

Creative Engagement

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This is blackfella country. I am a boat person (literally). I would like to thank those who know what it means to belong to this country, for the chance that my daughter has (who was born here) to learn what belonging may mean.

I will start by letting you know what I believe.

- A society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture.
- The cultural and creative rights of Australians have been trivialised, ignored and denied.
- The way a society governs itself cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions meaningfully affect the directions society takes.
- Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability.
- The processes of public planning should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.
- 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.
- Participatory arts is an enormously useful tool in the community building process. Indeed, it is the foundation of community building.

Everything I'm about to say is built upon these principles.

Unless we are able to clearly demonstrate the truth and importance of these claims to communities and to decision-makers AND suggest practical ways in which something can be done about them, we may as well go home.

In *'The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability'*, the small book I've written for the Victorian Cultural Development Network, that is exactly what I've tried to do [*contact and purchase details are shown at the conclusion of the paper*].

That is, develop an accessible language that clarifies the role that a cultural framework in general, and participatory arts in particular, can play in the building, wellbeing and sustainability of community.

The fact that the City of Port Phillip, an inner metropolitan Melbourne local government, has recently revised its Corporate Plan exactly along the lines proposed in *'The 4th Pillar'* encourages me to believe that I'm on the right track.

Even though it's a slim volume (it's very short – 70 or so pages – a busy Councillor could knock it off in a couple of lunch breaks), I've tried to make clear in it the essential connections between art, culture, human rights, community, governance, democracy and social policy.

Possibly the most critical of these connections, at least to this audience, is the one between art and culture.

First, I'll explain how I use the 'culture' word.

I use 'culture' in what is known as its 'anthropological' sense (in fact, it is the sense in which it is used in the 1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights). That is, culture describes:

- our values and aspirations;
- the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and
- the ways of life these processes produce.

This usage of 'culture' can be encapsulated as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense'.

What I'm saying is that of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; and that we need to recognise and facilitate this process in the ways that we organise our society.

In this context, the concept of community becomes extremely important. For me, community is based on the experience of being an empowered participant in the negotiation of common goals and of engaging in social action with one's peers towards those goals. That is, community does not describe an object; it describes a sensation - the sensation of sharing, of belonging, of connectedness, of common cause.

There are obviously significant parallels between culture and community. But a third idea has to be brought into play before they can intersect.

And that is, governance. Governance brings these interpretations of culture and community into direct impact with the real world. In this context, the foundation, and essential purpose, of governance is the democratisation and enlivening of the ways in which a society develops a sense of itself and applies that sense to its daily life.

These processes can be described as cultural action.

It is through cultural action:

- that we make sense of our existence and the environment we inhabit;
- that we find common expressions of our values and needs, and
- that we meet the challenges presented by our continuing stewardship of the planet.

Without culture, we are, quite literally, not human.

And a system of governance that lacks an integrated cultural perspective is equally bereft. Not least, because of the essential relationships between the three ideas. To recap:

Culture is the process of making meaning and values;

Communities are built on negotiating shared values and the growth of group identity; and

Governance enlivens and democratises these processes.

Culture, community and governance then, are in an endless dance; to omit culture (the making of meaning) from this movement is to have rhythm but no lyric. And without the lyric it is easy to forget what the point of the dance really is.

And what is the point? Perhaps 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', as the founders of one of the earliest modern democracies so concisely put it.

But, where do the arts fit into this perspective?

If culture describes how we make sense, and the results of that sense, then art describes that aspect of cultural action in which creativity and imagination are the key drivers, where we discover meaning and community in ways that are intuitive, non-lateral and unpredictable, irrational even. With the arts, we can imagine the future, unpack the past, confront the present. We can predict change, focus our visions and face our fears.

Unleashing the creative imagination can bring about the most extraordinary manifestations of vision and purpose – as has been so well demonstrated in the course of this conference. Indeed, many have claimed that the arts are the primary language through which meaning is discovered, invented and contested.

Participatory arts, which is what I'm most interested in, describes empowered and hands-on community involvement in these processes. Its practice embodies the principle 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.

There is a mass of research that demonstrates:

- that the insights and experiences participants gain through these activities make it easier for them to become better and more effective citizens;
- that utilising these practices in programs such as community education, community building, health promotion, cross-cultural understanding, etc, will enhance organisational responsiveness, delivery and flexibility; and
- that embedding these practices in the everyday processes of governance has the capacity to improve community engagement, communications, decision-making, policy development, expression of goals and evaluation.

So, on the one hand I'm saying that it is a basic democratic right that every community have access to the resources that will allow them to make art, to exercise their creativity, to make and express their own meanings.

On the other hand I'm saying that participatory arts is an invaluable instrumental tool:

- in the process of democratic governance;
- in the development of dynamic social communications;
- in the delivery of public services; and
- in the achievement of a wide range of social objectives, including, not least, the building of community.

The sort of long term sustainable social change that is really needed (and I'll come to that in a minute) can **only** be achieved through the widespread application of participatory arts activities.

Why? Because collaborative creativity is at the foundation of forging identity and purpose. And without these, everything else is ashes and dust.

And talking of ashes and dust, allow me a brief digression on the issue of collaboration and co-operation, which, I believe, are fundamentally essential to communities being able to make their own meaning, their own culture.

Despite the claims of anthemic ditties like 'Advance Australia Fair', we are not a land of abundance, and no-one knows this better than those who live outside the cities.

Which is why, perhaps, that notions of co-operation found their healthiest roots in rural Australia, and why it is in the bush that the strongest struggles against privatising public services have taken place.

When I was growing up on King Island, the biggest shop in Currie, the island's main village, was the Co-op – if you wanted anything other than fresh food, you went to the Co-op. King Island in the late fifties was no hot-bed of socialism; it was simply a community of ordinary, sensible people who knew that, being isolated, the most effective way to get things done was to pool resources, and that, in so doing, ensuring that whatever profit there might be was ploughed back into the community was a good strategy.

In the early sixties, my family moved to the Huon Valley, south of Hobart. Apples, hops and berries were the fruit of the land and the farmers had developed all sorts of co-operative structures to harvest, package and distribute their produce. All of these have long since disappeared, along with most of the farmers, but their legacy lives on. Some argue that Australian agriculture, indeed Australian society, was founded on the co-operative movement.

This is not a position that the free marketeers would wish to see promoted, but in the experience and memories of those of us who grew up outside of the big smokes, it remains blindingly obvious.

In conditions of chronic scarcity, it is abundantly clear that the only way to survive is with a little help from one's friends. Competition may help the cream rise to the top where there are a thousand wannabes for every one true champion, but in an environment in which we are all struggling, looking out for one's mates, welcoming strangers, and all lending a hand

are not old-fashioned clichés – they are essential survival techniques. Techniques that city folks would be well advised to learn.

Having got that off my chest, I should say that while I'm quite happy to extol the virtues of the community control and management of scarce resources, I really want to talk about the most abundant and fruitful resource that we have. This resource isn't simply renewable – it's infinite.

It's our imaginations.

Sadly, the existence, let alone the real value of this resource is not widely recognised.

Why? Because it can't be measured – we are still in the thralls of a way of thinking that believes that if something can't be measured then it can't exist – and that if it can be measured, the only way for it to be properly dealt with is to be bought and sold.

Despite all the efforts of the triple bottom liners, the 'market' continues to be touted as the saviour according to this perverse religion known as economic rationalism. We will all, it is fervently propagated, prosper mightily from the 'trickle down effect'. Allow the 'market' every opportunity to do as it wishes, privatise and/or corporatise government, deregulate everything, reduce taxes and we'll all have jobs and everything will be just dandy.

Again, no-one knows better than those who live outside the cities, just what a crock this line of thinking has turned out to be.

Nevertheless, most of our designated leaders still appear to be disciples of the notion that what is good for big business is good for the nation – that 'economic development' is the solution to all problems.

They have forgotten that material riches are simply one way of trying to achieve other, far more important goals.

Since we are only ten days away from the start of 'Celebrating Democracy Week', it may be a good thing if this chat goes a little way towards stimulating the debate about the goals and values inherent in a democratic system and how these values might effectively find expression, and influence the way we govern ourselves. As you will have already noticed, it is issues like these that I believe are at the heart of culture, of making sense, of expressing purpose.

Let's start with an expression of the values that underpin the democracy we wish to live in. I imagine we all share a commitment to being actively involved in the development and maintenance of a society in which all citizens are respected, engaged, empowered and fulfilled as well as healthy, housed, well-fed, safe, and informed.

The second set of goals – health, shelter, sustenance, security and education - could, at least theoretically, be achieved under any political system.

The first set of goals – respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment – would appear to be unique to systems that claim to be democratic.

Yet, so far, few democratic systems, and certainly not ours, have come close to achieving this first set of goals. Let alone in any sustainable fashion.

Intolerance, alienation, powerlessness and dissatisfaction have not been done away with. The democratic dream remains exactly that.

One of the chief reasons for this sorry state is that we have concentrated on achieving the second set (health, shelter, sustenance, security and education – often called the basics) in the belief that, if we get them right, then the first set (respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment) will inevitably follow.

This has, in fact, not happened.

This ordering of social priorities has been further skewed by the elevation of ‘material prosperity’ to the top of the list. Rather than recognising that economic development is merely one of a number of means for achieving other goals, it has become an end in itself.

The primacy of economic imperatives is beginning, little by little, to be eroded: the triple bottom line, Local Agenda 21, ecologically sustainable development are all conceptual attempts to get our priorities into an order that reflects our democratic vision.

But not only do we find ourselves in a society where the priorities are back to front, we’re in one where the process of working them out is back to front.

I recently attended a seminar, set up by the Victorian State Government, on community building. In reply to a question from a Councillor from a local government about what ongoing processes existed for communities to impact on State Government policy, the senior bureaucrat on the podium responded that the ballot box was the process. Political parties present platforms and the one that most of like becomes policy.

Ticking a box once every three years is democracy. No wonder so many of us feel alienated, powerless and dissatisfied.

In a vital society, the meaning we make of our lives is something we do together and continually, not an activity to be left to others, no matter how skilled, or representative, they may claim to be.

Politicians have begun to bemoan the apathy of the citizenry and to promote ways of re-engaging the body politic. This rhetoric will remain exactly that until they recognise that in an engaged democracy, the ideas actually emerge from community debate, from the constant, often fractious and difficult contestation of meaning at the base. Being offered a menu of barely differentiated options from above does not encourage engagement.

As I’ve already said, this is cultural action, and it’s an arena in which the arts can be extraordinarily potent. At this very moment, there’s a community building project happening in central Victoria called ‘Small Town Big Picture’ that is being co-ordinated by La Trobe University and the Cultural Development Network. Utilising a wide range of arts practices, it has been exceptionally successful in engaging local communities in articulating

the big issues that are important to them. This project, which you'll hear about in detail in a later session today, was running for some years before the arts were introduced; there has been an overwhelming growth in community interest since some creativity was added to the mix.

In *'The 4th Pillar'*, I say:

'A society makes (or discovers) meaning through its arts. In our pursuit of a democracy that really does engage all citizens, that facilitates active participation from the entire spectrum of the body politic, the democratisation of arts practice has to be at the forefront of our strategies.

'How can a community develop a conscious, symbolic and effective expression of its own values, meanings and aspirations (that is, culture) without having developed its own creative capacities (that is, arts skills)?

'No longer can we be content to leave the creation of meaning to the 'experts'. Yes, it is wonderful to live in a society in which those who choose to devote their entire lives to art are cherished and respected. But this should not diminish our own confidence in making meaning, it should not allow us to become lazy, embarrassed, passive witnesses, silent consumers, mere customers. The new rhetoric is 'engagement' – the first engagement we should have is with arts practice.

'Why? Because the arts are the creative imagination at work (and play). Its techniques involve improvisation, intuition, spontaneity, lateral thought, imagination, co-operation, serendipity, trust, inclusion, openness, risk-taking, provocation, surprise, concentration, unorthodoxy, deconstruction, innovation, fortitude and an ability and willingness to delve beneath the surface, beyond the present, above the practical and around the fixed. These are the aspects of human behaviour that social scientists have identified as being the source and manifestation of creativity and innovation - the essential elements for the survival of the species.

'An innovative society is open-minded, curious, compassionate and lively; it respects and embraces difference. In so being, it is able to meet every challenge and adapt to changing circumstances. But it can only become so if its citizens are comfortable with applying their creative imaginations to new and changing situations.

'A society in which arts practice is not endemic risks its future. The support of professional artists is a laudable policy but far more important is offering all citizens, and their offspring, the opportunity to actively participate in arts practice – to make their own culture.

'Creativity, engagement, cohesiveness, well-being and respect for difference will be inevitable outcomes.

'Communities need access to, and facility with, the tools that come with arts practice in order to find meaningful ways to express their values. Actively involving communities in

arts practice (as against product consumption) is the essential starting point to the exercise of generating community-owned expressions of what matters to them.'

Before concluding I think you may find it useful if I run through some of the ways that the long term social impact of the arts can be maximised.

As a short preamble, we should remember that there's been at least a thirty year period of a de facto strategy of public funding of 'pilot projects' in this arena. There are hundreds of examples of isolated instances of arts projects that have been intended to produce social change and that have, in many cases, actually done so.

The problem is that most of these are retained only in the memory of the participants. Anecdotes abound – documentation and evaluation are sparse.

Nevertheless, particularly in Britain, a body of literature is beginning to develop. Beyond identifying Francois Matarasso as my all-time favorite researcher, and volunteering to email a reading list to anyone that's interested, I won't delve any deeper at this point.

What I will say is that past efforts have given us a heap of signposts when it comes to:

Program development and design

What we can learn is:

- That initiatives emanating from communities are the best place to start. Particularly ones that emerge from tangible issues, no matter how small, that are of immediate and real concern to those communities.
- That arts practices can be productively utilised in almost any context, to illuminate almost any problem. And that artists and arts facilitators, if chosen carefully, can offer a perspective and commitment that will have profoundly positive results. That the most traditionally inarticulate communities can become startlingly eloquent when they engage in arts practices.
- That arts practices can be usefully applied to initiate community building. That is, in the originating articulation and expression of community values and goals.
- That support agencies need to be able to respond imaginatively and flexibly to community initiatives, not least by having the capacity to provide creative advice and support at the very beginnings of the developmental process.
- That support that focuses on the generation of sustainable local leadership, capacity, networks and partnerships will produce the best results. And that the development of sustainability takes time and long term commitment.
- That community initiative, control and ownership are imperatives. The challenge is to facilitate these attributes in ways that promote inclusiveness, equity and creativity.
- That participation must have integrity. It is the liberation of community creativity and imagination that produces the most profound results. And it is through the direct

experience of collaborative creativity that the most profound community effects are likely to emerge, rather than through the resulting artefacts.

Getting one's program right is all very well, but

What's really needed is systemic, structural and attitudinal change

Particularly from those who have accepted the responsibility to run our society.

In *'The 4th Pillar'*, I argue that the most important initiative that could be taken is the adoption of:

A cultural framework

We should introduce a cultural perspective into the public policy making crucible. You are all probably aware of the current systems based on a tri-ocular perspective – environmental, social and economic. In *'The 4th Pillar'*, I argue that, without a fourth perspective, without taking into account the sources, the nature and the implications of the values that underpin action, processes of evaluation can become empty rituals.

This extra perspective would normalise the conscious presence of values in the policy development and evaluation processes. A cultural framework would allow activities to be assessed against criteria like:

- What has been the quality of community input into the development of the actual and proposed activities under review?
- To what extent are these activities reflective of the values and ways of life of the communities upon which they have impacted or will impact?
- Do these activities improve the capacity of communities to act and interact?

In *'The 4th Pillar'* I argue that without an active consciousness of the values that inform our actions, and without clear, creative and engaging processes for facilitating community expression and debate of those values, and their practical application, social action is rootless, directionless and ultimately counter-productive.

But in the end it all comes down to:

Attitudinal change

The foundation of all these proposals lies in the mind and in the will.

Unless attitudes change, nothing else will. Unless the agents of governance are able to:

- trust in the creative capacity of communities;
- tangibly commit to democracy;
- be prepared to devolve control, and
- go beyond a service delivery model,

we will continue to spin in unproductive, and ultimately unsustainable, circles.

These are the arguments I've put together in 'The 4th Pillar' designed to convince decision-makers that they'd be mad not to take account of culture in their daily schedules. I hope they may be useful to you in your efforts to get arts practice on to the agenda.

But let's not leap off one bandwagon (the arts as a tool of economic development, the arts as an 'industry') and on to another – the arts as agent of social inclusion, even though it might look as if it will offer a comfier ride.

Or at least, this time, let's try to do it without losing a sense of the value and necessity of creativity in and of itself.

Yes, the practice of the arts can produce a plethora of positive social outcomes, but its true value is far greater than that.

Creativity is our channel to mysterious places larger than ourselves, it is the name we give to our capacity to make something out of nothing, to transform an idea into reality, to 'bring into being', as the Greeks put it, to become fully human.

I know that none of this rhetoric will have much appeal to an accountant – which is why the social impact line is so attractive, but nevertheless, if we wish to live in a world in which all people have the right, the opportunity and the means to become fully realised human beings, then we are all obligated to continue to struggle to find ways of effectively expressing what the sad and constricted economic rationalists would wish to dismiss as outmoded spirituality, wishy-washy mysticism or new age irrationality.

Thankyou.

The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning is published by the Cultural Development Network of Victoria in association with Common Ground Publishing. Copies can be purchased from www.theHumanities.com

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