

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2016**

Plenary 1: The Development of Cultural Ecology

Participation, Attitude, Engagement and Ambition: a window into Australia's arts sector and policies

Speech by Mr Rupert Myer, Chair of Australian Council for the Arts

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today and to contribute some thoughts about the Australia Council's approach to the theme of the forum.

The Australia Council and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council enjoy a strong relationship as leaders of the international conversation about the arts. We are advocates for the value and benefits of the arts in the continuing evolution of our national identity, and the contribution and impact of the arts in building social cohesion in our rapidly changing world.

"Inspiring a Creative Australia" is of course the core business of the Australia Council, and is a complex and multi-faceted enterprise.

The value proposition of the arts lies in the way in which the arts are embedded in our communities at micro -local - and macro - national and international – levels, and the impact that engagement with the arts and artistic practice has on the daily lives and wellbeing of all Australians. The arts are a big part of everyday life for Australians and play a vital role in our culturally ambitious nation. Never before has there been such rapid change driven by creativity and innovation, and never before has there been more engagement, participation or curiosity about art and culture in our everyday lives.

Last year, we released our "state of the nation" overview of Australian arts entitled "Arts Nation". This paper drew on new data, our own extensive existing data resources, and those of collaborators, to build a snapshot of the place of the arts in the lives of Australians – its scale, dimensions, contributors and participants. What this study clearly shows is that Australians value the arts. A growing number of Australians believe that the arts make for a richer and more meaningful life, that they influence how we express ourselves, and how our creative thinking and new ideas are developed.

Nearly all Australians consume at least one form of art, and half participate in arts creation each year. Geographic location does not impact on arts engagement as much as we might expect and creative participation has increased amongst some groups with historically lower levels of participation.

The report also confirms our appreciation of our unique position as home to the world's oldest continuous living culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts are cherished

both at home and abroad. Nine in ten Australians agree that Indigenous arts are an important part of Australian culture, and audiences for Indigenous arts are growing.

This snapshot in time affirms the significance of the arts in the lives of Australians – not only in terms of cultural consumption and enrichment, but in the way we meet our daily challenges and lead our everyday lives. And it's on this idea of how the arts intersect with, and impact on, aspects of our everyday lives that I would like to focus today.

Let's start by considering music. In her book, "*Music in Everyday Life*", the sociologist, Tia DeNora, suggests that music has long been more than a "decorative art". She states "it is a powerful medium of social order".

Music has, over history, had a strong social function for rituals, ceremonies, dancing, to articulate religious beliefs, and to mark the rites of passage – birth, marriage and death.

Now, though, this impact is significantly widened through the easy availability of music in everyday life, and has a powerful function in supporting the optimising of well-being, promoting relaxation, alleviating anxiety and the boredom of tedious tasks, and generally enhancing our quality of life.

Our research shows that almost all Australians intentionally listen to music weekly or more often, and 57% attend live music events each year, making music the biggest art form in Australia.

Even in tough economic times, the music business remains big business. In 2009/10 each Australian household spent an estimated \$380 on music-related goods and services, totalling over \$2 billion to the Australian economy. That's more than they spent on internet charges or domestic holiday airfares.

This "democratisation" of music has led to a re-evaluation of its impact on the social and psychological functions of everyday life, including self-identity, interpersonal relationships and mood.

Research concerning the impact of learning to play a musical instrument on children's intellectual and cognitive development is commonly reported, and exceptional achievements of the young tend to make a good story.

The range of reported benefits is wide:

- Children who study music from an early age do better across a range of subjects;
- have more highly developed creative thinking and fine motor skills;
- develop teamwork and shared goals;
- and explore emotions and other cultures through music.

The benefits to the broad population of both listening to music, and playing music, are less widely reported.

Music educator, Dr Anita Collins, of the University of Canberra has collaborated with neuroscientists to establish that when we listen to music, multiple areas of the brain engage and become active as we process the sound and create a meaning from it.

However, when we play a musical instrument, “that activity becomes more like a full-body brain workout”. It is not just the areas of the brain that respond to auditory stimulus that fire up, but those areas that involve visual response, fine motor skills, linguistic and mathematical processing, and enhanced memory function.

Let’s turn our attention to the visual arts, and think first about drawing as an art form that impacts the everyday life of every one of us. Professor Stephen Farthing, Professor of Drawing at the University of the Arts London, defines drawing as the translation of multidimensional events into readable two-dimensional matter. He notes that “drawing throughout history has been driven by our need to measure, estimate, imagine, record and invent”.

In his Plan de Dessin created in 2006, Professor Farthing attempted to map the many dimensions of drawing using a method similar to that used by Harry Beck in 1931 to map the London Underground – and you’ll certainly recognise that from this image. On this map you’ll see just how diverse the impact of drawing is on everyday activities – tattoos, comic strips, eye liner, air traffic control screens, and of course the London Underground map itself.

In a 2011 paper presented at Columbia University in New York, Professor Farthing cites what must surely be one of the largest drawings in the world – the road markings of North America.

What started as a simple white on black line drawing, gradually became more complex as words, symbols and colours were added, but the purpose of the drawing remains the same to this day – to facilitate the safe flow of traffic.

There is no doubt that visual art in its many forms has helped to shape society. Now researchers are discovering the impact of art on our brains and bodies. A psycho psychologist from the University of Westminster studied the impact of a lunchtime visit to an art gallery on London city workers. The report studied self-reported levels of stress as well as the stress hormone cortisol.

Participants spent 35 minutes exploring the gallery space in any way they wanted. Upon exiting, they expressed being less stressed and they also had lower concentrations of cortisol.

Our research shows that Australian galleries attract around 11 million visitors a year – more than the 10 million or so who attend Australia’s most popular spectator sport, Australian Rules football.

We know that creating visual arts and crafts is also the most popular form of creative activity by Australians, with one in three participating. Almost 2.6 million adults make crafts like woodwork, jewellery and ceramics, and 1.2 million children engage in arts and crafts for fun.

Let's now turn to reading...

Reading is possibly the most democratised of all art forms and is one of our most popular pastimes. It has been argued that reading is the single most important skill necessary for a happy, productive and successful life.

In the Australia Council's recently released Corporate Plan, we renew our commitment to support the development and delivery of Australian work in new contexts and to foster opportunities for the inclusion of art in daily life in local communities. In that context I'd like to turn now to sharing with you a couple of quite extraordinary projects that have been facilitated directly or indirectly by Australia Council funded organizations.

While each of these projects is remarkable in its own right, the two share a commonality in that they go well beyond the notion of public investment in the arts for the purpose of social value and good, and they extend well beyond the boundaries of excellence. These projects combine all those factors to create a completely new and surprising aesthetic that expands the boundaries and understandings of their form.

The first of these examples is *BrightHearts*, which was a project developed by artist Dr George Poonkhin Khut {Koot}, and Dr Angie Morrow, a Staff Specialist in Kids Rehab at the Children's Hospital Westmead in Sydney's west.

Following the success of earlier research *The Heart Library Project*, an interactive art exhibition designed for presentation in hospitals and health care settings, combining interactive heart rate controlled audio-visuals with audience participation, George hoped to find a partner from within health to further develop his work. So it was fortuitous that both George and Angie, attended the same "Art-Science Speed Dating" event at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney in 2010.

They then came together to develop the *BrightHearts* project. The project was conceived as a synthesis of Angie's clinical knowledge and experience in medical research, and George's in body-focused artist practice.

Their respective interests laid the groundwork for an enduring collaboration which has led to an innovative approach to the problem of managing pain and procedure-related anxiety experienced by children.

The aim of *BrightHearts* was to investigate whether heart-rate controlled artworks can be adapted for use in a clinical setting. The project involved using biofeedback assisted

relaxation-training games to help manage the pain and anxiety experienced by children who undergo recurrent painful procedures.

The *BrightHearts* project set out to design, build and then test whether a biofeedback assisted relaxation training ‘app’ can offer benefits above and beyond current iPad-based ‘distraction’ methods.

The goal of the interaction is for children to maintain a lowered heart rate. Children are rewarded with sounds and visuals that respond to decreases in heart rate over different periods of time.

The *BrightHearts* app is now publicly available through the iTunes App Store. The research and its outcomes have gained external recognition, been exhibited in art and design shows, has generated several research publications, won an Australian Business and Art Foundation (ABAF) award, and the Queensland New Media Art Award.

But most importantly it has made and will continue to make a real difference in the lives of children undergoing painful procedures.

The other project I want to describe today is quite different. It is called the “FIVE” project. FIVE is a multi-faceted arts initiative designed to address the challenge of stigma associated with mental health in regional Western Australia. It was facilitated and implemented by Western Australian community arts and cultural development organisation DADAA¹ – in collaboration with Rio Tinto, local government, and local arts and health organizations.

The stigma around mental health has been identified as a key barrier to people seeking help and treatment or stepping up to help a friend, colleague or family member. In rural and regional settings, this is exacerbated by social isolation, lack of access to services and other factors.

DADAA recognised that, according to the Mental Health Commission, the role of stigma around mental health was contributing to the suicide rate in Western Australia standing at one person per day. High-risk populations include Aboriginal people;

- fly in fly out (FIFO) workers and their families;
- people living in rural and remote regions;
- and young people.

A complex range of issues sat as background to the project, including:

- The insular and isolated nature of regional communities;
- The loss of social fabric;
- A workforce disconnected from home and community owing to FIFO practices
- Australia’s disconnection from the value that our resources workforce provides us with and the issues that they face

¹ DADAA - Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts

- The difficulties in building sustained social and cultural participation and of supporting cultural development and cultural change in remote WA

The FIVE project set out to start a conversation about mental health and wellbeing. It sought to bring the partner organisations and communities together to explore a uniquely regional Western Australian take on wellbeing, resilience and the strengthening of community. Its name FIVE refers to the fact that the project took place in five isolated WA communities, although my description today refers specifically to the project undertaken under the auspices of FIVE in Paraburdoo.

DADAA's Executive Director, David Doyle, relates that FIVE took 18 months to conceive and design but like all community arts processes, the reality was organic and reliant on many tangibles. FIVE grew and spread in ways that were hard to anticipate.

The project's core goal was the use of artistic and cultural interventions to break down stigma around mental health. Based on a community arts and cultural development framework, the project also drew from health promotion, prevention and recovery models.

As a residential mining town, the FIVE project at Paraburdoo had the deepest and longest engagement,

Artist Alex Mickle was charged with the process of turning miners into artists, to create a space where residential and FIFO workers could come together in the remote town of Paraburdoo to engage in dialogue around difficult issues in the process of building a sculpture. He involved more than 450 employees and community members in using the technique of 'blast forming' to create unique steel plates that would become part of a permanent sculpture in the desert. Once forms had been created, the sculpture was built and finished at the Para Men's Shed.

Overlapping with the sculpture project, digital artist Craig Walsh completed a four-week residency during which he captured 26 digital portraits that responded to the question of what it means to 'belong' in Paraburdoo. Candid and open responses about the challenges of mining life, the meaning of family and friends, community, loneliness and disconnection were woven together. The collective narrative – BELONGING Paraburdooⁱ – was screened at a community celebration in mid-2014." (Doyle and Lewis, 2015).

A key aspect of the success of FIVE was the extent to which it became embedded in Rio Tinto, with senior leaders from Rio Tinto operations actively involved. This increased dialogue and contributed to widespread employee engagement and business endorsement.

The evaluation report's key finding was that the project was successful in building both the depth and breadth of social connections – what the evaluators call '*connected belonging*' otherwise explained as "being useful, being meaningful, and feeling hopeful".

The convergence of art and mining is rare. Yet FIVE – in particular Paraburdoo – demonstrated that these two sectors have much to offer each other at a deep, human level. And as well as its impact on the everyday lives of those involved, FIVE Paraburdoo left behind as its legacy an awesome sculpture, named very aptly, "*Resilience*".

I chose these case studies particularly to share with you today. They are a couple of examples from many thousands of projects and endeavors in which the Australia Council invests the funds entrusted to it.

We have a significant responsibility to the major flagship arts companies across Australia and are proud of our relationships with those companies and the support that we are able to provide on a continuing basis. We are equally proud of our work with individuals and small to medium sized companies, and it was for that reason that I wanted to highlight just a couple of examples of the impact of these lesser known "game changers".

The creativity of those working at the interface between the arts and health, or in isolated areas of WA, or a myriad other examples, are inspired and inspiring. All – the major companies, the small and medium sized organisations, and the individual artists – are component parts of our precious and fragile national arts ecosystem, and it's the nurturing and development of that ecosystem with which the Australia Council is entrusted.

The decisions taken by the Australian Government in the context of the May 2015 budget, to propose a new Federal Government funding framework for the arts, has impacted on the Australia Council, and we acknowledge it has created anxieties within the broader arts community.

Ours is a fragile arts ecology with tremendous strength at what we might see as the centre of that ecology – our major performing arts organisations – as well as at the edges of the ecosystem – our small to medium organisations and individual artists. To inspire a Creative Australia, we need to pay careful heed to both the centre and the edge.

New Zealander, Kevin Roberts, Executive Chairman of Saatchi and Saatchi, one of the world's leading creative organisations, has written extensively about the importance of "the edge", using "the edge" as a universal metaphor for creativity, change and innovation.

The edge is the most innovative and generative place in any ecosystem, less constrained by composition, shape and form than the core.

The artistic vibrancy of our arts ecology depends upon not only our major organisations achieving to the highest international levels, but also upon those organisations being nourished and influenced by the evolution occurring at the edge.

Australians know that the arts enrich our lives and our communities; over 8 in 10 people believe the arts make for a richer and more meaningful life. It is a testament to the strength and vitality of Australian art and culture that not only are attitudes about the arts increasingly positive, but the depth of engagement has increased, with more Australians making art as well as being inspired by the work of others. Every Australian should be able to experience excellent art that reflects Australia's rich culture.

Over its history of nearly half a century, the Australia Council has fostered the ambition of arts and culture in Australia. We have engaged with and responded to ever-changing external environments, government imperatives and priorities, and the vision of our artists and arts organisations.

Demonstrating our capacity to continuously transform in order to ensure that our own expectations, and those of our communities of interest, are well served in every circumstance, we have come to embody resilience.

We remain focused on our spectrum of goals - infusing everyday life with arts and culture, ensuring more Australians have access to and engage with the arts, strengthening artistic experiences by, with and for children and young people, and increasing public and private investment in the arts.

Audience-centered and driven by the insights we are able to develop from our extensive data and research resources, we will continue to lead new approaches to audience development and increase arts access and engagement.

The Australia Council's Strategic Plan reflects in its title our aspirations to foster and support the development of a culturally ambitious nation. Thank you again for the opportunity to be here with you today as we work towards these common goals.

END

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