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Kathy Keele addresses ReGenerating Communities Conference

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Kathy Keele, the CEO of the Australia Council for the Arts, addressed a two day national conference gathered in Melbourne to explore methods by which the arts can build civic engagement. Kathy's opening address to the conference, ReGenerating Community, 2-4 September 2009, focused on how we recognise excellence in community art making.

"Excellence in Civic Engagement"

Thank you Martin for that introduction. And I'd also like to acknowledge that we are here today on the ancestral lands of the Kulin nation and I pay my respects to the elders, past and present. They of course have some mighty lessons for all of us in the centrality of the arts to Aboriginal identity and society.

Good morning to you all. Now, take a listen to these words ...

"We support cultural and arts programs and services that involve direct community participation. The programs should impact a variety of citizens by helping to provide them with a greater sense of self, family, community and place."

These words are not from the Australia Council's website, but on the site of the Regional Arts Council of the Portland Oregon area. It reflects the tradition I grew up with, and makes me proud to say that I was a Portland girl.

Early in my life – living in a big family with little money but a rich imaginative culture – I realised that arts and culture were an essential part of every day life; and vital to our being as individuals and communities. Our civic life and events in Portland were always underpinned by citizens exploring our past, present and future, through participating in a vibrant artistic life.

I remembered this quality when I was looking through some of the works of our distinguished guest speaker, Anmol Vellani ... and also while reflecting on why, three years ago, the Australia Council invested \$780,000 in the Generations project.

Some may ask why the Australia Council – the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory agency – should be interested in projects at a local government level.

Let me answer, first, by acknowledging how much local governments across the country are significant contributors to our arts and cultural infrastructure. Just think of our local libraries, galleries, performing arts venues ...and the contribution they make to supporting local arts and employment. Of all spheres of government, it is local government which knows best the nature of their local communities. They are at the coal face of developing the best artistic expression of that community ...and how best to build its participation.

In pursuing these same goals, the Australia Council has a long history of working with local governments. Since the early 70's, we were funding cultural development officer positions in councils, across the country on an average of 15-20 a year. Twenty years ago, we took the different approach of funding policy and project development through the Australian Local Government Association and other federal agencies. Both approaches brought varying successes....but let me say, it's hard nowadays to find a local government which doesn't at least talk about the need to develop local arts and culture.

It was no surprise that in 2006 the scoping study for the Australia Council's new Community Partnership section identified working with local governments as a key priority ...if we were to achieve our aim of building culturally vibrant communities.

This section is now highly attuned to the opportunities of working partnerships with State/territory and local governments. This truly is “co-operative federalism”. This is all three spheres of government pooling our limited resources. Together, we are supporting excellence in the arts, strengthening the culturally vibrancy of communities, and introducing more people to the “intrinsic” benefits of being involved in arts and cultural activities.

Just one example of this approach is the ADVICE program, where in partnerships with state and local governments, the Australia Council is developing a deeper knowledge of audience ticket buying behaviour across the country. This will lead to a better management of box office but also give us the data for critical new marketing strategies to build new audiences.

And crucial here are local governments: they are the owners and managers of many of the performing arts venues that are part of the ADVICE program.

But the central reason the Australia Council works with local government – and local communities – is that this is the pathway to deliver the two reasons why we exist: to build the appreciation of the arts ...and to support the making of excellent art.

Pretty often I get challenged about what excellent community art is. We know what is in dance, theatre, literature, the visual arts and music. We have the accomplished individual practitioners, the critics and a whole pantheon of art traditions to tell us what excellent is. But what is excellence when it comes not from the talented hand of an individual, but from a community?

I say it isn't much different. Community arts – in engaging with communities and expressing their issues and their vision – strive for the same rigour of storytelling, the same conceptual and intellectual discipline in handling ideas, the same beauty and human empathy. These are what is best about all arts. The difference for community arts is that the first arbiters of that excellence are not artists, their peers and their critics, but the community members themselves, the participants and their neighbours. Indeed, community artists go further than many in seeking to engage with a community, to get people on their feet and participating in the arts experience. And that, I say, is a good role model for any artist: it's a further yardstick of excellence.

Because there is something magical that happens ...when communities rise to explain the nature of what they are, when together they make something happen, when they use arts tools to tell their story and define a vision of what they want to be. The artist who works with such a community is empowered by this magic to create an evocative, truly connecting arts experience. This participation defines this sort of art making process but it also enriches the final arts outcome. In the best of this work, this dual excellence reminds all of us that the arts must reach out anew to touch people, that they must be accessible across all society and not isolated in iconic arts fortresses. And through community arts, we can forge new Australian narratives about ourselves and explore new ideas – and new relations – around individuals and communities.

I hope this goes some way to explain why the Australia Council for the Arts is committed to the sort of work which this morning brings us all together.

This particular project, Generations, was the very first strategic initiative for Council's new Community Partnerships section, back in 2006. We decided to be the major funder and partner with the Cultural Development Network. We committed for three years, investing \$780,000 across five local council areas in Victoria, NSW and Queensland. Three spheres of government, working with communities, combined to explore the links between engagement in community based arts activities and active civic engagement.

At this point, I want to thank and honour my colleagues from Arts Queensland, NSW and Victoria and the five councils for their contribution to Generations, and acknowledge the expert project management by CDN. We should all be proud of what this conference reveals and the research which it heralds.

The independent evaluation of this project will help the Australia Council define the conceptual and project design of future initiatives. But already, Generations has revealed innovative ways to engage local governments and communities, in the ongoing process of using arts and cultural development as tools to explore complex community issues.

I don't want to steal the thunder of what the five councils will say later in the conference. But it's worth noting that the issues they identified, after consultations with their communities, are versions of the same complex issues now confronting most developed nations.

- How do we increase a sense of belonging and identity in a town with a dramatically ageing population?
- How do we engage marginalised (and culturally diverse) young people in the education system?
- How do we create a sense of identity and importance for a changing area where urban development is impinging on rural communities?
- How can we engage Aboriginal young people with families with a long history of marginalisation, in effective participation in our town?
- How can we create the space for debate about climate change and identity in a polarised community?

They're big local issues; they're global issues. How these projects have begun to answer them, the civic engagement outcomes of Generations so far, will be discussed tomorrow by the Global Futures Institute. But already there are some extraordinary results.

At the Australia Council, we're pleased to see how new people are being heard in public life, how the arts are engaging more people who were marginalised. We have learnt much already from Generations....and we must continue to learn from research drawing on similar initiatives from beyond our shores.

On that note, it is my privilege today to introduce our key note speaker, Anmol Vellani. Anmol is the Director of the India Foundation for the Arts, an independent philanthropic organisation. Before that, from 1986 to 1995, he worked in the New Delhi office of the Ford Foundation, responsible for grant making in the performing arts, folklore and classical learning.

Anmol has written on a range of subjects - including the arts and religion, corporate patronage, arts entrepreneurship, the role of foundations, intercultural dialogue, and cultural mapping. In an advisory capacity, he's also served as Co-Chair of the Conference of Asian Foundations and Organisations; on the Advisory Council of the Asia Society India Centre; and on the India Advisory Committee of The Resource Alliance.

He's designed courses on the arts and management. He studied philosophy at the Universities of Poona, Oxford and Cambridge, and taught at Bombay University in the 1970s. He's been active as a theatre director for the last 35 years.

In reading through some of Anmol's works, I was taken by these words:

"The arts, I have said, provide communities with a handle to examine and critique established values, beliefs and perceptions. It is the place from which authority and its prescribed meanings are often contested, and the limit point of a culture tested, stretched and reworked."

I think we in Australia can take something from this, in how we approach the chronic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, in how we can engage with the marginalised and the unheard ...and, importantly, in how we can use the arts as a means of Animating Democracy to get everyone participating in our national life.

Would you please welcome, to Australia and this conference ... Anmol Vellani.