



Meet, Meld, Merge II: Arts Bringing Communities Together

***Report on a one day public forum exploring the way arts can assist
in recovery from trauma, in particular bushfires***

Tuesday May 26, 2009. Yea Golf Club, Yea

Tuesday 26th of May saw the gathering of a diverse range of people at the Meet, Meld, Merge II Forum held at the Yea Golf Club. The forum, conducted by Berry Street and the Cultural Development Network, brought together over seventy people to explore the ways and reasons behind utilising the arts as a tool to recover from the fires and as a means of bringing communities and people back together again.

The day began with a hands-on clay activity, conducted by the Yea Pottery Studio, who recently worked on the Toil Art project in Yea; Toil Art was a direct result of the first Meet, Meld, Merge forum held in Yea in 2006. Participants present on Wednesday contributed to the creation of a clay mural that represents a small green plant unfurling on top of a burnt out mountain range.

Following the art workshop Lisa Rudd of Berry Street welcomed all those present and acknowledged the traditional custodians of the land. People were present from across the state with representative in attendance from Arts Victoria, Regional Arts Victoria, Yering Station Art Gallery, Shire of Yarra Ranges, Royal Children's Hospital, City of Bendigo, Three Stories Artspace, Yarra Valley Arts Council, Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material, Murrindindi Shire Council, Berry Street, KANDO, staff and students from Yea High School, City of Yarra, Kinglake Ranges Visual & Performing Arts Alliance, Yea Pottery Studio, Yea Historical Society and Dandenong Ranges Music Council. There were artists present from across the state, with a strong contingent of local artists; other artists attended to support and learn from those who had been directly affected by the Black Saturday Fires.

Lisa Rudd reminded all those present that there were those in attendance who were still dealing with the loss of family, friends, neighbours, pets, homes, communities, environments, art, history and so much more. Lisa highlighted that the days gathering aimed to bring people together to Meet, Meld and Merge for the benefit of themselves, their families and their communities.

Kim Dunphy of the Cultural Development Network, who performed the role of MC for the day, spoke of innovative arts projects that other communities from around Australia had undertaken in response to past bushfires.

Anne Riggs, PhD researcher and artist gave an extremely informative insight into the ways in which the arts can be utilised to assist those dealing with trauma. Anne spoke



of her research regarding trauma, loss and grief; focusing on how artists and the arts can contribute to wellbeing following trauma.

Ali Griffin, Creative Director of Healesville's Three Stories Artspace and curator of *Resurrected – Objects, Memories and Stories*; who lost her family home during the Black Saturday Fires spoke honestly and opening about her ordeals moving some to tears and opening minds to the harsh realities of the fires.

Ali gave those present an understanding behind her personal needs to find something positive amongst the devastation; Ali explained that when she and her husband Billy were sifting through the ashes of their home they came across the melted forms of treasured family memories and heirlooms. These found items had taken on a new form due to the fires but Ali and her husband were so taken by their possessions' new compositions that they decided to make them the starting point as they took steps to recover from their ordeals. This became the basis of Ali's exhibition *Resurrected*; an exhibition by and for people affected by the Black Saturday Bushfires.

Many small group discussions took place during the day as people talked of ways they could utilise the arts, their skills, their resources and energies to assist individuals and communities as they faced the process of recovery.

Bev McAlister of the Dandenong Ranges Music Council spoke of the ways in which communities have utilised music as a recovery tool in response to past bushfires. Bev highlighted the skills and resources her organisation has to offer to current bushfire affected communities and the benefits to be gained from utilising music to express, transform and heal.

Sue Strano, from Regional Arts Victoria, manages Creative Communities, the Regional Arts Development Officers Network and Regional Arts Fund. Sue spoke about the innovative arts project *Beyond the Smoke*, a book and festival that the Grampians region utilised to recognise the courage, tenacity and resilience shown by the people of their communities following the devastating fires of 2006.

Daryl Taylor, recently elected to a role on the Kinglake Ranges Representative Group, to work with the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, spoke with much insight into the situations that the residents of Kinglake are currently facing. The information Daryl presented enabled those in attendance to realise the many and varied issues confronting communities and individuals effected by the fires as they take steps to rebuild. Daryl, along with others, now refers to himself as a Fire Storm Refugee.

Another open and honest presentation was that of Julia Peddie, artist and arts therapist from Narbethong, who is currently working closely with the communities from her area. Julia is part of a Marysville and Triangle community group who are establishing art programs for young people and art therapy workshops for adults in the wake of the bushfires. Julia made those present realise that the "casserole period" of recovery had come and gone and that her communities and neighbours were facing the next chapter in the arduous recovery process.

After a massive sharing of information and insight everyone enjoyed a feast featuring local produce; Upper Goulburn Food Wine and Culture Group, Yea Cheese and Marmalades donated delicious goods. Amanda Hard, Lana McLean, Joan Canning and Yea High School Students Leigh Redding and Luke Hannah all assisted with the catering for the day. Many positive comments were heard about the quality and range of fantastic food products from the area.

After enjoying the generous catering, good company and picturesque surroundings of the Yea valley it may have proved challenging to return to the proceedings of the day but Kim Dunphy revitalised and refocused everyone with an invigorating movement session that brought everyone back together for the afternoon program.

Lisa Rudd of Berry Street spoke about thinking outside the box when seeking out potential funding sources and partners for community art projects especially in the wake of the fires. To highlight her point Lisa presented the very first public viewing of the recently made documentary about community art project "Toil Art". The documentary received extremely positive feedback and requests for viewings in other communities. Rick Connor, independent film maker and an employee of Berry Street received much praise for his film making talents.

The afternoon session focused on funding bodies, support agencies and resources. Mandy Grinblat, Senior Arts Officer with Arts Victoria and Sue Strano from Regional Arts Victoria spoke about funding and support that their organisations were currently offering. Sue spoke about an online project "Storyboard" created in response to the bushfires; the site provides a creative space to share photos, videos, artworks and stories with others who have been affected by this devastating event. Storyboard is an ongoing project and is also a safe place for people to archive precious images and record local histories. The Regional Arts Victoria website provides more information regarding this exciting project.

Murrindindi Shire Councilor, Sally Abbot Smith, spoke with enthusiasm about the important role that the arts can play as a fire recovery tool. Sally's speech strongly and positively affirmed the important roles that those present at the forum could play as we assisted our communities to rebuild. Sally finished the guest presenters section of the forum on an inspiring note.

People from each table at Meet, Meld, Merge II then reported back on the ideas that the event had generated. Ideas and goals included: the creation of memorial sculptures where people could reflect, express remorse and remember what people had been through. Film making and story telling for students to use as a medium to explore and express what young people experienced as a result of the fires. The establishment of an art trail across the Shire of Murrindindi that could include artist's studios, galleries and public art. Mapping and scoping of what is taking place across the Shire to collate a better understanding of what is occurring in response and recovery to the fires.

Offers of assistance came from artists, services, arts-worker and community groups not effected directly by the fires to share their energy, skills, support and resources with those who were dealing with the stress and increased work loads.

There was also talk of the creation of a web site that could act as community information resource so that there was a central point that could collate all the arts activities that were taking place across Victoria in response to the fires. A web site where people could blog and capture stories, information could be dispersed, ideas shared and a calendar of events could be displayed. The site could contain requests from individuals and communities in relation to their art needs; along with offers of donations, assistance, funding and resources from outside fire effected communities.

The responses from those in attendance at the forum was strongly focused on individuals, services and communities all supporting each other. Those present gained

a real insight into the pressure, trauma and exhaustion that local arts workers, volunteers, artists and services are experiencing. A comment from a participant was "It's alright for those of us not affected by the fires to come in with new ideas and energy - we now realise how exhausted and drained local people are. We know we have to take things a little slower and with much more consideration for what people have been through".

Some of the comments on the evaluation form included: all very interesting; moving rallying melding; special thanks to caterers and volunteers who provided delicious and beautifully presented food; a great opportunity to exchange, share, open doors and find ways forward. They also stated: a great variety- well balanced thanks for a terrific day- very inspiring; great networking; good to share resources and contacts; good timing- all vibrant and good communicators; so many people to talk to!

When asked about suggestions for future events the comments stated: just more and a follow up in a year's time. So the feed back from Meet, Meld, Merge II was extremely positive and people are looking to attend similar events in the future

Thanks is extended to Berry Street, the Cultural Development Network, Regional Arts Victoria, guest presenters, participants and all those who contributed towards an event that was informative, moving, realistic, positive, engaging and inspiring.

To find out more about what took place at the forum or to become involved in activities and events that may be taking place in the future then please contact Lisa Rudd, Community Art Worker, Berry Street, Yea on 0428 887 009 lrudd@berrystreet.org.au or Cindy Ferguson, Youth and Community Arts Worker, Berry Street Alexandra on 0419 517 045 cferguson@berrystreet.org.au

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