

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2017**

Plenary 1: Connecting the Arts with Audiences

A Culturally Ambitious Nation

**Full transcript of speech by
Mr. Rupert MYER, Chair of Australia Council for the Arts**

In the context of some of the remarks over the last two days, I have been reflecting upon this excellent topic: Where will the arts lead us? The Japanese Culture Minister (Ms. Mari AKIYAMA, Director of International Cultural Exchange, Agency for Cultural Affairs) spoke at the Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum 2017 yesterday about how the same cultural content can be enjoyed in real time globally, and that rural and regional towns have to prepare themselves to receive visitors and support the revival of local economies. I also liked the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Chief Executive's (Mrs. Carrie Lam) remarks last night about creative and commercial vitality.

Consequently, I have decided to speak to a slightly different topic and the spooling images behind me are closer to the talk that I was going to give. They give some visual representation to the diversity of audiences, and give validation to the recent Australia Research on audience participation.

Drawing on part of that research, I want you to imagine that we are not in Hong Kong but in the town of Hamilton, a four-hour drive west of Melbourne with a population of 10,000 people: a prosperous town with an art gallery, library, cultural facilities and performance spaces. For over 60 years, the gallery has built a collection of decorative arts, glass, Japanese ceramics and British watercolours. Why? Because that's what wealthy Australian collectors did in the 19th Century, and they then gifted their private collections to public collections.

Last week, I was invited to speak there to an audience of local politicians, benefactors, gallery staff, local government staff and the local community to draw on our audience data to support the case for a new gallery. I consider that knowledge of audiences serves no inherent purpose unless it is used for some end.

This is part of what I said:

“Let me start at the end, and then backtrack.

Public and philanthropic investment in the arts generally and art galleries specifically, produce not only economic benefits for the community. They create community confidence, provide cultural definition particularly to

diverse communities and enhance wellbeing, whilst being enlightening, energising and an inexhaustible source of pleasure.

I am conscious that there might be some who'd say, "Well he would say that, he's the Chair of the Australia Council for the Arts. What else could he say?"

So why do I feel so confident that what I am asserting is reliable?

A few months ago, in an Australia Council Board meeting, we discussed the results of the National Arts Participation Survey (the Participation Survey). This is a major study that has continued over 20 years, mapping the changing attitudes of Australians towards the arts. There are some remarkable numbers:

79% read books

72% attend live events

46% creatively participate themselves

35% attended First Nations Arts in 2016, doubling the 2009 figure.

However, even more significant than all of these is that the survey confirms that 98% of Australians participate in the arts. 98%. It needn't be our guilty secret. We should speak with far greater confidence than we do that people have shown through their actions that art and culture are valuable to them. And given that one third of Australians live in regional Australia, we can be confident that arts and culture are important to all of us too.

For interest, the National Gallery of Victoria is now one of the 16 most visited art galleries in the world. More of us visited art galleries last year in Australia than attended Australian Football League games, by a significant margin. In Tasmania, from scratch only eight years ago, annual attendance at Museum of Old and New Art is in excess of 400,000 and almost 75% were in-bound tourists, that is, not locals. I suppose it helps that Hobart is now one of the coolest places on the planet according to several travel magazines. Guess what made that happen? Yes, art and culture. Who would ever have thought that the Dark Mofo Festival in Hobart, in the coldest part of the country at the coldest time of the year, would lure vast audiences from around the nation and from around the world, as well as a few locals? Or that nearly 9 million Australians would attend festivals?

Visitors to cultural events tend not to sleep on sofas at their friends' houses as though they were coming for the footy; they buy hotel rooms. They tend not to bring their packed lunches from home, as they might to attend a game; they eat in cafes and restaurants. They tend not to arrive immediately before and leave immediately afterwards; they linger and add other activities to their programme and often stay for days.

What is going on here and why is it really important for those in charge of the policy levers at a national, state and local level to understand what is happening? Why is it worth the philanthropic investment?

Whilst the economic story is convincing and compelling, in the words of my Australia Council colleague Kate Fielding who lives in Kalgoorlie, and who is one of our leading thinkers on arts and culture:

It's the other stuff that matters more: the things that are hard to measure, almost impossible. How do you measure tolerance, respect, the value of thinking creatively, empathy, community cohesion. The arts and engagement in the arts provide one of the best tools we have to engage positively with cultural diversity as a point of interest and learning, rather than a point of difference, opposition and conflict.

I've just mentioned some of the statistics that I find most useful for explaining how the value of arts and culture is already measured. I use these particular ones because, in Kate's words, they help me quickly and clearly address the most common negative assumptions I encounter, namely 'not many people care about arts and culture', 'arts and culture are only a city thing' 'there are no jobs in creative work' and 'arts and culture aren't useful' or, one of my favourites, 'Sports stadiums are more useful.'

And consider this:

Recent world leading research from the University of Western Australia on the '[Art of Being Mentally Healthy](#)' found that similar to the 30 minutes a day of exercise having positive impact on our physical well-being

"engagement in the arts for enjoyment, entertainment or as a hobby, for two or more hours a week, is associated with good mental well-being."

There's a further beautiful quote out of this research:

"If health is more than the absence of disease, pain and sickness and is more about adaptation, understanding and acceptance, then the arts may be more powerful than anything medicine has to offer."

This is not fanciful. The Participation Survey, found that Australians believe the arts have a powerful role to play in promoting social cohesion.

This is perhaps the most interesting. It highlights one of the most powerful impacts arts and culture can have: building community confidence. A measure of business and consumer confidence is people's willingness to take risks and invest in different ways within the market. I think about community confidence in a similar way: how willing are people to take risks within their community? How willing are they to invest in their community?

How might you gather up all these factors to advocate for greater local, State and Commonwealth commitment, and philanthropic support for cultural projects? How can the projects themselves drive the support?

First, you need to understand what you are trying to do. You must be clear and single minded about how you build your case.

Second, you need to think hard about who you are trying to convince. You must understand their motivations and interests, be persuasive and progressively convert your evidence into their belief.

Third, you need to find a way to respond to someone who might say:

“I’m not really into the arts. I read a few books, I listen to music while I work out, when we go to Melbourne we take the kids to the art gallery and we take them to the festival here in town, I guess if there’s an Aussie film at the cinema we’d try to go and see it, but yeah I’m not really into the arts.”

Even when people seem unattached to the idea of arts and culture, try to remember that it may be as simple as them not realising that it is something that is already critical to their daily life, and that they value.

Accepting that art does matter, why might it matter particularly to Hamilton, and specifically to this gallery? What might cultural leadership in Hamilton look like for the second quarter of this century. What does a leadership role in regional Australia mean and what might the consequences be of not seeking a leadership role, and of becoming less culturally confident. How do you take the chance to refresh what you already have, honour the support given by others over many years and create vitality for this community?

In the last couple of years, I have had the opportunity to observe, often quite closely, how others have approached these questions both in regional and metropolitan areas, as well as internationally. I get asked, “What is a reasonable aspiration”? I prefer to respond by asking back, “What is an unreasonable aspiration”? My encouragement is to be unreasonable.

At the heart of what you do should be cultural relevance, enjoyment and fun. This is not solemn duty. The scoping should certainly be a fact-based body of work and it should inspire and draw a community together and along. Look carefully at the way public money is now pouring into cultural projects in Tasmania. Why? It’s because of a core belief within the community that it is good for the community; a core belief that it is a great investment and a core belief that it generates pride and confidence.

To achieve any of this, you need rock-solid local community support and an almost militant activism. It also requires strong local government support, passionate, resolute and driven. It must be collaboration. Develop a clear idea about what your strengths are and how to connect them.

What have Folk music, ceramics awards, fashion, lectures, exhibitions, art prizes, festivals got to do with each other? Make a cultural cluster of them and the question will answer itself. The significance of the event, project, programme, exhibition needs to extend way beyond the local community. It might no longer be yours anymore. You will be doing it on behalf of other people.”

I concluded my remarks by saying that the most successful examples that I have observed are where an entrepreneurial vision takes hold and is all consuming. You are no longer just custodians of a collection, but entrepreneurs. Cultural entrepreneurs. You

will need to be engaged with communities far away, creating unmissable cultural experiences.

That's a place that the arts might lead us: to drawing a community together in pursuit of a great cultural idea, using data and turning evidence into belief. Thank you.

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