

The Imaginary conference

Two pioneers in the movement trace the evolution of the debates, the processes and the roles of community artist towards community cultural development practice as it is today.

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Imagine this. At the end of the twentieth century a national conference entitled something like “Art and Community – New Century, New Connections” is about to begin in a major Australian city. Many of the diverse conference-goers have participated in hundreds of different projects involving “arts in a community context” or “community-based cultural practice”. Exhibitions, banners and displays of their successful projects deck the walls of the conference venue. Things in short look good. But suddenly an increasingly heated discussion starts up on the floor of the conference; an argument between a woman named Naomi and a man called Colin which forestalls the opening ceremony of the Imaginary Conference.

Colin describes himself an “artsworker” writing for “community theatre” as part of what he calls “the community arts”. In a casual sort of way, as you do, he observes to Naomi that in his opinion the “arts” have virtually disappeared from the community arts movement. But Naomi is a “cultural development officer” employed by a local Council and she, a little less casually, expresses the opinion that old-fashioned community arts have been replaced thank goodness by “community cultural development” which is at least sensitive to the actual “cultures” of real people, and also socially

useful. “Culture”, according to her, is a notion which includes a broad range of activities from gardening and cooking to music making and story telling, and consequently takes us way beyond the tastes in entertainment of a powerful elite which is what “art” has come to mean.

“Furthermore,” says Naomi (who admits she has left her notebook of exact definitions back at the council office), “community cultural development is a communal and collaborative process whereby people are able to work together to bring about improved understandings and even changes in their daily lives, and is thus unashamedly political.” (She knows where Colin is coming from, and where this conversation is headed.) “It is also a process which involves artists working with communities and using creativity interpreted in the broadest sense, as a way of illuminating and changing people’s lives rather than merely reflecting them. There is a direct connection between the practice and the political, social and cultural context of today!”

This speech, one might imagine, is pretty good for an off-the-cuff argument but Colin is less than impressed. He’s bumped into Naomi once or twice before and he feels that despite her somewhat cavalier use of the word “political” the

political guts of community cultural development are virtually non-existent. He knows what “political” means, having cut his teeth making documentary films with the likes of the Builder’s Labourers’ Federation while Naomi was still at school, and has even read some Marx. “Political” means class war; not making low-grade stuff with a randomly chosen group of people just to make them feel good, but explaining to working-class communities how they’re exploited. And anyway, Naomi is a council officer, a bureaucrat, and as such she couldn’t possibly understand the true power of art. The conference, still to begin, erupts as Naomi mutters something inaudible about stupid, patronising old lefties and launches into a diatribe about the necessity to respect other people’s cultures and work collaboratively with them while trying to hit Colin with an already redundant rolled-up conference agenda.

A third person, Shane, is listening. Shane, a newcomer to such forms of intellectual discourse, has been attracted to the conference by the promotional material which spoke of “New Connections” amongst like-minded people. Shane now wonders what if anything could unite such a group. They throw words of ever-changing meaning around like fire-balls invented by Terminus, the Greek god of



This Makes Me Feel, artwork selected from Visionary Images Billboard Development Project, Melbourne 1999. Salvation Army Crossroads Network. Artist: Maria Filippow.

Terminology (and Havoc). Shane wonders if such people could ever develop a language which would allow them in a reasonably peaceful manner to analyse their own work in “the community arts” and/or in “community cultural development”.

This paper is written for Shane. Many of the people at the conference would probably find it appallingly simplistic, patronising and reductionist. Yet it appears to be necessary. So where to begin?

This burgeoning dispute between Naomi and Colin, which is starting to gather a fairly disputatious crowd, is partly explained by the history of the development of “community arts” into “community cultural development” over the last 20 years, and so we need a small dose of that history to contextualise it.

Democratisation of the arts

“Community arts” is a term that obtained official currency in Australia with the creation of the Community Arts

Committee of the Australia Council for the Arts in 1973, which became a full Board in 1978. The Australia Council had consisted of six other Boards funding Theatre, Literature, Craft, Music, Dance and Aboriginal Arts. Much of what these Boards (with the exception of the Aboriginal Arts Board) subsidised was decried by advocates of the community arts as the “elitist arts” often created by individual artists for “the dominant culture” of a small but powerful section of society (for example only four or five per cent of the population go to the theatre). The creation of the Community Arts Board was strongly resisted by the other Boards of the Australia Council but its supporters managed to argue it through as part of a necessary program of “democratisation of the arts”, which entailed bringing “the arts” to those previously locked out of access to them by economic, geographic or social circumstances. As such, it made the Australia Council better able to argue that it was living up to its charter commitment to “access and participation”. For most artists of the time, this was initially a

period of “art” *for* “communities”, often defined as broadly as “ordinary people” or sometimes more specifically as “working people”, who were seen as materially and culturally “disadvantaged” by the modes of distribution of Australia Council funds. (This was probably where Colin entered the process.)

Concomitant with such activity there was an increasing focus on what was meant by “community”, to some extent induced by the increasing use by the Community Arts Board of what Tim Rowse has called ‘decentralised patronage’¹, whereby community groups became the recipients and administrators of funds rather than artists or companies of artists. This led to increasing levels of consultation with particular “communities”, defined by such factors as geographical location, ethnicity, gender, class etc., and by the fact that they coalesced around an organisational structure or a social welfare agency or the like. As a political strategy for those engaged in the work, and “politics” was never far away in the 1970s, this focus on the notion of “community” emerged from

the British New Left embrace of “community” as a well-spring of political activism represented by Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson,² which had been picked up by Owen Kelly and others associated with the Shelton Trust, an organisation of community artswriters in Britain, in the 1970s and 1980s.³

This phase of a developing history marks a drift towards making art *with* particular communities, which initially entailed strategies like “immersion” in particular communities or research via formal or informal interview as a means of “inhabiting” a community, even if only temporarily. It is also marked by the steady emergence of the notion that “communities” didn’t *lack* “culture”, but that they had perfectly good cultures of their own which were marginalised by a “dominant culture”. This entailed a shift from “the democratisation of culture” to the more radical notion of “cultural democracy”, which assumes a plurality of cultures and a democratic right that each should be able to be practiced, enjoyed and even supported by funding. This shift takes real effect in the next phase, and perhaps most clearly in work done under the aegis of the Art and Working Life Incentive Program (introduced within the Council in 1982), which was important in assuming, not that workers had no culture, but that they had a distinctive culture built round the union movement which merely needed some support and encouragement via funding to be brought back to life.

Cultural pluralism

The discovery that there wasn’t just “culture” but that there were “cultures” was further fuelled by explorations under the Multicultural Arts Incentive Program, introduced at around the same time. People weren’t necessarily “disadvantaged” because they didn’t know, appreciate or even enjoy “art”. “Culture” and “art” may not even be the same thing: “art” may, in fact, merely be a means of asserting the superiority of the cultural pleasures of the dominant Anglo-European “culture”. This new embrace of “cultural pluralism” also problematised the notion of “artistic excellence”, so that it no longer seemed sensible to assume that it was a quality which inhered in a

particular category of cultural activity (ie that it was something to which a string quartet could aspire but a bouzouki player, for example, could not).

The shift to *with*, and the embrace of cultural pluralism, also entailed the steady redefinition of the role of the “artist”. The Community Arts Committee of the mid-1970s began by funding community “artists” but steadily shifted towards the term community “artswriter”, which suggested a redefinition of the artistic role to something nearer to that of a tradesperson who would place his/her skills at the service of a community.

The consequent development of participatory models, in which communities cease being seen as audiences (consumers) or sources of stories/information, and become *makers* of their own culture, was accompanied by the introduction of the European idea of the “socio-cultural animateur”. The animateur’s task was to encourage the sense of confidence demoralised communities may need, or to break the nexus of cultural consumerism which is the basic stance encouraged by both “high art” and “mass culture”, which the community arts movement saw as its twin enemies for many years. This role was substantially encouraged by a funding policy shift in the mid-1980s, indicated by the change in title of the Community Arts Board to the Community Cultural Development Board.

‘Radical welfare’

This change in both terminology and practice pushed community arts in the direction of radical welfare.⁴ The central function of community cultural development became less the production of “art” and more the consolidation and development of dynamic “communities” as purposive coalitions able to act in their own best interests (a sort of neo-Trotskyite notion of “community-formation” as a prelude to political activism). In a sense communities were to be “trained up” to do so by the experience of engagement in a project. Thus the aim of a project became not so much the making of “art” as the making and celebrating of “community” through

what increasingly came to be called “cultural action”: “community” increasingly became less the *object* of projects and more their *goal*.

It also led to the Community Cultural Development Board embarking on attempts to place cultural work on the agendas of local councils, social welfare agencies, Ethnic Communities Councils etc. via schemes like CEAD (Community, Environment, Art and Design) and funding or part-funding of a bureaucratic layer of Community Arts/Community Cultural Development Officers in a range of settings (and this is probably where Naomi came in). “Cultural planning”⁵ in community-based work was initially a part of the strategy of constructing this bureaucratic layer and placing “community *cultural* development” on the agenda of those concerned with what was increasingly being called “community development”. It soon became part of the rubric of funding applications. Community cultural development was now seen as not just a worthy project with a particular “disadvantaged” community but a long-term process requiring the planning of a sequence of overlapping or interlacing projects with a specific set of social goals which clients were constantly enjoined to find ways of measuring the achievement of. This impulse is reflected in the Community Cultural Development Unit’s 1994 commissioning of Deidre Williams to undertake a research project designed to identify and find means of quantifying the social benefits of a number of funded projects.⁶

While all this tends to imply that “community arts” was brought into being by the Australia Council’s decision to fund it (and some have claimed as much?), it is worth pointing out that communities have been engaged in singing, telling stories, enacting rituals and constructing ceremonials without the involvement of funding agencies or professional artswriters throughout human history. Remnants of this “DIY culture” surround us, and are manifested in everything from garage bands composing their own music to country women’s craft groups, but all have been subjected to the pressure of commodification which capitalism gives rise to. As “culture” becomes commodity, and as

consumption of cultural artefacts replaces production, the necessity to encourage people to “make” their own culture as opposed to consuming somebody else’s has given the state a role to play in dignifying their activity, by funding and the intervention of “animateurs” if necessary.

Product, process and empowerment

Meanwhile back at the Imaginary Conference, Shane listens as Colin recalls how way back in the late 1970s he began writing for community theatre because he rejected the elitism of mainstream theatre and wished to return to much older traditions of theatre “for the people”. So Colin wrote for working-class people whose lives and culture (often still thought of as singular at this point) were marginalised by the dominant culture of a mainly male, white, Anglo-Saxon ruling-class. Collaborating with like-minded professionals in the many small community theatre companies which began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, he sought through the making of “good art” in accessible popular forms to change the oppressive circumstances of the lives of the people he wrote for. All good art, for Colin, must possess not only an aesthetic dimension but also a political function.

Colin cites a successful example of such work. In 1979 he wrote a play called *Mesh* for Sidetrack Theatre in Sydney. *Mesh* was based on first-hand experience and research amongst factory workers who suffer a horrific rate of industrial accidents. It was a short social realist narrative, not unlike the naturalism of popular television drama with which its audience was presumably familiar, and designed for performances in workplaces.

It told its story through three characters who typified aspects of the workforce it was intended for: an Anglo-Saxon foreman, a Turkish female suffering from repetition strain injury and a Greek male affronted by having to work with a female Turkish co-worker. The professional actors used in the first production were two Anglo-Saxon males and a Jewish female. *Mesh* was toured nationally by Sidetrack and enthusiastically received by working-class audiences in workplaces. It also appealed to Colin’s peers, and was

subsequently produced and toured by a number of not entirely dissimilar companies around Australia.

Furthermore it was presented on request for lawyers and judges employed in the workers compensation courts in New South Wales who afterwards credited the play with having helped them in their reform of the State laws governing industrial safety. The play was thus, as far as he was concerned, artistically and politically successful.

Colin now triumphantly rests on his aging laurels – for a moment. Naomi, who points out that she was 12 years old when *Mesh* hit the factory floor, is less than impressed. Meanwhile, Colin is under attack from another quarter. Another delegate is claiming that he’s long been of the opinion that the community arts movement has produced a lot of bad, old, boring art, and a sociologist is agreeing, claiming that the movement may have got good at *process* but has been notoriously bad at *product*. Someone else, an old friend no less, is launching into a diatribe about the need to embrace the avant-garde, to create “occasions for intelligence” in community contexts. Another is waving a video of some postmodern street performances at him. He decides to take them on, thinks better of it, and returns his attention to Naomi, as will we, for the moment.

Colin concedes that his early smash hit is perhaps receding into the mists of antiquity, but that’s not the point. But Naomi has a long list of other problems.

“Why no Greek and Turkish actors?” Colin concedes the point, but in his defence cites the fact that there weren’t a lot of them about at the time, and that they at least went searching for some soon after.

“And more to the point”, she continues, “why professional actors at all? Why weren’t factory workers themselves encouraged to perform the play? And wasn’t it patronising to use a cultural form (theatre, and the well-made play at that) which was foreign to them, which didn’t come from their own cultural experience? And were they given any say in the making of the play, and how it might represent them?”

“Well we talked to a lot of them...”

“In fact they had no power in the process. They were actually *dis*-empowered!”

“Good God!” cries Colin. “*I dis*-empowered the community?”

“Yes.” says Naomi. “You may have researched your play in the community and you may have thought you were speaking for the community – but what you did was not made *with*, or *of*, or *by* the community!”

“But if something was made completely *by* the community then people like me and even people like you would be unable to contribute anything. We’d all be redundant!”

Naomi herself baulks at such a conclusion. If community cultural development projects were not only *in*, *for*, *with* and *of* the community but also, above all, *by* the community – then all artsworkers are redundant?

Colin pauses. Didn’t Donald Horne, when he was Chair of the Australia Council way back in the 1980s, write something very like that in a book?⁸ He tries, very hard, to dismiss the thought.

Shane (remember Shane?) wonders quite a lot of things, but particularly if the people at the Imaginary Conference have the courage to examine such a proposition.

Colin and Naomi don’t just at the moment, and so we digress, returning to the debate Colin has recently sidestepped, which is hotting up around him.

Artistic excellence and innovation

A little bit more history (more conjectural because it’s still happening).

The shift towards radical welfare heralded by the change in name of the Community Arts Board to the Community Cultural Development Board consolidated particular sorts of community arts processes, but it also gave rise to a crisis of confidence in the movement in the early 1990s. This was perhaps partly

induced by a stance reflected in Gay Hawkins's closing comments, in her history of the community arts program in the Australia Council, *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras*, about the "movement's" success at making "community" and failure at making "art"; at "process" over "product".⁹ It was also partly induced by the increasing unwillingness of the other artform Boards of the Australia Council to continue co-funding work which they found difficult to square with the old notions of "artistic excellence" which were regaining ground lost during the period of maximum influence of the CCDU (the 1980s). "Social benefit" was all very well, but that was more the responsibility of social welfare agencies than of the Australia Council for *the Arts*, wasn't it?

As "artistic excellence" once again became the dominant criterion for appealing to the Australia Council, community artworkers were thrown into the arms of social welfare agencies (some redefined as "community development"), and many were happy there. Others weren't and were forced to rethink if they wanted to continue working professionally. "Artistic innovation" became an increasingly popular criterion to appeal to, and led to much flirting with the avant-garde and the postmodern, practitioners of which were also chasing the same ever-diminishing pot of gold. "Artistic innovation" has legitimated the exploration of an exciting range of cultural forms in community contexts: multimedia, video, popular music, opera, skateboarding, postmodern performance etc. It has also allowed the possibility of working within the cultural forms of specific communities, which probably didn't happen often enough in the 1980s. But it may not have always done much for "process". What was clear, though, was that plays like *Mesh* were unlikely to be seen as models of the sort of "artistic innovation" which some of the movement started to see as the way forward.

Some of the history of developments in practice may be evident in the following.

In 1999 BHP closed its oldest steelworks in Newcastle, and chose to do so with an "arts festival", which was funded by the company itself, but also by the Community Cultural Development Fund

of the Australia Council. In 1975 Australia Council funding might have led, we believe, to the making of a piece of angry agitprop written and performed by a troupe of professionals after a brief process of consultation with militant sectors of the workforce and the relevant unions. Their show, possibly called "BHP Are Bastards", would have been designed for working-class audiences and been about the callousness of global capital. In 1985 this would have been more likely to have taken the form of a far more conventional play for such an audience, once again written and performed by a troupe of professionals but this time based on an exhaustive oral history process of interviews with the victims of the closure and made in fairly close consultation with them. In 1995 we would have expected a play, written by a writer in close consultation with volunteer members of the community in question, facilitated by a small team of professionals hired for the project, and performed by the workers themselves.

When the closure was eventually announced in 1998 it in fact led the Workers' Cultural Action Committee of Newcastle Trades Hall Council to devise a set of interlocking projects which included a sculpture project in part designed to offer metal workers a broader sense of what could be done with the skills their work had developed in them; a photography project which led to an exhibition; an oral history project and writing workshop which led to a book; and a theatre project which drew on material generated in the photography and oral history projects in a piece of "verbatim theatre" on the ramifications of the closure. All of this happened within the framework, or at least around the edges, of a much larger "festival" (although we're not too sure what anybody had to celebrate) which included another play written by John O'Donoghue, an established local playwright who had worked at BHP many years before, and staged by Freewheels, the local theatre-in-education company. The centrepiece of the "festival" was an amazing performance in and around one of the huge sheds at the steelworks by members of the workforce and the broader community, local choirs and brass bands and a fairly large number of professional artworkers, which

included, among other things, performances of little plays by local primary schools, mime artists, stiltwalkers, avant garde performance artists, trapeze artists, an oratorio, and a finale which included dancing forklifts and a fire sculpture. It encompassed a celebration of working lives, an exploration of community history, and even the odd expression of hostility to BHP (for example, in the glorious moment when a group of primary school kids in boiler suits held up individual placards which spelt out BHP SUX to a crowd including various uncomfortable executives of the company on a flying visit from Melbourne). The performance, and the festival, broached almost every model of community arts work imaginable, attracted huge crowds and national press coverage, and drew the workers together momentarily before they went their separate ways to early voluntary retirement or long-term unemployment...

As "culture" becomes commodity, and as consumption of cultural artefacts replaces production, the necessity to encourage people to "make" their own culture as opposed to consuming somebody else's has given the state a role to play in dignifying their activity, by funding and the intervention of "animateurs" if necessary.



Fleay's Frog puppet created by artist, Leisa Riggs, for Splash!, to be held on the Sunshine Coast in 2002.
Photo: Greg Thompson

In, for, with, of and by, the community

Back in 1991 we published a paper on community theatre which suggested the usefulness of the prepositions “for” and “with” as a means of mapping community-based practices.¹⁰ Rather than offering them as an either/or choice, we described them as either ends of a spectrum, which rendered them a little vague. Naomi’s addition to the lexicon of “in”, “of” and “by”, which she may have drawn from an American journal article by Richard Geer,¹¹ widens that spectrum and offers the possibility of a little more precision, although the use of the terms only bears a very tangential relationship to Geer’s. The map it allows her to draw of community cultural development practice is based, in her mind, on the power relationship between communities and artists and it runs, essentially, as follows:

In: Artists immerse themselves within a community but have total control or power over all the processes of making and presenting the work, which is then designed

for presentation or performance before a general audience which may or may not include members of the community in question. As an example, a visual artist may spend some time in a steelworks, talking to the workers, and take photographs of machinery or execute sketches of workers which will later be displayed in a public exhibition. This model is on the outer edge of a community-based practice, as it tends to treat the artist as an autonomous “artist” and the community as a quarry for images or information – while the artist is “in” the community at least for a while it is assumed he/she will come “out” to display the art emerging from the experience.

For: Artists make something designed to be presented/performed to a specific community. In this case, a theatre group, for example, may make a play on anything from the exploitative nature of a capitalist economy to racism in the workplace or occupational health and safety with a specific community in mind as a target audience. It would be wise of them to get to know this community first, perhaps through placing themselves “in” the community for a while, so as to speak in an appropriate cultural (and actual) language (advertising agencies devote a lot of time and energy to doing this...). Once again, power and control rests with the artist, and the members of the community are treated as passive recipients of what has been made and presented (whether it’s designed to sell socialism or soap powder). They have some power in this case though, as their approval or disapproval of what has been done for them can be manifested in loud applause or no applause or even a refusal to attend the work at all. While this perspective is, again, at the outer limits of what is sensibly seen as community-based work it is a model which has been applied over a number of years.

For, of course, could be taken to mean something entirely different – for example a case in which a community hires an artist to image it to another community or to society in general, rather than it might hire a barrister or a promotions company. For example, a trade union might hire a visual artist to make a series of banners or posters in support of an industrial action. In this case, power resides entirely with the community, and the artist does what he/she is told, which is easier if he/she is in broad agreement with the community on the issue at hand, although not absolutely necessary. More commonly, artist and community select each other because of a shared belief or understanding, but when push comes to shove, as it has on occasion, it’s clear where power lies. The community can refuse to allow the artist to show the video or not use the poster or advise its members not to attend the performance/exhibition or insist on its copyright over the artistic product etc., and communities have acted in this way.

Either of these cases can, and often does, lead to much more amicable and mutually satisfying outcomes than those we suggest but, at base, the unequal distribution of power makes work *for* communities a fairly tricky area, in which careful negotiation is essential. Negotiation tends to move work *for* a community towards the realm of the next category, work *with* a community.

With: As the word implies, this indicates an equal distribution of power between artist and community. This sharing of power with the community is usually manifested in the fact that members of the community are consulted on and actually participate in decisions about what the artwork should say, and even the form it should take. This has been the most common mode of community-based work over the last fifteen years, and is probably the condition to which

most of it aspires, and so there are countless examples. It is often seen in theatre work in which a small group of professional artists makes a piece of theatre for a large cast, most or even all of the members of which are community members, which has been written or devised by a team in which the artist(s) have played a central but essentially facilitatory role. It is assumed that the artist(s) will bring to the process a set of artistic/technical skills which the community does not already possess, and thus will have an indispensable role in shaping the final product. These skills may include a technical and aesthetic understanding of video or recorded sound, or an ability to shape the creative efforts of community members into a form larger than the sum of its parts, as in a large mural or a performance. As the forms chosen for the work move towards cultural forms which emerge from the community itself rather than from the artist's repertoire, this category shades into the next.

Of: In this case, the role of the artist tends to be entirely facilitatory, unless he/she is actually a member of the community itself. The cultural forms used are here likely to originate within the community itself rather than in the mind of the artist, and are consequently less likely to look like "art" in a conventional sense. For example, a youth-based project may take the form of a skateboarding exhibition with a loose narrative frame supplied by a large video screen, or a series of apparently unrelated hip hop dance sequences, or a video, or a rural women's project may concern itself with a "traditional" craft skill like quilt-making, or a local community may wish to design and even build an adventure playground for their children. Each of these projects will rest on the assumption that the community in question actually has a culture of its own, and that it doesn't need legitimisation by being converted into what we might think

of as "art". In this sense, the artistic outcome will be genuinely **of** the community in question, and the role of the artist is reduced to the sometimes difficult task of shaping or framing a community's expression of its own culture in forms appropriate to it.

By: In this case the community is in total control, and may not feel the need of input from an artist at all. Examples of such work may include a photography club wishing to organise an exhibition of photographs taken by community members, or an ethnic dance troupe or amateur theatre group staging a traditional or culturally specific performance, or a youth group organising an outdoor musical performance. Artists, as **artists**, probably have no role to play here, and have probably, indeed, become redundant. But the bureaucratic function of assisting the community to organise the event by, for example, negotiating access to a public venue and necessary equipment, or even funding material costs, may offer an important function to an artist based in a local council. It is at this point that the role of the artist, if there is a role at all, most clearly becomes that of community cultural development.

Naomi still has a role here, but Colin is beginning to feel a touch redundant.

In fact Colin is sulking. Until now he had always thought it was sufficient to write plays like **Mesh for** a community.

He probably needn't worry, as variants of all these categories can be seen in contemporary practice – in fact Shane can see examples amongst the projects displayed all over the walls at the conference, as well as examples which seem to combine several of them at once. Some of them, though, don't appear to have anything even faintly resembling an artistic "product" at all, and consequently don't fit the above road map particularly easily. These projects have fully embraced the notion of "community cultural development" and seem more concerned to use a "cultural" process as a means of

making a group of isolated individuals into a "community", or even a lobby group. There are even a couple of projects which look as if they are more concerned with discovering, through an arts-based activity, the opinions or needs of groups of young people as part of a process of presenting information to local council planning committees, with no immediate "artistic" outcome at all.

Shane is a member of an Aboriginal group that has agreed to enact the opening ceremony of the Imaginary Conference. Until now the group has never had anything to do with what is officially known as "community arts" or "community cultural development". Their performances and indeed everything they do has always until now been in every sense in, for, with, of and **by** the group, sometimes seeking the advice, approval or even consent of elders within their own community. They have never been funded or assisted by any organisation or artists outside their own group, and are now wondering whether they need any of this aggravation.

They came with questions, but their major question is now this: Should they enact the opening ceremony of the Imaginary Conference or just pack up and leave them to it?

We believe that Shane and her group should open the conference, if for no other reason than that if they wait until all the arguments on the floor are resolved, then the conference will never begin. The debate Shane and her group have witnessed typifies both the weakness and the strength of the community cultural development sector, which is in itself a community of artists and groups involved in "arts in a community context" or "community-based cultural practice". The community of artists at the Imaginary Conference is, like any other community in a democratic society, divided by arguments which make it "weak", but these arguments are also the source of its vitality. That vitality, represented by the wide range of processes and cultural forms the field has produced, is not created by any easy consensus or failure to continually examine and question what is done, how it is done and why it is done. But Shane was right in wondering

if artists could ever develop a language which would allow them in a reasonably peaceful manner to analyse their own work in the community arts or community cultural development field.

We don't believe there is a single "right" way to engage in the field, and the road map we tentatively propose is merely that: a means by which artists may locate themselves in the area. The argument between Colin and Naomi with which we began, for example, we see as a useful dispute about strategies and tactics rather than a fundamental disagreement about objectives. We see no inherent opposition between "community arts" and "community cultural development": in fact there has been a steady if uneven evolution of one into the other.

"..... never go where you're not invited (but it's possible to foment an invitation); never do one project with a community when you can do three; and never leave nothing behind....." Pauline Peel.

We also see no necessary connection between good community cultural development and bad, uninteresting or un-innovative "art". Community cultural development continually offers artists the exciting possibility of at least temporarily occupying someone else's cultural space and using their skills, experience, sensitivity and ability to think laterally (all prerequisites for working in

this most difficult of fields) to produce a myriad of new cultural forms. Under these circumstances, "artistic innovation" is not so much possible as almost mandatory.

At least as importantly, it is possible to grasp the opportunity for artistic innovation while actually improving someone else's life in the process by facilitating the sheer human pleasure of purposive, collaborative activity. For this reason, we believe that "artistic excellence" or "artistic innovation" should not be the only, or even the central, criterion by which the worth of a project should be judged. We remain committed to the notion that work in the field *needs* to produce some identifiable social benefit, whatever else it may produce. But we are probably old-fashioned enough to expect that of all "art" anyway...

And this, at least, should lead us to the one essential point of consensus. We now live in the age of "globalisation", when everything conspires to fracture our sense of communal life and reconstitute us as an homogeneous international "community" of passive consumers in the "free market". "Creativity" is steadily reduced to a random series of purchasing decisions, and we are enjoined to see community organisations, like trade unions, for example, as infringements of our individual human rights rather than as an embodiment of the obvious point that there is strength in numbers. Under these circumstances we should be more determined than ever to engage in the task of meaningful community formation with which the movement began. "Think globally, act locally" seems even more of an imperative now than it did when the phrase arose in the 1960s, and community arts or community cultural development is a tailor-made response to the injunction.

And this leads us to close on a set of principles laid out by Pauline Peel, a pioneer in the field, some fifteen years ago: never go where you're not invited (but it's possible to foment an invitation); never do one project with a community when you can do three; and never leave nothing behind.¹² Beyond that, it's open slather ■

Footnotes

1. Rowse (1985), *Arguing the Arts*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 25-30.
2. See D. Watt, 'Interrogating "Community": Social Welfare v. Cultural Democracy' in Vivienne Binns (ed.) (1991) *Community and the Arts: History, Theory, Practice*, Leichhardt: Pluto Press, pp. 55-66; Raymond Williams (1958), *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, Harmondsworth: Penguin; E. P. Thompson (1963), *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. See also Anthony P. Cohen (1985), *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Chichester: Ellis Horwood, for an account of the meanings associated with the term.
3. Kelly (1984), *Community, Art and the State*, London: Comedia; Shelton Trust (1986), *The Manifesto*, London: Comedia.
4. See Gay Hawkins, (1993) *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras*, St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, pp. 78-88.
5. See David Grogan and Colin Mercer, *The Cultural Planning Handbook*, St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1995.
6. This was eventually published in 1996 as *Creating Social Capital*, Adelaide: Community Arts Network of South Australia, and led to her further publication of Williams (1996) "How the Arts Measure Up: Australian Research Into Social Impact", London: Comedia, Social Impact of Arts Programs Working Paper 8, in which her work is described by the editors, from a Europe-wide perspective as 'the only substantial research into the social impact of community arts projects which we have come across': (p. 3)
7. See, for example, Hawkins (1993), p. xviii.
8. Very nearly: "... community art participation is a restoration of art to life. If you are talking about a fully participatory art-performing society - which is the aim of community art-participation policies - you are talking about the end of 'industrial man'. For that matter, you are also speaking about the end of 'art', since if all the people became, in one way or the other, 'artists', you no longer need the word 'art'. (Donald Horne (1986) *The Public Culture: The Triumph of Industrialism*, London: Pluto Press, p. 236.)
9. Hawkins (1993), p. 164.
10. "Community Theatre and Political Activism: Some Thoughts on Practice in the Australian Context", in Binns (ed.) (1991), pp. 119-133.
11. "Of the People, By the People and For the People: The Field of Community Performance", *High Performance*, No. 64, Winter 1993. Available through *High Performance Online*, <http://www.artswire.org/Community/highperf/hp/hpstories/Geer.html>.
12. Cited in D. Watt, "The Popular Theatre Troupe and Street Arts: Two Paradigms of Political Activism", in Steve Capelin (ed.) (1995), *Challenging the Centre: Two Decades of Political Theatre*, Brisbane: Playlab Press, pp. 23-4.

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