

Creative Engagement

JON HAWKES

How does culture affect and relate to human activity and policy realms and what are the essential ingredients for keeping arts and culture on the public planning agenda.



Opening Night at Groundswell 2002: *Enchanted Ground*, a fantastic fire spectacular telling a traditional Wiradjuri creation story with representatives of the local Indigenous community and performers from the Flying Fruit Fly Circus. Devised by Annie Edney, Directed by Kim Walker. Photo courtesy Regional Arts NSW

This is blackfella country. I am a boat person (literally). I would like to thank those who know what it means to belong to this country, for the chance that my daughter (who was born here) has to learn what belonging may mean.

I will start by letting you know what I believe.

- A society's values are the basis upon which all else is built.
- These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture.
- The cultural and creative rights of Australians have been trivialised, ignored and denied.
- The government of a society cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions meaningfully affect the

directions society takes. Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as are social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability.

- The processes of public planning should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.
- Active community participation in arts practice creates a crucible in which the synergy that comes from collaborative effort can be directly experienced and productively channelled. No other activity provides such immediate and tangible evidence of the power and joy of cooperation. Participatory arts is an enormously useful tool in the community-building process. Indeed, it is the foundation of community-building.

Everything I'm about to say is built upon these principles.

Unless we are able to clearly demonstrate the truth and importance of these claims to communities and to decision-makers and suggest practical ways in which something can be done about them, we may as well go home. In the small book I've written for the Victorian Cultural Development Network, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, that is exactly what I've tried to do – to develop an accessible language that clarifies the role that a cultural framework in general, and participatory arts in particular, can play in the building, wellbeing and sustainability of community.

The fact that the City of Port Phillip, an inner metropolitan Melbourne local government, has recently revised its corporate plan exactly along the lines

... community is based on the experience of being an empowered participant in the negotiation of common goals and engaging in social action ...



Groundswell 2002 workshop session 'Indigenous Arts Practices and Engaging with Local Communities' - with Charlie Trindall and Fay Nelson, Regional Indigenous Cultural Workers. Photo courtesy Regional Arts NSW

proposed in *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, encourages me to believe that I'm on the right track. Even though it's a slim volume (it's very short – 70 or so pages – a busy councillor could knock it off in a couple of lunch breaks), I've tried to make clear in it the essential connections between art, culture, human rights, community, governance, democracy and social policy. Possibly the most critical of these connections, at least to this audience, is the one between art and culture.

Defining culture

First, I'll explain how I use the 'culture' word. I use 'culture' in what is known as its 'anthropological' sense (in fact, it is the sense in which it is used in the *1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights*.) That is, culture describes our values and aspirations, the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and the ways of life these processes produce. This usage of 'culture' can be encapsulated as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense'.

What I'm saying is that of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; and that we need to recognise and facilitate this process in the ways that we organise our society. In this context, the concept of community becomes extremely important. For me, community is based on the experience of being an empowered participant in the negotiation of common goals and engaging in social action with one's peers towards those goals. That is, community does not describe an object; it describes a sensation – the sensation of sharing, of belonging, of connectedness, of common cause.

Governance

There are obviously significant parallels between culture and community. But a third idea has to be brought into play before they can intersect – and that is, governance. Governance brings these interpretations of culture and community into direct impact with the real world. In this context, the foundation, and essential purpose, of governance is the democratisation and enlivening of the ways in which a society develops a sense of itself and applies that sense to its daily life.

These processes can be described as cultural action. It is through cultural action that we make sense of our existence and the environment we inhabit, that we find common expressions of our values and needs, and that we meet the challenges presented by our continuing stewardship of the planet. Without culture, we are, quite literally, not human. And a system of governance that lacks an integrated cultural perspective is equally bereft. Not least, because of the essential relationships between the three ideas.

Thus – **culture** is the process of making meaning and values; **communities** are built on negotiating shared values and the growth of group identity; and **governance** enlivens and democratises these processes. Culture, community and governance then, are in an endless dance. To omit culture (the making of meaning) from this movement is to have rhythm but no lyric. And without the lyric it is easy to forget what the point of the dance really is – and what is the point? Perhaps 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', as the founders of one of the earliest modern democracies so concisely put it. But, where do the arts fit into this perspective?

Culture and the arts

If culture describes how we make sense and the results of that sense, then art describes that aspect of cultural action in which creativity and imagination are the key drivers, where we discover meaning and community in ways that are intuitive, non-lateral and unpredictable, irrational even. With the arts, we can imagine the future, unpack the past, and confront the present. We can predict change, focus our visions and face our fears.

Unleashing the creative imagination can bring about the most extraordinary manifestations of vision and purpose. Indeed, many have claimed that the arts are the primary language through which meaning is discovered, invented and contested.

Participation and the arts

Participatory arts, the area I'm most interested in, describes empowered and hands-on community involvement in these processes. Its practice embodies the principle that we are all creative and that we all have a right, a responsibility and a desire to be actively involved in making our own culture. And that if we don't, it is inevitable that we will become alienated, disconnected and mightily pissed off.

There is a mass of research which demonstrates that the insights and experiences which participants gain through these activities make it easier for them to become better and more effective citizens, that utilising these practices in programs such as community education, community-building, health promotion, cross-cultural understanding etc. will enhance organisational responsiveness,



Jon Hawkes speaking at Groundswell 2002.
Photo: Rachel Vincent

Collaboration and co-operation ... are fundamentally essential to communities being able to make their own meaning, their own culture.

delivery and flexibility. Furthermore, embedding these practices in the everyday processes of governance has the capacity to improve community engagement, communications, decision-making, policy development, expression of goals and evaluation.

So, on the one hand I'm saying that it is a basic democratic right for every community to have access to the resources to enable them to make art, to exercise their creativity, to make and express their own meanings. On the

other hand I'm saying that participatory arts is an invaluable instrumental tool in the process of democratic governance, in the development of dynamic social communications, in the delivery of public services, and in the achievement of a wide range of social objectives, including, not least, the building of community.

Collaborative creativity

The sort of long-term sustainable social change that is really needed (and I'll come to that in a minute) can only be achieved through the widespread application of participatory arts activities. Why? Because collaborative creativity is at the foundation of identity formation and purpose, and without these, everything else is ashes and dust. And talking of ashes and dust, allow me a brief digression on the issue of collaboration and co-operation, which, I believe, are fundamentally essential to communities being able to make their own meaning, their own culture.

Despite the claims of anthemic ditties like 'Advance Australia Fair', we are not a land of abundance, and no one knows this better than those who live outside the cities. Which is why, perhaps, that notions of cooperation found their healthiest roots in rural Australia, and why it is in the bush that the strongest struggles against privatising public services have taken place.

When I was growing up on King Island, the biggest shop in Currie, the island's main village, was the Co-op. If you wanted anything other than fresh food, you went to the Co-op. King Island in the late fifties was no hot bed of socialism, it was simply a community of ordinary, sensible people who knew that being isolated meant that pooling resources was the most effective way to get things done. In so doing, they were ensuring that whatever profit there might be was ploughed back into the community and that it was a good strategy.

In the early sixties, my family moved to the Huon Valley, south of Hobart. Apples, hops and berries were the fruit of the land and the farmers had developed all sorts of cooperative structures to harvest, package and distribute their produce. All of these have long since

disappeared, along with most of the farmers, but their legacy lives on. Some argue that Australian agriculture, indeed Australian society, was founded on the cooperative movement.

This is not a position that the free marketers would wish to see promoted, but in the experience and memories of those of us who grew up outside the big smokes, it remains blindingly obvious.

In conditions of chronic scarcity, it is abundantly clear that the only way to survive is with a little help from one's friends. Competition may help the cream rise to the top where there are a thousand wannabes for every one true champion, but in an environment in which we are all struggling, looking out for one's mates, welcoming strangers, and all lending a hand are not old-fashioned clichés – they are essential survival techniques, techniques that city folks would be well advised to learn.

Resources

Having got that off my chest, I should say that while I'm quite happy to extol the virtues of community control and management of scarce resources, I really want to talk about the most abundant and fruitful resource that we have. This resource isn't simply renewable – it's infinite. It's our imaginations. Sadly, the existence, let alone the real value of this resource is not widely recognised. Why? Because it can't be measured – we are still in the thrall of a way of thinking that believes that if something can't be measured then it can't exist, and that if it can be measured, the only proper dealings for it are its sale and purchase.

Despite all the efforts of the triple bottom liners, the 'market' continues to be touted as the saviour according to this perverse religion known as economic rationalism. We will all, it is fervently propagated, prosper mightily from the 'trickle down effect'. Allow the 'market' every opportunity to do as it wishes, privatise and/or corporatise government, deregulate everything, reduce taxes and we'll all have jobs and everything will be just dandy.

Again, no one knows better than those who live outside the cities, just what a crock this line of thinking has turned out

to be. Nevertheless, most of our designated leaders still appear to be disciples of the notion that what is good for big business is good for the nation – that ‘economic development’ is the solution to all problems. They have forgotten that material riches are simply one way of trying to achieve other, far more important goals.



‘Enchanted Ground’ performed by the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, at the opening night at Groundswell 2002. Image courtesy of Regional Arts NSW.

Values and goals

Having recently celebrated ‘Celebrating Democracy Week’, it may be a good thing if this talk goes a little way towards stimulating the debate about the goals and values inherent in a democratic system and how these values might effectively find expression and influence the way we govern ourselves. As you will have already noticed, it is issues like these that I believe are at the heart of culture, of making sense, of expressing purpose.

Let’s start with an expression of the values that underpin the democracy we wish to live in. I imagine we all share a commitment to being actively involved in the development and maintenance of a society in which all citizens are respected, engaged, empowered and fulfilled, as well as healthy, housed, well-fed, safe, and informed.

The second set of goals – health, shelter, sustenance, security and education – could, at least theoretically, be achieved under any political system. The first set of goals – respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment – would appear to be unique to systems that claim to be democratic. Yet, so far, few democratic systems, and certainly not ours, have come close to achieving this first set of goals, let alone in any sustainable fashion. Intolerance, alienation, powerlessness and dissatisfaction have not been done away with. The democratic dream remains exactly that.

One of the chief reasons for this sorry state is that we have concentrated on achieving the second set (health, shelter, sustenance, security and education – often called the basics) in the belief that, if we get them right, then the first set (respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment) will inevitably follow. This has in fact, not happened. This ordering of social priorities has been further skewed by the elevation of ‘material prosperity’ to the top of the list. Rather than recognising that economic development is merely one of a number of responses for achieving other goals, it has become an end in itself.

The primacy of economic imperatives is beginning, little by little, to be eroded: the triple bottom line, *Local Agenda 21*, ecologically sustainable development are all conceptual attempts to get our priorities into an order that reflects our democratic vision. But not only do we find ourselves in a society where the priorities are back to front, we’re in one where the process of working them out is back to front.

Community and democracy

I recently attended a seminar, set up by the Victorian State Government, on community-building. In reply to a question from a councillor from local government about what ongoing processes existed for communities to influence state government policy, the senior bureaucrat on the podium responded that the ballot box was the process. Political parties present platforms and the one that most of like becomes policy. Ticking a box once every

three years is democracy. No wonder so many of us feel alienated, powerless and dissatisfied.

In a vital society, the meaning we make of our lives is something we do together and continually, and should not be an activity left to others, no matter how skilled, or representative they may claim to be. Politicians have begun to bemoan the apathy of the citizenry and to promote ways of re-engaging the body politic. This rhetoric will remain exactly that until they recognise that in an engaged democracy, the ideas actually emerge from community debate, from the constant, often fractious and difficult contestation of meaning at the base. Being offered a menu of barely differentiated options from above does not encourage engagement.

As I’ve already said, this is cultural action, and it’s an arena in which the arts can be extraordinarily potent. At this very moment, there’s a community-building project taking place in central Victoria called ‘Small Town Big Picture’ and is being coordinated by La Trobe University and the Cultural Development Network. Utilising a wide range of arts practices, it has been exceptionally successful in engaging local communities in articulating the big issues that are important to them. This project was running for some years before the arts were introduced and there has been an overwhelming growth in community interest since some creativity was added to the mix.

In *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, I write:

A society makes or discovers meaning through its arts. In our pursuit of a democracy that really does engage all citizens that facilitates active participation from the entire spectrum of the body politic, the democratisation of arts practice has to be at the forefront of our strategies.

How can a community develop a conscious, symbolic and effective expression of its own values, meanings and aspirations (that is, culture) without having developed its own creative capacities (that is, arts skills)?

No longer can we be content to leave the creation of meaning to the 'experts'. Yes, it is wonderful to live in a society in which those who choose to devote their entire lives to art are cherished and respected. But this should not diminish our own confidence in making meaning, it should not allow us to become lazy, embarrassed, passive witnesses, silent consumers, mere customers. The new rhetoric is 'engagement' – the first engagement we should have is with arts practice.

Getting one's program right is all very well, but what's really needed is systemic, structural and attitudinal change, particularly from those who have accepted the responsibility to run our society.

Why? Because the arts are the creative imagination at work (and play). Its techniques involve improvisation, intuition, spontaneity, lateral thought, imagination, co-operation, serendipity, trust, inclusion, openness, risk-taking, provocation, surprise, concentration, unorthodoxy, deconstruction, innovation, fortitude and an ability and willingness to delve beneath the surface, beyond the present, above the practical and around the fixed. These are the aspects of human behaviour that social scientists have identified as being the source and manifestation of creativity and innovation – the essential elements for the survival of the species.

An innovative society is open-minded, curious, compassionate and lively; it respects and embraces

difference. In so being, it is able to meet every challenge and adapt to changing circumstances. But it can only become so if its citizens are comfortable with applying their creative imaginations to new and changing situations.

A society in which arts practice is not endemic risks its future. The support of professional artists is a laudable policy but far more important is offering all citizens, and their offspring, the opportunity to actively participate in arts practice – to make their own culture.

Creativity, engagement, cohesiveness, well-being and respect for difference will be inevitable outcomes.

Communities need access to, and facility with, the tools that come with arts practice in order to find meaningful ways to express their values. Actively involving communities in arts practice (as against product consumption) is the essential starting point to the exercise of generating community-owned expressions of what matters to them.

Before concluding I think you may find it useful if I run through some of the ways that the long-term social impact of the arts can be maximised. As a short preamble, we should remember that there's been at least a thirty-year period of a de facto strategy of public funding of 'pilot projects' in this arena. There are hundreds of examples of isolated instances of arts projects that have been intended to produce social change and that have, in many cases, actually done so.

The problem is that most of these are retained only in the memory of the participants. Anecdotes abound – documentation and evaluation are sparse. Nevertheless, particularly in Britain, a body of literature is beginning to develop. Beyond identifying Francois Matarasso as my all-time favourite researcher, and volunteering to email a reading list to anyone that's interested, I won't delve any deeper at this point.

Program development and the arts

What I will say is that past efforts have given us a heap of signposts when it comes to program development and design.

What we can learn is that:

- Initiatives emanating from communities are the best place to start, particularly those which emerge from tangible issues, no matter how small, which are of immediate and real concern to those communities.
- Arts practices can be productively utilised in almost any context, to illuminate almost any problem, and that artists and arts facilitators, if chosen carefully, can offer a perspective and commitment that will have profoundly positive results. Traditionally inarticulate communities can become startlingly eloquent when they engage in arts practices.
- Arts practices can be usefully applied to initiate community-building; that is, in the original articulation and expression of community values and goals.
- Support agencies need to be able to respond imaginatively and flexibly to community initiatives, not least by having the capacity to provide creative advice and support at the very beginnings of the developmental process.
- Support that focusses on the generation of sustainable local leadership, capacity, networks and partnerships will produce the best results. Furthermore, the development of sustainability takes time and long-term commitment.
- Community initiative, control and ownership are imperatives. The challenge is to facilitate these attributes in ways that promote inclusiveness, equity and creativity.
- Participation must have integrity. It is the liberation of community creativity and imagination that produces the most profound results. And it is through the direct experience of collaborative creativity that the most profound community effects are likely to emerge, rather than through the resulting artefacts.

Getting one's program right is all very well, but what's really needed is systemic, structural and attitudinal change,

particularly from those who have accepted the responsibility to run our society.

In *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, I argue that the most important initiative that could be taken is the adoption of a cultural framework.

A cultural framework

We should introduce a cultural perspective into the public policy-making crucible. You are all probably aware of the current systems based on a tri-ocular perspective – environmental, social and economic. In *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, I argue that, without a fourth perspective, without taking into account the sources, the nature and the implications of the values that underpin action, processes of evaluation can become empty rituals. This extra perspective would normalise the conscious presence of values in the policy development and evaluation processes. A cultural framework would allow activities to be assessed against criteria like:

- What has been the quality of community input into the development of the actual and proposed activities under review?
- To what extent are these activities reflective of the values and ways of life of the communities upon which they have impacted or will impact?
- Do these activities improve the capacity of communities to act and interact?

In *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, I argue that without an active consciousness of the values which inform our actions, and without clear, creative and engaging processes for facilitating community expression and debate of those values and their practical application, social action is rootless, directionless and ultimately counter-productive. But in the end it all comes down to attitudinal change. The foundation of all these proposals lies in the mind and in the will. Unless attitudes change, nothing else will. Unless the agents of governance are able to trust in the creative capacity of communities, tangibly commit to democracy, be prepared to devolve control, and go beyond a service delivery model, we will continue to spin in unproductive, and ultimately unsustainable, circles.

These are the arguments I've put together in *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability* and which are designed to convince decision-makers that they'd be mad not take account of culture in their daily schedules. I hope they may be useful to you in your efforts to get arts practice on to the agenda.

But let's not leap off one bandwagon (the arts as a tool of economic development, the arts as an 'industry') and on to another – the arts as agent of social inclusion – even though it might look as if it will offer a more comfortable ride. Or at least, this time, let's try to do it without losing a sense of the value and necessity of creativity in and of itself.

Yes, the practice of the arts can produce a plethora of positive social outcomes, but its true value is far greater than that. Creativity is our channel to mysterious places larger than ourselves, it is the name we give to our capacity to make something out of nothing, to transform an idea into reality, to 'bring into being', as the Greeks put it, to become fully human.

I know that none of this rhetoric will have much appeal to an accountant, which is why the social impact line is so attractive, but nevertheless, if we wish to live in a world in which all people have the right, the opportunity and the means to become fully realised human beings, then we are all obligated to continue to struggle to find ways of effectively expressing what the sad and constricted economic rationalists would wish to dismiss as outmoded spirituality, wishy-washy mysticism or New Age irrationality ■

This article is an extract from the presentation delivered at *Groundswell*, the 2002 Regional Arts Australia National Conference, held in Albury Wodonga in October 2002, hosted and coordinated by Regional Arts NSW in partnership with Regional Arts Board Albury Wodonga.

For more information on *Groundswell*, the 2002 Regional Arts Australia national conference in Albury Wodonga, 10–13 October 2002, go to: <http://www.region-alarternsw.com.au/groundswell/>

Creativity is our channel to mysterious places larger than ourselves, it is the name we give to our capacity to make something out of nothing.

Jon Hawkes is author of The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning and Director of Community Music Victoria. He continues as an independent cultural advisor after having been the Director of the Australian Centre for International Theatre (1991–98) and Director of the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council (1982–87). Jon is also a founding member of Circus Oz and the Australian Performing Group.

The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning is published by the Cultural Development Network of Victoria in association with Common Ground Publishing. Copies can be purchased from www.theHumanities.com Jon Hawkes, the author of this paper and *The Fourth Pillar*, can be contacted on 03 9489 2668 or artslink@vicnet.net.au. Jon is available to talk to community, arts and/or governance groups on arts and cultural topics.

For more information contact the Cultural Development Network of Victoria – Judy Spokes, Executive Officer on 03 9658 8850 or judspo@melbourne.vic.gov.au