Stepping Out of the Shadows of Neglect

Martin Mulligan
Pia Smith

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Towards an understanding of socially applied community art in Australia

Martin Mulligan, RMIT University, Australia
Pia Smith, RMIT University, Australia

Abstract: Often considered a distant and poor relative of ‘authentic’ arts practices in Australia, community arts have experienced something of a renaissance in recent years. However, this has not been acknowledged in arts funding policies and so community arts projects and practitioners continue to be poorly resourced. Working in collaboration with Australia’s most innovative health promotion agency, VicHealth, the Globalism Institute at RMIT University in Melbourne has recently completed a three-year study of the role of the arts in community development strategies across four diverse local communities. The selected communities ranged from inner-urban St Kilda in Melbourne to the rural/regional centre of Hamilton in western Victoria that has experienced the negative impacts of rural economic restructuring. We concentrated on analyzing the work of a wide range of highly experienced community arts practitioners, working within a range of media, in order to better understand what it takes to become successful in the field. More broadly, the study focused on how community arts can help local communities negotiate the impacts of globalization and this paper will present arguments for increasing the public investment in community arts in the context of accelerating global change.

Keywords: Community Arts, Globalization

Introduction

In late 2004 the Australia Council for the Arts decided to abolish its Community Cultural Development Board in order to channel more funding through boards supporting specific artforms (literature, theatre, and so on). There were howls of protest from around the country and the Council probably came under more intense lobbying to change its decision than at any other time in its 30 years of existence. In response to this pressure the Council agreed to restore funding for community projects, and set up a Scoping Study, led by highly experienced and well-regarded community arts practitioner Ann Dunn, to establish a new Community Partnerships section. Furthermore, a commitment to arts in communities was, for the first time, written into the Council’s overall aims. The Scoping Study, which wound up in mid-2006, reported that it found a ‘diverse, vibrant and professional community-based arts and cultural development field’ in Australia (Australia Council 2006: 1). At a consultation meeting in Melbourne, reporting on the national consultations that informed the Scoping Study, Dunn said she was convinced the field is bigger and stronger than it has ever been.¹

The suggestion that the field is as strong as ever comes as a surprise to some experienced community arts practitioners interviewed by the authors of this paper because they felt that they had more opportunities in the 1980s than in recent times. No doubt the growth that has occurred since then has been uneven and it is likely that a higher proportion of funding is going to administration rather than to the arts practitioners directly. However, the hostile response to the Australia Council’s decision to close its CCD Board suggests that the community arts field has, in some way, come of age in Australia and can no longer be ignored by major arts funding organizations.

Not surprisingly, community arts practitioners saw the backflip by the Australia Council as a huge — and surprising — victory for their field. Yet an increase in the number and spread of activities does not necessarily mean an increase in the quality of practices. Any recent growth of the field may be related to a broader tendency to ‘use’ the arts to achieve targeted social outcomes and this raises concerns about a possible utilitarian subversion of unpredictable artistic processes. Jon Hawkes, an

¹ Ann Dunn gave her report to a Scoping Study consultation meeting in Melbourne in March 2006 and she said that in traveling extensively to conduct the Scoping Study she had been pleasantly surprised by the extent and diversity of community arts practices that she encountered right across the country.
Australian community arts practitioner who popularized the idea that ‘cultural vitality’ should be seen as the ‘fourth pillar’ of the sustainability of local communities, has more recently suggested that many organizations with little knowledge of or sympathy for ‘authentic’ community arts practices are ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ in ways that can endanger ‘authentic’ practice.

Certainly claims are being made for ‘participation’ in the arts that seem hyperbolic. For example, a recent publication by the Victorian government agency Arts Victoria suggested that ‘Participation in the arts encourages an inclusive society, providing opportunities for everyone to contribute to the community’. While such grand claims are being made for participation in the arts, the skilled practitioners who can facilitate meaningful participation are still feeling very isolated and undervalued.

The backlash against the Australia Council’s decision to wind up its Community Cultural Development Board and the outcomes of the subsequent Scoping Study on establishing the new Community Partnerships program suggest the need for more research on the evolution of the community arts field in Australia over the last 30 years. The Scoping Study found that the term ‘community cultural development’ is not well understood by community arts practitioners and Ann Dunn has suggested reverting to the term ‘community arts’.

However, the study on which this paper is based confirmed that community arts and community development practices have become increasingly intermingled over the last 10 years or more, at least in Victoria if not nationally. As a result, the field has probably made itself more socially relevant and also more diverse. In this context, it is important to look more closely at the relationship between community arts practices and their social outcomes and to try to understand more fully the extent and nature of the social outcomes of ‘authentic’ arts practices. The accumulation of experience across a wide range of social contexts makes it possible to discuss what constitutes good practice in regard to the merging of community arts and community development work and it is probably more important than ever to look at ways to better support skilled and effective practitioners.

**Concerns about the Misuse of the Arts**

It is ironic that Jon Hawkes used his keynote address at the 2004 Fourth Pillar Conference in Melbourne (Hawkes 2004) to launch a spirited attack on people jumping on the ‘bandwagon’ of community arts when he had played such a prominent role in popularizing the idea — taken up by a host of local government authorities across Australia — that ‘cultural vitality’ should be targeted as the ‘fourth pillar’ of community sustainability (Hawkes 2001). He argued that community arts projects can easily be hijacked by people and organizations wanting to pursue their own preconceived aims, and that token projects undermine the key community art principles of participation, collective meaning-making, and unpredictability about what might emerge. He went as far as saying that inauthentic practices can do more harm than good for people living difficult daily lives.

No doubt Hawkes wanted to use this speech to a well-attended national conference to promote reflection about what might constitute good and bad community art practice. However, a number of practitioners who were subsequently interviewed by the authors of this paper felt that in making such sweeping criticisms he had deflected attention from the good work being done by many isolated practitioners and, in doing so, he may have undermined their efforts to gain appropriate acknowledgement. Several practitioners took issue with Hawkes in suggesting that one-off community art events could do more damage than good for people with difficult lives by saying that such people often relish a ‘day out’ and might draw considerable inspiration from brief exposure to artistic practices. They suggested that any criticism regarding the short-term nature of most community art projects should be directed at funding bodies rather than the practitioners and they suggested that the field needs a more balanced critique than that offered by Hawkes in this particular speech.

However, other advocates for community arts have echoed some of Hawkes’ concerns — albeit in less provocative ways. For example, a former director of Australia Council’s Community Cultural Development Board, Deborah Mills (2006), has also expressed a deep concern with the ‘utilitarian’ use of the arts to achieve very specific social outcomes — such as reduction in graffiti in a particular area — that might constrain the open-ended creativity of authentic artistic processes. To extend Mills’ example in regard to graffiti, the idea of diverting graffiti artists into harmless, confined or private practices might conceivably backfire in making them more determined to use their enhanced skills to continue their provocative public practices. Diversion programs could take the social meaning out of the art practice.

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2 A monograph by Hawkes, titled ‘The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability’, was published by the Melbourne-based Cultural Development Network in 2004 and it argued that cultural vitality should be rated alongside environmental, economic and social sustainability as a ‘fourth pillar’ of sustainability; expanding the triple bottom line to four.


4 As was confirmed by the Australia Council Scoping Study mentioned earlier.

5 Dunn made this suggestion in a consultation on the Scoping Study held in Melbourne in March 2006.
Concerns about using the arts to achieve ‘instrumental’ benefits were also raised in a major review of the relevant literature in the US conducted by Kevin McCarthy et al for the RAND Corporation (McCarthy et al 2004). As with several Australian reviews of the literature (see McQueen-Thomson and Ziguras 2002; Cultural Ministers Council 2004), this study concluded that the evidence for the benefits of the arts in terms of individual and social wellbeing is rather weak. McCarthy et al also concluded that the arts deliver many benefits to individuals and groups that are ‘intrinsic’ rather than instrumental although they suggested the need for developing more adequate language for articulating and discussing the intrinsic benefits. They have suggested that it is possible to map out a matrix of instrumental and intrinsic benefits applying across the spectrum from the private to the public domain. However, such a two-dimensional mapping of benefits does not convey the complexity of how such outcomes might overlap and operate at different levels of consciousness and emotional engagement. It does not help us to distinguish what social benefits the arts might be uniquely capable of delivering and it fails to take into account the fact that the outcomes of an engagement with the arts can be unpredictable and not always overtly ‘beneficial’ in terms of normalizing attitudes and behaviour. A segregation of instrumental and intrinsic benefits leaves the door open for shallow, instrumental misuse of the arts.

As McCarthy et al indicate (ibid), the demand for instrumental outcomes from public investments in the arts has been increasing in the US since the 1970s and a similar pattern can easily be detected in Australia, even if it started a little later. David Throsby (2001) has pointed out that economists in the ‘developed’ world started to discover the economic achievements of the growing ‘cultural industries’ in the 1990s and that the economic discourse then became dominant in any discussions about the overall social benefits. While Throsby argues that it is important to make the case for the economic outcomes of a wide range of cultural activities in both the developed and ‘developing’ world, he suggests that this case has now been made and that it is important to realize that arts and culture have a ‘broader role … in articulating essential values by which human beings express their identity and work out ways of living together’ (2001: 134). Throsby argues that many cultural ‘values’ lie beyond the scope of economic inquiry. Yet, a UK-based specialist in regional economic development, Professor David Charles, recently told a seminar at RMIT University in Melbourne6 that the continuing enthusiasm in the UK and in Australia for the role that the ‘creative industries’ can play in revitalizing sagging economies means that investments in the arts are being made according to economic concepts — such as ‘clustering’ — that are simply not relevant to the actual practice of artists. US-based regional development economist Ann Markusen echoed the findings of McCarthy et al (op. cit.), saying that we need new language for understanding the arts sector in its own terms, based on more empathetic studies of how arts practitioners operate. She reported that an unpublished survey of 22,000 practicing artists in the US would reveal that most of them work alone and that there is a high degree of mobility between professional practice, teaching, and involvement in community projects and the not-for-profit sector.

The study on which this paper is based has also demonstrated that there are many highly skilled artists working within local communities across Victoria who struggle to sustain community art practices in a policy and funding environment that is largely insensitive to the ways in which they work. It also suggests that there has been far too much emphasis on short-term projects funded by government agencies at the expense both of longer-term programs and of a diversity of events and activities that may be spontaneous or ‘organic’ in character. While we can accept the recommendation to revert to the term ‘community arts’ rather than persist with the alternative of ‘community cultural development’, our study suggests that it is important to consider a host of community ‘celebrations’ alongside art projects and programs.

Problems with Studies on the Social outcomes of the Arts

As mentioned, recent reviews of the literature on the social benefits of the arts all appear to reach the same conclusion: that the studies to date have been unconvincing in their scope and methodological rigour. Much of the ‘evidence’ of positive social outcomes has been anecdotal and/or based on very limited surveys or self-referential assessments by project organizers. Most of the studies have focused on a small number of short-term projects. The work of UK-based arts advocate Francois Matarasso remains very influential in Australia even though Matarasso has himself said that his work should only be seen as the beginning of the research needed to demonstrate the social benefits of the arts (Matarasso 2003).7 The most extensive and influential Australian study was conducted by Deidre Williams in 1996 and while it found some evidence of beneficial social outcomes it did little to explain how and why these benefits might accrue.

6 The seminar, organized by the Lab-3000 design research centre, was held at RMIT in July 2006.
7 Matarasso made this point in his response to a sharp critique of his research methodology written by Paola Merli (2003).
In another paper based on the outcomes of the study on which this paper is also based, Scanlon, Mulligan and Welch (2006) have argued that Australian studies on the links between community arts and community wellbeing have reached an impasse. They identify three reasons for this impasse:

1. the impossibility of finding linear, causal relationships between community projects and activities and specific social outcomes, as demonstrated by a fruitless search for narrowly framed ‘indicators’ for effective practice;
2. the imposition of terms from other fields, especially economics, that have confused the picture rather than induced clarity; for example, the use of the popular term ‘social capital’ that has been used without success now for around 10 years; and
3. a resort to one-dimensional conceptions of what constitutes community life at a time when all social life — from the local to the global — is being constantly reconstituted by far-reaching ‘global’ changes.

The paper by Scanlon, Mulligan and Welch (ibid) suggested that the arts are good for helping individuals and groups of people develop narratives of meaning that can give them a stronger sense of agency in negotiating the terms of their engagements with other people and groups in the context of global change. It argued that an investment in community arts can have a very wide range of beneficial, yet unpredictable, outcomes in overcoming social isolation and alienation. This paper will examine the outcomes of the study in regard to community art and community celebration practices across four diverse Victorian communities in order to better understand when and how it might be appropriate to turn to the arts (or artistic processes) to create more inclusive and more resilient local communities. It will also consider what it might take to nurture good practice in the field of community art and celebrations.

The Study

In part this study was designed to test the value of a major investment in community art activities by Victoria’s major health promotion agency, VicHealth (see VicHealth 2002, 2006). However, because we started with the observation (discussed above) that earlier studies on the social impacts of the arts had been too narrowly focused and methodologically weak, we broadened the focus beyond specific funded projects and used research methods that ranged from quantitative surveys to the collection of relevant stories and the recording of lengthy ‘strategic conversations’. We started with the assumption that local communities remain an important layer of social integration in the context of globalization (see James 2006). However, instead of imposing our own conception of how the four communities included in the study might be defined we allowed interviewees to define their own sense of community. We conducted one random survey (with 400 respondents) that explored various aspects of the lived experience of community life and we used a photo-narrative technique to explore this topic in more depth with a smaller number of residents in each of the study communities. As well as conducting the random survey on experiences of community life we conducted another more targeted survey of people attending community events (n=400) to explore their motivations for participating in such events.

The study took place over a period of three years and it examined the experiences of four local communities that ranged from inner-urban to rural and regional:

1. the inner-urban, bayside Melbourne suburb of St Kilda, which has a ‘colourful’ history and attracts large numbers of visitors, especially on weekends;
2. the outer-urban Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows, which has long had the unwarranted reputation for being one of the worst places to live in the city and is now at the centre of new urban developments;
3. the popular, rural Central Highlands town of Daylesford, which attracts large numbers of visitors and tourists and is renowned for hosting a diverse array of significant cultural events; and
4. the Hamilton region in the western district of Victoria, which once prided itself as being the ‘wool capital of the world’ until declining world prices for wool left the region vulnerable and falling behind other regional centres in this part of the state.

In entering each of these four diverse communities we consulted widely with local people about the range of community art and celebration projects that we might want to examine in detail. Across the four research sites, 13 major projects and activities were examined through a combination of lengthy conversations with project initiators and/or co-ordinators and ‘response interviews’ with people less centrally involved in the projects and events. We also collected 14 stories, selected from a much longer list of nominations, which seemed to capture diverse forms of creative practice across the four research sites.

Not surprisingly, the selected projects reflected sharp differences in the local social contexts across the four communities, and we aimed to select projects that seemed to best represent their local contexts. In St Kilda, for example, many residents and the Port...
Phillip City Council are concerned that ‘gentrification’ will radically change the character of the area and reduce the social diversity that has long been seen as a hallmark of this local community. It was probably this concern at the potential loss of local history and identity that prompted the Council to support a very ambitious Margins, Memories and Markers project that collected more than 200 local stories and turned six of them into permanent art installations across the municipality. St Kilda is home for many people with ‘special needs’ (related to factors such as health, disability, drug dependence, etc) who may well be displaced by the impacts of gentrification. A range of community art projects — many of them funded by Port Phillip City Council — have tried to enhance the social integration of such ‘disadvantaged’ residents. Several of these projects have won statewide awards and some have been showcased in major arts festivals such as the Melbourne International Arts Festival and the Melbourne Writers Festival. At the same time, St Kilda has long been a centre for Melbourne’s ‘sex industry’ and Port Phillip City Council has also sponsored Sex and Drugs Historical Tours, which use street theatre to give residents an insight into an industry with a lengthy history in the area.

The contemporary community at Broadmeadows began with the hasty construction of ‘broad-acre’ public housing estates in the 1950s and 60s and the early residents had the sense of being dumped into empty paddocks on the edge of the city. Some of the community art projects initiated by the Hume City Council have sought to convince local residents that the area has much greater natural beauty and a much richer local history than they had ever imagined and such projects are commonly enhanced by practitioners of ‘traditional’ arts and crafts brought to Broadmeadows from many parts of the world. One of the most interesting ‘multicultural’ events in the Broadmeadows area is an annual planting festival that combines a mass planting of native plants in degraded areas, the sharing of food cooked by people from a range of the local ‘ethnic’ organizations and a sharing of ‘traditional’ dance performances from around the world. The sharing of food has become an important part of many multicultural community events in the Broadmeadows area. However, multiculturalism can lose its meaning unless it is enriched by ‘cultural maintenance’ activities. The large Muslim community in the area has developed a unique celebration of Eid (at the end of the month of Ramadan) that is also open to non-Muslim residents. Another interesting project grew out of the Broadmeadows community in response to an increase in incidents of racism following the events of September 11, 2001: the Anti-Racism Action Band (A.R.A.B.). This project has involved over 100 young performers, of various backgrounds, working with artforms ranging from Derbakki (Arabic) drumming and belly dancing to hip hop, beat box and stand-up comedy. By March 2006, A.R.A.B. had performed over 80 times to a total audience of more than 20,000 people.

As already mentioned, Daylesford has a surprisingly rich and diverse cultural calendar for a small rural town. For example, annual festivals held in Daylesford and neighbouring Hepburn Springs include one that celebrates a ‘Swiss-Italian’ heritage dating back to early settlers that arrived during the Gold Rush in the 1850s, the second largest celebration of gay and lesbian pride in Australia, and a very relaxed Words in Winter Festival that celebrates all forms of writing and encourages wider participation in the practice. The Swiss-Italian Festa is a good example of using a neglected story from the past to create a unique local identity that stimulates the interest of locals and visitors alike, but it also poses questions about whether or not other neglected stories can also be celebrated to enhance more multiple forms of identity and belonging. Just over one hour’s drive from Melbourne, Daylesford has attracted many arts practitioners as residents and many of them choose to engage in community activities. They have included skilled community arts practitioners such as the playwright Rebecca Lister and the popular community choir leader Anni Coyne. After 10 years of innovative work in community theatre in the district, however, Lister has recently left the community and it remains to be seen if her work will leave a lasting legacy. Daylesford probably has a reasonable chance of replacing the void left by Lister’s departure with other forms of creative endeavour; however, the loss of skilled people is a big challenge for small communities.

According to Olive McVicker — a former Mayor of Hamilton and a prominent community activist — the region experienced a 10-year ‘golden era’ in community arts when the local government authorities employed Alan Macgregor, an experienced community arts practitioner, as Community Arts Officer. The energetic Macgregor initiated a host of projects targeted at particular sectors of the Hamilton community but his biggest project was launching an annual Hamilton Festival that morphed into a bigger Southern Grampians Festival following the Council amalgamations in 1996. The biggest festival was held in 1998 and it featured a range of activities in small towns across the region. However, Macgregor left the district after the success of 1998 for a position in another area, and the festivals — and other projects he had started — collapsed. At the same time, several of the small towns in the region have initiated their own festivals or community celebrations, and we were also able to examine how a routine proposal
for a fund-raising event for the local hospital was turned into a ‘magical’ Top of the Town Ball that captured the community’s imagination to the extent that it raised a staggering $269,000 for the hospital. This initiative won two significant national fundraising awards in 2004.

**Knowing when and how to use the Arts to Enhance Community Wellbeing**

By recording conversations with practitioners involved in the projects discussed above, we were able to gain insights about the circumstances in which community art projects and community celebrations might be able to have significant social impacts. Practitioners were able to provide examples of people who were able to break out of social isolation by engaging in art projects and/or inspiring community events that gave their lives a new sense of meaning. They gave examples of social tensions that could be addressed in ways that might foster dialogue rather than conflict and of projects and events creating stronger local networks. However, the benefits described are often diffuse, long-term and very hard to measure. People can take different meanings from their participation in, or engagement with, the arts and this makes the impacts of the arts unpredictable at both an individual and group level. People use the arts to express a wide range of feelings and emotions—sometimes bleak and angry—and such feelings may need to be ‘processed’ over time and in a variety of ways. Those who want predictable outcomes or clear behaviour modification from an investment in community art initiatives may be sadly disappointed or they may seek to compromise the ‘authenticity’ of the artistic processes.

As mentioned earlier, a search for direct causal linkages between activities and outcomes in this field is doomed to failure. The links are much more indirect and complex. However, we can say that the ‘weaknesses’ associated with using artistic processes for positive social outcomes are, paradoxically, related to the very strengths of the arts in this regard. Rather than setting out a matrix of segregated instrumental and intrinsic social benefits of the arts as McCarthy et al did (2004), we suggest it is better to develop an understanding of the circumstances in which it is appropriate to turn to the arts for a mix of complex and interlocking benefits and outcomes. This approach leads to the conclusion that there are certainly many circumstances, in a rapidly changing world, in which it is appropriate to turn to the arts and there may be other circumstances in which it is appropriate to include an arts component in a broader project or program. However, it also helps us to understand when a turn to the arts might lead to an instrumental misuse of artistic processes.

On the basis of the practices we examined, we can conclude that a turn to the arts may not be appropriate if the desired outcomes are:

- predictable and easily measured in the short-term;
- aimed at giving people skills that will significantly enhance their prospects for paid employment;
- broad and relatively uniform in their impacts on a wide range of people; or
- related to the modification of particular forms of ‘anti-social’ behaviour.

Community arts practitioners can, and do, make claims regarding outcomes that can enhance employment prospects for people by saying that they can gain self-confidence and cognitive and communication skills that can help them get jobs. However, there are many successful programs that can help people more directly to get into paid employment and this is not a strength of participation in the arts (although an arts component, properly understood, might be included in broader job preparation programs).

However, ‘authentic’ artistic practices can have wide-ranging and enduring social benefits because:

- they can help individuals and groups of people interpret their lived experiences to create new ‘narratives of meaning’ in a changing world;
- they can be locally relevant while, at the same time, addressing broader social concerns and developments;
- they can help people develop a stronger sense of purpose and agency so that they can better negotiate the level and forms of their engagement with other people and groups (overcoming social isolation to the extent that the person concerned might desire);
- they can lift the mood of a group of people or a whole community;
- they can provide cathartic experiences for people by sharing difficulties or painful experiences that might otherwise increase social isolation for some;
- they can help people and groups make connections with other people and groups based on a sharing of common interests or the pursuit of curiosity (a habit that is probably under siege in an increasingly fearful world);
- they can make the invisible more visible and give voice to those who are rarely heard; leading to more open discourses on how to reduce social exclusions;
- they can address unresolved social tensions in relatively non-threatening ways to foster dialogue rather than conflict;
• they can help culturally diverse communities to negotiate cultural differences and explore common ground;
• they can help make the argument that social diversity has benefits for communities as a whole at a time when that diversity is being threatened by processes such as gentrification;
• they can help to locate and/or retain stories from the past that can give a local community a deeper sense of belonging;
• they can help to make people more open-minded and less fearful of unknown ‘others’.

Supporting Good Practice

Supporting good practice in the community arts field involves not only creating a sustainable environment for practitioners and projects, but also, as mentioned earlier, creating a deeper understanding of the nature of the work so as not to constrain its potential, for example through limiting language or funding structures. It became clear through this study that there is a remarkably broad range — in background and motivation — of practitioners working under the umbrella of community arts/community cultural development. Trying to develop a supportive environment or more stable career paths for practitioners is therefore complex. In terms of the projects themselves, further thought needs to be given to the funding and organizational structures that impact on arts-based projects, in terms of how they may constrain or support projects and their outcomes in the short and the longer term.

A broad range of practitioners facilitated the projects chosen for this study. Some of the projects were initiated by artists who wanted to extend their practice through a more intense engagement in social life; some by people with a strong background in a particular artform and a commitment to the communities in which they live; some were initiated by community development practitioners or local government officers who have developed good skills in working with artists and artistic processes; and some were initiated by well-connected community activists.

Sometimes projects were structured to use a cooperative approach; indeed, many would have been impossible without more than one person involved. Project organizers who came from a background in community development or social policy said that they had learnt to appreciate artistic processes more fully and could see when particular artforms might be appropriate, but that they would always seek to engage skilled artists. Sometimes large or well-funded projects, such as the Margins, Memories and Markers project sponsored by Port Phillip City Council, can have a division of labor among the organizers – some with artistic skills and some with organizational or community work skills. However, many projects must be organized by a practitioner working alone.

No matter what brings practitioners to the work, it was clear from our conversations that practitioners need to possess a sophisticated set of skills in order to facilitate successful projects. These skills include: listening to people and communicating ideas; getting people to work well together; having a range of contacts within the community and knowing how things work locally; organizing events, exhibitions, and/or performances; helping participants to process the experience of public exhibitions and/or performances; giving participants realistic advice about how they might further pursue their interests in any particular artforms; giving participants advice on how to sustain connections with other people and groups within the community. Further, practitioners need to be alert to when people in a group may be struggling with unspoken concerns or feelings, and be able to do something to address such ‘tensions’, or be able to identify when it is more appropriate to refer people to relevant professionals or support services.

As discussed earlier, it is important to have a broad conception of what constitutes community arts. We have included discussion of celebrations that may be run entirely by volunteers. In complex and changing local communities, it may be more important to support a range of diverse, smaller activities than a smaller number of large and expensive projects. However, we encountered some extraordinary and highly skilled practitioners who should be supported in their desire to work sustainably between community projects and their own individual practices. Our interviews would suggest that a capacity to move across such a spectrum of practices probably helps the artists to hone their skills and refresh their ideas (even if this ‘mobility’ is often a matter of necessity rather than choice). At the same time, community development workers who have developed a good capacity to work with artists and artistic processes may get few opportunities to use these skills for there are few positions for people specializing in this line of work.

For all practitioners of community arts career paths are limited. Further, many practitioners are working on a project-by-project basis and have limited access to superannuation or leave benefits, and limited job security. While many projects are lent greater substance and security by a relationship with an agency, such as an area of local council or a social services agency, if that agency shifts focus away from the arts/project practitioners may find it difficult to continue using these skills (and in some cases, a project may therefore have to cease).
In terms of supporting a career path, at one level we reach the conclusion that it is better to invest in skilled people, in order to give them stronger career paths, rather than in projects or organizations who must employ good practitioners. In this field, effective capacity building takes place at the level of individual practitioners who can use that capacity in a range of contexts and projects rather than at the level of organizations who simply auspice the projects. At present, organizations and project committees get the credit for success as much as the individuals who are primarily responsible and it can be difficult for individual practitioners to build a ‘portable’ reputation for their achievements. Of course, the focus on individual practitioners needs to be balanced against a need to retain a capacity for this field of work in a local community even if skilled individual practitioners move on or become unavailable for this kind of work. Organizations also need to learn from their experiences and retain their ability to employ the right people to design and carry through effective projects. And, of course, opportunities need to be created for new practitioners with no track record in the field. Ideally, emerging practitioners could be mentored by experienced practitioners who have honed their skills across a number of projects or programs, but current funding arrangements rarely allow that to happen.

Of course, all is not lost when an experienced practitioner moves from one local community to another because the new community might benefit from her/his experience. The mobility of practitioners can help to ‘cross-fertilise’ good practices. However, it is not always easy for practitioners to carry their reputation from one local community to another or even to construct a CV that can be easily assessed. There is no sector-wide agreement about what really constitutes good practice in combining good quality art and good quality community development processes. There are no agreed criteria against which practitioners can assess their own performances and communicate their achievements. It may be possible for experienced practitioners to develop an ‘inventory’ of required skills — provided that they are not defined too narrowly or instrumentally — and there may be more room for peer-assessment of good practice.

There are intangibles involved in becoming a ‘good’ practitioner in this field and many of the skills can only be learnt in practice. How do you ‘train’ a person to become a good artist and/or a socially minded person? The people we spoke to have come to this work in a number of ways. Most of the successful practitioners had accumulated the relevant skills on the job over a number of years. Some had completed tertiary courses that were partially relevant for this line of work but most said that any course needed to be based on a better understanding of contemporary practice in the field. Most of the practitioners said that the skills they had accumulated were rarely acknowledged and that it is extremely difficult to create a sustainable career path in community arts in Australia.

Individuals can develop a high local profile for the work they do and this can lead to further projects and opportunities. However, short-term project funding cannot create income security for practitioners who must move from one project to another. Furthermore, a competitive funding environment makes it very hard for new practitioners to break into the field and forge a sustainable career path. Anni Coyne, in Daylesford, spoke very highly of the statewide network of people running community choirs that has been driven by Faye White. Artists working alongside each other in the Bowling Club studios at the Veg Out Community Gardens at St Kilda can share ideas and experiences. However, many of the practitioners we interviewed feel very isolated in their work and, despite the growth of the field, many still feel that the work is not properly understood or valued. While surveys show that the Multicultural Planting Festival in Broadmeadows is much loved by the people who participate, some senior people in Hume City Council have said that the ‘outcomes’ are probably not worth the cost.

While funding and creative projects are necessary bedfellows, theirs is not always an easy relationship. Funding timelines or requirements can place restrictions on a creative process that by nature may need to remain flexible. For example, perhaps there is too much emphasis on funding individual, short-term projects with tightly defined aims and outcomes. This environment makes it difficult for projects to evolve and interact with each other and it sets a narrow and truncated framework for design, creative development and evaluation.

In terms of a final artistic product, expectations may be placed on community-based art projects to deliver a ‘good’ art outcome, but they have not had the benefit of funding structures given to non-community art, such as a creative development period. The pre-project creative development phase may be the most important of all for ensuring social relevance, meaningful participation and artistic authenticity, yet it is rarely allowed for in funding agreements. Post-project funding, which would allow for thorough evaluation of a project and how its outcomes unfold through time, is also rarely accommodated in budgets or funding structures. While recognizing the value of effective evaluation, most of the practitioners we interviewed said that current requirements tend to make the process more token and frustrating than truly valuable. It may be more important to evaluate the work of both practitioners and
organizations over a number of projects and to include peer assessments related to sector-wide and sector-generated criteria for success. However, such criteria for success need to be based on a deep understanding of how the field operates and what the arts can and cannot achieve in terms of social outcomes.

**References**


**About the Authors**

**Dr Martin Mulligan**

Recent research: sense of place and community well-being in particular Victorian communities; community development strategies in Papua New Guinea; the recovery of local communities in post-tsunami Sri Lanka; strategies for nature conservation in the post-colonial era; rethinking attitudes to water in Australia and internationally; social history of ecological thought and action. His books include Ecological Pioneers (2001 with Stuart Hill) and Decolonizing Nature (2003 with William Adams)

**Ms Pia Smith**

Pia Smith joined the Globalism Institute in 2005 to provide research support on the Community Sustainability collaborative project, with a particular focus on the 'Wellbeing of Communities' project.
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