9 Community arts and its relation to multicultural arts

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> Developing a broader basis for the arts is not the afterthought of community arts. It is essential to the Australian condition. For us, the only hope is for the arts to become part of the everyday lives of a majority and not a minority of the people. (Bower, 1980; Bower was the first director of the Australia Council's Community Arts Board.)

The term 'community arts' has multiple meanings. This is a result, no doubt, of the profound ambiguity of the two categories 'community' and 'art':

> Despite nostalgic claims that community art is the oldest and most essential form of cultural practice, the term had no real currency in Australia until it was invoked in Commonwealth cultural policy in the early 1970s. As difficult as it may be for many community artists to accept, community arts are an official invention. (Hawkins, 1991)

From its formation in 1973 the Community Arts and Development Committee of the Australia Council for the Arts (and, through many changes in name and status, to the current Community Cultural Development Board or CCDB), has initiated, funded, debated, criticised and praised community arts programs in all their variety. The Board has always based its work on the principles of access and equity of community development and on the rejection of hierarchical or restrictive notions of 'culture' and 'art'.

Community arts activists in the 1970s were committed to the idea that 'ordinary' people, particularly the disadvantaged, should get their share of support and assistance to organise activities and develop their artistic skills. These activists believed, quite correctly,

that decision making and access to the arts were the sole province of elite sectors of society. Fundamental, too, was the belief that all people had capacities for creativity and that despite differing levels of skills, participation in cultural activities was an important element in a community's quality of life. The forerunners of this movement also believed that art should be relevant to the people and that Australians should not accept the notion of a 'cultural cringe', deeming art created in this country to be inferior.

Folk song collectors in the 1950s who came from the Left were motivated by the need for material about working-class heroes and working-class life. Trade union activists were to support the publishing of works by writers such as Dorothy Hewitt and Frank Hardy; to organise the first Australian folk music tours in the 1960s; and to produce recordings of Australian material well into the 1970s. They were also later to recognise the changing nature of their membership and to make recordings of groups such as Los Parras from Chile. For the first time, artists such as Tassos Ioannides, Rita Menendez, Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Dancers, Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter performed on major stages such as the Perth and Melbourne Concert Halls. Trade unions have continued to support different sectors of their membership through workplace performances or arts projects.

From the outset, the community arts movement was radical. It naturally made alliances with the trade union movement and with other progressive organisations. Its principles of access and equity implied that artists and communities from different cultures had an equal right to support and assistance. As policies and funding programs were developed within the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council (now CCDB) and with some state government arts departments later following suit, the community arts movement grew substantially. It became organised at both state and national levels by the early 1980s. Ultimately it became 'professionalised' in terms of its support infrastructure, development of training and notions of career potential.

Throughout these periods of change and development, a symbiotic, if sometimes confrontational, relationship has existed between people working in community arts and the Community Arts Board. The hand that fed community arts certainly responded to concerns and direction coming from its field workers and artists. The Australia Council's achievements in pursuing cultural democracy in Australia can never be underestimated. With the Community Arts Board's pursuit of affirmative action through Council's priority areas (Youth and Women, Art and Working Life and Arts for a Multicultural Australia), and its desire to see these policies appropriately implemented across the program areas of other artform Boards, a

system for equitable access to the arts has at least been shown to be possible.[1]

The nature of support for artists from different cultures has been coloured by the changing banners under which it was promoted. It has changed from the term 'ethnic arts' in the 1970s and early 1980s, to 'multicultural arts', programs for non-English speaking background (NESB) artists and communities and, since 1988, 'arts for a multicultural Australia'. As terms which described government policies based on social justice issues they were as much an official construction as was the notion of community arts. What they were to mean to people involved in implementing them, or to whom they were directed, would come to be many different things. Like the Art and Working Life Program, 'ethnic arts' or 'multicultural arts' as priority areas proved problematic to various sectors of arts-funding bodies, at both national and state–territory levels. In many cases they were strongly resisted. The Community Arts Board led the challenge to address these issues. It did this through its funding programs, areas of staff support and by making sure that the problems it posed for the other Boards of the Australia Council were not going to go away. As Annette Blonski wrote in 1992:

> In the chronology, the specific opinions of each board from 1980–82 are described. The Literature Board was not in favour of specific programs; the Visual Arts Board argued that visual arts 'transcended all ethnic barriers'; the Music and Theatre Boards argued that excellence was the major criterion for assessment. In 1980, only the Community Arts Board and the Crafts Board differed. They suggested that 'excellence' was a relative term and that the Boards' objection to special programs arose from a 'narrow aesthetic base'. Council itself had no clear policy on the issue at this stage aside from the various positions offered by the individual Boards.
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> The ethnic arts were closely associated with the Community Arts Program until 1982. Their minutes and papers suggest a growing awareness and desire both to clarify and develop strategies to deal with problems within the Australia Council and the Boards, as well as externally in the provision of support and services to the community and individual artists. Throughout the seventies and early eighties, attempts were made to circulate information to ethnic communities but there were problems with the quality of translations, the intermittent nature of the attempts and so on. Ultimately, they were not particularly successful because there was a sense in which there was no continuity in Council's programs and policies.
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> The Community Cultural Development Unit (CCDU) [CCBD], established in 1987 and replacing the old Community Arts Board, assumed responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the multicultural program. The position of Program Manager–Multicultural (PMMC) is also located within the CCDU. This has

given rise to a certain ambiguity with regard to the Arts for a Multicultural Australia program (its present title) since it is possible to associate the program with community arts rather than all the art forms and it is therefore important to make the distinction that the program covers all the art forms and all units. (Blonski, 1992, p. 9)

While funding did come from the other Boards for community-based projects, some of which were significant (involving artists from other cultures), the load has always been carried by the CCDB. This has meant that the confusion of community arts with multicultural arts has persisted. Some of the findings of the Cultural Access team, set up by the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council as its first serious attempt to advocate the Board's support for NESB artists and assist in the implementation of its then Multicultural Arts policy, bear this out. Here are sections from the reports of public meetings held by the team in all capital cities in 1986:

Most of the participants know very little about the Australia Council, let alone its programs and priorities. Most seem to know more about the Community Cultural Development Unit and very often asked questions that indicated the multicultural arts and artists were perceived as community artists, since they were very often enclosed within their ethno-specific area of activity, and their work was mostly directed to their communities. (Ioannides, 1990)

Most of the people seemed to know little about the Australia Council. They appeared to know even less about the program that prioritises multicultural arts. Very often the 'Community Arts' way of thinking was getting in the way in some cases. Multicultural Arts seems, for many, to be synonymous with community arts. (Ioannides, 1990)

The support of ethnic arts officers by the CCDB reinforced the notion that these difficult areas of arts development are the province of community arts. However, the few ethnic arts officers around the country discovered that their jobs entailed far more than cultural development within various communities, often being the driving force behind multicultural arts development at broader levels. They became an early port of call for many professional artists for whom there was no other means of assistance. They found that, on arrival, artists' first contact was with Migrant Resource and Health Centres or Adult Learning or Community Centres. At these Centres very often staff had no knowledge of artists' needs, such as professional associations and contacts. With no support structures, no English for special or academic purposes covering the arts, these professional artists were lucky if they found an ethnic arts officer or sympathetic community arts officer who could at least provide some connections.

Many highly skilled musicians, be they opera singers, composers

or instrumentalists, well known in their country of origin, were and still are, forced by reversed fortune to forget the glamour of major concert performances and to work at the grass-roots level or search for alternative avenues of music making. If, to gain a living, individual artists are forced to fit the mould of community arts, they first of all find the term difficult to comprehend and then rarely understand the role they are supposed to play as community artists. That many adopt a 'student–teacher' approach is hardly surprising since it comes directly from the style of their professional training.

For many artists coming from politically oppressed countries, it is also difficult to understand or embrace the concepts that support for community arts comes from the 'top'—that is, from government institutions. For these artists such activities have traditionally occurred at grass-roots level. There may also be a genuine fear of government-devised programs and a fear of dealing with bureaucracies. Those whose job it is to provide cultural assistance and support for artists have not always learnt about or respected the political significance of different issues within communities.

We posed a range of questions about the meaning of community and multicultural arts, about the links between community-based activities in Australia as compared with their country of origin, to many artists and community members with whom we have had contact through our work. They all spoke of the many artists who are still trapped in menial factory jobs and considered themselves fortunate to have received any recognition or support. It was stressed that there is a need for information in other community languages and for the community's own members to gain access to the funding system and run activities. One person's reaction to the terms community or multicultural arts was that it always meant 'ethnic' or 'folkloric' activity to them—that it was all about the burgeoning number of multicultural festivals. The perception was that it had nothing to do with community development nor arts services. Though these festivals at least offered an opportunity to perform, it seemed to them to be for the benefit of communities other than their own.

A leader of a dance group from a Latin American country said that her people had limited knowledge of services or funding that might exist:

> We are so conditioned to make do with what we have. In our country local dance groups are based around very strong community and political motivations. Their costumes are very basic and simple. People have no money; it's often a hassle for them to get the bus fare to go to a performance where they get no pay. We're talking about such different realities. Making costumes is a community activity. Here we have the luxury of paying someone $20 to make

> our costumes but in doing it we lose the community spirit. Political oppression brings people together, but there is always an element of fear because community groups are seen as subversive. There is an urgent need to keep grass-roots culture alive, a culture that represents peasants' struggle and is often banned! Here in Australia we could get more performances if we invested in more glamorous costumes but if we put on the spurs and other decorations, we would be representing the landlords, our oppressors.
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> We formed our group here on the principle of working for solidarity activities. Rather than being a group that exists solely for social reasons or to help maintain cultural identity, which is important, we wanted to play our small part in a larger cause. This has meant that with a shared ideology, people work harder and more effectively. Every new dance we learn is discussed as part of the group process of understanding its place and meaning, its political and class symbolism. Such motivations are more meaningful to us than merely performing to be the icing on (generally) someone else's cake.
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> Although we now know that some funding exists, much to our amazement, we still find the notion of grants scary. When the most money you've ever had to manage is $500, the bureaucratic procedures for grants—and we have some awareness of this through welfare areas—seems to be beyond us. We generally move in fairly closed circles, though some of us are attending university, so the fear of the unknown is quite real. We need help to bridge the gap.
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> Our artists of all types are very important to our community, a part of our social activities. However the community often feels that artists who have 'made it' here have sold out if they no longer do their bit for the community. This is such a big issue because solidarity is the major thing in community life—the reason people are living in this country.

Equally, the notion that the work of an individual artist or group can or should be representative of the experiences or concerns of the whole cultural or social group is ridiculous. But it still persists. Fundamental blunders have occasionally occurred where well-meaning, but naive, organisers have set up programs or performances for sectors of their community but, through lack of consultation, have chosen artists who are inappropriate for either social, political or other reasons, to their local constituency. As artists and communities from other cultures need information about arts support and the context of funding processes, so also arts service providers need training in cross-cultural issues and consultation.

Artists stated that places such as Footscray Community Arts Centre, the Perth Ethnic Music Centre, the Multicultural Artsworkers Centre and several others, provided some contacts, some work and assisted their feeling of acceptance or belonging in their new communities. Some community arts projects have led to skills

development, contact with other cultures and, in many cases, the capacity to work in mainstream Australia. Access to speakers of community languages has been crucial to this process of assistance.

Multicultural arts officers are fairly thin on the ground. In 1992, at a national meeting of ten multicultural arts officers, they were concerned about the perception that they were required to be all things to all people. The work demands knowledge of, or the capacity to learn about, large numbers of different cultures and communities and the factions or sectors within them. It also requires familiarity with all artforms. The areas overlap, from assistance to professional artists through to community and welfare work. In many cases, they felt that their employers gave no consideration to their needs for training in specific areas nor ways in which they could work as an integral part of their organisation's team to be more effective.

It must be remembered too that these officers all came into their positions without any specific training, since none is available for this specialised area of work. In new positions they have had to 'create' their programs and get out into their communities to make contacts and assess needs. They are always faced with the problems of both meeting the needs of individual artists and creating structures which can provide longer term support. Project-based work cannot be sufficient in itself. There must be ongoing activity if artists are not to fall by the wayside before they have the confidence and contacts to operate in wider circles.

Multicultural arts officers are expected to educate the wider community as a means of breaking down prejudices against other cultures. This involves exposing the community to performers and art works in a range of different venues. These venues include schools, particularly those with NESB students who might only rarely have their culture acknowledged or presented as part of the educational process.

Depending on where multicultural arts officers are based (be it migrant resource centres, an ethnic communities' council or a community arts centre) they generally have the additional task of educating or convincing their work colleagues, management or committees either that cultural support and development can be as significant as welfare services in the early stages of successful resettlement, or that NESB participation must occur across all areas of an organisation's activities. Positions based in arts centres have the potential to provide access to three things:

- a broader range of artform expertise;
- opportunities to meet and interact with other professional artists;
- a milieu more appropriate, perhaps, than one which makes artists feel as if they are recipients of welfare.

Most migrant artists arrive here with great hopes and expectations. Multiculturalism in Australia, as they understand it, or have been led to believe, is all about equal opportunity and freedom of cultural expression. As a recently arrived Chinese artist told us 'with such a diversity of cultures and art this must be an exciting place to live and develop artistically'. He was one of the lucky ones to have found support and be able to participate in a project soon after arrival in Australia.

A positive frame of mind on arrival unfortunately does not last long. Only in rare cases does the reality match these expectations. Positive benefits can be achieved for artists by support soon after arrival, while their cultural identity is still strong and they are actively seeking information and new possibilities. Information and referral provided to recently arrived artists and a project initiated and organised in Midway Migrant Hostel in 1985 by an multicultural arts officer based at Footscray Community Arts Centre were important examples. Craft workshops at Midway involved women from six different countries. The women were all in the same situation, feeling isolated, in limbo and waiting for the next move. They developed a capacity to communicate without language; as well as using their own skills, they managed to learn new ones from some of the highly skilled women in the group. Some of the most surprising friendships were formed which persisted as individuals spread through the suburbs; Footscray Community Arts Centre continued to function as their base for cultural contacts and advice.

Similarly musicians, both professional and amateur, came to workshops at Midway and then used Footscray Community Arts Centre and the assistance of its musician-in-residence and multicultural arts officers to continue their work. At Footscray Community Arts Centre they had access to instruments and rehearsal space and became part of the Centre's group of performers for local concerts. While they came from different cultures, they also maintained contact with one another. As a natural progression, their desire to keep playing together, to learn about the instruments and music of one another's cultures, led to the establishment of the Music Hive.

Since it was important for them to have their own place, which they could organise and control, an empty warehouse next to Footscray Community Arts Centre became their base. The musicians took responsibility for the space, its decoration, the timetabling of rehearsals and performances. All decisions were made collectively, there was no leader, and the multicultural art officer's role was one of facilitation and assistance with promotion and publicity. Because the musicians had control of their own development as well as a place of their own, they were motivated to raise funds and build up

a bank of instruments to be shared. With each musician having a key to the warehouse, total responsibility was also shared.

Unfortunately, from the outset the warehouse occupancy was known not to be long term. After three years of successful operation the Music Hive had to find another venue. The move into Footscray Community Arts Centre's main building was obviously not going to work. Once the musicians lost their own space and control, the same situation could not be maintained. However, by the time the Music Hive in its original form had folded, the musicians were reasonably well established. They became known through Footscray Community Arts Centre's and other regional concerts and were sought after for performances in other areas of Melbourne and also interstate.

Many of them are now working as professional musicians and through this lengthy process have not, like many others, had to suffer cultural isolation nor a sense of cultural inferiority. They have learnt new skills and musical styles, overcome the fear of interacting with Anglo–Australians, known the benefits of government funding and support as well as developed the capacity to work in the mainstream. Or, like one African musician, a traditional purist who learnt his skills as part of his family heritage but had no funds to bring instruments here, developed adaptability and a new mode of creativity. This musician adapted the available instruments but found they altered the sound and timbre of the music, as did the style of the musicians he found to work with. He then began to create new forms of music which worked best in this new situation.

The need to educate and sensitise the wider community as well as community workers in a culturally diverse region led to the development of a pilot project called 'Working cross culturally in the arts'. This project was held at Footscray Community Arts Centre in 1992. It was an initiative funded by the CCDB and is worth repeating. It was designed for community arts workers, providers, educators and artists by a multicultural arts officer and a community development worker in consultation with academics, practitioners and artists from the Vietnamese and Islamic communities. The four-day series concentrated on these two cultures which are strongly represented in Melbourne but are still deeply misunderstood and surrounded by wider community prejudices.

The fact that the workshops were organised and delivered by appropriate representatives of these cultures increased their impact both in the ways in which they were presented and received. They provided a first-hand understanding and knowledge of the issues as well as face-to-face contact with artists, their work and their problems. This creation of a real situation proved far more effective than isolated debate and discussion under a more bureaucratic auspice.

Morag Loh, writer, oral historian and a long-time fighter for the

recognition of cultural diversity, opened the event. She presented an historical dimension to the exclusionist fundamentalism still persisting in Australia:

> The founders of the State Library of Victoria, and, in particular Redmond Barry, firmly embraced the principle, now expounded by SBS TV, of 'bringing the world back home', or, as they would have expressed it, making the knowledge of the civilised world available to the Victorian public. Consequently, from the 1850s on there were books bought in languages other than English. Immigrant artists and intellectuals including those of non-British background were not only represented in collection but [were also] leaders in their field—for instance von Guerard, against whose influence the Heidelberg school rebelled, Lindt the internationally known and respected photographer, and contributing above all perhaps, the amazing von Mueller. In the Great International Exhibition of 1880, prizes were won by a Chinese artist and the Scots–Maltese Azzopardi brothers. The Lutheran Church, from the 1860s on, ran a bilingual school system; Italian opera performers settled to teach Melburnians; German and Welsh choirs competed in a friendly rivalry; the Japanese governments and the King of Prussia sent items of cultural significance to Melbourne. With activity like this a hundred years ago why are we today gathered to discuss working across cultures, to ensure that the cultural diversity that is a feature of modern Victorian society is enhanced and shared?
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> Colonies were always 'inferior', even the 'white' ones being but second class images of the original, the recipients of secondary sons of well-to-do and noble families for whom there was no room at home, and of the working class. But British was best, even in a place so far from London as Melbourne, and most important, had to be seen to be best. That was not so easy to achieve. The Kooris had never taken to British ways and those who survived disease, poison or the gun were rounded up and brought into the missions where they could be safely kept in subservience. The Chinese, from the 1850s on, not only showed they were equal but actually excelled in many occupations, setting a dangerous example. And so began a long period of institutionalised discrimination and racism which aimed to ensure that what was not British was mostly kept out and that what remained conformed to a British model.
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> An acceptance of a variety of world views in the arts has come slowly and perhaps not surprisingly, first of all to visual artists, crafts people and some musicians. Certain galleries, for example East and West Art and Kayah, were founded by immigrants with the express purpose of encouraging cross cultural dialogue. For writers and many actors, life has been much harder because, despite Australia's diversity of languages, each a gateway to the understanding of a culture, our institutions have mostly remained committed to monolingualism.

Dr Phan Van Luu opened the Vietnamese cultural workshop:

> As a French writer once said: 'Partir, c'est mourir un peu', it means that to leave is to die a little. But to the older Vietnamese, their departure has been even more painful, their departure is the loss of what is left of their emotional lives. These people are much too old to copy easily and adapt themselves to a new society. To them, the present and the future are meaningless. Their lives are mere memories of a once beautiful Vietnam. Indeed, a Vietnamese elder said to me: 'Living in Australia, I have ears but can't hear, a mouth but cannot speak and legs but cannot walk. To me, a life has lost its meaning. This society has made me deaf, dumb and crippled.'
>
> Young Vietnamese generations also suffer a large division within their emotional subconscious. They have undergone a severe identity crisis. They suffer, worry and are confused about who they really are. They ask themselves whether they are Vietnamese or Australians. At home, they are confined to Vietnamese customs, traditions and speak Vietnamese in order to communicate with their parents. At school, however, to assimilate with their friends, Vietnamese young people must try to think, learn, play and speak English as Australians.
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> The greatest challenge and torment to the Vietnamese people are the contradictions and conflicts between the two civilisations, East and West, and their having to realise the combination of the two within their hearts and their minds. (Luu, 1992)

And from the Islamic culture workshop, Abdullah Ayan:

> In relation to service provision, any attempt to provide the Muslim community with a new service is fraught with difficulty. The assumptions and presuppositions on which programs are based are not shared by the recipient. For example, with arts programs, your preconceptions of what art is may not be shared by the Muslim community. So you must find out a little bit about Islamic art. First and foremost it is necessary to open communication links with recognised leadership within the Muslim community. Religious leaders have considerable, and sometimes overwhelming, influence over their community. Contact therefore should be made with and assistance sought from most Imams or members of the executive of Islamic societies. There are few Islamic social workers in Victoria, but they can play a useful role in establishing first contact with the Islamic community. (Abdullah Ayan)

Initiatives to establish cross-cultural links are based very often on a superficial knowledge of those cultures and traditions and may be blurred by prejudices and assumptions. Not only must protocols be observed in making approaches to communities, but time must also be spent learning about its internal dynamics and the most appropriate ways of contacting and consulting with its various sectors.

Another presenter, Islamic Community Development worker Leila Aloush, lead a workshop covering the controversial issue of feminism within Islam, trying to challenge stereotypical images:

> I'm involved in the North West region women's health service which has a very strong feminist focus, but we don't use the word feminist, because it is not applicable to a large part of the migrant population. It's not relevant—to them feminism equals extremes.
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> In Islam, men and women are not in competition with each other. That is very essential to Islam. Both have rights and duties that are clearly stated in the Quran. Men and women complement each other. For example, with segregation, men and women are supposed to have equal space. In the eyes of God men and women are equal, but that is not present in practice, in my opinion. Islam clearly states that all human beings are equal. Therefore the most highlighted role for Muslim women is their responsibility for the psychological, spiritual, educational and financial needs of the family.
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> There are wide differences in the way women are treated within different Islamic countries. There are different levels of women's participation in decision making processes and public life. For example, in Egypt there are many women ministers, whereas in Saudi Arabia there wouldn't be any women in parliament. (Leila Aloush)

Interestingly, there are some aspects of the women's head dress in Australia which differ from the Middle East. There, women who have a head cover wear it in very loose form; here, it is worn tightly, which may be indicative of the extent to which they want to identify with the culture. Also in Australia they wear a band that has a colour and on top of that a plain cover. That is a very Malaysian and Indonesian tradition, rather than a Middle Eastern tradition. So there really is a specific Australian Islamic culture. Women with the head cover are the most articulate and educated Muslim women, and they are very assertive. They would be the ones to bring change, like the Western feminist, because they challenge the men.

In our community arts practice we have noticed that NESB women frequently come forward readily to participate in projects. They have been eager to experience new things through involvement in different art practices, to mix with other cultures and share experiences.

However, professional NESB women artists encounter more obstacles than do their male counterparts in trying to establish themselves in the mainstream work area. After arrival in a new country, their priorities, often of necessity, revolve around the requirements of their families and the social and psychological support needed during the process of resettlement. Women's needs, as professional artists, often take secondary importance, whether by choice or because of what is expected of them. Long breaks from professional life can make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to return. While these problems and dilemmas face all Australian women artists, along with the struggle for equitable representation and

acceptance of their work, NESB women face, in addition, the difficulties of language, social and cultural differences.

In the absence of support structures in professional or institutional areas of the arts, community arts funding and workers have achieved remarkable results for both individual artists and community groups. With more than 50 exhibitions over the years, Footscray Community Arts Centre has provided visual artists with the opportunity to show their work and the encouragement to continue. The difficulties artists face through not being accepted by galleries and colleges because they do not have the prerequisite 'Australian' experience, folios or qualifications, trap them in a vicious circle. There are no training or bridging courses available to break it.

In an attempt to fill this gap, another pilot project has been developed by Footscray Community Arts Centre. The 'Bridging-training program for recently arrived NESB visual artists' aims to develop and extend a professional partnership with institutions such as the National Gallery, Victorian College of the Arts, galleries, Arts Industry Unions, Community Arts Network and the media, in order to develop relevant training programs.

The guiding principle of the project is that it must involve educational elements of mutual benefit. Knowledge of differing cultural mores, styles and methods of professional training can be acquired by these institutions. The training program itself will be conditioned by the needs of the artists involved which will also provide the basis for a specially designed course of English language for visual artists. It is worth noting that, of the ten participants, only three women artists have registered for the project. Yet again, this program for professional artists is funded by the CCDB. Its aims are ambitious, its resources modest, yet, if successful, it could trigger the initiation of a new approach, which is long overdue, towards NESB artists by some of the mainstream arts organisations and educational institutions.

A community arts component has been included in this program since there are opportunities for employment and to reiterate, many artists have little knowledge of organised or institutionalised community arts practice as known in Australia. To quote a Latin American visual artist's perception:

> . . . sometimes you are perceived or judged to be a community artist if you are amateur or you are practising your artform without mainstream or professional membership recognition.

We have both been members of a range of government grant assessment committees at both state and national levels. In some cases we have witnessed applications from NESB artists being rejected because the artists were not 'known' to the department staff

or committee. At other times they were rejected because the work was deemed 'derivative' by people with neither the professional nor cultural qualifications to make such judgments or because an ethnomusicologist considered a group's work not 'pure' enough to be eligible for support. We have also been disturbed to hear the view expressed that it is preferable to have English-speaking artsworkers who are 'sensitive to the issues' sit on a multicultural arts committee rather than NESB artists who are 'neither familiar with the policies nor the system'.

In the mid to late 1980s there did not even seem to be an awareness of these problems in some government arts areas, let alone initiation of strategies to assist a more informed decision-making process. Some changes have finally been made. Equally importantly, at local levels, serious effort must be made to ensure appropriate community representation and control, which will also assist the development of requisite skills and knowledge of the system. How else did the rest of us learn about arts policies, funding and the means to gain access to them?

Some artists have become involved in projects and have found fulfilment through community arts without even realising it. Andreoni (1988) has collected some of their thoughts:

> When I came to Australia there was almost no choice and I immediately got myself involved with community groups. But I have been involved in a very positive way. Listening and interpreting people's concerns. And when I saw the need but not the body, I organised the group or the activity and the community response has been great. After a short time I gained respect and wide estimation and most groups still call for my commitment to solve all the problems and difficulties.

> Latin American arts are spontaneous. They are in the environment. And it is amazing how Latin American artists develop their skills without any kind of support nor protection. How? Simple. People respond, participate, buy and do appreciate the arts. Art is a way of life when consumerism is deprived.

> In my country only the elite had access to galleries. Professional artists often worked with the community on a voluntary basis but things such as murals, sometimes with political messages, which everyone got involved with were, of course, illegal. Community arts offers many things. The first step for some people to learn skills, enjoy and appreciate the arts, or for skilled artists to do some of their work while they have to stay in factory jobs. It was very hard for me to work as a community artist, to be both the co-ordinator and the tutor. But the benefits outweighed the difficulties; we produced some very interesting work in the end and were all very proud of the results. The project also introduced us to Aboriginal

> artists and culture which was very new, something we'd never thought about. I now want to have more contact with Aboriginal artists. The only other community arts projects I've worked on were using my skills to carry out someone else's idea. I was just a labourer really.

> . . . the firmly held belief in the superiority of 'High Art', those artforms which are seen as 'international'. All else is pushed to one side under the less prestigious labels of 'Community Art' or 'Multicultural Arts'. Such divisions are spurious. They fail to recognise the social, cultural, geographical and community origins of so much that is now classified as 'High Arts'.
>
> They forget that opera began very much as a popular and community-based artform. Yet the divisions between 'High Arts' and 'others' strengthen the decision-makers' underestimation of the power and range of Multicultural and Community Arts.

The question of 'excellence' as embraced in the rhetoric of government funding authorities has always been a thorny one:

> The perception of otherness is not just one of difference but inherently one of hierarchy. Whom do we identify as others? Not those we identify with, but those we believe inferior or superior to us, or potentially subservient or dominant. (Dominguez, 1990, p. 131)

The bottom line in funding decisions, which can make or break an artist's chances or opportunities, is of course the nature of the decision-making process itself. Who are the peers it includes or excludes? To what extent is it appropriately informed? Under whose rules will assessment take place?

While community arts funding has been the principal source of support and employment for artists from other cultures and for their communities, in many cases it has led to them becoming casualties of a system which stereotypes them. The perception that multicultural arts equals community arts is both simplistic and naive.

The many critics of funding for community arts never seem to have understood its important role in the growth of Australian cultural life. It has broadened participation and skills levels in the community. It has supported local content and innovation, in audience and consumer development and it has nurtured a culturally aware and informed society. Nor have they understood that it has provided for many of those areas of cultural development that get put in the 'too-hard' basket, including support for professional artists from other cultures. Major arts institutions seem to have not yet seriously grappled with the issues of multiculturalism in a realistic or productive manner. Do they know that in Australia communities from other countries are often highly organised, operate at sophisticated levels and have leaders whom they can consult? We may have

some idea from immigration statistics of the numbers of qualified doctors and engineers from overseas living in this country and probably not practising their professions, but how many professional artists are there whose skills are lost to this country? How do we find out? The small multicultural arts sector has found many of them; workplace concerts in factories have flushed them out as well. These areas which fall within the community arts sector provide the first stage of support and even more. The professional arts sector has yet to step in to provide real access to the services that the rest of the Australian arts community is able to enjoy.

While enlightened and progressive policies have enabled the establishment of organisations such as SBS, changes in community perception come slowly. It may now be considered not too strange to read subtitles on films on television while we listen to voices we cannot understand. The growth and popularity of 'world music' is acclimatising younger generations to the sounds and values of music from other cultures. We pay for expensive tickets to performances by visiting artists from other cultures at our International Festivals, but we still do not have the means to put the artists of international standing who are living in our midst in major venues.

At their own community level they may be supported (particularly financially), written about in their own media here, have found some opportunities through community arts, but in terms of appropriate professional practice the attitudes and monolingual walls of our arts institutions remain essentially exclusive.

Naturally, new policies with funds tied to them can create problems and pressures for people whose job it is to implement them. In some cases, for those who work at community level or in arts organisations it may be viewed as something imposed upon them. Their reaction may be to think that, since multicultural arts is the 'flavour of the month', then we had better dream up a project to get some of the action. Or, as one community theatre worker, whose work is involved with social justice issues, asked: '. . . if I'm dealing with women's issues why should I have to deal with multiculturalism as well?'

The danger here is of encouraging separation and competition between people working in different areas of priority for funding rather than building the alliances which can lead to a more realistic and holistic approach. There is still a great need for education and for training, at all levels of the arts, in the areas of cross-cultural awareness and skills for consultation with artists and NESB communities.

The principles of community arts have been integral to most of the multicultural arts work carried out in this country. There are many examples documented, be they from well-established

organisations such as the Multicultural Arts Centre in Adelaide, the Perth Music Centre, Brisbane Ethnic Music and Arts Centres, or the work of individual multicultural arts workers in other states. There are also many examples of projects and support work for professional artists carried out under the banner of multicultural arts, by the same organisations and individuals.

The hard work to gain professional organisation and legitimacy for community arts has led ultimately to its becoming slowly more conservative and inward-looking. A large majority of the purveyors and organisers of community arts, and in some cases of multicultural arts, are still of monolingual English-speaking backgrounds, their staff and committees of management likewise. While they have the skills to obtain funding for 'multicultural' projects, some still tend to be locked into the patronising pattern of organising things for communities, rather than assisting communities to run activities for themselves. Most NESB communities in Australia are well organised in the areas of social as well as cultural activities, either at informal levels or through established clubs.

The community arts sector now only rarely steps outside its own organisational network to interact with leaders from different cultural communities. When it does, the exchanges have yet to achieve the level of trust which allows handing over control for decision making or funds. Ultimately, this cannot be seen as anything but a reluctance, if unwitting, to relinquish power.

It would be of value to analyse the organisational elements of programs funded under the banner of multiculturalism which have left their mark on an artist's life or on a community's ongoing cultural development. It is highly likely that successful outcomes would be found in situations where appropriate consultation had taken place and where control had been handed over or shared. It is also important to discover and learn about the many different cultural activities that communities organise for themselves, the wealth of unknown, unpublicised cultural life that takes place in our towns and cities.

Changing peoples' perceptions, preconceptions and attitudes is a slow process dependent on access to information, education and experience. While initiatives have been undertaken by funding bodies and some arts organisations to provide information in other languages and interpreter services, it is not only the client base that needs to be resourced. Cross-cultural awareness training should be mandatory for the deliverers of arts services to people from different backgrounds. Within arts organisations it is important to utilise the linguistic assets of the membership or community, to ensure that all involved have access to representation. The potential for contribu-

tions, cultural, intellectual, ideological or otherwise, from members of different cultures too often remains unexplored.

Despite problems, setbacks and in many cases, lack of resources, community arts workers have still managed to provide examples of effective support to NESB artists as well as a few successful models of support infrastructure. They are worthy of examination by both the mainstream and future community arts sectors. As brave attempts to work with and support different cultures, to be open to the experiences and understanding that can change attitudes and behaviour, they have taken a few large steps, not only in the pursuit of access and equity objectives, but also in the creation of new art.

Note

1 Much has been written elsewhere of community arts history, its theory and practice as well as the shifts in direction both at grass-roots level and within the program areas of government funding agencies. See Binns (1991). The impact of multicultural policy on the arts, the history of its form of implementation and name changes, is discussed in Chapter 12 of this book.

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