

# artwork

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C O M M U N I T Y   A R T S   N E T W O R K   S A I N C



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CAN is a non-profit, membership based organisation that promotes cultural development by supporting community arts.

#### CAN

- works towards a society in which cultural diversity, artistic expression and human dignity are valued and supported
- promotes and supports excellent processes and practices in community arts
- advocates for community cultural development and community arts
- supports artists, artworkers and communities in work which supports these aims.

#### COMMUNITY ARTS

Arts practice and creative expression are at the heart of a community's vitality. People have always come together to sing, tell stories, enact rituals, to celebrate, to mourn and to mark significant events in their lives. Besides being able to see great art, people need to actively participate in these activities. This is what is meant by the term community arts, it might be a new name but it is not a new idea.

#### LOCAL CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

It is through the things we do together as groups and communities that we gain a sense of collective identity, a sense of place and a sense of belonging. When we value these things a positive concern for our social well being follows and we begin to take charge of our present and shape the future to meet our aspirations.

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A R T S A



# c o n t e n t s

REGIONAL ARTS: A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

**1** Glynis Flower of the South Australian Country Arts Trust introduces this special edition of *Artwork* inspired by the 'Real Communities' Conference held in Mount Gambier in October 1998.

COMMUNITYCULTURALDEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF A LANGUAGE

**2** Deborah Mills reflects upon two decades of community arts and the apparent metamorphosis of the term 'community cultural development'. \*

TWO NATIONS

**6** Keynote speaker to the Regional Arts Australia conference, Hannie Rayson, provides her insights into the impact of the new corporatism and the work of artists in urban and rural Australia today. \*\*

DISTINCTIVE OBJECT MARKING OR EXPRESSING DIFFERENCE

**11** Regional arts officer, Alex Reid, asks if artists make their mark in different ways in regional environments. \*\*

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES AT TCHARKULDA ROCK

**15** Malcolm McKinnon offers a critical perspective on EPIC, a large scale community arts event staged at Tcharkulda Rock on the Eyre Peninsula.

INDIGENOUS ARTS

**19** A sample of the work of desert and Top End artists under the umbrella of Barkly Regional Arts in the Northern Territory by Jane Russell.

SOME DEFINITIONS

**23** Dee Martin presents a short overview of some of the principles and values that inform the work and direction of the Queensland Community Arts Network.

ISOLATED ART AND THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THINGS

**26** The sense of isolation felt by young people is addressed in the work of Riverland Youth Theatre says former artistic director, Steve Mayhew. \*\*

A PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE: MULTICULTURAL ARTS IN THE REGIONS

**29** Pilar Kasat sees multicultural arts and regional arts as under threat from similar forces. \*\*

A NEW SLANT ON ART AND WORKING LIFE

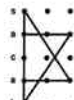
**34** Jock McQueenie describes a new art and working life partnership in Tasmania. \*\*

IS THERE A ROLE FOR COMMUNITY CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN TOURISM?

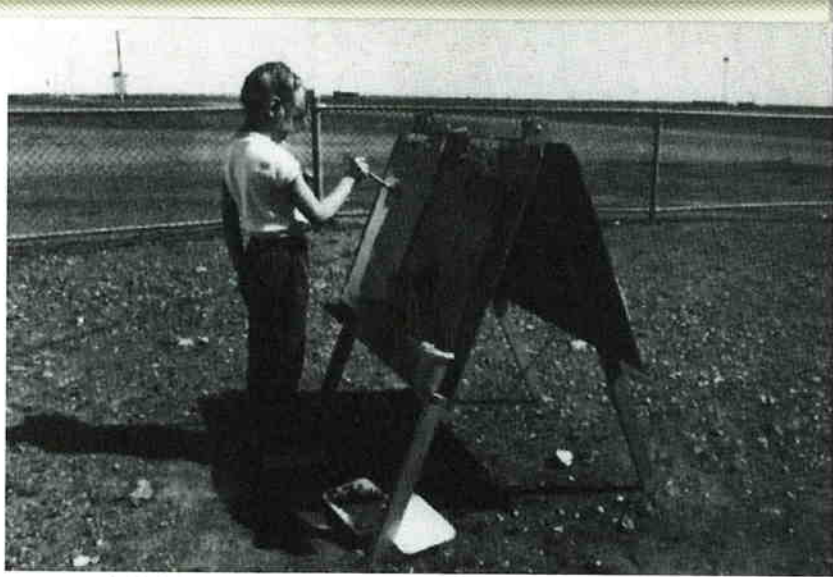
**38** Fostering a sense of place is a common aim of cultural tourism and community cultural development and sets them apart from mass consumerism says Robin Trotter.

\* This article is an abridged version of a presentation delivered at the 1998 Regional Arts Australia national conference, 'Regional Arts - A Changing Landscape' Mount Gambier, South Australia, October 1998. Permission to reproduce this paper has been granted by the speakers cited and Regional Arts Australia.

\*\* This article is an abridged version of a presentation delivered at the Real Communities Forum which followed the 1998 Regional Arts Australia national conference, Mount Gambier, South Australia, October 1998. Permission to reproduce this paper has been granted by the speakers cited and Regional Arts Australia.



**This edition of ARTWORK is a way of continuing the debate that began at the Regional Arts Australia Conference and the 'Real Communities' Forum. This selection of papers extends the topics at both events and with the readers' assistance perhaps discussions will continue.**



Leticia Palmer painting at Manquri Railway Camp, South Australia. Photo: Sally Colechin

# Regional arts A changing landscape

I was recently asked to take part in a city radio discussion about regional Australia, the population drift to the cities and the lack of resources in rural settlements. The producer's briefing included sweeping generalisations about the narrow minded attitudes in country communities. I immediately became very defensive about rural towns arguing that surely he did not believe that racist and judgemental people were absent in the city. I went on air expounding the joys of country life.

Although I have chosen to spend much of my own working life in the regions I felt I had been vaguely dishonest, as I believe working in the arts isn't always easy and there can be a real sense of isolation from 'like minded people'. This theme, raised by Steve Mayhew in this issue of *Artwork*, was one of the motivations behind the staging of the 'Real Communities' Forum in October last year.

The organisers also recognised that the political, social and cultural agenda in Australia is dramatically different from the times when the 'community arts movement' took off in the '70's. In putting the Forum together there was a sense of urgency. We recognised that many workers are no longer employed by the 'on the edge' community based organisations but in local government, industry and mainstream arts companies with the benefits of a better resourced and connected infrastructure while perhaps losing some of the freedoms of relative independence. Some felt we had become too serious, 'corporatised' or

academic. Some believed we do not examine our work enough in a philosophical or political sense.

While new technologies and faster communications have changed our lives, perhaps now distinctiveness is harder to define and celebrate. Hence the name of the Forum - a search for 'Real Communities' aiming to give community cultural development workers a chance to meet, debate and feel a sense of shared vision.

How far those aims were met is difficult to assess. The time frame was much too short. Following a full three day conference most delegates were tired and the gathering, which we thought might attract up to 50 people, became a closely packed 91. The meeting attracted artists, volunteers, museum and gallery directors, arts officers, administrators, regional theatre and dance workers, touring managers and academics.

It was evident that this event was so rare that many people didn't wish to "spoil" the opportunity by being too controversial, while others who see their work as politically motivated were nonplussed that the debate was at times tame.

However with Deborah Mills' skilled guidance discussions were animated and experiences shared.

There was disappointment expressed about the low numbers of Aboriginal workers and volunteers present at both the Conference and the forum. Despite cultural sensitivity in our work, the structure of conferences and seminars as well as the content is often still culturally specific, and despite travel subsidies from the Australia Council, attendance required considerable expenditure.

Shortcomings aside, for many of the newer recruits to the field(s) the Forum put their work into a historical and social context and most commented on the motivation gained from coming together. Almost every delegate asked for a longer forum in the near future.

*Glynis Flower was the coordinator of the 'Real Communities' Forum for Regional Arts Australia. She is employed by South Australian Country Arts Trust as the Riverland and Mallee Arts Development Manager. 'Real Communities' was funded by the Community Cultural Development Fund of the Australia Council.*