

artwork

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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

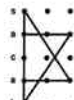
34 Jock McQueenie describes a new art and working life partnership in Tasmania. **

IS THERE A ROLE FOR COMMUNITY CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN TOURISM?

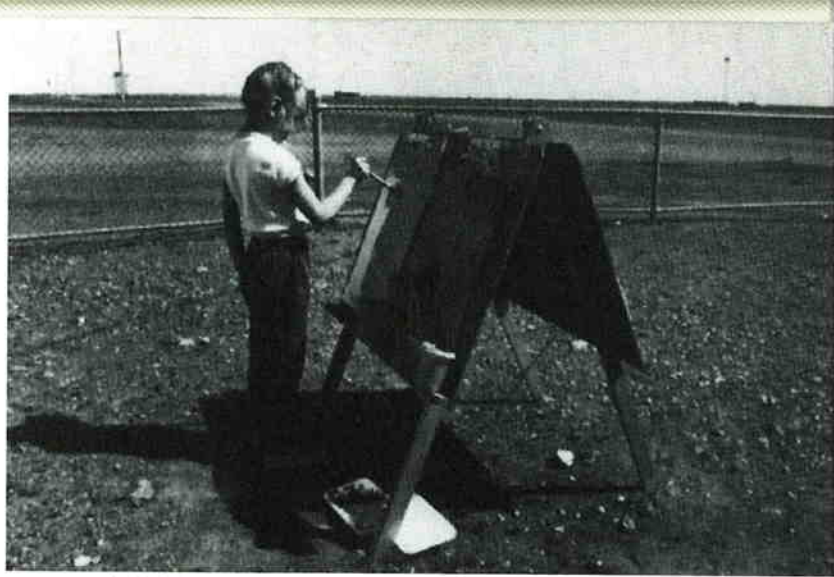
38 Fostering a sense of place is a common aim of cultural tourism and community cultural development and sets them apart from mass consumerism says Robin Trotter.

* 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

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.

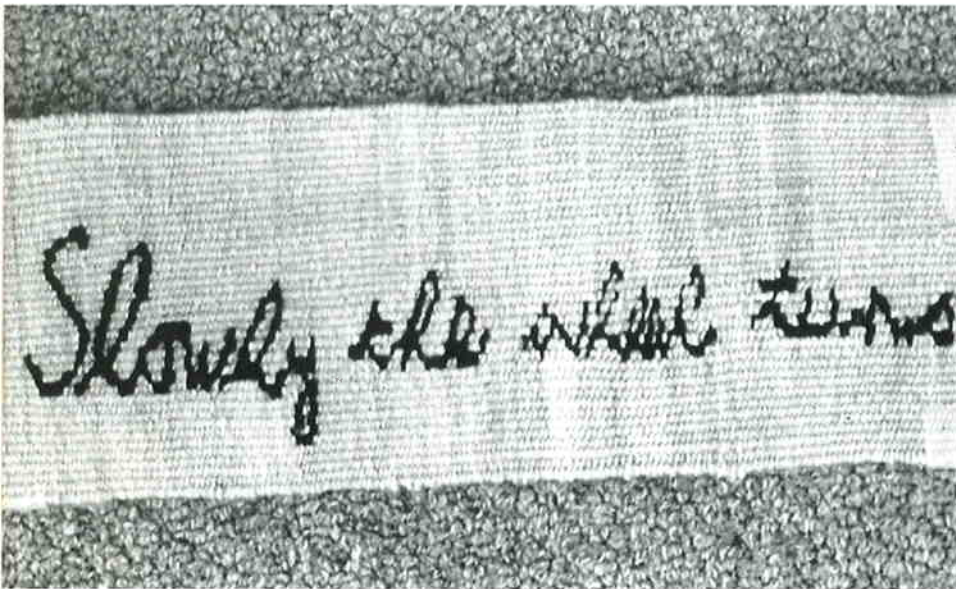
There was disappointment expressed about the low numbers of Aboriginal workers and volunteers present at both the Conference and the forum. Despite cultural sensitivity in our work, the structure of conferences and seminars as well as the content is often still culturally specific, and despite travel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

Regional arts A changing landscape

Community Cultural Development



Tapestry by Jean Hamilton. Photo: Kay Lawrence.

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



When I was a little kid - about three and in kindergarten - we used to sing carols. One of them was Silent Night and there was that line in it, 'Silent night, holy night, round yon virgin mother and child' and as a third generation heathen I was always wondering what 'rounyonvargin' was. I finally figured out it was the halo.

At this conference I am struck by the way in which we mumble 'communityculturaldevelopment', a bit like the way I referred to the roundyonvirgin. Sometimes we can't even be bothered to say the words - we just use the initials CCD. I think that these terms are being used to mean different and sometimes opposite things. We need to understand our terms better, so we can understand where we actually agree and where we differ with each other.

I would like to give you a bit of history into the origins of the term community cultural development, so that you can better de-construct and/or interrogate the term yourselves. You may want to put a different interpretation on that term which you think is more relevant to today.

Community arts in the 1970s really meant access to product and access to skills development. There were still a lot of assumptions about artists' unique and inherent creativity and the mystery of the creative process itself. There was certainly a strong view that the arts were a civilising influence. This view was a carry over from our Colonial heritage, but during the 1970s the arts were still

Reflections on the evolution of a language



Deborah Mills

seen in this way and as an antidote to television. So when I became involved with community arts in the late 70s, television was the Antichrist and technology was the enemy.

In the late 1970s we began to see a bit of a shift. We began to see a questioning of the hierarchy of excellence and the privileging of some art forms over others. With feminism the question was asked: 'If a bloke paints something on a canvas, why is it called art and hung in a gallery, but if a woman stitches something on a canvas, why is it not art?' So an interrogation of that hierarchy and that privileging of some forms of creativity over others began to happen.

The notion of cultural homogeneity was also challenged. The view that there was a core of cultural activity which was essentially Anglo and male and all this other stuff which, not being Anglo or male was therefore non-core came under question. There was a resistance to the belief that some forms of cultural expression were centred and others were on the periphery - the 'other'.

The process of creativity began to be interrogated and demystified and seen to be as important as the product or end result. The demystification of creativity meant that everyone was seen as being potentially creative - not just artists.

In 1984, there was what Marxists would call a specific historic conjuncture. Jon Hawkes was appointed as the Director for the Community Arts Board, Donald Horn was appointed as the Chairperson of the

Australia Council and there was a Community Arts Board and staff who shared certain philosophical assumptions. And with this specific historic conjuncture the shifts in understanding that had been occurring gained momentum and the concept of community cultural development evolved. The concept was based on the belief that there were many communities, not just one. There was a shift towards understanding communities as communities of interest based around class, gender, ethnicity and race, rather than just communities in place. A big shift.

The term culture gained currency, representing an attempt to move 19th Century notions of art and the privileging of those notions of creativity over others which were part of every day life, like gardening and cooking. This posed huge contradictions for the Community Arts Board because it was part of the Australia Council, an institution entirely predicated on the 19th Century notions of cultural production and the hierarchy privileging those forms of production. So there was a huge contradiction within the Australia Council at the time around these concepts.

Then notion of community development, which was defined if I can remember my 'black book' correctly, as people working together to bring about improved understanding and/or changes important to them in their lives. Community development was thus defined as an unashamedly political process and a collective communal process.

The notion of community development was a notion about empowerment of people to bring about changes in their lives. Okay, so community cultural development practice was seen as a political process - sometimes bottom up, sometimes top down. It wasn't party political, it was about people taking control of their own lives and being skilled up to do their work. A project was a means to the end, it wasn't an end in itself.

Community cultural development was therefore defined as a collaborative process, often involving artists working with communities using creativity interpreted in the broadest sense, as a way of illuminating (not merely reflecting) and/or changing peoples lives. So there was a direct connection between the practice and the political, social and cultural context of the day.

What I'm hearing, talked about at this conference, is the use of the word 'culture' and the use of the word 'art' as if they are interchangeable, and they are not. What I'm hearing talked about is development as something that is project-based, and that was never the understanding in those times. I'm not saying you're wrong, I'm just saying that you need to understand that a number of people here, who are of my generation, will be using this language in a particular way and a number of you who have had different experiences will be using the language in another way. That's not to say that somebody is right and somebody is wrong. What we need to understand is that we've got very different context, and that we are giving very different meanings to our words. It's like there is a cultural conflict within this group, even though we are, unfortunately largely culturally homogenous. But there is a cultural conflict within this group about the use of that terminology. You need to start to explore some of that, not because you necessarily have to reach some sort of boring consensus about it all, but just so that you better understand your differences ■

Deborah Mills is a former Director of the Community Cultural Development Unit at the Australia Council. This is her address to the Real Communities Conference held in Mount Gambier last October.

... a fracturing from our past ...

notes on the Real Communities Conference

Deborah Mills

Part of the deal in accepting the invitation to facilitate a two-day conference for rural arts workers in Mt Gambier last month was to write a summary of the conference which 'critiques the process and summarises the outcomes'.

On reflection, this is a big ask for someone who was neither completely in or of the conference - never having worked in either the arts or community development in rural Australia and concentrating as I was on getting us all through the experience rather than on the experience itself. But I'll have a go.

Setting the scene

Mt Gambier - cold, wet and windy. I cannot testify to the existence of the lake or the mountain as I saw neither - perhaps they are a myth. Mt Gambier - seat of rural power - important power base for the National Farmers Federation. One conference participant wore his Waterside/Patricks dispute T-shirt as a gesture of class consciousness and attracted interest from the locals that may have turned belligerent but for his size. A motel grappling with more orders for vegetarian meals than they had had in a lifetime. The ejection of Bob the dog from the conference caused a frisson of solidarity amongst the late night conference revellers.

People - 90 of them - most of them replete on a rich ingestion from the preceding three-day national rural arts conference and needing no encouragement whatsoever to get straight into discussion. Topics included maintaining artistic integrity, identifying the impact on our values and practice of working with and within institutions and industries, professional development needs, working with volunteers and

grappling with the notion of developmental practice. All enlivened and elevated by both spontaneous and studied displays of creativity and wit.

Evaluating the outcomes - why were we there?

The purposes of conferences are to plot and to gain nourishment - to exchange knowledge and ideas. Did this happen at Mt Gambier? Probably. There was much energy, enthusiasm, good will and celebration at this national coming together. So eager were people to be together that there was a tendency to obscure some of the differences in values, positions and understandings. Language was used as a way of blurring rather than clarifying meaning. Some of those with overtly political positions were prompted, as usual, to explicate their position. Others for whom the political stance of their practice remains unacknowledged were silent, as usual, and saw no need to explain themselves. There was nothing new in this, except that perhaps other such gatherings have been characterised by a more vigorous debate. Perhaps people felt freer then to argue with each other - to defend their positions and acknowledge differences.

I couldn't help noticing how language which was originally used to signal a clear set of political motives was being used to describe very different things. There appeared to be a predominant understanding of the term community as meaning diverse groupings sharing a common sense of place. The buzz word here was 'inclusion' but - without any explicit acknowledgment of distinctiveness based around class, gender, race or ethnicity - it was difficult to assess how close or how far this term was from assimilation in meaning and application. Culture was used by some

I actually came to this conference and I wanted to hear more than just the warm and fuzzy. I wanted to hear about how communities in conflict articulate themselves and it seems when you're looking at the documentation it always emphasises simply this fantastic outcome and there is no talk about division or fracturing or controversy.



to signal a deliberate move away from the privileging of some forms of creativity over others. And yet some participants seemed to speak of arts activity synonymously with culture. One participant went so far as to suggest that the touring of a drawing room comedy written by a 19th century Irishman was community cultural development. The understanding of community development as people working together to bring about changes in their lives and circumstances appeared to have lost currency in favour of the term 'developmental'. This latter term seemed to be used to describe arts projects. The understanding of community cultural development as a process of people working together and using a wide range of creative processes to illuminate aspects of their lives and to bring about change did not appear to have much status.

I couldn't help noticing, therefore, that what had been a language of social, political, cultural and economic change had become appropriated and was being used to describe activities which were predominantly arts based, which focussed on limited-life projects rather than on a process of community empowerment over time and were intended to make people feel better. This is not to say that these objectives are bad in themselves (although they are not objectives which have inspired my own work) but rather that the language being used was not a faithful description of what is being attempted or achieved.

Someone who has been going to these sorts of conferences longer than I have commented that they felt born again by the revival of the term community arts. I took that to mean a return to an earlier set of understandings based around the practice of arts in community contexts and focussing on outcomes to do with celebration, civic enhancement and skills

development. While this term may be undergoing a revival in the urban wilderness of Melbourne, this revelation cut no ice with this bunch of rural arts workers. Or maybe they thought to ignore what they took to be a heretical statement out of politeness. This was a pity, because it was an honest statement in that it more accurately described the kind of work this particular person had done and probably wanted to do than the term 'community cultural development'. And my assessment is that it probably came closer to describing the work of many of those at the conference as well.

Why did no one respond to this statement? Have we become straight-jacketed by language? Are people remaining silent out of fear of offending others whose values are different from their own? Are we frightened that if we depart from the orthodoxy of officially sanctioned rhetoric, our chances of getting funding will be reduced?

Or is it, as another conference participant suggested, merely that in assuming the camouflage necessary to work within the institutions we have chosen we have become the camouflage and lost sight of what and who and why we are? Have we allowed the values of those institutions to influence our own and not noticed how our own colouring has changed over time?

The stories

A culture is revealed through its stories. There is a hierarchy of stories - those which have more currency than others - those which have the official nod and those which may continue to be told but have gone underground. There is also a hierarchy of storytellers - some are more privileged than others. What are the official stories being told about community cultural development? Are

they about political processes of empowerment or are they about activity and civic enhancement? What has happened to the stories about community development - about the systematic, thoughtful, careful and collaborative building of skills, confidence, resources and power? Who is telling these stories and who is listening?

My reading of recent publications on community cultural development confirms that this appropriation of language is part of the official culture and that over time - either by accident or by design - the political objectives of community cultural development have become subverted. My reading of the content of some recent conferences on the subject is that they have been a parading of pet projects rather than a critique of sustained processes for empowerment and change. Whether one objects to this or not (and obviously I do), that these shifts should go apparently unremarked should in itself be of concern.

A living culture is one with a sense of its past and its future. Its present is informed by the stories of the past. We must understand our cultural heritage if we are to successfully operate in the present and critique our work. At Mt Gambier I had a sense of a fracturing from our past, by which I mean a kind of absent-minded drifting into forgetfulness rather than a deliberate rejection of past orthodoxies. I attribute this in part to the failure of those institutions established by and for community arts or community cultural development to ensure that a robust and resilient transfer of culture - of values, work practices - of stories - has taken place and that, simultaneously, a robust and resilient critique of these stories is undertaken ■

Corporatism has become the dominant global ideology and is rapidly undermining democratic values and dividing our society. As keynote speaker to the Regional Arts Conference writer Hannie Rayson provided her insights into how these changes impact upon the work of artists in urban and rural Australia today.



There is a very large billboard at the end of my street that has been troubling me for about a month. It's a Claude neon sign about three metres by four metres right up high at the entrance to Brunswick Street, Fitzroy in Melbourne. It says in big letters 'Art Does Matter'. I ride my bike past that sign every day, and I have to tell you that I hate that sign, and as the days go by, my antipathy towards that sign is deepening. I hate it because of course it implies the opposite. It is screaming out to every motorist waiting at the lights: You and I both know that this is bollocks.

Art matters

If art really mattered why would you have to employ some expensive marketing executive to come up with an inane campaign to persuade us of the fact? Even if it had said 'Art Matters'. But 'Art Does Matter' is a defensive position, it expresses a terrible apprehensiveness that the majority hold a counter view. It's a quintessential expression of cultural cringe; the drab statement, depressingly reminiscent of an Australia of the 50s. Art does matter, yeah right! My husband is sitting next to me in the car looking up at the sign, 'I wonder why they didn't just put a piece of art work up there,' he said, 'or maybe it's supposed to be a kind of post modern pun, Art Does Matter.' This is a statement terrifyingly

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reminiscent of an Australia of the early 1990s. If this is indeed what they intended, clearly some of us are disappearing up our own postmodern bums. I'm with Noel Pearson, he says 'Post modernism has a lot to answer for. When the best and brightest in our universities have been preoccupied with deconstructing signs and symbols, the forces of conservatism have been busily deconstructing our society'. We know art matters, but the billboard reminds us that there are some who are less sure.

Let me begin by quoting Socrates. This is the last paragraph of Socrates' speech at his trial in which he defends the importance of an examined life.

Perhaps someone may say 'but surely Socrates after you've left us you can spend the rest of your life quietly minding your own business', this is the hardest thing of all to make some of you understand. If I say I cannot mind my own business, you'll not believe that I'm serious, but if on the other hand I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness, and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking, and then examining both myself and others is really the very best thing a man can do. And that life without this sort of examination is not worth living you'll be even less inclined to believe me. Nevertheless gentlemen that is how it is.

The examined life; what is this? Obviously self-examination is the quest for knowledge about oneself as an individual. But there is also the quest to more fully understand what it means to be a member of a society. That is a citizen, and it's this question of citizenship that I'm concerned with here. It seems to me that psychoanalysis and the psychoanalysts have hijacked the debate about self-examination.

Everybody's in therapy. Emptying the contents of their psyche, and sifting through with psychological metal detectors, looking for buried treasure under the surface. The glittering explanations for our personal dysfunctionality, the jewellery of self-fulfilment. I'm not big on this stuff as you can see because I worry that the obsession with peering into the murky depths of our individual unconscious is replacing the need for public consciousness. I worry that self-examination is being confused with self-absorption, that at the end of this millennium we have come to a point where the only thing that seems obtainable is personal self-fulfilment. As though once achieved, all things will spring from this. And yet this quest leaves no room, no hours in the day for the individual as a responsible and conscious citizen.

Living an examined life

Enter the artist. How can we lead an examined life without the arts, without books, without generations of thought, without language, without the poetry of the human heart? How can we be moved to understand things without music, or to appreciate the majesty of the human body without dance? How can we believe in the legitimacy of our culture if we are never witness to its stories in the theatre, in film, in literature?

Let us look for a moment at the society that we have participated in creating over this past decade. Essential shifts have taken place, which have transformed us into a corporatist society, a corporatist culture; and these shifts have real implications for arts practice in the community. So what do I mean by corporatist culture? I mean a society in which the prevailing ruling structures serve the aims and practices of business. Corporatism is the dominant ideology, its champions tell us that there is not a political position, it's not a matter of choosing one sort of ethics over another.

Its champions refuse to admit that they are agents of ideology at all. Corporatism they insist, is inevitable. It's the way things are. It's the way we do things. In these secular times God has been replaced by another ideology called the market place, and here the world is divided into buyers and sellers, and the overriding aim is to maximise one's potential for private ownership and private money profits. Now how do we know that this dominant ideology is a corporatist one? Because the majority is unable to find the space, unable to find the words, unable to tell the stories which show that life is more complex and that the costs are more savage than the corporate warriors comprehend. Yet those of us who live in the real world, those of us who understand that the high street and not the Internet is the highway of life, know that it defies common sense to rearrange the entire organisation of our society according to business principals. That is, private ownership and private profit. The key strategy which these corporate warriors use to silence us is the undermining of the instrument of communication itself, the language. Business terminology is assaulting the language and we all rush to get a grip on the new sexy talk to sprinkle it in conversation around the barbie, until it becomes second nature, unconsciously shaping the way we think.

Undermining language

I remember the first time that I heard someone say 'What a loser', I was shocked, it sounded so callous, so brazenly American, so like Gordon Gecko in 'Wall Street'. I couldn't believe my ears that my own neighbour in Fitzroy could be so heartless (although he is a lawyer). But now everybody uses it. It's just like saying 'What a dill'. It is, in a very Aussie way, even affectionate. Except of course that it underlines the whole idea that society is made up of winners and losers.

When the corporate custodians look at this society, when they actually come down from the skyscraper onto the ground, when they wander up the main street, they find sites of activity which are not part of the market place at all. They find the bowls club, the library, the creche, the church, the school, the front bar at the pub.

You and I of course are in the winning circle; we make winners, but that guy over there, what a loser. The most pervasive and to my mind pernicious example of this sea change is how each and every one of us has been transformed into the customer. I want to pause for a moment and talk about this. When you travel Qantas, you're no longer a passenger or a traveller, you are a customer. Remember Qantas would like to welcome passengers on flight 432 to Singapore and to London? Not any more; Qantas would now like to remind customers that flight 323 is now ready for boarding.

At my local council I was once a ratepayer or a resident. As a person living in Victoria I was a constituent, or a voter, even a citizen, I was even happy to be a member of the public. At the doctors I was a patient, and at the real estate agents, I was a client. The list goes on. In our daily lives we all played a range of roles identified by a variety of terms. Now we have one function in life, and that is to consume. All nomenclature has been reduced to one title, customer, one who customarily purchases. Do you remember the television quiz show 'Pick a Box'? Remember how Bob Dyer used to say 'Howdy customers!'. Do you think he knew just how prescient he was being? The steward on the plane last week told me it was company policy. It's more friendly. He shrugged. He knew he was talking crap. The Chief Executive Officer of my local council told me it was empowering. Excuse me? A customer can demand better service, she argued. I haven't quite figured out how this customer business applies to getting a parking ticket yet: I am the customer and you are the parking officer providing a service in fining me. Thanks very much. And if we really take this empowerment business on board: I won't take the ticket today thanks, after all, the customer is always right. Also I would have thought being a customer implied a certain amount of choice, but it doesn't work like that. Take dog registration, which is after all one of your local council's customer service operations. What are we

supposed to do in the name of demanding better service? Ring complaints? 'You've been totally, totally inefficient in registering my dog, I've had appalling service. You've just lost my business, I'm going to go and register my dog elsewhere'. In fact there is one local council in Victoria that sold its parks and gardens to New Zealand. So I guess if you've got any queries, like 'Why is the grass dead on the oval?' you can always whip over the Tasman and have a chat with their customer service people over there. Customership is a profoundly impoverishing idea. The idea that it is empowering is real deceit. If government at all levels was committed to empowerment it would be working hard at promoting the idea of citizenship, which speaks to us of responsibilities as well as rights. I'm not being pedantic here, customer is not just a name, it's a way of thinking. It reduces our interactions in the world to person with wallet.

Disempowering

This is an example of the discourse of the corporate world infiltrating our culture. I sit on the board of a combined arts school, we no longer refer to the various schools as the drama school, the music school, the arts school, we call them the cost centres. In arts bureaucracies we no longer have specialist units setting the disciplines like literature, visual arts, music and so on, we have tourism, marketing and audience development. I see in my mind's eye a poet walking down the lonely corridors clutching his collected works which he hopes is a true expression of his lyric personality, trying to figure out whether he fits in to tourism or audience development. At university the student has become the educational consumer, and I read in the journal of Philosophy of Education that in universities in Canada and the United States, the subject, as in Sociology, or Archaeology or Chemistry, is now called a source unit, which the educational consumer, the student, can study as part of his or her all program package. What used to be called research and the search

for truth is now the process of buying ideas. My favourite one here in Australian universities is referring to teaching as information transfer or skills transfer. As though the student is an empty vessel with the lid flipped up and information is poured in. The idea that teaching is about encouraging a student to think critically, creatively and rebelliously, doesn't enter the paradigm.

Let me talk for a moment about tertiary education in Australia, because I think it's useful to look at what is happening in this sector, because of the warnings that are being flashed to those of us who work in the arts. In general there's been a steady pattern of funding reduction in higher education in Australia, and throughout the world. University managements have responded by seeking ways to justify education that will motivate government and corporate sponsors to provide more adequate financing. And so they should, that's their job. But as university administrators have begun to model themselves after private sector corporate executives, the justification for higher education has taken the form of a clearly non-educational rationale. To be precise, it has taken the form of justifying higher education as necessary to compete economically in the international market place. Whatever happened to the charter to teach people how to think?

The value of questioning

Business leaderships have meanwhile pressured business-supported governments to compel universities to adapt to the new reality of competing to survive in business and market terms. The market place is interested in efficient, exact managers - all of them trained to solve problems. To provide answers, which in the sexy business lexicon we call 'solutions'. Another way of looking at academic research, or indeed the research that artists are involved in, is to see it as a commitment to enquiry, a creative act which often involves stumbling in the dark towards meaning. An act which has no other master than the search to

understand more fully. This is different in nature to researching how well a product line can be made to sell, it's different from satisfying the wants of the customer, or perfecting a commodity so that it is problem free. Conclusions, certainty, the eradication of doubt, these are the goals of corporatism where in the arts and in education, we know that doubt is the great motivator. But what is the role of doubt in the business plan?

Speaking for democracy

Now let me be clear about this. I am not discounting the value of efficiency, and it would be a sad, dangerous and muddled world, if we didn't have well targeted problem-solving skills. Planes would fall out of the sky, water would be poisoned, gas plants would blow up. The tragedy is that the champions of this one way of seeing, have embarked on a crusade to destroy all other social activities which do not conform to their paradigm, in their ideal world the market place is all there is to society. Remember Maggie Thatcher, the godmother of rationalism said that there was no such thing as society. In her worldview we are all individuals jostling for private ownership, private profit, and individual excellence.

When the corporate custodians look at this society, when they actually come down from the skyscraper onto the ground, when they wander up the main street, they find sites of activity which are not part of the market place at all. They find the bowls club, the library, the creche, the church, the school, the front bar at the pub. The irony is that these champions of competitive practice actually can't stomach the competition. They will either corporatise or they'll close us down. They will make the market place where they are overlords universal, and this is the challenge we face because we represent the diversity of the society, we are on the side of democracy. We speak for difference. We are the storytellers, the painters, the poets, whose charter is with the people. To fulfil this charter we must speak for democracy, and to do that we must never



Hannie Rayson, Photo: Ponch Hawkes

allow ourselves to capitulate to those who would close democracy down and erect a shopping mall in its place.

Now where in all of this is the common good? The common good, it's a quaint expression these days. Who uses it? Who cares about it? Not I'm afraid when you're in the competitive fast lane on the win-win dance floor, swinging from the chandelier of the profit culture. It seems to me that there's been a great deal of propaganda that we've been fed and many of us have swallowed whole without chewing, about the imperative to reduce the size of governments. Small government is the catch cry. Reduce sluggish public bureaucracy. The private sector can do things more efficiently and so on. The point I want to make here is that I think that the most powerful force possessed by a citizen is his or her own government. So the citizenry might well wonder why we are keen to put limits on our own force. Our only force. Because the power we refuse ourselves goes somewhere else. Government is the only organised mechanism, which makes possible that level of sheer disinterest known as the common good. Business is about interest groups.

Growing insights

I'd like to now turn my attention to how all of this impacts on regional Australia and our arts practice. I am a city person as is obvious, my reference points and my experiences have been by and large urban ones. But as I have looked on the political scene during the recent election and



...what urban Australia needs to know is about the diversity of life in the bush, because from diversity we get energy, and richness and contradiction and drama and dynamism. And this is the stuff of art.

reflected on the last election, I've become more and more aware that Australia has become two nations. And I think that the rise of One Nation has taught us all a lot about who we are and what we might become. I think like a lot of people in urban Australia: the rise of Pauline Hanson initially made me feel a deep hostility toward people in the regions in far north Queensland. I felt unbridled fury at that ignorance, xenophobia and prejudice were threatening what I believe to be the core values of quite an exemplary society, the Australia I love, the Australia I feel proud of, the Australia that is tolerant, multicultural, fair and decent as a place. There is no denying that the phenomenon of Hansonism has been deeply shocking for many Australians. It represented the violation of one of our core values, the sanctity of tolerance. Racial vilification was being legitimated under the guise of freedom of speech. And in Melbourne we had to consider the possibility of violence in the streets in a way that was certainly unprecedented in my lifetime as the so-called race debate hotted up. But in all of this, Hanson's brand of feral patriotism did serve to put people of good will under real pressure to articulate what they wanted our of society to become. And in that I found cause for real optimism. Bernard Levin had this to say:

In every age of transition men are never so firmly bound to one way of life as when they are about to abandon it. So that fanaticism and intolerance reach their most intense form just before tolerance and mutual acceptance come to be the natural order of things.

I hope that's true. But as so much public and private rumination was going on, mobilising everyone to think through the issues, two things asserted themselves as

being very clear. The first is that people in the Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne triangle began to understand that things are not good in regional Australia, not good at all. I think we began to see quite clearly that people in the bush were fighting for their citizenship, so disenfranchised did they feel, so undermined and ignored by consecutive governments. After years and years of deregulation, erosion of services, job losses, deplorable reductions in education and health services, dying country towns, rising rates of suicide, and the general sense of grief about loss of community and loss of hope, rural Australians are finding life very hard. And I think urban Australia has finally woken up. Secondly I think it has highlighted the great divide between rural and urban experience which is generating prejudice in both camps. I'm convinced that we don't know enough about the way the other half lives.

What I do know is that the 19th century urban Australian looked to the bush as the sight of the real Australia, and this is no longer true. And it is no longer true, because the idea of one Australia has no currency any more. It occurs to me that when we talk about diversity, when we talk about difference, we think of it largely as an urban preoccupation, because urban societies are more multicultural and there's a greater pluralism of interest and activity. But what urban Australia needs to know is about the diversity of life in the bush, because from diversity we get energy, and richness and contradiction and drama and dynamism. And this is the stuff of art. People in the regions are endlessly going to be encouraged to avail themselves of art that can tour from the capital cities and art that can tour from the rest of the world. Say yes. See, hear,

experience as much as you can, but don't be duped that great art can only be produced from elsewhere. The truly epiphanous moment in my life was when I realised that things of beauty and profundity could actually happen in an Australian kitchen. That the Russians didn't have a monopoly on profundity, that momentous things that shed luminous insights into the human condition could actually happen in Mount Gambier, not just in Russia, with people gathered around the samovar. Take heart that the examined life seeking to express itself in Woy Woy or Port Augusta is potentially as powerful as the tortured poet working away in Paris.

It occurs to me that artists in regional Australia have a lot of challenges to face which are potentially very invigorating. There is a critical need at this moment to engage with issues in the public domain, harnessing all our intellectual acumen and emotional integrity to ask the really hard questions. Not only is the cultural elitism of the cities ripe for the challenge, but so is the broader issue of the dominance of corporatism stifling us all and threatening the democracy. It seems to me that artists must take a leading role in re-empowering the citizenry. Art does matter, but it does so much more than that ■

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A temporary work made from found objects by Jo Crawford, SA Country Arts Trust project - *waterworks*. Photo: Lisa Philip-Harbult.



Sculpture by Kriss Borgas, SA Country Arts Trust project - *See Saw*.

distinctive object marking or expressing difference

ALEX REID

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



What exactly does marking and expressing difference mean in a regional context? As artworkers and community members interested in cultural development we encourage projects that mark our communities. As artists we make marks on our environment. Is this mark making any different

in a regional context? What is it that we seek to identify and how do we construct knowledge about the best marks to make? This paper explores notions of identity in the construction of knowledge and posits 'situated knowledges' and 'partial perspectives' as passionate rather than pragmatic models of practice in mark making in regional Australia.



Alex Reid

**... we are able to absorb
so little information that
our perspective on the
region will always be
limited and incomplete**

Distinctiveness is clearly about perception and representation in relationship to another. To be distinctive is to be marked against some other - to be represented and viewed as different. I live and work in a region of South Australia that is commonly marked as distinctive and different, off the beaten track, like nowhere you've ever been, like nothing you've ever seen. The western region of the South Australian Country Arts Trust covers approximately half of the state and includes the vast wheat belts of the Eyre Peninsula, the spectacular coastal communities of the far west coast and Head of the Bight, the cities of Whyalla, Port Augusta and Port Lincoln, the expanse of the Far North and Flinders Ranges and the land owned by the Anangu Pitjanjatjara communities adjacent to the Musgrave Ranges in the north west. Each of these regions within

the larger region defy description and easy representation and constantly challenge my knowledge and perceptions about place, community and the nature of identity.

Identity and the unmarked

Identity is a two-edged sword, and while clearly a community's own marking of itself is an essential component of its cultural development, an easy reliance on identity as a source of all that is good in a community's life should be held under more detailed scrutiny.

As Peggy Phelen states in *Unmarked - the Politics of Performance*:

There is real power in remaining unmarked and there are serious limitations to visual representation as the political goal. Visibility is a trap ... it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperialist appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal.¹

I believe the region I have described and probably most of regional Australia is in the enviable position of being largely 'unmarked' by those who would seek to identify, characterise and represent us. The current use of the term 'the Bush' comes no closer to accurately representing our communities than did the 'Red Centre' mythology that's pervaded the century to date. The communities I work with defy marking and in many cases actively pursue anonymity. If you agree with my simplistic view of 'identity' and 'representation' and the limitations around their construction then I'd like to present an equally subjective model for working in regional settings which is constantly under review and open to criticism.

Legitimate mark making

My own entirely subjective ideas on making art in regional communities come from lived experience. Aside from a few years studying and working in the city I've spent the remainder of my life in a regional setting. My current position has

allowed me to travel extensively throughout the north and west of South Australia and to work closely with an incredibly talented group of colleagues who share my passion for our isolated environments. This experience brings me only a little closer to understanding the complex identity of the communities I work in.

The representations we present of ourselves and those that others create on our behalf are often judged on the basis of the knowledge the creator has of the subject. How long I've lived in regional Australia, what role I play in my community, how many people I've talked to and what I've seen might be fair judgements on my ability to develop this commentary on regional distinctiveness. What you are really assessing is my knowledge of the subject and whether I have enough knowledge to speak on behalf of others. Perhaps then, before going any further we should explore knowledge and its construction as a basis for legitimate mark making.

Over a number of years I've been fascinated with theories of vision and the ways in which we construct our world. This comes largely as a result of an illness that rendered me blind in 1993 followed by my sight slowly returning over a period of days. I remain partially sighted. The experience radically altered my understanding about sight and my belief that what I saw in my world was real. The world I see today still looks like a complete picture and yet I know now that it isn't. To construct knowledge about my world I need to adjust my view, otherwise the picture I construct will be partial and incomplete. This is OK though, because I've learnt to operate in this way. I have created a model for seeing that takes account of my partial vision. What this illustrates is a fairly simple concept that what we believe we are seeing is not necessarily real. If this is so, then the creation of knowledge and distinctive art that I talked of before will also be partial and unreliable and the models we use to make marks in our communities need to take account of this.

**Regional distinctiveness
is about marking
difference but it's how
we see what's different
and how we choose to
mark it that's important.**



EPIC (Eyre Peninsula in Concert), staged at Tcharkulda Rock on the Eyre Peninsula, 24 October 1998. Liz Davis & Bronte O'Brien

Situated knowledges and partial perspectives

In 1988 feminist theorist Donna Haraway coined the term 'situated knowledges' to describe her theory of partial perspective and the possibilities this offered to the construction of knowledge. The theory is one that I believe has particular relevance to those working in regional communities and with the representation of distinct identities. Haraway says:

I am arguing for politics ... of location, positioning and situating where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I'm arguing for a view from a body, always a complex contradictory structuring and structured body versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.

I too, would argue for the construction of knowledge and identity from a position which is specifically situated, actively constructed and therefore subject to change and reinterpretation. Perhaps I should give you an example.

The South Australian Country Arts Trust has recently appointed an officer to the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands in the Far North west. This appointment follows 18 months of extensive consultation and networking with the communities and art centres throughout the region. The Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands would be described as regionally distinct, whatever dictionary definition or theory of identity you chose to use.

Mark making in this environment is common, in fact intrinsic to life. Art and culture intertwine in a distinct expression of identity, place and spirituality. To work in this region is to encounter a culture which is both breathtaking and breaking down, where tradition and meaning compete with poverty, inadequate housing and the various addictions common throughout the entire country.

Coupled with extreme language barriers and physical isolation you probably have the ingredients for personal and professional failure. I'm proud to be able to say that this is not the case at this stage of our growing relationship and I firmly believe

that the theories of situated knowledges and partial perspectives have played a significant role in ensuring that this is so.

A reliable construction of knowledge

Having just suggested that identity in the marking of communities is a dangerous practice you could hardly expect me to begin to describe the Far North in any more detail. What is important however, are the processes we have used to ensure a reliable construction of knowledge. They are the stuff of all good community cultural development projects. They begin with an organisational commitment to a particular region and the communities within it. In the case of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands this included a very real budget allocation along with the provision of extensive staff time and travel. They involve developing networks of supportive mentors, partners you can trust and who share your passion and commitment to the project. We have worked closely with staff at Arts SA and the South Australian Museum, the Australia Council, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission,