

ARTWORK² is a group of arts activists who have been meeting since the 1980s to debate critical issues which connect art, life and people; provide support for community-based arts and cultural projects which ‘build bridges on the margins’ and advocate for new partnerships between communities and the public and private sectors. The principles and values of community cultural development inform our work.

We are interested in promoting projects, which celebrate and make connections between people, their stories, their identities and the social and economic life of communities.

Community Cultural Development: Connecting Art, Life and People

The focus of Artwork² has been to promote discussion and ideas around artists working in the public sphere, working with people in an interactive way to create art and to contribute to the cultural development of the people they work with. A variety of names (for example, community art, community cultural democracy, and new genre public art) has been applied to this area of work over the last 30 years, but for this purpose we will be describing the style of work we are advocating and discussing as community cultural development.

We can get a closer understanding of what we mean by considering the expression **connecting art, life and people**. This short phrase connects all the key ideas underpinning our idea of community cultural development.

Connecting

Our conception of community cultural development is founded on the idea of active engagement between an artist or cultural producer and the specific group they are working with. For this engagement to be real, both parties need to connect.

Real connection is vital on a number of levels. Firstly, in choosing to work with specific groups and peoples, artists will be working with diverse cultures that may be unfamiliar. It is our experience that to work with a specific group (for example, residents of a particular place), it is necessary to work within and respect their culture. Their culture is what has meaning for them. To work outside of their culture runs the risk of creating artworks that simply have no meaning for them, works that for them might be culturally redundant.

Connecting in a real and respectful sense with a group of people creates a space in which negotiation can take place. The range of projects that have been described identify that these sorts of projects are sites of learning for both the artists and the groups they engage in. Both parties need to learn about each other and each other's issues if the project is going to have meaning and be valued or relevant to both parties.

One of the issues to be negotiated will be process, or establishing how the project will proceed. While there are some general guidelines that can be referred to, both parties need to discuss and agree on a process for the project that is mutually acceptable. Proceeding on the basis of assumption rather than agreement can unwittingly jeopardise the whole project.

Once agreement is reached, all parties effectively own and are responsible for the success of the project. Whilst it takes some time in the initial stages of the project to reach agreements about how the project will operate, this step is critical to ensure that a very real cultural connection or partnership is created.

Art

Community cultural development is challenging for some because it is about working and thinking about art making in different ways. Firstly, it presumes that a range of people have a creative contribution to make, rather than creativity being the contribution of just the artist. Based on the assumption that all people can make a creative contribution, community cultural development projects create a process that allows a range of people to participate and creatively interact with each other in the making of art.

We might say that community cultural development projects are particularly democratic because they call for active participation from the community or group involved. The practice of community cultural development in this context is quite different to

studio-based practice. In order to be successful in this field artists and project organisers need to have a range of skills at their disposal.

It is impossible to draw up a 'textbook' approach to the practice of community cultural development, but our experience is that there is a direct relationship between the quality of the process in community cultural development projects and the artworks produced out of that process. Of primary importance is willingness by project organisers to work and respect the contribution of the members of the community they are working with. If this is missing, it is likely that the specific project will fail. The specific culture of the group engaged in the project will itself inform what might be appropriate practice. Some of the other skills, apart from the aesthetic and technical skills possessed by artists required for community cultural development, are described in the section on Practice.

Life

People talk about their experience of life and the issues that arise in their everyday living. The need to communicate and make meaning is a fundamental human need. From our point of view, the use of creative means to explicate an issue or situation by a group is community cultural development.

The issues that a group or community may want to address may not be art or aesthetic issues in themselves; this doesn't matter. The business of community cultural development is to give form to the issues, whatever they may be. The Waderbirds

project was concerned with environmental issues in South East Asia and the South Pacific. The project had interrelated artistic, scientific, environmental, political and educational dimensions.

In ordinary life most people experience issues and situations in a multi-perspective sense that brings together a range of dimensions such as those addressed in *Waderbirds*. We believe that community cultural development projects create an opportunity to bring a wide range of concerns together and explicate them in a creative way that builds on the culture of the group as the framework for whatever is being expressed.

Many people, including artists, have been concerned with the issue of making the arts more relevant or central to everyday life. We are suggesting that the gap between people and 'the arts' will be bridged if artworks speak to people's own real life issues and that the way those issues are aired or presented has meaning for them.

People

What we are concerned with are the concepts of diversity and community. We understand that our communities are diverse in terms of age, occupation, gender, ethnicity, culture, and geography. Traditionally in the arts (we're considering the Western tradition here), we have tended to universalise people in relation to art: that there is art and there are people and all combine to make one big happy art family. Our experience is that things don't work like this! Different groups or communities have their own

traditions and cultures that aren't immediately accessible to all others, despite the fact that they all might live in the one city.

We understand that it is communities or groups of people that create and possess cultures, and the culture of a community is inextricably linked to the identity of that community. By working within the cultural framework of a particular group, the identity of the group is enhanced and validated. We believe that this validation does in itself assist the development of independence and innovation in that group or community.

The visibility created by community cultural development projects enables communities, sometimes marginalized communities, to see themselves connected and acting in the wider world. This expression of difference or diversity, in other words the articulation of the identity of a community, strengthens both the community and therefore its culture and the wider society they belong to. Increasingly participation or involvement with arts and culture in our society is privatised or individualised. We believe that community cultural development, which generally takes place in public settings, is important for a wide range of social as well as cultural reasons.

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