

Expanding Cultures

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REGIONAL FOCUS: HOW CAN LOCAL ARTS PROJECTS CONTRIBUTE TO THE STRENGTH OF THE REGIONAL COMMUNITIES?

Lindy Allen

Director

Regional Arts Victoria

'Common Ground' project: finding new ways to tap into rhythms, skills and passions in regional communities

Abstract

The 'Common Ground' project saw Regional Arts Victoria work with festivals in Sale, Lakes Entrance, Shepparton and Horsham in 2006 and 2007. The project aimed to find new ways to tap into the rhythms, skills and passions that already exist in these communities, inspired by the Indonesian experience. Common Ground was developed in response to expressed needs for professional development around community engagement. We looked to Indonesia, to see what drives successful community celebrations there including long-established cultural traditions, involvement of local arts and craft practices and the creation of temporary performance venues. Project artists were Ian Pidd and Eko Prawoto from Yogyakarta, Java.

'Common Ground', a Regional Arts Victoria state-wide project, saw RAV work with four regional Victorian festivals in Sale, Lakes Entrance, Shepparton and Horsham from mid 2006 to early 2007. The project was developed in consultation with Victoria's regional festivals in response to an expressed need for professional development in the area of community engagement. We looked to our nearest neighbours, Indonesia, to see what drives successful community celebrations. Successful events build on long-established cultural traditions, involve local arts and craft practices and often create temporary performance venues.

The aim of 'Common Ground' was to challenge assumptions that exist about what local people feel excited about by finding new ways to tap into the rhythms, skills and passions that already exist in these communities, using the Indonesian experience as an example. Ian Pidd, a freelance director of theatre and events, was the Artistic Director of 'Common Ground'. Eko Prawoto has taught architecture in Yogyakarta, Java for about twenty years and has much experience working in collaboration with other artists and with members of the community – Eko visited Victoria four times during the course of this project.

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Both Ian Pidd and Eko Prawoto were chosen specifically to work on this project because each has a strong track record in projects that have combined solid community engagement principles, skills development for participants and high artistic values.

Lakes Entrance, a fishing town of 5,000 on the eastern seaboard of Australia, has the second largest Indigenous population of any community in Victoria. While many local Indigenous artists have made waves in Australia and overseas, at home, they have little visibility. What mostly hits the local headlines is the bad news alcohol-infused and sometimes brutal inter-racial brawling.

‘Common Ground’, a cross-cultural event held over the Australia Day weekend in 2007, helped turn the tide. It saw genuine collaboration between white and black and a commitment from both groups to make it an annual event that will put Lakes Entrance on the map for the right reasons. Its potential to become a true celebration of identity beyond the rhetoric of reconciliation is very real and very exciting.

In preparing this paper, I did a quick survey of the available marketing about Lakes Entrance from sites such as Tourism Victoria, East Gippsland Shire Council, East Gippsland Visitor Information and various accommodation businesses.

I gleaned that Lakes Entrance:

- has a population of about 6,000
- is 319 kilometres east of Melbourne
- is adjacent to the largest inland network of waterways in Australia
- is home to the famous Ninety Mile Beach
- features many water-based local activities
- is the major tourism centre for East Gippsland
- is home to a large commercial fishing fleet
- has a wide range of accommodation, restaurants and retail services to meet peak tourism season demands
- has spectacular ocean and lake views to be enjoyed on the western approach to town
- features quality education and sporting facilities including an indoor pool

Having lived in East Gippsland for about ten years, I was able to add a few more interesting facts to the list.

In relation to tourism:

- The town is heavily reliant on tourism as a mainstay of the economy
- In the summer months, tourism increases the population by 28%
- Adult visitors per day in the peak season (Nov - Feb) are 8,800

In relation to general socio-economic disadvantage:

- Lakes Entrance ranks in the lowest 25% in the state in terms of relative disadvantage
- The unemployment rate for the township is 11.3% compared with 5.5% for regional Victoria as a whole
- Average per capita income is \$16,000 – less than half the regional Victorian average
- 7% of the population has a tertiary qualification, about one third of the regional Victorian average

In relation to Indigenous disadvantage in particular:

- Lakes Entrance has the second largest regional Indigenous population in Victoria.
- The Indigenous unemployment rate is 3 times higher than the overall average, or about 30%
- Only 1 in 20 Indigenous people have access to a phone at home or own a vehicle
- 16% are homeless
- 11% are in special accommodation

Against this background, it is probably not surprising that local unrest between the haves and have nots is high, that racism is often referred to, that there is little opportunity for meaningful cultural interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents and that even within the Indigenous community there is significant friction between families.

‘Common Ground’ was a Regional Arts Victoria initiative that involved a managed residency by an international artist with four regional Victorian festivals. The project was developed in consultation with Victoria’s regional festival sector in response to an expressed need for professional development in the area of community engagement. This followed a forum held by RAV at the Castlemaine Festival in April 2005 that identified that regional Victorian festival directors collectively struggled with finding ways to more universally represent the aspirations of their local community and attract a more diverse local audience.

Coincidentally, the RAV Board was interested in exploring international examples of cultural practice in a regional context and, in 2004, I completed an Asialink Arts Management residency in Indonesia that enabled me to explore the nature of celebration in a more traditional cultural environment. Successful Indonesian festivals build on long-established cultural expressions, involve local arts and craft practices and often create temporary performance venues which include the sharing of food. With the support of RAV’s artistic advisor Donna Jackson, we formed a project outline, invited Indonesian architect and installation artist Eko Prawoto to give up the best part of twelve months to be our key artist, set about raising some funds and invited expressions of interest from Victorian regional festivals.

The four festivals we ultimately worked with were: Sale, Lakes Entrance, Shepparton and Horsham and in this presentation, I’d like to focus on the Lakes Entrance event.

At this point, it’s worth revisiting the key question for this session: how can local arts projects contribute to the strength of regional communities?

In developing her expression of interest to hitch her Lakes Entrance event to our state wide international artist in residence project, East Gippsland artist Catherine Larkins had this very question at the heart of her thinking as she always has had throughout her career.

It’s worth making the point that for a great many artists working in a community context, the art itself is weighted evenly with community outcomes. These outcomes include the expression of local cultural identity, participation, celebration and skills development for local artists and participants. There is often a tension between maintaining high artistic

values whilst supporting community outcomes: one of the reasons I want to focus on this particular project is that the artist has successfully balanced these two frequently conflicting demands.

Having lived in the region for most of her fifty-plus years, Catherine was keen to work with the Lakes Entrance community to create an event that genuinely celebrated local culture and place the Indigenous community and Indigenous artists very much at the centre of the stage. The initial concept was to work with the Lakes Entrance Business and Tourism Association extending their 50 year-old New Year's Eve fireworks event by building in community engagement and developing the artistic content. Eventually this hoped for partnership foundered and, in close consultation with all those involved, the decision was made to hold the event on the next available long weekend, the Australia Day long weekend. For obvious reasons, supporting this move represented a significant gesture of goodwill from the Indigenous community and was a strong indication of their own excitement and ownership around the project.

In developing the project, Catherine focussed on what she saw as local strengths. These included:

- a strong weaving tradition that had been handed down from generation to generation uninterrupted
- other skills, such as crafting the traditional bark canoe
- local totems that are unique to the Gunai/Kurnai clans of the regions
- a young community who were keen to learn from their elders and elders who wanted to pass on their skills
- a unique moment in time afforded by the appointment of a new CEO at Gippsland Lakes Community Health who was working to establish a number of opportunities for genuine engagement with the Indigenous elders – including establishing an Elders Advisory Group who would advise his Board on health management issues



Frances Harrison works with a team of local artists to create the totems for the rods and spears for the footbridge installation (photo: Eko Prawoto)

The purpose of RAV's state-wide project was to find new ways to tap into the rhythms, skills and passions that already exist in communities, using the Indonesian experience as an example. The Indonesian artist RAV chose to work with, Eko Prawoto, had a strong track record in engaging with rural communities. As an architect, he is committed to discovering locally available skills and materials, and working with local farmers, builders,

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weavers and others in the community to create exceptionally beautiful temporary and permanent festival spaces. These spaces are always strongly expressive of local cultural identity.

Our first meeting in Lakes Entrance with Catherine and members of the broader community was an eye-opener. While everything had looked quite solid on paper, it wasn't until Eko was there, sharing a cup of tea, asking questions, that I understood how powerful cultural exchange can be. As an Indigenous artist of our nearest neighbour, Eko was made immediately welcome – he could ask questions that might never occur to a white Australian – what sort of house did you live in as a child? What did you eat? Did you travel in to town? I heard an elder explaining to Eko that once you turn forty in Australia, you are considered an elder, whether you want to be or not, because your life expectancy is about sixty, and you have a relatively short time frame to pass on knowledge to younger people. I heard Eko's thoughtful response, that the knowledge is still there, in the landscape, the way it has always been and always will be.

In an article published on July 17 in the Jakarta Post, Eko said of this first visit: 'Maybe because I have black hair, I was accepted by the local Aboriginal people'. Typical understatement perhaps! He added, 'The spirit of togetherness must come from within. Although the people in Lakes Entrance are somewhat separated by race, culture and history, they all live together in one community. I introduced the community to the principles of gotong-royong (or working together for the greater good). I explained that working together in this way could help fresh migrants assimilate and create a united community'.

The RAV team of Ian Pidd (state-wide artistic director) worked with the Lakes Entrance team to support the development of a three day festival program which involved the Indigenous community, the fishing community and the migrant community.

- Eko worked with Catherine to design an installation on the Lakes Entrance footbridge
- Catherine, Eko and local Indigenous artists Lennie Hayes and Frances Harrison decided on the designs that would be used to decorate the bridge 'totems' and gathered a team to help create these
- This team also worked with one of the fishing community's net-makers in relation to binding the poles to the bridge (300 metres of rope in two pieces of 150 metres were used)
- Catherine and Elaine Terrick developed a program of weaving workshops to involve the extended community in learning more about local Indigenous culture and create a learning exchange for the artists



Weaving workshops with Elaine Terrick and artists from the local community (Photo: Catherine Larkins)

- Catherine developed her own team of artist collaborators that she wanted to work with for her element of the festival which was a sculpture/fire/neon installation on the footbridge on Australia Day evening
- Lennie Hayes worked with elder Albert Mullet to create a bark canoe for Catherine's installation

The best test of whether a collaboration is working or not is when you ask someone who's in charge – in Lakes Entrance, everyone was in charge, everyone owned the project, everyone was 100% invested in ensuring its success.

It was clear to everyone involved in the project during the two weeks leading up to the festival weekend that something extraordinary was happening.

Collectively, we had provided a framework to present the town's thriving Indigenous heritage.

We had used the language of architecture and contemporary art.

In community cultural development terms, we had found a means for supporting cross cultural collaboration between disparate sectors in a town that has long suffered socio-economic disadvantage. The black community worked with the white community. Koorie families who hadn't spoken for decades buried their disputes. The fishing community worked with the arts community. For the first time in the post-colonial history of Lakes Entrance, the totems of the Gunai/Kurnai clans were proudly displayed in public. The white community had the opportunity to attend workshops in Indigenous cultural practices such as weaving. All the above took place within and around an iconic landmark, the footbridge, in an architecturally designed installation that gave the whole a quiet grandeur. Everyone noticed.

We talked a lot within the working group, seeking the permission of the elders at every turn, and there were a great many turns.

We targetted a couple of influential journalists to steer the media away from negative stories about Invasion Day and create a new ...

We programmed several events around food where the local Indigenous and non-Indigenous community could meet on Common Ground, many for the first time...

We kept the program simple and gave space for appropriate acknowledgements

We developed a campaign of stories in the local press to keep the local community informed

We worked with the Shire and the RSL to make sure that Australia Day celebrations focussing on European settlement of Australia occurred at a different site

To answer this question as objectively as possible, I will quote from two journalists who wrote about the project.

Jill Singer wrote in her column in Melbourne's Herald-Sun on January 29 2007:

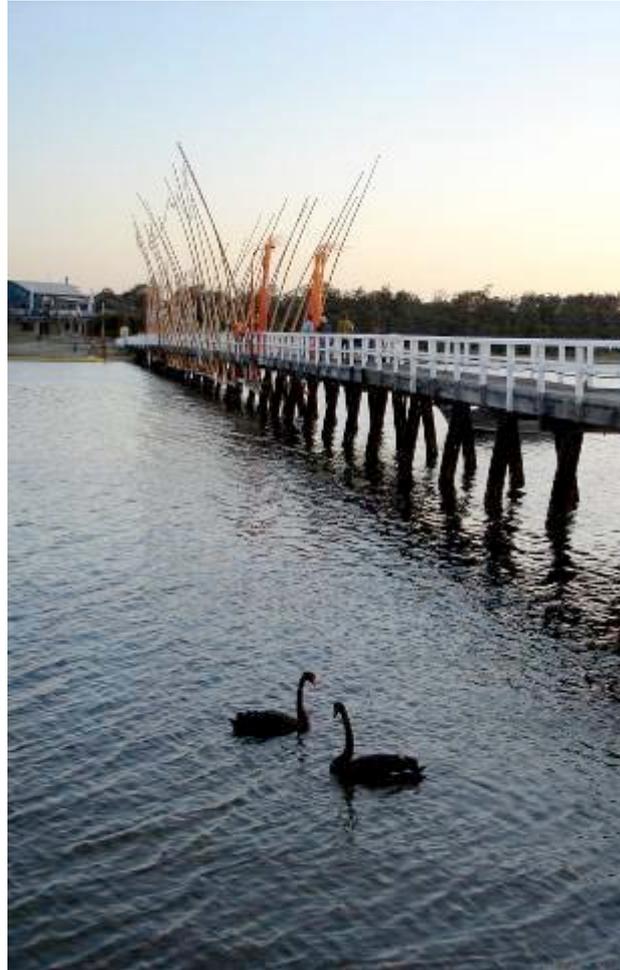
AUSTRALIA Day reminds us of the enormous benefits offered by our place of birth or settlement. It is also a reminder of how far we have to go toward reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This is demonstrated by the unfortunate standard of media coverage original Australians are subjected to. There is nothing surer than if an Aboriginal person protests rowdily, gets drunk, disorderly, violent, or is in any way disruptive, the media will pay them great attention. Positive stories about Aborigines have become rarities; negativity toward Aboriginal people has become endemic in our television industry.

But the remarkable fact is that some Indigenous Australians are now choosing Australia Day to extend the hand of friendship, to their non-Indigenous brothers and sisters.

Regional Arts Victoria continues its impressive work toward reconciliation with a special four-day program to celebrate Australia Day held at Lakes Entrance. As a number of Indigenous artists from the area put it, they wanted to reclaim Australia Day as a day to celebrate their own, living, culture. Local Aborigine Lennie Hayes acknowledges that it was a bit strange for him to have worked on a project for Australia Day, but he reckons it's all about reconciliation. Onya Lennie.

Peter Craven wrote in his opinion piece published in Melbourne's Age on the same day: **IT'S some time after nine and the night is a deep dark blue as the crowd of local people stands on the bank of the lake.** In the stillness the soundscape of cicadas, then kookaburras is heard. Lights appear and the spears of the black women of Lakes Entrance can be seen silhouetted along the right of the bridge, those of their menfolk appear on the left.

In the mid-distance, illuminated like a great fairytale emblem of their dreaming, is the tree designed by the Indonesian architect Eko Prawoto, in collaboration with the land's Indigenous people and bearing the totem of the lizard. Far off, a blur across the water, there is a barge bearing the traditional Aboriginal canoe.



Installation on the Lakes Entrance footbridge (Photo: Eko Prawoto)

There is something poignant and surprising, as well as thought provoking, about the fact that the Aboriginal community, in this place of all places, should be willing to come to the party on this day that celebrates the beginning of white settlement to Australia.

This particular enterprise in country Victoria seems to have worked to bring people together, not in cosiness but in simple acknowledgement of the fact that it all happened a long time ago and no one can unpick the knot that tied Aboriginal and white Australians together. In the wake of Australia Day, it's worth remembering the generosity of Aboriginal people. And if you want symbolism (and a reconciliation beyond name calling) Australia Day 2007, in Lakes Entrance, shows one way to go.

The best measure of success however is how the punters feel about it – in this case, the tourists who shared the evening with us in Lakes Entrance on Australia Day. This is a letter sent to Jill Singer following the publication of her column:

Dear Jill

I find that you have once again deftly placed your finger on the heart of an issue that needs exploring. I was in Lakes Entrance last week. Sauntering over the bridge for a swim I noticed an aboriginal woman tying long fishing rod/ spear shaped rods in place arching over

the water. She explained the 'Common Ground' program to me and extended a welcome to the opening ceremony that evening. It was a no fuss, casual affair, but for me profoundly moving in a way that I find hard to articulate. The Elders of the community, both black and white sat on deck chairs while kids black and white splashed and squealed in the shallow water under the bridge. There was a possum skin rug, a bark canoe, an audience of sunburned tourists and locals milling around. It was like any other 'opening' and yet somehow completely different. Auntie (cant recall name) held her squirmingly shy grandchild against her thigh as she said with quiet dignity and enormous pride that this was the first time she had ever spoken in public. She spoke of how happy she was to see the people come together to celebrate Australia Day and Common Ground. Jill it felt like even the swans stopped swimming to listen to this old lady. She told us of how wonderful it was to see the local aboriginal community living in houses that were warm and had hot water in contrast to the "hard days when I was a kid livin' up there in the bush in humpies and walkin' down to school". How she loved going out to Lake Tyers to visit her relatives knowing a warm bed was waiting. She welcomed us to her land with genuine warmth and invited us to follow the elders over the bridge to the surf clubhouse for a bite to eat. Standing there holding a paper plate while a stringed quartet played I realized that this was the first time I had ever shared a meal in a mixed group of Aboriginal and European Australians – I am 60 years old. I've missed so much. Something very important was happening right there in Lakes Entrance. Onya Jill for writing about it."

And Eko, ever the master of the understatement, said: 'We came together to celebrate Australia Day and ended up creating a Peaceful Day!'



*Left to Right: Eko Prawoto, Frances Harrison, Elaine Terrick, Catherine Larkins, Bob Bundle
(Photo: Susan Purdy and Jean-Marc Dupre, Blue Moon Press)*

Locally, there has been a lot of talk since the event around making it an annual celebration.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous families are interested in forming an arts council – their own version of an arts council where meetings take place not around a corporate grey table in a corporate grey room but around a fire, with food. Instead of a committee of management, families are members, and each family sends a representative along to each meeting, depending on who is available. The community health centre will support this process by providing a professional who will assist with incorporation and other fundamental legal and administrative requirements.

There are plans for a return residency for one of the Lakes Entrance Indigenous artists to travel to Yogyakarta to exchange weaving techniques with Javanese weavers.

There are challenges: this is a project that has prompted the need to have someone on the ground to build on the momentum and ensure the good work continues, and there is good will in the local government area to direct resources towards arts and culture, but RAV's resources in relation to its RADO network are stretched to capacity at this point in time. It does however help us create the argument for federal, state and local government that regional Victoria needs a properly resourced and sustainable RADO network that can effectively cover the state – The Board of RAV is committed to working with decision makers at all levels to ensure this happens.

Importantly, what happened in Lakes Entrance, while it was good for tourism, good for the economy and good for the community, it was built on something very genuine, and when a powerful idea takes hold of a community, there are no leaders, no bosses, no directors, no workers – it belongs to everyone. You just feel very privileged to have been part of it.

Lindy Allen: *A distant career as a performing artist led Lindy Allen into behind-the-scenes roles at the Conservation Council of Victoria and North Richmond Community Health Centre and back into the arts as a festival director in Mallacoota and Mildura. Two years as Sponsorship Manager at Melbourne Theatre Company preceded her move in early 2004 to Regional Arts Victoria. Lindy firmly believes in the importance of the expression of local cultural identity to the maintenance of vibrant, vital and healthy communities. In 2004, she completed an Asialink Arts Management residency in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in which she explored community cultural expression in an unfunded environment.*

Ph: +61 3 9644 1803

lallen@rav.net.au

www.rav.net.au

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