work by professional artists which is derived from the experiences of members of a community and generally serves to highlight concerns or specific events that are pertinent to the community, the creation of new works by artists and community participants in collaboration, social change through collaborative arts and cultural development activity, and the creation and production of art works by members of a community working together. The connection with community can take place in a variety of forms.

When artists devise and develop a work that is relevant to a specific community and then present it to the community the work is ‘for’ the community. This exemplifies an autonomous process with any decision making being the sole domain of the artist. The artist may choose to base themselves within the community to undertake the work. The community can however reject the work for any number of reasons including inappropriate cultural references. This model is often used although it is

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considered to be on the “outer limits of what is ostensibly seen as community based work.” On the other hand for could also relate to situations where a community may commission an artist and in this instance the artist works under the direction of the community. In both of the above models there is potential for conflict and working for and in communities must be well thought out with clearly defined parameters.

As community based practice has matured the most prevalent mode of practice has become working 'with' communities. This involves the artist or arts organization entering into a relationship with the community. This necessitates community involvement in all of the decision making processes in relation to how and what the artistic outcome will be. The role of the artist is to both facilitate and provide a range of skills that are not already present in the community and to utilise any that already exist. In this way the community has a key role in shaping the outcome.

When art moves outside studio production and becomes a process of community or institutional negotiation, when it must be responsive to a social dynamic and address the needs of others, when it is collaborative by nature, or when it draws upon the expertise of other fields, it becomes a more open ended and fluid process.

When communities undertake arts based projects themselves without an artist it is referred to as being ‘by’ the community. This model relates to a broad range of activities that have taken place with little or no assistance from anyone other than those involved. Cultural Development Officers in local government are often aware of these activities having assisted via

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12 Dave Watt and Grahame Pliits, 2001 *The Imagery Conference*, [http://www.ccd.net/about/history.html](http://www.ccd.net/about/history.html) accessed 5th Feb 2010 7.23pm

funding and in navigating the statutory requirements such as risk assessments and public liability. There are nearly as many models for working in a community based context as there are artists and communities. Defining what is and what is not community based arts practice is difficult and to complicate matters large scale projects often combine a range of models.14

A perfect example of how all of the models for community based arts practice may be employed can be found in Newcastle’s largest, to date, arts related event. When BHP closed its steelworks in Newcastle in 1988, the occasion was marked with an arts event jointly funded by BHP and the Community Cultural Development Fund of the Australia Council. The event, Ribbons of Steel brought together artists, steel workers and BHP management, the University of Newcastle, Newcastle Community Arts Centre, the Workers Cultural Action Committee and Freewheels Theatre in Education to devise and implement a range of related projects that would celebrate the history of steel making in Newcastle. The projects included a large-scale sculpture project that gave metal workers the opportunity to use their skills in a different application, a photography project that involved BHP employees and culminated in an exhibition, a “verbatim theatre” production that examined the deaths of two steel workers and a commissioned theatre work, No More the Fur Elise: No More the Bullied Bloom written by John O’Donoghue, an established Hunter playwright.

The largest project was a performance, Ribbons of Steel, set in and around one of the huge sheds on the steelworks site. The performance involved steelworks employees, professional artists and members of the broader community and was open to the general public. The exterior area was used for small performance vignettes that included mime, dance, aerial work, stilt walkers and a drumming group. Once inside the audience

14 Dave Watt and Grahame Pitts, 2001 The Imaginery Conference, http://www.ccd.net/about/history.html accessed 5th Feb 2010 7.23pm
was treated to a large scale performance piece with a brass band, spoken word and trapeze. The finale involved a ‘ballet’ for forklifts as the back section of the shed opened to reveal the industrial landscape of the steelworks complete with moving trains.

*Ribbons of Steel* as an event was both a celebration and a wake. It looked at the ramifications that would be the result of an end to steel making in Newcastle and it provided the steelworks with an opportunity to connect with the broader community. The legacy left behind by *Ribbons of Steel* is the *Muster Point* sculpture, a book, two play scripts, the *Tool Shed* museum, the *Men and Women of Steel Choir*, a composition specifically for a brass band and number of steel workers who have continued to pursue photography.¹⁵

The heart of Ribbons of Steel was firmly placed in the community of steel workers and artists who joined together to create an arts project that the broader community responded to. Collaboration in its truest sense based on mutual respect, honesty and ethical practice developed as an integral part of the creative process.

¹⁵ I was involved in *Ribbons of Steel* as the General Manager of Freewheels Theatre in Education and as a member of a University of Newcastle project team that undertook a ceramic project with people employed on the steel works site and also associated industries. Further information in relation to Ribbons of Steel can be found at http://www.artshunter.com.au/ribbonsofsteel/ribbonsofsteel.html
CHAPTER TWO

COMMUNITY, CONTENTION AND COLLABORATION:
THE ETHICS OF COMMUNITY ART PRACTICE

…community does not describe an object; it
describes a sensation - the sensation of sharing,
of belonging, of connectedness, of common
cause.¹⁶

The term ‘community’ is a contentious one. The debate rages and some
protagonists reject the notion that such a thing as community exists. What
constitutes a community? Lucy Lippard posits a beautifully simple
explanation:

A peopled place is not always a community, but
regardless of the bonds formed with it, or not, a
common history is being lived out. Like the places
they inhabit, communities are bumpily layered and
mixed, exposing hybrid stories that cannot be seen
in a linear fashion, aside from those “preserved”
examples which usually stereotype and oversimplify
the past. … Community doesn’t mean
understanding everything about everybody and
resolving all the differences; it means how to work
within differences as they change and evolve.¹⁷

¹⁶Jon Hawkes, 2002. Creative Engagement, Keynote Address for Groundswell, Regional
Arts Australia National Conference, available on line at:
http://www.regionalartsnswm.au/groundswell/docs/jon_hawkes.pdf accessed 2nd August,
2005
¹⁷Lucy R Lippard, 1997. The Lure of the Local; Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society;
The New Press, New York p 24
There is a strong base of support for community arts with theorists and practitioners advocating the benefits. Since the 1990’s there has been an increase in international artists and theorists with high profiles adopting or espousing the principles of community based practice. International advocates include Suzi Gablik, Lucy Lippard, Suzanne Lacy, Mark Dion, and Tim Rollins to name a few. Many terms are now used to describe what is, in essence, community based arts practice.\(^{18}\)

Nicholas Bourriaud coined the term relational aesthetics in 1997 to describe arts practice that involves participation. The notion of art as an interaction rather than as a product exposes or questions the concept of quality and the monetary value of an art work. Relational Aesthetics challenges the premise that art is a commodity and that artists are special. Instead Bourriaud espouses the capacity of collaboration and communication to directly affect the capitalist model of the relationship between art, artist, viewer or participant and the market.\(^{19}\)

Participatory art is a direct challenge to cherished assumptions about the meaning of art, its function in society, and the special nature of the artist’s calling. But in their place, it poses a set of models for the melding of art and life and opens up exciting new possibilities for artists seeking a more significant role in contemporary culture.\(^{20}\)

Other terms currently used to describe participatory or community based arts work include Dialogical Art, Conversational Art and New Genre Public

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\(^{18}\) Suzi Gablik and Lucy Lippard are respected theorists, writers and educators within the sphere of contemporary arts practice. Artist Tim Rollins is the founder of K.O.S (Kids of Survival). KOS grew out of after school/weekend art workshops.


\(^{20}\) ibid., p 412
Art. The commonality is the relationship between the artist and the participant, the interaction of artist, participant and artwork.

There is considerable criticism with regard to the quality, value, relevance and ethical practice of community based arts. Community artists are often accused of undertaking work for the purpose of fixing a myriad of social problems by waltzing into the community and waving their magic wand. Given that the community arts movement in Australia began as the result of political and social concerns arising from the fierce debate and direct action taking place in the 60s and 70s, when many questioned the political and social directions of the time, it is no wonder that there is at core an element containing the notion of social democracy. Ideas such as Feminism, the Vietnam War, Worker’s Rights and Aboriginal Rights led many arts practitioners away from the Gallery system into creative collaborations within communities.\(^{21}\)

Consequently community based art can be and has been seen and referred to as ‘aesthetic evangelism’\(^{22}\) that is carried out by artist/social workers whose aim is to transfigure the community by transforming individual members through exposure to arts practice. Community based art cannot of itself effect change. It does not and cannot address the real social issues and the needs of social policy, but it can highlight issues of concern within a community and function as the catalyst that energises the community itself to take action.

It is fallacious to think that all artists who work within the community have the intention of effecting change. However, there are examples of social outcomes that can be attributed to community based art projects and a number of artists who have undertaken projects that are highly political

\(^{22}\) In 1995 Grant Kester wrote an article for Afterimage magazine, titled Aesthetic evangelists: conversion and empowerment in contemporary community art.
and have succeeded in raising awareness both within and outside the communities involved. The Roof is on Fire, a project Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby and Chris Johnson organised involved marginalised ethnic youth from Oakland California in a performance work that explored the attitudes and opinions of the participants in relation to media, racial stereotypes and economically disadvantaged education. Conversations between participants took place in parked cars and were ‘overheard’ by the audience that had been invited to view the event. This project challenged stereotypical views of youth and had a positive effect on local law enforcement officers and members of the community as well as the participants and other young people.

The social benefits of the arts may be called into question and criticised but it certainly has not had an impact on bighART, Australia’s highly acclaimed and critically praised arts company. bighART proudly considers its work to be firmly grounded in the benefits of social change that are a direct result of high quality and innovative new works made in collaboration with communities. Established in 1992 by Scott Rankin and John Bakes, the company works with and within communities exploring a range of concerns, including but not limited to domestic violence, crime prevention, climate change and drought, racism, suicide and homelessness. The company is considered a leader in the field of community cultural development and has both a national and international profile as a producer of high quality innovative arts experiences with projects being referenced in books and conference papers, as well as publications by the World Health Organisation and the Australia Council.

Whilst bighART sees its work firmly grounded in working towards social change this is not the primary concern at the beginning of a project. The

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24 Grant H Kester, 2004. Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art; University of California Press, Berkley, p 4
25 Documentation of other projects and other companies involved in Community based public arts in Australia can be found at http:www.australiacouncil.gov.au
premise for all of the company’s work is ‘it’s harder to hurt someone if you know their story’.26 In short, all of their projects are stories, stories that come from a particular place, person or history and it is through exploration and collaboration around the stories that a work develops. Working in small communities and cities highlights that there are people everywhere who are affected by situations and decisions that are not of their making. BigHART gives these people an opportunity to have their story told and in this way brings into question issues that relate directly to social outcomes.

BigHART works across a number of artforms with projects often including film, performance and visual arts. This multi-media approach to work means that the company can constantly change and experiment with style and scale. Projects can take up to 3 years from inception to final presentation and in some instances have continued for much longer, as has been the case with Ngapartji Ngapartji. This project is the culmination of several years of research and includes a web based component set up to teach and expand the knowledge of the Pitjantjatjara language and foster cross cultural collaboration.

Whilst BigHART is grounded in working towards social change Rankin is quick to point out that neither he, nor any other member of the company, are social workers. They do however maintain links to appropriate organizations so that they are able to refer participants if necessary. “BigHART believes that it’s possible to produce quality art and effective social change at the same time. Possible? Make that necessary.”27 The real power that BigHART works have lies within their power to draw attention to not only the problems associated with particular communities or places but also to the history that lies beneath the problem. Telling these stories within a personal context creates an atmosphere in which the viewer is able to easily access the information and to empathise with the individual stories presented.

26 http://www.bighart.org/public/?p=80 accessed 14/1/10
27 http://www.bighart.org/public/?p=79 accessed 14/1/10
A criticism directed towards some community based artists is that they are
in a privileged position in relation to community participants, particularly
when the community participants are powerless due to health, financial
need or violent situations. This fails to acknowledge that many individual
artists create their work to inform or elicit a response from their audience,
to address issues that concern the artist personally. Artists committed to
community based arts processes, who work within marginal communities,
provide opportunities for involvement that expand the participants'
experiences beyond their normal everyday activity. The mere bringing
together of disparate community members for the duration of a project can
challenge assumptions about each other’s worth and position within the
community, and their relationship to each other. Often discussion within a
project results in meaningful dialogue that relates to broader community
issues, life in general and on occasion world politics. If this dialogue, this
establishment of relationship, is the only outcome then it is an extremely
worthwhile one that often translates positively to the project being
undertaken.

When art is rooted in the responsive heart, rather
than the disembodied eye, it may even come to be
seen, not as the solitary process it has been since
the Renaissance, but as something we do with
others.\(^28\)

Mark Dion in discussing the role of collaborators and assistants
acknowledges their contribution: “Over the past decade I have been
considerably lucky to have had the privilege of working with some
exceptional talents from a wide variety of disciplines.”\(^29\) He says of his
collaborative practice, “It must be rare for any artist to find him or herself in
the fortunate situation of being consistently surrounded by collaborators,

p106

\(^{29}\) Alex Coles and Mark Dion (Ed); 1999. *Mark Dion Archaeology*; Black Dog Publishing,
EU, p8
supporters and assistants eager to share the clarity and precision with such energetic enthusiasm."\textsuperscript{30} For Dion, there has been a shift from the institutional space to a practice that relates more to the notion of field work or field studies, with the emphasis being directed to process and relationships rather than a myopic focus on the object in isolation.\textsuperscript{31}

Dion often works cooperatively with individuals of many backgrounds, intentionally disrupting the notion of an originating author. In this way, his works attempt to undermine the authoritative voice of the artist, honouring and encouraging the audiences capacity to make associations and form independent meanings that are not merely an extension of his own. This aesthetic position by its very nature puts into question the ideological structures of institutions and the cultural assumptions they embody.\textsuperscript{32}

Exploitation of community participants by artists, who espouse collaboration within a community, has also been raised as an issue in relation to community based arts practice. In considering the possibilities of working within a community it is important to note that what is pertinent is the methodology or process proposed and agreed upon by the community participants and the artist. Exploitation will only occur when the artist fails to uphold the agreed methodology. Community members are not stupid, participation is by choice; if a project is not of interest they will not get involved and if they are not happy they will leave. True exploitation of community participants occurs when the artist is credited with sole copyright. This form of exploitation is also perpetuated every time a critic,

\textsuperscript{30} ibid., p8
\textsuperscript{32}ibid.,pp 49-50
theorist, curator or artist fails to acknowledge everyone who made the work or participated in the project.

As a means of ensuring that participant’s moral rights are protected when they are working collaboratively in Australia, a document has been commissioned by the Australia Council and is available on its web site which provides artists and community members with guidelines and a sample contract. Tim Rollins and KOS ( Kids of Survival ) are an established partnership who work together in New York. The work that they produce has attracted large sums of money that is put back into the partnership to provide, among other things, financial assistance for the education of KOS members. Using a group title as Rollins does, would seem to be an effective means of acknowledging the participants of a project that has a large number of collaborators. Many projects credit the community as well as the artist/facilitator.

A further extension of the notion of exploitation can be seen in the increasing presence of curators and institutions in the organisation and planning of community based work: not just facilitation, but the devising of projects and the partnering of the right artist with the right community.33 This bears no resemblance to an authentic community based arts process that ideally brings together interested community members and an artist or artists who develop concepts in collaboration that translate into works of art. The process requires that both the artist/s and the participants enter into a relationship that is based on a shared vision and mutual respect. Organisations or umbrella groups that want to be involved in administering or managing community based practice must have an understanding of what that practice is and what is considered best practice.

33 Miwon Kwon, 2004. One Place After Another, Site Specific Art and Locational Identity; MIT Press, pp 123 - 125
An example of an initially unsuccessful project occurred in Newcastle when the Hamilton Business Chamber called for expressions of interest for a community based project for the latter part of 2008. Funding had been successfully applied for that would allow a project involving a series of artworks to be developed and made based on community stories about the 2007 storms that devastated the Hunter and Central Coast. As the Hamilton Business Chamber is a committee of the Newcastle City Council the project was required to go to public tender. At this point the Public Art Advisory Committee (PAAC) became involved as all public art projects considered for Newcastle City Council land must be approved by the PAAC.

Concerns were raised about the financial capacity of the project to adequately recompense the artists involved and to achieve a high standard of art work for the proposed ten art works, or even the feasibility of producing this number of works with the allocated funds. The stated opinion was that the funds were insufficient for one work let alone ten. An Expression of Interest document prepared and approved by Business Hamilton was rewritten by PAAC. The new document contained several conditions that are not conducive to good community based arts process. The project’s stated conditions were demeaning to the artist and the community’s capacity to self determine and grow, and did not allow flexibility of approach and outcomes. As a consequence the commissioned artist and the commissioning body were unable to achieve a satisfactory outcome. In 2009, Business Hamilton and the artist mutually agreed to sever their relationship. Caroline Hale and I were approached to complete the project. Many of the stated conditions were successfully circumvented as a large number of the works were to be installed on private property. Hale and I started the project with the work that had been produced during the workshop process conducted by the original project artist – six drawings of birds and several stories about the storm.
The position of the artist as a privileged member of society is also of concern. As an artist who works with communities I am aware that I appear to be of Anglo European descent and as such occupy a position of affluence and power, at times in contrast to the community with whom I am collaborating. My education in arts practice also bestows an aura of specialness, of being part of an elite with knowledge and ability inaccessible by others. This potential influence must at all times be subjected to scrutiny and control to ensure that projects reflect genuine collaboration and skills transference rather than imposed hierarchical direction.

The important fact is that, within the community-based art context, the interaction between an artist and a given community group is not based on a direct, unmediated relationship. Instead it is circumscribed within a more complex network of motivations, expectations, and projections among all involved.34

Community based public art should not be seen as a panacea for all community ills but could be viewed as a process of building new routes to communication and interaction. Lucy Lippard suggests that by entering a community of which one is not part, or is inherently different from, we change that community; but the community also changes us, so that we can occupy different positions within each community. Each community that we have contact with will have a different dynamic of change and exchange.35

34 Miwon Kwon. 2004. One Place After Another, Site Specific Art and Locational Identity; MIT Press, p 141
S/he remains the same person, and may remain an outsider in both cases, but reciprocal identity is inevitably altered by the place, by the relationship to the place itself and the people who are already there.\textsuperscript{36}

It is possible that the introduction of a new element into a community, the presence of difference, will of itself initiate further potential for change. If this enables a process of cross cultural communication, of reciprocity and a finding of common ground then it is more likely that a meaningful and accessible creative expression of community will emerge.

The Artful Dodgers Studio in Victoria operates in a similar manner to KOS in California, with professional artists working alongside youth at risk in a fully functioning access studio. Whilst some would consider this social work, it provides an effective and creative alternative to spending life on the streets. The studio offers opportunities for marginalised young people to engage in visual arts projects under the guidance of Sally Marsden, a well respected artist and community based arts practitioner. Participants within the studio are encouraged to develop skills and critically evaluate their work as they progress towards public presentations. When works are exhibited the participants are introduced as artists and are not only able, but also willing to enter into discussion about the work and themselves.

Marsden argues that in order for arts based projects to achieve any form of social change they need to be long term. This attitude is opposed to the common trend popularised by many agencies for short-term funded opportunities that are offered with the aim of achieving a quick response to anti-social behaviour by young people. Both Deborah Mills and Jon Hawkes, in various presentations, have alluded to the potential of poorly

\textsuperscript{36} Lucy R Lippard, 1997. \textit{The Lure of the Local; Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society}; The New Press, New York p 6
thought out projects to do more harm than good.\textsuperscript{37} The Artful Dodgers also provides access to accredited training courses. \textsuperscript{38}

There has been some increase in critical discourse around these issues. However documentation, publicity and reviews are still few and far between unless the work relates to a high profile artist or event. There are countless works produced that go unnoticed except by the community in which they occur. This is a concern frequently raised by artists who try, yet fail, to attract critical attention and discourse. Of equal importance to increasing the profile of community works is the need for artists working within communities to document and critically evaluate their own projects. Arts Victoria, Vic Health, Darebin City Council and the City of Whittlesea, (organisations that support and fund a range of community art activities), funded the development of a well thought out model entitled *Evaluating Community Arts and Community Well Being*…, to encourage artists and organisations hosting community arts projects to collect evidence about the impact of community arts projects. This is an extremely useful method of evaluating a project as it is particularly effective in evaluating participants’ benefits and is worthy of wider use where it is seen as necessary to judge outcomes.

In 2004 the Wallace Foundation commissioned the RAND Corporation to research the benefits of the Arts to individuals and communities. The result was *Gifts of the Muse*, a monograph that was “…intended to engage the arts community and the public in a new dialogue about the value of the arts, to stimulate further research and to help public and private


\textsuperscript{38} Artful Dogers originated as a program set up through Jesuit Social services in 1997. In 1993 Marsden wrote *Healthy Arts* for Arts Access and has a proven track record as an advocate for professional community cultural development practice. Early in 2000 Marsden began a research partnership with Martin Thiele with the aim of providing a theoretical framework for working with marginalised communities.
policymakers reach informed decisions." While the research supports
the arts as being able to provide benefits, it questions the arts’ ability to
achieve social outcomes or instrumental benefits such as those relating to
economic growth, improved health and capacity building and shifts focus
to the significance of the arts capacity to deliver intrinsic benefits. The
intrinsic benefits include captivation, pleasure, expanded capacity for
empathy, cognitive growth, and the creation of social bonds and
expressions of communal meaning. Gifts of the Muse, also draws
attention to how and why an emphasis on social outcomes may have
occurred and suggests that it is the result of increasing pressure from
funding authorities, both private and public, put on the sector to justify arts
activity in terms of benefits.

American arts advocate and researcher Alan Brown has built on the ideas
in Gifts of the Muse reinterpreting the way in which intrinsic and
instrumental benefits are articulated making the correlations easier to
understand. For Brown, Gifts of the Muse has been undervalued with
some of the most pertinent ideas overlooked. The idea of art’s benefits
excites Brown and he has become a strong and passionate advocate for
continued debate and research that further explores the links between
instrumental and intrinsic benefits that result from arts activity. Brown
asserts that the use of a continuum, as was the case in Gifts of the Muse,
to demonstrate the benefits of the arts is narrow, and overlooks the
possibilities that arise when different perspectives come into play. To this
end Brown has developed a theory that he articulates in An Architecture of
Value. This essay maps out what he terms a rippling effect of benefits
that occur over time. Brown is also careful to highlight that different arts
experiences provide different benefits and that there is an enormous
amount of arts activity that takes place via solitary activities and within
personal living spaces. The benefits of this activity are undervalued and

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39 Kevin F. McCarthy et al; 2004. Gifts of the Muse Reframing the Debate About the
Benefits of the Arts; RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Preface p 3
40 Alan Brown has been a guest for the Australia Council Speaker Series on more than
one occasion and his essay, An Architecture of Value, is available:
overlooked, and there is a failure to recognise that they do, however, contribute to the cultural fabric of society.41

Community based art is well and truly back on the agenda in Australia, with the Creative Communities Strategy42 now firmly in place. The debate around both the value and place of community arts will continue and change as research becomes grounded in recognised methodologies or develops more appropriate ones. Community arts, as a practice, has grown and developed and will continue to do so into the future. bighART, Mark Dion, Suzanne Lacy, Stephen Willats and large scale events such as Sculpture Chicago and the Echigo Tsumari Art Triennial, help to attract attention internationally, making it harder for community works to be ignored and undervalued on the basis of aesthetic criteria founded in elitist, gallery dominated practices. The next challenge is in recognising that community arts projects may foster a broadening of understanding of ourselves and our place in the world, and can assist the development of concepts of cultural and social democracy and promote an exchange of views that cannot be other than beneficial, even if that is not the primary objective of the work.

…this practice is deeply committed to democratic access to the means of production, to the process of creation and ownership of results. As a critical reaction to alienation, oppression and a loss of meaning, there is a focused effort towards the inclusion of the voices of the marginalized, the isolated and the oppressed in the public sphere.43

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41 From notes taken and information provided by Alan Brown, September 2009 APACA Conference, Port Macquarie
CHAPTER THREE

YOU KNOW YOU’LL NEVER BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

To have meaning the right to art must translate into active engagement not passive provision. If the aim is to enable everyone to have an informed choice it is not enough to open the doors of the gallery, make the entrance free and provide wheelchair ramps and explanatory leaflets. There are also barriers to be removed in people’s minds.44

Occasionally the ingredients are present in the right mix to create a flashpoint within the community. Anger, frustration, common goals, a desire for peace or a need to preserve can be the catalyst that fuels the outpouring of emotion and binds disparate communities together in a collective response. In 1979 I started working with the Hunter Valley Theatre Company, a professional company based in Newcastle, NSW. It was here that I was first introduced to the concept of the community based arts project. The pivotal event, informing my understanding of community art and action, took place in September 1979 when the most infamous hotel in Newcastle, The Star, had been scheduled to close for redevelopment of the area.

As a place the Star attracted an eclectic mix of patrons. The physical structure of the old building rambled across a block and accommodated three culturally diverse but harmoniously coexisting groups. Many attempts, including petitions and protests, were made to halt the closure and redevelopment. On the final night a large crowd was in attendance. Minutes before the closure a riot broke out involving police and patrons.

Newcastle City was confronted with thousands of angry Star patrons. It has been estimated that there could have been between three and eight thousand involved. They set alight police cars and blocked a main thoroughfare. The police were totally overwhelmed. As a result of this event Newcastle was in the national and international news.

In 1980 the Hunter Valley Theatre Company was under the direction of Aarne Neeme and his response to this event was to commission a new play - the first play commissioned by Hunter Valley Theatre Company *The Star Show - Tonite Heroes: Tomorrow Forgotten*. The commissioning brief included research into the history of the hotel. Information was sourced through individual and group interviews with patrons and staff. The material this process generated was both interesting and exciting. Script development included work-shopping with community members and creating a core of characters. These characters represented archetypal patrons – the slut, the worker, the art student, and the barmaid. The play opened on October 10th 1980. The performances elicited spontaneous active participation from the audiences. The final scene of the play involved the band kicking piles of empty beer cans and starting to sing, *The Last Rage*.46

The cast members were dancing and one of them gestured for the audience to join them. Three rows of audience leapt to their feet and joined in, followed shortly after by most of the audience. After the initial shock of the first incident it was never known when the next audience break out would occur. By the third week it happened at virtually every performance. The success of *The Star Show – Tonite Heroes: Tomorrow Forgotten* prompted a local businessman to fund the production of an original cast recording. The play had an extraordinary impact because it was grounded in the history of a particular place. It had relevance not only to the people that frequented The Star, but also because of the hotels

46 This was a song written by Allan McFadden, Peter Mathieson and John McCallum, specifically for the production
infamy within the broader community. This wasn’t a play written by a well-known playwright nor was it an established work that everybody wanted to see. Its success was a result of its connection to its community. This also made it a parochial work with limited potential for other audiences. To my knowledge it has never been produced again, although the incident still sparks passionate debate as evidenced by the recent flurry of media attention on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the riot.47

This was the first of many wonderful experiences within community based arts practice. During the course of my professional involvement in theatre I developed an interest in political work such as Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*,48 and the work of Dario Fo and Franca Rame49. The excitement and intellectual stimulation of this process of community interaction continues to inform my current practice as a visual artist with a major interest in Community Based Arts. The notion of cultural democracy, where all are able to access cultural activities without economic or social barriers, are able to express themselves without having trained in art and are able to make their own culture, is of paramount importance to my practice.


48 Augusto Boal is the founding father of *Theatre of the Oppressed*. He developed a range of methodologies for working with performers and audiences for example, Forum Theatre and Invisible Theatre, that use theatre as a tool to examine social issues to find pathways to solutions. In the case of Forum Theatre a play is performed once and then audience members are invited to take the places of characters and changing the text as they choose. In this way both the play and the character are changed. This can be a powerful experience revealing the possibility of change in real situations.

49 Dario Fo is a master of writing and producing biting political satire that uses the traditional Italian performance techniques of farce and Commedia dell’Arte. Together with Franca Rame he has been praised, banned and abused for daring to produce works that have dealt with some of Italy, and the rest of the world’s, most sensitive subjects. *Can’t Pay, Won’t Pay* and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* are regularly performed in Australia because of their comedic appeal rather than the political content. One looks at the effects of inflated prices and the other at corruption at an official level.
Every project unearths people who express concern and uncertainty about being involved because they are not creative or do not have an artistic bone in their bodies. More often than not it is these very people who joyfully exclaim that it wasn’t so hard after all, what a good time they had and what fantastic work they had all produced together. Even more extraordinary are the extremely skilled craftspeople who do not see the capacity of their work to become art and who experience an epiphany when they realise that they have been involved in creating an art work. By their very nature, community based projects are free and flexible and encourage the participation of members of the broader community who may be socially and economically disadvantaged, and possibly socially isolated. The project is the catalyst that establishes the commonality of the participants. A community within the community forms.

Every project is a collaboration, an adventure in which everything is possible and no idea is a bad idea. The project becomes a journey with the only premise being that it should be fun. Even though research is undertaken in specific areas prior to projects, it is never an intention to remedy perceived social issues or problems. Obviously projects do have social outcomes, but these are difficult to gauge and this is not my primary objective. My role within the community is to facilitate the project and maximise opportunity for participation, to be accessible to any member who wishes to participate. Participation is never proscribed in any way.

There is nothing reprehensible in artists seeking to extend cultural democracy by opening their practice to others, by sharing their creativity and experience – even perhaps learning from people uninitiated into the mysteries of contemporary cultural discourse.50

François Matarasso, 1997. USE OR ORNAMENT? The social impact of participation in the arts, Comedia,. Forward p 4
http://web.me.com/matarasso/one/research/Entries/2009/2/19_Use_or_Ornament_files/Use%20or%20Ornament.pdf
The uncertainty of whether or not individuals within the community will be interested in the project and who they will be is an added excitement. Participation is never guaranteed but participants are often a source of knowledge, inspiration and great pleasure. For a project to be successful it must be founded on mutual respect and trust. Every participant must be valued and have equal opportunity to contribute. Participants must be free to come and go throughout the process as they choose and be able to contribute as little or as much as they choose. The project participants should agree upon the final work which is collaborative in its truest sense with every participant, even the dogs, acknowledged as part of the creative process, that is the design and making of the work. In this way ownership rests with the collaborative team not the artist.

Suzi Gablik hypothesises that “art will come to signify a very different set of behaviours and attitudes from its modernist aesthetic assumptions”. Gablik believes that artists need to re-examine the basis from which they make art and that they need to reconsider the relevance of their practice. She suggests that the need to produce art, that will please the critics and be attractive to galleries, and therefore sell, has de-sensitised the artist. Art produced for this market has therefore become a money making commodity affordable only by those with the disposable income that can accommodate an art purchase. That is not to say that artists should not be making money, but Gablik makes pertinent observations in regard to how the art market has become a major force in determining what artists produce.

The major difference between the practice a traditional gallery orientated artist and a community artist, dialogical artist, conversational artist and relational artist’s work is that there is nothing to buy, sell or collect. Community based arts is a multi-disciplinary practice that involves artists and communities in collaborative creation. As a practice it offers participants a range of options for engaging with both art and artists, establishing new pathways for communication and creativity.

British artist Stephen Willats uses the term *new reality*\(^{52}\) to describe the consistent visual bombardment, by authorities and commercial interests, whose aim is to condition the public to accept, actively seek, covet, and to aspire to the ideal of the designer home, clothes, job, and even child. This doctrine of the new actively encourages the formation of the new suburbs that consist of the same, or similar looking housing, that is chosen from a few variations and which allows for no individuality. Willats intervenes by building relationships between the residents and the place in which they coexist. These works re-contextualise their, and our, perceptions of reality and our place within it, thereby creating a starting point for the development of new relationships within the community.

Planners and bureaucrats, in the interests of convenience, often undervalue the relationships between people and place. This can lead to economically viable but socially untenable housing and urban developments.\(^ {53}\) The importance of the work of artists like Willats is to recognise this, to address the problem by actively creating dialogue within the community and by acknowledging the significance of ownership and belonging in community formation. The processes that operate in his projects serve to break down barriers and act as a conduit for building new relationships and challenging assumptions about the physical and social nature of community.\(^ {54}\)

Another example of community based practice is *The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial* which began in 2000 and which has been referred to as “…one


\(^{53}\) In 2008, as part of my position as a Community Artist with Wyong Shire Council, I attempted to engage with the Woodbury Park community to develop an artwork that was to be installed at the Community Centre. All attempts to engage failed. Woodbury Park is a new suburb created to cater for a burgeoning population looking to purchase or rent affordable housing away from the larger and more expensive metropolitan area of Sydney. This is a common occurrence on the Central coast with a number of new subdivisions attracting large numbers of people who commute to work and consequently have no connection to place let alone one another.

\(^{54}\) Willats' work *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp, 1981*, is a series of photographic works incorporating found objects and text that reassesses the significance of an adjacent piece of vacant land to inhabitants of a West London housing estate. For the users of the area the vacant land has become a means of rebellion against the strictures of the housing block and perhaps broader social restrictions.
of the largest and grandest experiments in the history of contemporary art.  
What makes the Triennial radically different from much previous practice are the underlying aims of the exhibition, which include the rejuvenation of a rural region, participation by six different municipalities across an area of more than 700 square kilometres, and the production of artworks that respond to the distinctive nature of the Niigata region. “The artists will work closely with the local people to create works with strong roots in place. The goal is to make this event an integral part of the ongoing local development efforts.”

The region has changed dramatically in the past decade. Previously the area was famous as a prominent rice producing region, however as a result of free trade agreements, more rice is imported and less grown locally. This has generated a loss of employment and a subsequent decline in the areas population, especially young people, who leave seeking opportunities that are more readily available in the cities. This exodus has seen the area left with empty houses, abandoned rice fields and businesses either closed or in decline. Many of the vacant buildings are used, by the artists as sites for works, during the Triennials.

Based in an empty traditional wooden building and using the native flora of the region and local knowledge of its medicinal traditions Janet Laurence created an interactive elixir bar where visitors could sample the products of various distillations mixed with sake. Large blown glass shapes reminiscent of laboratory equipment filled with coloured fluids and plant samples were attached to the walls and placed on tables. Large glass panels which appeared to be laminated together and contain green fluid surrounded the bar area. These were evocative of microscope slides. The work Elixir was heavily reliant on the participation of the local population and a Japanese botanist to gather the plant specimens and for their specific knowledge of the various uses and dangers associated with them.

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55 In Yusuke Nakahara, ECHIGO-TSUMARI ART TRIENNIAL 2000, Catalogue p12
56 In Kitagawa ECHIGO-TSUMARI ART TRIENNIAL 2000, Catalogue p12
Laurence's work demonstrates the value and importance of the natural environment as well as traditional practices and knowledge which are often overlooked in favour of contemporary commercial products and processes. Also using the distillation process was Nigel Helyer. Helyer's work *Everything's Nice with American Rice* highlighted the political and social effects within this region of the importation of large amounts of rice grown by American farmers as a result of the free trade agreement. Using a combination of liquor distilled from rice mixed with gasoline, Helyer and his local team operated a small tractor type vehicle experimenting with and refining the process and quantities necessary to run farm machinery effectively. The ultimate goal was to enable local farmers to produce an economical alternative bio-fuel source.\(^7\)

Australian artist Anne Graham devised a project for the 2003 Echigo Tsumari based on a local legend involving a serpent that lived in the nearby river. Everyone in the village of Nakasato knew this legend which was strongly linked to the landscape and fishing culture of the villagers. After several village meetings the community decided that they wished this local legend to be the story around which the artwork would evolve. *The Snake Path* was to be a permanent work, featuring a mosaic path that wound its way from the fishing park at the river to the ceremonial park at the top of the hill overlooking the village.

Anne gathered a team of Post Graduate Fine Art Students from the University of Newcastle to work with her and facilitate the project. As part of this team I was involved in facilitating workshops with young people and the local community and working on the actual path. These workshops took place over several days and in varied venues from schools to community halls. Many designs, for inclusion, were submitted from all over Japan by children, students, artists, designers and families. A local day of celebration was chosen for the works of participants from outside

\(^7\) One of the advantages of attending the Echigo Tsumari, in 2003, was being able to see both Nigel Helyer and Janet Laurence with their respective works. Helyer and Laurence are Australian artists.
the local community to be completed and installed. Thousands descended on the site either to work on their mosaics or to enjoy the festive atmosphere. Local delicacies and traditional performances were featured as part of the festival.

Our base was a house owned by a local farmer in the village of Nakasato. Not only were this family totally supportive and welcoming but the village also embraced the project and by extension us. Smiles and nods soon became our means of communication whether working on site or shopping for food, clothes and other exotic paraphernalia. There was a real sense of community and shared aspirations. This was an extraordinary experience on a number of levels. Not only did it provide me with knowledge of working within a different culture in a non-English speaking community, it also afforded me the opportunity to view other works within the Triennial. This experience made me think about art in a different way and allowed me to share in the experiences of other artists; Australian, Japanese and other international artists.

The core of all these projects is the shared commonality experienced. The feeling that the snake path is not just a work of art but was creating a piece of history for us all, something that when looked back on links us to place and people is overwhelming. It is this same sense of connection that cements events in people’s minds drawing them together time and time again as they relive the shared experience. Perfect examples of this are The Star Hotel Riots and the closure of BHP and the collaborative artworks that marked those specific events in a unique way. The Star and the BHP share commonality with the Echigo Tsumari in that they were and are iconic events within their region.

This kind of iconic event does not describe the totality of possible experience offered by Community based arts practice. Small, more focussed short term projects can be equally influential within their scope and provide participants with valid skills, creativity, knowledge and less quantifiable benefits such as shared experience and valuable insights as well as the tangible symbol, the lasting reminder of their involvement, the art work.
MOSAIC THE MALL: EVERY CLOUD HAS A SILVER LINING

Arts projects can strengthen people’s commitment to places and their engagement in tackling problems, especially in the context of urban regeneration.58

A cohesive and stable society depends on developing those aspects of community that bind us together, that give us common cause. Community is a concept that encompasses ideals that are unable to be measured, ideals such as belonging and connectedness, the sharing of goals and the ability to negotiate with one’s peers with regard to those shared goals. Tolerance, respect and interdependence must be fostered. Empowerment is the cornerstone of participation, particularly when applied to arts practice within the community. These principles are of importance particularly when a sector of a community is seen in a negative light, and as a result targeted as an undesirable element as was the case in relation to young people in the Chalestown Mall. Ongoing arts activities that involve young people may be the way to develop artistic skills and interests and to foster the development of a broad based and thriving culture that enhances and reflects a sense of community.

More often than not young people are perceived as loud, noisy, trouble makers with little to contribute to the general well being and functioning of the community. It is a widely held view that young people feel negated by this attitude, with minimal opportunities for positive social and cultural interactions, and an inherent distrust of adults.59 As a result young people

58 François Matarasso, 1997. USE OR ORNAMENT? The social impact of participation in the arts, Comedia
http://web.me.com/matarasso/one/research/Entries/2009/2/19_Use_or_Ornament_files/Use%20or%20Ornament.pdf p85

59 My experience working with young people and within organizations that focus on young people includes: eighteen years as the General Manager of Freewheels Theatre in
form their own close knit communities and often function in an electronic/cyber, world with little face to face interaction. The challenge then, is to offer alternative opportunities that engage young people and provide a genuine sense of involvement where their views, ideas and contributions are seen as worthwhile and of benefit to all.

A 1999 study for the Canadian Conference of the Arts’ Forum on Arts and Community states that

It seems evident that both society and the arts can benefit from active public participation and involvement in the arts: communities by becoming more confident, creative, and self-determining, with a stronger sense of common ownership, responsibility and pride, and artists by having more dynamic and engaged audiences and supporters.60

In 2005 a project was undertaken for the Charlestown Mall Committee that involved groups of students working in co-operation and collaboration with four artists. The students were required to design, select and execute the chosen images in small groups. For students ranging in age from eight to seventeen to be involved in this level of negotiation and decision-making with their peers was a valuable, if not always smooth, experience. Our policy and practice as assisting artists was to refer issues back to the group and often to the original designer or designers for resolution. We endeavoured not to impose our values and aesthetic judgements onto the students, although we did offer advice. We acted as facilitators, refining but not changing, assisting in cutting tiles, particularly for the younger

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60 Arts and Community: a Discussion paper prepared for the Canadian Conference of the Arts’ Forum on Arts and Community (Halifax, Arts and Community Working Group, 1999) p1
students, and in the process of gluing, grouting and finishing. The dirty jobs.

Undertaking a project such as Mosaic the Mall has many inherent problems - organisation, funding, supplies, tools and participants. Perhaps the major concern is whether or not the participants will be enthusiastic and enjoy themselves. This project demonstrated that the results of such projects often outweigh the effort. The Conference of the Arts’ Forum on Arts and Community study found that

… studying and participating in the arts at an early age increases the capacity for learning itself. The arts enhance skills such as problem solving, creativity, self discipline, critical thinking, recognition and respect for differences, understanding of the self and others, and communicative abilities. …. Artistic experiences also consolidate skills in organising and teamwork.61

Feedback received from participating schools provides solid evidence in support of the ability of the arts to initiate and foster positive attitudinal change within the community. Our experience in this project validates this. The teachers involved commented on the personal pride, sense of achievement, and feeling of excitement expressed by students due to the fact that the works are on permanent public display.

We visited four Primary schools, five Secondary schools and a local youth centre. At the primary schools we spent the day with the children and their teacher, having to shoo the children out of the room at lunch time. The kids were excited and highly motivated, wanting to know where to get the tiles and cutters so they could start their own mosaic at home. For a brief moment we could see Charlestown completely tiled and younger siblings

61 ibid., p20
missing toes and fingers. These young students demonstrated real ownership of their designs, resisting any attempts to modify the images or introduce new elements. A suggestion by one of the artists to a group of students, that perhaps some other colours included in a design would be beneficial, was greeted with scepticism. Some demonstration tiles were cut and the result was resoundingly denounced. They demonstrated a level of honest response that left no room for misunderstanding. We received letters from each child involved at one particular primary school. They were delightful

Dear Caroline

When Mrs Miller-Brown said we were going to make mosaics I thought how boring. I really loved it thank you for coming and helping us make mosaics.

Another commented on the physicality of the process, I learned that smashing tiles was hard work and that small bits was better and another concern for an injury one of the artists sustained,

Dear June

Thank you for helping us with our mosaics. We had fun I hope your soar [sic] gets better.

The secondary students ranged from well or possibly over disciplined to extremely wayward in behaviour but most expressed a desire to produce good work as it was going to be on public display. One student’s quality check and control of the group’s execution of his design was so rigid that he tried to determine the placement of each piece. Some conflict resulted from this approach. Another group of boys were only involved due to injuries which prevented them playing football. They began in a very half hearted way, gradually becoming so enthused that they discussed the merits of the piece. They decided to rework a large section of the mosaic again, as the work they had already done was not considered good enough by them. A secondary teacher from one of the schools was amazed by the rapid formation of roles within the groups. She observed the emergence of the problem solver, the ideas person, the motivator and
the leader and that students developed team-work as well as their creative skills.

The youth centre visited during this project services an extremely low socio-economic area. The centre provides an evening meal for very little money as well as a place to go after school and activities in a supervised environment. Many young people arrive shortly after school finishes and do not leave until quite late. They spend their time watching T.V., playing computer games and pool, all of which we had to compete with. Often they would work on their mosaic until called to have their turn in the pool comp, or to go outside for a smoke with a friend. We also intermittently lost some of them to the serials on the T.V. It was an anarchic, totally chaotic experience matched only by the extraordinary pride these particular young people exhibited on the day of installation.

These students amply demonstrated Hawkes’ position that:

> Participatory arts describes empowered and hands on community involvement… Its practice embodies the principles that we are all creative and that we all have a right, a responsibility and a desire to be actively involved in making our own culture. And that if we don’t, it is inevitable that we will become alienated, disconnected and mightily pissed off.62

Not only did all the groups of young people participate with enthusiasm but they also maintained a critical watch on the work they were producing. They were supportive and complimentary towards other groups and their efforts and at no time expressed any derogatory comments about each other’s mosaics. They did of course indulge in colourful and extremely creative personal invective. Participants sought advice and put forward

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suggestions to improve their work and were keen to redo any sections that might not be up to standard. They wanted information about what other schools were doing with their mosaics and were really nervous that their works would, or would not, meet with approval once they were in the public domain. A young Aboriginal boy said, “you’d tell us if it looked like shit wouldn’t you miss, you wouldn’t let us put it up. You wouldn’t let us be shamed.” This illustrates the necessity to encourage young peoples’ involvement in projects such as this without denigrating their efforts, as Hawke’s says; “We need the confidence to facilitate diversity, to believe that, at the end of the day, good will triumph, even though we, at the time may not recognise it.”

Young people are often seen as a problem to be dealt with, rather than as a part of, and a reflection of, the wider community. It is essential that their innate capacity to harness their creative abilities and to express themselves in a joyous and spontaneous manner is not gradually crushed, with each generation seeming to visit this doom on the next in an effort to instil societal rules for behaviour. William Lines expresses what for many of us was our experience of school:

But then there was school. School was barren, dreary, tediously repetitious, and leaden, and I spent far too much of my childhood there. The sterile routines inflicted an enormous waste of time, indeed a wholesale misdirection of life. I was a prisoner sentenced for a crime I had not committed.

Unfortunately this is still too often the experience of our young people. The current focus on vocational training and the emphasis on measurable skill acquisition, effectively negates any ability that young people retain to celebrate and enjoy their innate creativity in the arts. No longer is the good teacher judged by the support and happiness of the class, but by how they

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63 Jon Hawkes, 2002. The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability; culture’s essential role in public planning, Common Ground, Melbourne p 22
measure up according to both national and statewide performance indicators. Flagging a need for increased parental and community involvement in education, Hawkes states:

…Every level of government has a finger in the child rearing pie; we must remind the authorities that we expect our children to emerge from their clutches not just as people able to earn a living but as people with the capacity to love life, to engage, to build relationships and who had a lot of fun while learning all this.65

Encouraging young peoples participation in community based arts activities can have wider ramifications than the cessation of vandalism and graffiti in problem areas, although that can be a major benefit. Young people may actually come to enjoy being seen as worthwhile and positive contributors, rather than as disruptive and destructive elements. And we, the wider community, may even enjoy the process and the results. According to Hawkes:

Active community participation in arts practice creates a crucible in which the synergy that comes from collaborative effort can be directly experienced and productively channelled. No other activity provides such immediate and tangible evidence of the power and joy of co–operation.66

The feeling of disengagement from society that has been identified as problematic for the individual, as well as the whole community may be able to be combated in a positive and empowering wave of creativity that utilises the abundant energy and enthusiasm of young people. We may even find that a by-product of this process is increased creativity, imagination and innovation in all areas.

If we look at the negative focus that was communicated in relation to young people, then Mosaic the Mall has perhaps created a shift from the negative to the positive. By providing young people with an opportunity to do, as opposed to the passivity of watching, we may have opened up a whole new way forward for them to be active in the community and to participate as citizens. The community, through its criticism of the Mall as a space has voiced its opposition to a business as usual approach by the Mall Committee. They are looking for change. The addition of the mosaics to the space has stimulated positive comment. It could be the beginning of real change, an opportunity for the community to reassess the potential of the space and to gradually reshape the community’s image of itself. 67

Mosaic the Mall is not a one off example of a positive result. If we look elsewhere there are a myriad of positive examples to be found relating to young people and community based arts activity. It is a sad fact that community based practitioners, and quite often the organisations that support them, are not necessarily good at disseminating information and publicising outcomes. One of the reasons for this is that once you are in the thick of the project all energy is taken up with the process, and by the end of the project you are so totally physically and mentally exhausted that promotion of the project is the last thing on your mind. However, it can be done. If our understanding of what constitutes community benefit changes to seeing opportunity for participation, newly gained self confidence and a

67 A major redevelopment, which has resulted in the mall being reopened to traffic and the shopping centre adjacent being greatly enlarged, was completed in November 2010. Discussions with management indicated that the mosaics would be preserved and relocated within the redeveloped shopping centre.
sense of individual effectiveness as worthwhile and desirable end products.

Jon Hawkes, in his book *The Fourth Pillar*, espouses the value of participatory arts practice as hands-on community involvement that has the potential to enhance cultural life, add to economic development, address social issues, develop self-representation, express identity and reclaim public space. Hawkes is not suggesting that all problems can be solved by setting in place a range of community based arts projects, but he is advocating a change in attitude towards community development and a move away from service delivery to a focus on active community engagement.68

The question is how to convince the decision makers and project funders that investment in projects that allow the community to actively participate can produce results that are of immeasurable benefit. The evidence of opening night and the effect that was produced by active exposure to community response indicates that a key factor is the inclusion and attendance at functions that celebrate these activities in a broader context than just the participants. The participants’ enthusiasm and commitment are the best endorsement for the success of any project. Community projects need to include some exposure of the decision makers to these exciting and affirming events. Nothing succeeds like success!

The success of the project prompted the Mall Committee to fund another mosaic project in the following year. It was disappointing that the funding only allowed for one artist, Caroline Hale, to be employed as a liaison between the school and the Mall Committee. The rationale was that the skills had been passed on to the selected schools in the previous year. The teachers were enthusiastic and the Mall Committee was supplying the

materials. Hey presto we’ve got a project! The result was disastrous, with less than half of the mosaics produced suitable for public display. I can only speculate on the reasons why the project failed. Given the situation in schools in relation to teachers’ time, it is possible that the work was fitted in between other curriculum tasks, that the teachers’ skills were insufficient, there were not enough tools to be used, tiles were not cut in preparation for the students and the logistics of supervision of the class by one person did not allow for works to be guided adequately. It should also be noted that Hale had expressed concern about the viability of the project under these circumstances.

The Mall Committee, although it had comprehensive reports on the Mosaic the Mall project, failed to recognise the importance of the input that was provided by having four artists working with small groups of students and that for the school the project offered a unique experience. At the end of the day, it has to be recognised that the project failed because of insufficient funds and a lack of understanding in relation to the role of the artist in a community based project. The time available to commit to the project was insufficient to ensure quality of experience and result. It could also be said that this was the perfect example of an organization wanting a quick fix or just wanting to repeat something that had worked previously without examining the process required and the funds needed. Ultimately responsibility rests with the artist/s involved who failed to ensure that all components were in place for the successful execution of the project.

Community Arts practice has the potential to contribute to communal well being by encouraging communities to express themselves and by developing structures that redefine the ways in which we interrelate within our communities. It can encourage the re-evaluation of our perceived reality, challenge habitual patterns of thinking, acting and ideation. Complacency and mindless acceptance need to be guarded against by the development of critical evaluation and the confidence to challenge the status quo. As Hawkes says:
We are pattern makers. That is, we come to understand the world through filtering our perceptions through templates that we learn. This process extends from the basic functions of the brain through to the most rarefied of intellectual discourse. Innovation, creativity, lateral-thinking, insight, intuition and imagination are ways of describing the process of inventing new patterns. This process is crucial to our survival. Brain researchers have tentatively claimed that while the brain’s left hemisphere is the site of analysis and logical thought (rationality), it is in the right hemisphere that intuition and its associated functions reside. We are in danger of being a society with half a brain.\(^6^9\)

CHAPTER 5

KARUAH: HEAT, SWEAT and FEARS

The greatest social impacts of participation in the arts – and the ones that other programmes cannot achieve – arise from their ability to help people think critically about and question their experiences and those of others, not in a discussion group but with all the excitement, danger, magic, colour, symbolism, feeling metaphor and creativity that the arts offer. It is in the act of creativity that empowerment lies, and through sharing creativity that understanding and social inclusiveness are promoted.\(^70\)

All too often the impetus for exciting and valuable arts activity is generated by the community experiencing some form of crisis, and an individual or a group recognising a need for action and a way forward. It is essential that the community also has the ability to spot an opportunity and be open to risk; the challenge of the unknown. This was the case for Karuah. The community was in need of reinvigoration, hope for the future and a sense of worth and validation. It also needed to come together as a single entity, to recognise common humanity, shared experience and common goals.

Active community participation in arts practice is an essential component of a healthy and sustainable society. The methodologies of arts practice not only open up fantastic vistas of community expressivity but

\(^{70}\) François Matarasso, 1997. *USE OR ORNAMENT? The social impact of participation in the arts*, Comedia, p85
http://web.me.com/matarasso/one/research/Entries/2009/2/19_Use_or_Ornament_files/Use%20or%20Ornament.pdf
also, in their application, profoundly contribute to the development of community.\textsuperscript{71}

Karuah is not just divided by a river but also by social cultural and economic barriers. Karuah is a small town, roughly three hours north of Sydney, with a population of approximately one thousand two hundred people and one of the oldest Aboriginal Missions in N.S.W. Like most small towns isolated from larger centres there are numerous problems, chief of which are substance abuse and unemployment. Few opportunities exist within Karuah that foster interaction that is not focused on the local RSL club or the hotel. This is particularly pertinent to young people.

The \textit{Meeting Place} project was seen as a potential means of establishing various pathways of interaction between sectors of the community. In effect the community gathered to discuss the project, actively create lanterns and boats, construct the fire pit sculptural work that was the core of \textit{Meeting Place}, mosaic the border of the pit, create gardens and participate in the \textit{Meeting Place} opening event. The expectations of the project team were \textit{blown out of the water} by the response of the community. Not only did residents participate, but gathered as a community to celebrate past and present in what became a space laden with cultural history for all sectors of the community. \textit{Meeting Place} became the catalyst for the people of Karuah to celebrate as a whole in a way not previously experienced.

Creating a cultural container for dialogue can give people the chance to encounter each other as human beings, to consider before they speak the effect their words may have on the listener, to speak from the heart. Not all differences can be resolved this way, of course. But this path almost always leads to the

\textsuperscript{71} Jon Hawkes, 2002. \textit{The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability; culture’s essential role in public planning}, Common Ground, Melbourne, 2002 p38
possibility of a world that can contain real differences without bursting apart at the seams.\textsuperscript{72}

The Meeting Place project started life in 2004 as an application to Festivals Australia through the Regional Residencies Program. The closing comments in the application sum up why the community believed that the project would be valuable.

The Karuah Community has been hard hit by the By-Pass. Economically and socially the community has and is continuing to suffer. However, they are working together to mitigate these problems and they are looking for opportunities where they can work together to make a difference and assist the growth and development of their area.\textsuperscript{73}

When the project was first discussed it engendered great excitement and the consensus was that should the grant application not succeed funding for the project would be found from resources within Karuah. A perceived benefit of the \textit{Meeting Place} project was that it would add a very different aspect to the existing Oyster Festival to which it was attached. In particular the lantern parade was viewed as having the potential to engage families, including extended family that had moved from the area, through the involvement of the primary school children.

An important corollary was that it would attract greater numbers of tourists to the event and also foster continued visitation and usage of the site. Cultural Tourism was seen as the catalyst for community revitalisation, particularly economic.

\textsuperscript{72} Arlene Goldbard, 2006. \textit{New Creative Community; The Art of Cultural Development}; New Village Press, Oakland, p53
\textsuperscript{73} Regional Residencies funding application \textit{Meeting Place}
This project has been enthusiastically embraced by the community from the moment it was discussed. The cultural boost the project will bring into the community will act as a catalyst for social, economic and community capacity growth and development. The added skills that the project will bring to the community participants will bring lasting opportunities to the Karuah community.\(^74\)

Prior to the construction of the by-pass Karuah was the traditional stopping place for travellers. This was the place to refuel, take a break, picnic, buy oysters from the growers and regroup. Petrol stations and service providers flourished. The negatives were the traffic jams. Karuah was a busy town until the by-pass.

After initial community consultation and research the work was devised and referred back to the community for discussion and approval. Following this process, the application was written and all the stakeholders proffered letters of support. The project had two components, a permanent installation and an ephemeral piece using lanterns. Both components used fire and involved a diverse range of participants drawn from the local community. The aim was to encourage collaboration and partnerships by involving as wide a representation from the community as possible, in support of, and participation in, the project. In essence the core of the project revolved around fire and its significance as an integral part of many rituals. Consideration was also given to fire having played an important role in the shaping of Australia’s physical environment. Australians experience a degree of ambivalence to fire: as a tool, a destructive force and as a seductive and beautiful element.

The site of the work is of historical significance due to its location. It is directly opposite the entrance and exit of the ‘old punt’, which was, in its

\(^74\) Regional Residencies funding application Meeting Place
day, the only way to cross the river and was a popular meeting place for locals to have a yarn and catch up over a fire and a cuppa, or just in passing as they moved to and from the punt. It also became the site for the tent town for workers during the construction of the bridge in 1957. Capitalising on this, the permanent work is a site-specific installation based on the Australian tradition of the campfire – a place to meet, a place to share a meal and a place to tell stories and sing songs.

The design of the work was formed as a shallow basin style fire pit with a diameter of approximately five metres, lined with stone sourced from the local area, and which contains a central grate for the fire. A mosaic depicting the river encircles the fire pit. The perimeter of the area has seating made from local timber. Community members worked with the artist in choosing and laying the stone for the fire-pit. The selection of timber, the style and the construction of the seating were devised and undertaken by a local timber miller.

The mosaic around the perimeter of the pit was added to the work at the request of the community. In order to fulfil this request it was necessary to employ an additional artist. This was essential due to the amount of time needed for the physical work associated with the project, as well as the necessity of writing publicity releases, and the organisational implications of ensuring the smooth running of the project by maintaining close contact with the participants and town. On a positive note the addition of another artist also provided additional creative input for the participants and the process.

An ephemeral lantern procession across the bridge over the Karuah River celebrated the river’s importance historically and culturally. The lanterns were made at workshops held in the school, the community centre, the local hamburger shop and in the Karuah Land Council Hall. Community members not only produced a lantern to carry but also large lanterns to
hang at the meeting place event. The entry/exit ramps of the punt were lit using large candles to further highlight the role the river and its crossing played in the development of the community.

An additional element, small boat lanterns, were included as a collaboration and development between myself and members of *The Murrowey Project*, a boat building project specifically for Aboriginal youth, aged sixteen to twenty five, in Karuah. These lanterns, made by young participants from the Karuah Aboriginal Community, were floated along the river where the punt was originally situated. The lantern procession across the bridge formed part of a festive community celebration to light the first fire of *Meeting Place*. Once the procession reached *Meeting Place* participants with lanterns gathered around the perimeter. The central fire was lit by Aunty Colleen Perry, a respected elder of the Karuah Aboriginal community and Hayley Eggington a non-indigenous child whose family have resided in the area for over sixty years. The choice of an elder of the community and a young child represented the connection between past and future, personally and for the community as a whole. A poem, specifically written for the project by a member of the community, David Benson, was read.75

*Meeting Place* as an event involved at least half of the population of Karuah. The project participants included the local Aboriginal Land Council, the Oyster Growers Association, the Progress Association, the local Primary School, the Festival Committee, the Wetlands Committee, the Tidy Towns Committee and the Karuah Working Together Inc. Committee as well as members of the broader community. Participation in all aspects of the project was voluntary and participants were not obliged to commit to the project in its entirety. The *Meeting Place* project gave people an opportunity “...to make something out of nothing, to transform an idea into reality, to ‘bring into being’, as the Greeks put it, to become

75 The poem titled *A Meeting Place at Karuah* and is on page 56
fully human”.76 The whole community was excited and energized by their sense of achievement, personally, and as a community, and asked continually what was happening next year.

Although several ideas to source funds were suggested and one was investigated the possibility to continue working in Karuah did not eventuate. The potential for this event to grow and become a self-generating, art focused, community celebration on an annual basis was enormous. The unfortunate aspect of this situation is that the community was ready, the artists were ready, but it proved impossible to secure any funding.

The project provided an opportunity for the community to work together and achieve a common goal – a celebration of the area, as well as a chance to utilize the enormous potential to reinvigorate pride and strengthen identity that is inherent in such a project. Research shows strong evidence that participatory arts is an invaluable tool in the achievement of a wide range of social objectives such as the building of community identity and ownership of place.77 The process built trust and connection between people in the community and between the artists involved.

Creative processes can help breach divisions within a community, inject new life into strategies for community engagement, encourage partnership and cooperation, promote cross-cultural and inter-generational understanding, reduce fear of crime, promote neighbourhood

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security, enhance leadership and organizational skills and provide new vision and hope and a shared sense of purpose, as well as practical solutions for economic revitalization.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{78} D. Mills and P. Brown, 2004. \textit{Art and Wellbeing}; Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney, Australia, p77
A MEETING PLACE AT KARUAH

Sit within the protection of this fire
Be near to each other
Listen to the sounds of your river
Swim in your hearing with the hiss of dolphin rising
The soft grunt of turtle taking the river air
The sharp whistle of a kite late in the day
Swim in your seeing with young flathead tracing their prey
And giant stingray flying in water
Know that the jellyfish slowly holding their place against the tide have their
place as well as you have yours

Know too that you are not the only person to have chosen to cross the
river here
Many, many people crossed this river and climbed up this bank and sat at
this place being glad to be here before we chose to fly across on steel and
wheels
Many, many people crossed here by ferry and paused again to consider
the swirling water

This is a place for pausing and resting
It's a place for calm decision and talk
What ever you decide as you sit here within the hold of river and fallen
warriors and playing children
I hope you decide wisely for yourself, your family and your fellow man
At this Meeting Place

David Benson
February 2006
CHAPTER SIX

WYONG SHIRE, WORKING WITH AND WITHIN COMMUNITY

A community can be any group of people who choose to identify with each other. Communities can be created through the things people have in common; geographical location, interests, cultural heritage, or simply a desire to strengthen relationships and share experiences.79

In 2005 Wyong80 Shire Council decided to facilitate the creation of public art works connected to new community buildings in the shire by employing community artists to work under the umbrella of the Community Development Unit. The commissioning of artists had been previously considered but was seen as impossible given the constraints of commissioning an artist that were imposed by Council’s insurance requirements.81 By employing us as artists, we became employees, and were therefore covered by the Council’s existing insurance policies. All of the associated costs incurred in the production of art works were covered by Section 94 funds, which are generated as a percentage of the cost of new developments.

Employing community artists related directly to goal one of the 2005 Cultural Plan ‘CREATIVE PLACES – facilities that Support the Cultural Aspirations of the Community’. One percent of the construction budget

79 Scott O’Hara, 2002. hands ON!: PRACTICES AND PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY THE COMMUNITY CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT BOARD; Australia Council, 2002 p 5
80 Wyong is located approximately midway between Sydney and Newcastle with a population of 140,000
81 Council’s insurer requires all contractors to have Workers Compensation or Income Protection Insurance, Professional Indemnity Insurance and a minimum of ten million dollars Public liability insurance.
was to be allocated to facilitate public art projects that actively sought full community participation.82

Wyong Shire Council’s principal aim was for all community arts projects, undertaken in relation to new community facilities, to result in a public artwork that was the outcome of collaborative processes involving the artist and members of the identified community. Margrete Erling and I were the first artists employed under this initiative. As artists we were tasked with ensuring that the process reflected an exploration of ideas, a sharing of knowledge and skills development for all participants. We were required to flesh out a basic council document into a brief that included budget, objectives, a list of relevant stakeholders, community statistics and additional project deliverables such as a project evaluation and maintenance schedule. Given that the artists were based within the community development section of Council, and that a community development worker was also involved within the identified community, it stands to reason that community cultural development outcomes were also seen as a benefit. As the community development worker was already familiar with and had established links within the ‘project community,’ their role was to introduce the artist, organise community meetings, attend workshops and provide support for the project.83

During the four years that I spent working within Wyong Shire, I developed and completed seven different projects relating to new community facilities, with budgets ranging between seven and forty thousand dollars. They all exhibited varying degrees of success in generating interest from participants. Wyong Shire Council initiated all of

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82 Section 94 funds are developer contributions paid to Council and are used by Council to provide the public services and amenities needed to accompany development
83 Wyong Shire Council employs a team of 21 staff members with a diverse range of skills who work with residents and community organisations to identify local projects, community assets, and develop community partnerships. In this way they support the development of local strategies that respond to local issues and build on existing community strengths. The community development team works within what is termed an ABCD framework. ABCD is a strategy which sees the “glass half full rather than half empty” that is, starting with what is present in the community, the capacities of its residents and workers, groups and organisations and not with what is problematic.
the projects and the responses elicited by the finished works were overwhelmingly positive. The biggest challenge was working within communities where it was almost impossible to attract participants to develop and execute the work.

The project developed for Woodbury Park was intended to involve community members in the design and construction of the work, but despite our best efforts at organising meetings to consult and raise interest, few community members eventuated. Taking advantage of a planned community market day at the community centre an ephemeral lantern project was undertaken over the course of the day. Visitors took part in the project and also responded to a questionnaire in relation to what type of artwork they would like, and what the subject matter should be. This information was then used in an advertising leaflet with dates for workshops to begin. Woodbury Park Community Centre 355 Committee distributed this leaflet throughout the suburb. Two local primary schools, the private secondary school and the local library also received leaflets and an advertisement was included in the local newspaper.

This strategy elicited absolutely no interest. Much of the lack of interest is, I believe, a result of the centre’s isolation and lack of use as a community resource. Interestingly three kilometres down the hill from the centre there is a park with a well used playground. Due to the problem in attracting participants for the project, I sought permission from council to relocate the project to the park area. This was denied as the funds were tied to the community centre. The Community Development Worker suggested that the secondary school might be interested in being involved. An approach was made and an art teacher committed a year nine class to participating.

The information gathered from the community market day was used to develop a direction for the students to consider in the design process. Using techniques of abstraction, students developed designs that interpreted the human image. The chosen designs were then transformed into marquette’s using cardboard. Students participated in a final process
of elimination and selection. The end result was the construction of seven
designs using mild steel. The mild steel was galvanized and painted bright
red. The constructions were installed on timber poles of varying heights
which responded to the diverse makeup of community. The work
Gathering was slated to be installed in the grounds of the community
centre. Installation of the work was, however, delayed for more than
twelve months due to controversy around Margrete Erling’s project, The
Big W at Watanobbi.

By contrast Erling’s participant group for the Watanobbi project was ‘in
excess of three hundred people’ and the concept and design were drawn
from a series of workshops involving the participant group. The majority of
the work made with those same people. The work comprised four large-
scale timber totem poles, shaped like a W, with a native bird habitat box at
the top of each. The habitat boxes are intended to attract native birds, and
the design reflects local history, indigenous heritage, and environmental
issues pertinent to the Watanobbi community. During the installation of the
work a number of residents confronted the artist and other council staff
demanding to know who had authorized the installation. Invitations and
media releases for the opening of the work were distributed Council staff
became increasingly concerned that the opening event could potentially
turn nasty, given the backlash at the installation. All community
development staff attended the opening and attempted to diffuse the
tension.

During the ensuing weeks the debate grew, with numerous newspaper
articles both positive and negative appearing in the local paper. This was
not a community wide reaction. The debate was, however, fuelled by a
small group of residents who argued that The Big W was in contravention
of Council’s own development processes. In short, a development
application (DA) had never been lodged. For the residents, in question,
The Big W was an illegal structure and should be removed. For Erling the

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84 Erling, in a debrief involving myself, the Wattanobbi Community Development Worker
and Community Development Manager estimated that there were three hundred plus
participants.
work was undertaken on behalf of Council and at no time during the organisation of the installation, which involved senior staff in building and maintenance, was a DA mentioned. Removal of the work, for Erling, would contravene her moral rights as the facilitating artist. *The Big W* debate slowed down and the installation of *Gathering* was scheduled for the Woodbury Park Community Centre. A DA had been sought through normal council processes due to the controversy surrounding the Watanobbi work.

During the installation of the work at Woodbury Park, a number of residents commented on what a great addition it was to the area. As a community artist this positive response, as well as the process of working in a high school with kids who wanted to make art, and a supportive teacher, was a positive and rewarding experience, particularly after spending three months trying to achieve participation and support from the general community. In a debrief that involved the Community Development Worker, myself and the Community Development Manager I was informed that the very make up of the area is not conducive to community participation as most of the residents are involved in full time work out of the area, often in Sydney. This is compounded by the fact that a large percentage of the dwellings are rental properties.

It seemed that the controversy surrounding the *Big W* would not go away. As a way of moving forward it was suggested that Deborah Mills, a consultant with a strong background in Community Arts and Community Cultural Development be engaged to facilitate a community meeting between interested residents, Erling and the Community Development Manager. Unfortunately before the meeting took place, the work and the community centre was vandalised. The damage included graffiti, broken windows, and damage to a number of pieces of playground equipment and the sculpture. Two of the totems were sawn off and smashed. The *Big W* once again made headlines, although it was not clear whether or not the *Big W* was attacked because of the controversy surrounding it, or just plain vandalism. Deborah Mills did facilitate a community meeting although
it was not until about twelve months after the initial problem surfaced. Mills found that all parties were at fault. As a result of this meeting a commitment was made by Council, the artist and the community to work together to develop the *Big W* into a work that was more inclusive of the community.

Perhaps the major issue with the *Big W* relates more to members of the community having a strong negative response to the work, as opposed to problems with the process involved in the creation of the work. It is obvious that the relationship between the artist, the participants and the community did not succeed in establishing common ground in relation to the broader community’s sense of identity and place and instead fed into general feelings of discontent and alienation which became evident during the resulting forum undertaken by Deborah Mills in June 2009. By no means are negative responses to art work uncommon, particularly to public works. The response to Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* was so vehement that the work had to be removed completely.

Moreover, they saw that Serra’s artistic pursuit, no matter how complex and genuine its critical engagement with the site and its sociopolitical issues, was still driven primarily by art-specific concerns that had little bearing on the lives of the people who constitute the actual, rather than abstract or metaphorical, reality of the site.

Serra did not allow this work to be repositioned as it was site specific. This resulted in the work being destroyed. This particular incident occasioned a massive court battle and close examination of the notion of the artist’s moral rights over the work that they create, and the public’s right to

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85 Notes from Watanobbi Public Art Forum facilitated by Deborah Mills, June 2009 and subsequent Wyong Council Community Development staff briefing.

86 *Tilted Arc* was a large scale steel sculpture (120 feet long and 12 feet high) that was installed in the Federal Plaza, New York in 1981 and removed on March 15th, 1989.

87 Kwon Miwon, 2004. *One Place After Another, Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, p82
maintain control over public spaces that they view as their own. In the light of this, it is advisable that consideration of public concerns and their response to any public work should be included as part of the commissioning process.

The next project, for me, was at Blue Haven, at a new Community Centre that was in the process of being built. The centre was seen as a showpiece for council due to the scale of the project and its potential to service two communities, Blue Haven and San Remo. The project began with a site meeting with the Project Manager, Architect, Wyong Councils Cultural Planner and myself. The purpose of the meeting was an introduction and an opportunity for me to become familiar with the site. The meeting also revealed that the Architect and I had very different perspectives on community based art. The assigned Community Development worker had been working in the area for some time prior to my arrival and was able to provide a wealth of information about existing groups, service providers working in the area and a pending Christmas event.

I was invited to attend a meeting of the Christmas Event Committee so I could be introduced and to talk about opportunities for people to get involved in the ‘arts’ project for the new community centre. Being keen to see if an ephemeral work could be used to draw attention to the project, I asked if everyone attending could bring a piece of string. At the end of the formal meeting I was invited to address the committee and before I could say anything I was quizzed about why I had asked people to bring a piece of string. I put forward the concept of each person adding a piece of string and winding the pieces to form a small ball and then moving the ball

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It was a tense discussion about ‘what’ the artwork would be and a reluctance to accept that the work or works would be the result of community participation. In a subsequent meeting involving Boyd McMillan, Wyong Council’s Future Planning Landscape Architect, the Project Architect and myself, McMillan’s opinion was sought in relation to what and how I worked. It seemed that I had become invisible. McMillan, being very familiar with my process of working, validated my plans and strongly supported my position. That was my last encounter with the architect until the official opening of the building. Interestingly I overheard a conversation between the architect and a council staff member relating to how successful the resultant work was.
through the community to see how big the ball of string would become. Everyone was keen, and so at the end of the meeting a ball of string, the size of a large marble, was taken by the representative from the San Remo Neighbourhood Centre to see what would happen. This was the beginning of Gathering the Threads an ephemeral project that was meant to conceptualise the various threads (people) that made up the community.

The journey began at San Remo Neighbourhood Centre with the Community Garden Group and then travelled to Northlakes Primary School. Every class had their turn at adding various pieces of string and wool that the students had brought from home. The students decided they could not keep calling it The Ball of String, so I was contacted by the school principal and asked if I would mind the ball being renamed the Ball of Friendship, which naturally became abbreviated to BOF. It was at this point that the committee took over organising to whom and where the ball would go. The ball of string left Northlakes Primary School at about the size of a cricket ball and continued to grow as it was passed on to Northlakes Pre-school, Community Centres at Northlakes and Blue Haven schools, Blue Haven Primary School, Scallywags Pre-school, Northlakes High School, San Remo After School Care, San Remo Neighbourhood Centre, Blue Haven Craft Group, Northern Milparra Local Aboriginal Group and the contractors involved in building the new Blue Haven Community Centre.

I periodically received information about the projects’ progress by casual conversation or via the community development worker. Over the months BOF not only grew but also developed a gender and a personality! References to BOF were always prefaced with ‘he’, for example: “…he’s so heavy, hasn’t he grown. He’s so colourful…” Everyone wanted to add string, and BOF was proudly pushed in his special wheelbarrow by the various community groups that joined the parade from Camp Breakaway, San Remo to the Blue Haven Oval for the Community Christmas Event in
December 2006. During the evening members of the local community were encouraged to add further pieces of bright coloured string and wool.

My original intention had been to burn the ball of string at the Christmas event, but that idea went by the wayside months earlier upon realisation that as an object BOF had become an icon, a local identity. BOF, weighing in at eight kilograms with a diameter of forty cm, currently sits in a purpose built display box in the foyer of the Blue Haven Community Centre. No one could have been more surprised than I was at the enthusiasm that this project generated. During the course of the months that BOF was moving through the community over 2,500 people contributed to his growth. I have been told that community members often bring visitors to the centre to show them BOF and relate the story of how all of the artworks around the centre came about. The local community newsletter is entitled B.O.F. Rolls On!

In addition to Gathering the Threads there were five other permanent works undertaken and installed within the buildings and grounds of the centre. Gathering the Threads had given the overall project a high profile within the community and attracting participants was not an issue. Another stand out project for the centre was Patchwork. This project was developed with the Blue Haven Craft Group, one of the longest running groups in the area. Initial meetings with the group indicated that they were keen to be involved but didn’t see themselves as being creative. Every member of the group was highly skilled. The skills base included patchwork, knitting, crochet and tatting to mention a few. During the course of a workshop, to look at ‘what makes Blue Haven unique? ’I was shown an exquisite patchwork in progress and in a roundabout way the idea of a patchwork was put forward as a project.

Due to the outstanding success of the BOF project a collaborative work involving myself and Boyd Mc Millan, Wyong Council’s Future Planning Landscape Architect, was developed. The resulting work Temari, is the entry point to the Blue Haven Community Centre and references the significance and development of BOF as it passed through the community.
After much discussion about the practicalities of keeping it clean the idea was discarded. During the course of lunch I suggested that the idea of the patchwork was good and if we made it in timber the care and cleaning issues would disappear. There was dead silence and all eyes suddenly turned in my direction with a member asking “are you mad?” The following week we did a design workshop to come up with abstracted imagery sourced from the week before. The patch workers in the group refined the images and developed the final series of designs for approval by the group. All members of the group were involved in transforming the drawn squares into the final timber patchwork. Some members of the group were surprised that the work was so impressive and everyone expressed pride not only in the work but also in the fact that it was to be placed in a prominent position within the community centre.

Mosaic was also requested and two projects resulted. A local Aboriginal teacher, was based at Blue Haven Primary School, designed a large BBQ table in collaboration with Aboriginal students within the school. Over the course of a couple of months members of the community who knew about the project through advertisements placed in the local shop and paper, met on a Tuesday afternoon to complete the table. We involved young people in the project as they used the playing fields and centre grounds as a place to ‘hang’ and concern was expressed about the likelihood of vandalism. However their involvement has resulted in them adopting the work, and subsequently it has become a valued part of their environment.

The second project involved students in Year Two at Blue Haven Primary School. A design workshop took place involving discussion of the natural environment surrounding the school and focusing on the endangered Wallum Froglet. Students produced drawings and selected the final design – a large frog and fish. Given that the students were so young, and that the school had agreed to allow the class to work on the project for a week, it was necessary to enlist the assistance of two additional artists who were experienced in working with children. Caroline Hale and June Longridge generously volunteered to spend two days working on the project. Despite
the disaster of one of the facilitators breaking her knee, the mosaic was completed and installed within the grounds of the Community Centre, on a pathway that was planned to link with the school. The work received high praise and it was considered especially noteworthy that such young children produced it.

Perhaps the most exciting project to eventuate during my tenure at Wyong was the one involving the students and staff of Woongarrah Public School, myself, Margrete Erling, Katherine Simmons Wyong Council’s Landscape Architect and Danielle Hargreaves, the Environmental Education Officer and members of the Darkenjung Aboriginal Land Council. Whilst this project was partially funded by Section 94 contributions it was made possible via State Government funding that was specifically related to ‘Building Stronger Families and Communities’. It was the brainchild of a project officer in the Councils planning department.

The project involved a parcel of land, located in close proximity to Woongarrah Public School on Mataram Road. Council had already earmarked this land for a park. All in all the process to turn the land into a park took just under three years and began with the Environmental Education Unit developing educational materials specific to the flora and fauna of the Wyong Shire that were then used, by the teaching staff, to develop specific units of work across the whole school. The next phase involved members of Darkenjung who undertook workshops, again across the whole school, to raise awareness about Aboriginal history and provide specific information pertinent to the area.

The aims of the project were to create a park that reflected the design ideas of the students of Woongarrah Public School; to facilitate the selection by students of all equipment to be used in the park; to ensure that artwork designed and made by students, would be a principal feature

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90 North Wyong Integrated Child and Family Services had received funding via the Building Stronger Families and Communities initiative that they contributed to the project.
of the park; that the park would be a unique facility for the Woongarra
community and that the Mataram Road park would be owned by the
Woongarra community. Students from years 4, 5 and 6 were given the
task of undertaking research within the school to determine the type of
equipment that should be in the park and what the park should look like.
Simmons provided plans of the space, the equipment budget and a
selection of catalogues for students to consult. Following the research
phase, year 4 students were given the task of laying out the equipment
within the plan and years 5 and 6 set about designing the overall park.
Designs were then voted on by the school population with 6 designs being
selected for formal presentation to myself, Margrete Erling, Katherine
Simmons, Wyong Councils Cultural Planner and senior members of the
teaching staff.

The presentation involved each designer tabling their plan with an
opportunity for questions and answers that gave all involved further insight
into the rationale for various inclusions and omissions. This also gave the
panel an opportunity to explain why certain elements could not be included
and to ascertain priority areas. Armed with the student designs and our
copious notes Erling and I then set about re-designing the park to reflect
the students’ ideas and concerns. Simmons then modified the design to
comply with relevant standards and consulted with the students to ensure
that their ideas had been maintained. This design was then presented to
the students and staff.

At the conclusion of the presentation the students were asked if they
required changes to be made. With no changes to be made the design
was approved. The design was also presented to the Parents and Citizens
meeting. Interestingly they were not as enthusiastic as the students and
felt that the walkways in the form of a snake were frightening and
suggested that it be changed. There was a sense of pleasure when the
meeting was informed that any changes would have to be approved by the
authorized student representatives.
With the design approved it was time for Erling and I to move into the school and work directly with each class to design and make the artworks. As a major aim of the project was for every pupil to contribute to producing an artwork that was to be permanently installed within the park, being based in the school provided us with opportunity to work with the student body and gain maximum exposure for the art works while in production and when finished. We were incredibly fortunate that there was a small room available for us in which to hold workshops and to use as a base from which to visit classrooms and store materials and finished works. It was also fortuitous to have a school principal who saw having two artists based in the school as a bonus, as opposed to an interruption to school life.

In order to have artwork throughout the park, items such as pathways and seating were designed to be included as art features. The wall of the seating area had polycarbonate bricks that were used as containers for copper pieces made by Year Five. The *Snake Path* had numerous mosaic inserts, including two large pieces designed by Year Six students in conjunction with Jenny McEwan, an Aboriginal artist based on the Central Coast. McEwan's workshop was joyous. Her ability to engage with young people and put forward complex ideas and share her knowledge and skills was extraordinary and she had everyone in fits of laughter all the way through! The resulting mosaics relate to the ‘stories’ about the wetland behind the school and tell the story of how we all met and worked together to create artworks using aboriginal visual language and how we enjoyed our participation in the workshop.

Whilst the project was a great success, it was disappointing that bad weather and the consequent flooding of the site continually delayed the construction period. A consequence of this was that the students involved in the design process and in making much of the artwork had moved on to secondary school. Although these students still live in the area I wonder if they missed out on the excitement and accolades when the park finally opened. It is now some years since the inception of this project and as yet
major elements are unfinished due to a lack of commitment to complete by the Landscape Architect now in charge of the project. Many students' individual artworks have not been installed. Additionally, design elements such as the Maze created from varying heights and sizes of poles at the entry to the park have not been completed, and the small timber houses designed by Kindergarten students are also missing. This is a major disappointment that I am no longer in a position to remedy.

Working in Wyong Council as a Community Artist was a great experience. During the course of my tenure I was privileged to have access to an extraordinary group of highly skilled trades people including boiler makers and fitters who originally viewed me with suspicion but became valuable collaborators and mentors by the time I left. Having two artists working on staff at the Council also changed the nature of how Council developed open spaces. Both Erling and myself were involved in a number of projects not associated with Section 94 funds. The most exciting of these projects was my involvement in the design and execution of the Saltwater Creek playground. Personally, working with Rachael McWilliam, one of Council's Landscape Architects, and the key stakeholders from POP for Kids, was a great opportunity and provided me with valuable knowledge and experience. POP or Places of Play for Kids were the prime movers, in instigating the project by lobbying council and also in raising funds for the expensive Liberty Swing\(^1\) that was installed. This group of motivated and inspirational parents provided a huge amount of research on the needs of disabled children and had visited Westmead Hospital playground, considered by POP to be the benchmark for Saltwater Creek.

POP for Kids wanted to include visual stimulation in the form of artworks, as many of the children they were concerned about had little or no mobility and this was seen to be an important, in fact mandatory feature to include. Workshops were held with children from Kindergarten through to year two.

\(^1\) A Liberty Swing is a swing specifically designed to allow a wheelchair to be placed within it thereby allowing disabled people who cannot be removed from their wheelchairs to experience the sensation of swinging. The approximate cost of the unit is $35,000. POP for Kids raised in excess of $80,000 that was used for the playground.
that attended the two local primary schools to find out what they thought would be good to have in a park. The key themes that emerged were animals, flowers and places for grown ups to relax. The children were also very conscious about including work that referenced Aboriginal history. This formed the basis for the final designs that included flower fence panels, a paper doll fence and large sculptural ball forms painted by Wendy Pawly, a local Aboriginal artist, and myself. Ibis, a turtle and several wombats formed the animal population. Whilst Saltwater Creek was not a community based project actively involving participants in the making, it did encompass the best principles of community consultation and accountability.

As a result of the 2007 floods and storms on the Central Coast two projects were developed, Capturing the Community and the Mannering Park Community Vision project. Capturing the Community was a photographic project involving the submission of photographs and stories by interested members of the community who responded to an invitation to participate placed in the local newspaper. My role was to edit photos and curate an exhibition of the work. This was an incredibly successful project that acted as a means of catharsis for participants and members of the community who viewed the exhibition or read the stories published by the local newspaper. Most of the participants had incredible stories of near misses, survival or loss. Mannering Park used disaster recovery funds to create a number of art-based projects. In collaboration with the local community, a much desired and individual entry point sculpture for the town was designed that incorporated a major planting of local species. A mosaic picnic table was made by the students of the local Public School and placed in the grounds of the community centre and a sculptural slant delivered to a pathway in the centre by adding a spiral section and a dry riverbed landscape design.

A major result of the involvement of the community artists in works outside their original briefs, was the recognition and capitalisation on their capacity to be of use in other areas. Both artists were called upon to develop
projects that were used as part of community consultation or community building processes by other departments. A photo voice project, banners for Council Chambers for NAIDOC week, Council’s display at the Flora Festival, picnic tables for the Point, Mannering Park and the design of a farewell gift, a farm gate, for a retiring Director exemplify the various ways in which my role was extended. Towards the end of my tenure I was involved in the development of Council’s current Public Art Policy and strongly advocated the benefits and strengths of its commitment to community based practice ensuring that it continues to remain high on the agenda within policy and decision making.

Each project I was involved in provided opportunities to do new things, meet different people and share experiences. Conversely, the community participants benefited from their involvement by exposure to contemporary arts practice, a broadening of their perspective on their community and its physical structure, a change in their attitude to the purpose and role of the Council as an entity and the place of art within their lives. Council also benefited by identifying other ways in which an artist could help develop lines of communication and also provide an alternative viewpoint.

The arts engage, provoke, amuse and excite us but, above all, the arts reflect and shape our sense of community identity and helps build social cohesion.92

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92 The Hon. Mary Delahunty MP Minister for the Arts (Victoria) in Keating, Clare. *Evaluating Community Arts and Community Wellbeing: AN EVALUATION GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY ARTS PRACTITIONERS*, State of Victoria, 2002  pii
CONCLUSION

The breadth and diversity to be found within the field of community based arts practice both in Australia and internationally is immense, despite its constantly changing state of flux in terms of status and popularity. Since Community Based practice began to attract arts funding some thirty years ago in Australia, it has changed and developed as priorities were reinterpreted and new funding objectives came into play. The number of individual artists, arts based companies and service organisations working within the sphere and pushing boundaries, brought to the forefront a need to respect and respond to cultural pluralism, cultural diversity and accessibility. This was one of the greatest achievements of the Community Arts Board during the late 1980s. The Community Arts Board was also responsible for instigating and supporting the inclusion of community based arts projects within the other Boards of the Australia Council such as the Literature and Theatre Boards. This allowed a range of art form specific projects to be funded leading to the formation of a number of targeted programs such as Art in Working Life and The Multicultural Arts Fund under the umbrella of the Australia Council.

Even though community based practice still battles with preconceptions of poor aesthetics, the collaborative works of artists such as Mark Dion, Suzanne Lacy, Judy Baca and Stephen Willats show this to be a misconception. Organisations such as bighART and the Artful Dodgers studio are committed to working with marginalised communities and their works are a testament to what can be achieved when ample time and resources are devoted to projects. Often the very best and most effective of these artworks evolve through experimentation, and the projects teeter precariously on the knife edge of risk. The risk exists for all stakeholders and advancement is reliant on pathways of trust established through engagement between artist and community.
Best practice artists and organisations effectively develop a skills base and democratic process within their teams or participants and foster the meeting of the experienced and inexperienced in a mutually respectful collaboration that encourages many voices. In doing so they break down barriers between the maker and the audience. To make an assumption that community arts practitioners do not care about the final outcome of a project denies the obvious quality evident in many works. In fact it would be ridiculous to assume that any practitioner deliberately goes out to make or facilitate poor work. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that the process involved from conception to fruition is seen as equally valuable as the final product or outcome.

The principles of participation, collaboration and exchange that form the core of best practice community based art works are what makes it an appealing resource for those working within any field that undertakes community engagement strategies. This strategic adoption has laid open community based art works to the criticism of lack of aesthetic value, but has also highlighted its capacity to provide more within a community than a short term engagement with a project. Urban regeneration requires the commitment of communities and individuals to problem solving and to placemaking. Community based arts projects can facilitate and enhance the relationships necessary for this to occur.

Working within the area of community based practice, I personally have witnessed people make commitment and change their attitudes and I recognise that the experience of sharing with others can lead to an epiphany that can be life changing. However, it is not inevitable that all projects will be successful or reach all participants in a meaningful way. I have also seen participants leave projects because they do not want to work collaboratively or they just do not like the ideas or the other participants. It is clearly equally as valid to make the decision to leave a project if expectations are not being met and collaboration proves to be difficult and perhaps inappropriate to the artists’ or community participants’ way of operating.
Placemaking, in a community based arts context, centres on engagement with communities in the process of creating collaborative art projects that encourage ideas about, and interactivity with, particular spaces and their personal and public history for the purpose of turning them into places of significance. The community can then claim these places as their own. It is through the exploration of ideas and stories that connections can be made that contribute to a sense of shared or individual identity. Feeling connected to the places in which we live and work, to the everyday that surrounds us, is vital.

All too often placemaking strategies and decisions are made by professionals who have had little or no meaningful consultation with the people for whom the places are intended. Whilst this may seem to be appropriate for large scale developments, all too often the results are disastrous. Good placemaking is challenging, not because it is too difficult or too expensive, but because it demands that professionals engage with communities; not by commissioning consultants to do research and write reports, but by sitting down with stakeholders and engaging in an open dialogue. Recognition of the complexity and the ever changing nature of community is essential to establishing truly meaningful discourse. Communities are multi-layered and it is imperative to ensure that all voices are heard.

There is considerable debate around the social impact of community based arts practice. There have been numerous reports, studies and evaluations of reports and there is still no recognised criteria, or agreement, as to what is valid evidence of the benefits or otherwise. Community based arts projects are deliberately broad and multi-faceted to benefit all stakeholders and as such may require the development of alternative research methodologies that take into account their uniqueness. When existing methodologies are used to analyse community based works they deliver a flawed outlook as only some aspects of the totality are taken into account. In relation to the long and short term impact
that a work may have, consideration of a number of factors that are not necessarily easy to map must occur.

Skills development is quantifiable but concepts such as belonging, identity and connection to place are qualitative and not easily measured. Changes may not manifest immediately or in an obvious manner so how can the impact on place, individual participant or viewer be assessed? How is impact to be assessed if it does not fit within the planned and expected outcomes, or within the period when data is collected? Questions still need to be asked about how, by whom, when it is appropriate to gauge the success of a project or even if it is necessary or valid to measure outcomes at all.

If involving the community in art making encompasses notions of the democratisation of art, then it must call into question the current system of commoditisation of art, the pre-eminence of the gallery hierarchy and the promotion of art as being for and by an elite. The continued devaluation of any form of cultural expression that falls outside the accepted sphere of influence of the galleries, their patrons and the art critics, in other words of high art, needs to be rigorously examined, questioned and if necessary rejected. Perhaps, like previously undervalued media such as clay, glass, fibre and of course work by female practitioners, Community based art will, in time, come to be seen as worthy of the attention and praise of the powerbrokers in the art world.
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