

The case for ‘socially engaged arts’: navigating art history, cultural development and arts funding narratives

Marnie Badham

Abstract

Over the past 30 years of community cultural development policy and practice in Australia, artists and communities have been stimulating dialogue and developing cultural expression through collaborative and creative practice. Growing evidence has been collected regarding the instrumental benefits, such as increasing ‘social capital’, economic development and health outcomes. However, there remains little critical attention paid to the intrinsic artistic values of this practice. This diverse field is inherently interdisciplinary, and, like traditional art forms, follows particular principles and ethics. Without a clearly articulated aesthetic, it is often overlooked as non-professional art practice. This paper argues that more attention needs to be paid to the artistic merits of this field as socially engaged arts practice, and to do so, three inter-related lenses for the practice are considered: an art history context, cultural development theory, and the ever-changing Australia Council’s community arts policy.

Keywords: socially engaged arts, community cultural development, artistic merit, cultural democracy, Australia Council for the Arts

Introduction

In an increasingly uncertain world, societies are facing mass migration, climate change and economic collapse. Artists and communities are addressing these global issues at a local level through practice known as community cultural development, community arts, or socially engaged arts practice. Over the past three decades, there is mounting international evidence from health, culture, and social science fields linking arts engagement and cultural participation with increased democratic participation and enhanced community wellbeing¹, alongside other instrumental values of the arts. More challenging to describe are the

intrinsic values of arts engagement: aesthetic enlightenment, communicative processes, and contributions to public sector capacity. Rather than relying on the more easily measurable instrumental descriptions, this paper advocates a new framing of the practice as socially engaged arts within an art historical context, placing more value on the artistic integrity of the work, a key factor of the success of this practice.

McCarthy et al's *Gifts of the muse* (2005) sheds light on the roots of this challenge: the lack of attention to the intangible and difficult to define intrinsic benefits of the arts:

They lie beyond the traditional quantitative tools of the social sciences, and often beyond the language of common experience. Although many advocates of the arts believe intrinsic benefits are of primary importance, they are reluctant to introduce them into the policy discussion because they do not believe such ideas will resonate with most legislators and policymakers ... the arts community is expected to focus on tangible results that have broad political backing, such as improved educational performance and economic development.²

This paper argues that if the artistic merit in this field is overlooked we will lose the social impacts. It proposes that the field of community cultural development, and to be more specific, socially engaged arts practice, requires a more rigorous inquiry of relevant arts based conceptual frameworks, to be grounded as a legitimate art form. While other art disciplines are positioned within the historical trajectory and protocols of specific art mediums, this practice is inherently interdisciplinary. The practice has traditionally responded to locally perceived realities or injustices, with artistic leadership guiding the application of social and cultural aesthetics. As a result this field of art practice is informed less by its own historical context and more by its shared principles and ethics³. To support these claims, this paper provides a descriptive chronology of the field's development in Australia, read through the context of Australia Council funding language and how it sets up the relationship of the art or artist to 'community'. This reflects a shift from 'democratisation of art' to 'cultural democracy'. The second narrative of the paper will be a more general placement of the field into art historical context, attempting to draw attention to the aesthetic theoretical relevance of the work. The last thread, a cultural development perspective, is explained through processes of cultural change: cultural intrusion, creativity, and dialogue. Ultimately, the paper concludes that continued critical and conceptual discourse is required for not only acceptance of this practice as a professional art form, but to also sustain an innovative and resilient community of practice.

Socially engaged arts practice

Despite a more than thirty-year history of community arts in Australia, practitioners engaging in transformative practice, and government support

for projects, there is no definitive understanding or comprehensive theory.⁴ The practice is known by many names: community art, participatory arts, community-engaged arts, socially engaged arts, arts for social justice, artist and community collaboration, relational or dialogical art, applied aesthetics, and community cultural development. By extension, folk art, ethnic art, outsider art, collaborative art making, circus arts and grassroots arts are also at times included in this 'too hard to define' basket. This extensive 'shopping list' is presented here to underscore the fleeting language and jargon created by policy makers. For the purposes of this paper, the term socially engaged arts will include all of these community and cultural development art processes that intend positive social change and facilitate individuals and communities in active participation in their cultural identity. To clarify, this paper uses the more focused term 'socially engaged' arts practice, which is seen as residing within a much broader landscape of community cultural development.

Over the last fifteen years in Canada, and now in Australia, my practice has been as an artist and amateur in numerous communities and mediums: outdoor site-specific dance projects in remote communities, prison art workshops, art installations at housing estates, experimental video created by sex workers, and so on. These examples are cited only to illustrate the diversity of my practice, as this is a theoretical paper and will intentionally not locate specific projects as case studies. My own practice has resulted in instrumental community outcomes of social, justice, educational and health impacts.⁵ This paper will not argue against such benefits, but it does raise the concern that artistic integrity is often undermined or overlooked. Too often, the challenge of articulating and qualifying the artistic becomes too complex and we resort to the more easily expressed translation of social policy outcomes. The exclusion of the essential role of the artist and aesthetic commitment in project development and production may be overlooked in the broader field, if the critical dialogue lacks this inclusion. Therefore, this paper will attempt to strengthen the case for artistic merit within this social practice.

Practitioners and theorists have been unable to define a particular style, form or aesthetic in socially engaged arts, but, like any other art forms, it is approached by particular principles and ethics.⁶ Interpretation by the artist *and* community of these principles (collaboration, hybridity, creativity, innovation) inform the process, form and outcomes of the field. These principles have shifted over the last few decades from the democratisation of culture: a 'top-down' welfare-like approach of *helping* disadvantaged communities, to the embracing of cultural democracy: the recognition of unique, valuable and plural communities' right to control the creation and trajectory of their own culture. Cultural democracy upholds the rights of authorship; representation and dissemination of this new balanced collaboration between artist and community.

This is a particularly interesting shift: from democratisation to democracy. A corresponding shift in Australia Council for the Arts⁷ ideology can be illustrated through examples of changing public funding language of federal agencies, from the time when the Community Arts Board was established in 1973.⁸ The titles of funding programs have regularly changed, however distinctions are made between art *for*, *by* and *with* community. These tiny prepositions might seem insignificant but they alter the meaning substantially in regard to power relationships and ownership of voice, aesthetic and artistic content. *Art for community* can be explained as work that has been developed for an audience, and in this context, typically an expansion of the archetypal audience, for example, sponsorship of a children's music festival for workers and their families. *Art with community* suggests work that is made through collaboration between professional artists and non-arts groups, as seen in 'workers theatre' or artist in residence programs in health, educational or justice settings. Lastly, *art by community* suggests that the makers of art, and the understanding of what art even is, need to be reconsidered, questioned and ultimately, reinterpreted.

Arts for community

Dr Penny Tripcony of the Ngugi people has noted: 'There is no one word in any Aboriginal language for the term art. Art forms are viewed as an integral part of life and the celebration of life.'⁹

While artists have been working in the context of community since the beginning of time, many indigenous languages do not even have a separate word for art. Culture, engaging in day-to-day life with ceremony, ritual, music, and dance, is not separated from everyday life. Western societies have typically placed the artist on the outskirts of society, regarded rather as genius and author of creative commodities, objects or staged performance. This has made the task of defining the role of the artist within the field of community art an enduring challenge, with models ranging across this spectrum of token engagement to authentic ownership of creative projects. Generally speaking, early publicly funded community arts (from the early 1970s in Australia) reacted against the tradition of art for the elite. The content of community art, at this time, changed to include glimpses or stories of everyday life, but the form remained the same: that is, object-based art, staged art, and art that required an audience in a purpose designed gallery or theatre.

In early funded community arts programs, the predominant style was Realism, a residual of colonising practices, which encouraged an 'objective' perspective and a somewhat detached position from the artist or author: documenting history and shedding light on reality. Social Realism was a movement that emphasised the faithful representation of social reality. While not all work of this time presented a strictly Realist perspective, American critics Greenberg and the younger Fried, spoke of this work as *literal*. They favoured Modern Art over the literal, as Modernism did not

provide an illustratively accurate depiction of the world. Much of this early publicly-funded community art focused on the plight of the working class, called for social reform, and the end of racial and social injustice. Traditional mediums – such as *workers theatre* – can be seen as an aesthetic and politically left ‘hangover’ from the American Depression in the 1930s and on a broader scale it reaches back to the Realist movement of the late 1800s in France and in Germany.

As mentioned earlier, the Community Arts Committee was established at the Australian Council of the Arts in 1973. This was part of the global policy movement towards the ‘democratisation’ of culture, with a commitment to providing access to the arts for all, particularly for those who experienced economic, social and cultural barriers to participation. As Duland has put it: ‘Dissemination was the key concept with the aim of establishing equal opportunity for all citizens to participate in publicly organised and financed cultural activities’.¹⁰ This objective of cultural democratisation could be seen as the aesthetic enlightenment, with a focus on educating the general public. Within cultural policies of many western worlds, culture and the arts are seen as a public good that betters society through an egalitarian approach.

This particular paradigm was met with resistance from the other traditional art disciplines (performing arts, visual arts, etcetera), which challenged the status of community arts as a professional arts practice. This resistance, in turn, received criticism from community arts comrades, who saw it as an attempt to extend access to the *already* privileged or elitist art forms, such as regional touring of symphony orchestras or giving free tickets to the national art gallery for ‘at risk’ youth. Either way, the debate was about art ‘for’ community to participate in as audience. This global project of democratisation aimed to propagate a mainstream aesthetic and the values attached to it, and to disregard other notions of plural culture(s) as being marginal or less important. In other words, democratisation was about extending access to, not ownership of, cultural products for all.

At this point, we need to take a step back from community arts policy descriptions to more seriously consider the concepts of culture and development. Socially engaged art can be seen as *a tool for change*. Culture, as understood in broad terms, relates to how we both engage in, and make meaning of, the world in which we are immersed. Culture gives us ‘tools’ to make sense of the world. This accumulated repertoire of knowledge, assumptions and beliefs is comprised of both history and heritage – documented traditions and achievements – and new and changing ways to interpret the world through experience, learning and socialisation.¹¹

Change can be called ‘development’ if there is a sense of adaptation or updating of culture. However, such cultural change can occur in a variety of ways and three distinct processes can be identified. The first process can be called *cultural intrusion*, and this is when cultural change is imposed from the ‘outside’. This can probably be seen most clearly in regard to colonisation,

when one group – or cultural entity – imposes an external cultural *inheritance of meaning* on another, forcing them to give up control of their historical cultural trajectory. Gramsci described a process of cultural ‘hegemony’ in which diverse cultures and values can be dominated by singular rule, when people become unaware of the larger structures that impose prevailing cultural norms. As Miller and Yudice (2002) have put it, cultural hegemony occurs when ‘the dominant culture uses education, philosophy, religion, aesthetics and art to make its dominance appear normal and natural to the heterogeneous groups that constitute society.’¹²

A relatively small, elite segment of society is often seen as imposing its tastes and traditions on the choices and courses of action that people come to believe they have. As Stanley has noted, this process is not always as ‘drastic as the conquistadors showing up on your doorstep’¹³, rather, it is experienced through the adoption of new worldviews, outside information, and adaptation to new meanings. Homi Bhabha has described this process more bluntly as ‘the barbaric transmission of culture.’¹⁴ He has suggested that the intrusion results from an injection of new meaning by subjects of the intrusion; that it is not simply oppression, but an acceptance of new meaning. This helps to explain why the Realist phase in community art adopted a mainstream aesthetic.

Arts with community

The Australia Council for the Arts first introduced the term ‘community cultural development’ in the mid-1980s, in order to acknowledge a shift in the practice of community art, now focused on broader cultural, economic, and social outcomes and the inclusion of new voices and forms that were previously unacknowledged. This can be seen as the second of three processes of ‘cultural development’. However, this broader and more inclusive reach of practice seemed to have very flexible boundaries for outlining the field. Indeed the shift was accompanied by a number of very long and very verbose ‘definitions’ of the new inclusive practice. In a nutshell, it was proposed that community cultural development can be explained as a community-based creative practice, which engages artists and communities in processes of cultural development and self-determination. Further, the field was seen as encompassing a diverse range of activities and practices aimed at providing communities with opportunities to tell their stories, build creative capacity, address social agendas, express identity, and participate directly in the development of their own culture(s).¹⁵ This far-reaching agenda could include a spectrum of activities ranging from subversive political art interventions to local government cultural planning, such as ‘place making’.

Artists interpreted this as cultural activity *with* community and also art *by* community. A conscious shift was made from the ‘democratisation’ of culture (as access) to a notion of cultural democracy in which communities were seen to have more control of their own cultural trajectory. They were

now in charge of their own representations, their own production of culture and its applications. American writers Adams and Goldbard (1990) have said that the concept of cultural democracy involves three components: equality, participation, and democracy. In their words:

Cultural democracy is not a complicated idea, though its applications can become very complex. It encompasses several interrelated concepts. First, it posits that *many cultural traditions co-exist* in human society, and that *none of these should be allowed to dominate* and become an official culture. A second component of the idea of cultural democracy is *participation*. Cultural democracy proposes a cultural life in which everyone is free to participate. And finally, a third component of the idea of cultural democracy is that *cultural life itself should be subject to democratic control*. We need to participate in determining the directions that cultural development takes.¹⁶

The more inclusive strategies for cultural ‘development’ resulted in the word ‘art’ being replaced by ‘culture’ and ‘artist’ by ‘arts worker’. This new paradigm linked art skills to the service of a community, whereas previously the artist was considered to be either a skilled technician or a conceptual genius. Artists were now seen as working *with* community, rather than *for* community and this shifted the perception of ownership to an emphasis on partnership or collaboration. It is important to understand the mechanics of such partnerships: it is not a funding relationship, nor simply an artist teaching a class in community, rather, it is a collaboration in the production of art. The inclusion of the word ‘with’ suggests a relationship of shared risk and, in terms of culture, a new process of engagement and exchange of ideas that will have substantial impact on content, process, decision making, and ultimately the new aesthetic developed from this coming together. With an increase in the development of participatory models, communities now became both creator and producer, not just audience. This certainly led to a broadening, and perhaps a deepening, of community art practice across Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA.

Previously, within prevailing conceptions of community art, cultural change was the result of an intrusion: the domination and imposition of one particular cultural form. This new conception of community cultural development was seen as enacting cultural change through creative processes. Hence, creativity was seen as a process of evolution that actively challenges old meanings and creates new meanings or representations, and this could apply to innovations in art, science or philosophy. In this paradigm, citizens, scientists, artists and philosophers create new meaning through education, debate, and interpretation.

In the 1990s, Australia saw the start of growing research interest in the impact of community cultural development on mental health, community wellbeing, and social inclusion from a variety of sources including philanthropy, health organisations and universities. This is also when a

crisis in confidence developed regarding the value of artistic outcomes resulting from the new forms of practice. Australian writer Graham Pitts has suggested that: 'The 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.'¹⁷

What was once considered highly charged and political art was perhaps becoming more a means of disseminating a social welfare model. Had community cultural development dropped art in its pursuit of social outcomes? Or were practitioners and the broader cultural community just lacking the language to discuss the new aesthetics? Gay Hawkins' polemic, *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras: constructing community arts*¹⁸, presented this as a challenge, suggesting that the field had become a construction, or invention, of an arts policy aimed at achieving social outcomes.

From 'grassroots' community arts – such as the painting of murals to social realist theatre – to government planning, this practice was once again presented with the challenge of defining itself in terms of artistic excellence. Unfortunately, those who were faced by this challenge, in particular those requesting this designated arts funding, were hampered. First, they were limited in their ability to represent an adequate understanding of the history of their field of practice. Individual artists working in more traditional art forms can resort to aesthetic principles and technical skills derived from the history of their art form. For example, people working in theatre or visual arts are broadly aware of the trajectory of art movements in their fields and their work is reviewed by other 'professionals' in the light of such histories. When artists in the field of community cultural development request funds their requests were not reviewed by a jury of their peers, but a range of those who presented, administrated and partnered in this practice. The challenge for those working in the field now called community cultural development was to articulate new aesthetics emerging from local cultural realities; with some practices being literal, some more symbolic, some traditional and some new hybrid forms. To be more precise, this was the challenge for the cultural democracy movement which had prompted the shift to the language of community cultural development.

This may have also presented a challenge for those who had a primary interest in the social policy outcomes of socially engaged art. The message for those who might want to employ artists to achieve certain social policy outcomes was 'Don't lose the art'. In other words, socially engaged arts are inherently transformational because they are collaborative and engaging, especially when lead artists are determined to uphold the artistic integrity of the work. However, it is the art more than the social policy outcome that results in transformation, yet there has been limited discussion in the literature on these kinds of artistic processes.¹⁹ A debate between Bishop (2006) and Krester (2004) has noted that it is difficult to be critical of art that

helps to make people feel good about themselves because art that has taken a 'social turn' is resisting the notion that there is such a thing as 'bad art.' This 'social turn' in art practice has been criticised as a way of providing social services on the back of artists with the result that the work of artists is diminished. The ability to critique such art practice is also complicated as it is difficult to critique work that appears to be of social merit, even if it does lack innovation.

By contrast, Mulligan and Smith, who undertook an extensive three-year research project in this field, argued that: 'Artistic projects can only shift perceptions and attitudes in a meaningful way if they have a 'wow factor' related to an inspirational artistic vision and/or the clever crafting of diverse and well targeted activities.'²⁰

Mulligan and Smith conducted detailed research on significant creative community collaborations located in five local government areas across Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, to see how effectively the arts projects had aided the local governments concerned to address pressing social issues in their areas (for example, aging population, disengagement, indigenous land claims). Successful projects, they concluded, were those in which lead artists made particular aesthetic choices, rather than simply focus on community participation. This echoes points made in a handful of significant studies in both UK²¹ in the US²² which have argued that 'intrinsic' values of the arts are at least as important, if not more important, than instrumental values. In other words, art needs to be judged in terms of aesthetic merit and its ability to communicate or inform the 'public sphere' in order to understand the contribution it can make to social policy. Clearly, this touches on a larger discussion about the role of art in society but it can also open up the discussion about the impacts of socially engaged art. When the instrumental values of this practice are overstated, the intrinsic values are overlooked, endangering the commitment to artistic integrity. Yet, as Mulligan and Smith suggest, the shift in public attitudes is likely to be connected to inspirational artistic vision in practice.

While some might consider Modern art to be a far stretch from forms of art that reflect this 'social turn', there are, conceptually, a number of elements within the historical development of Modern art that provide insights into the challenges now faced by socially engaged art. The philosophy of Modern artists – stretching across most of the twentieth century – was experimentation and new ideas regarding ways of seeing, the nature of materials, and the functions of art. Indeed, Modern Art even became critical of itself, offering self-consciousness about aesthetics and social debate. American curator, Lucy Lippard (1985), was one of the first who named conceptual art of the 1970s as Modernism's 'de-objectification': a letting go of the object, gallery or the stage that identified art as art. She also wrote extensively about feminist art, another movement that could be qualified less by a predominant aesthetic of a particular medium, but informed

more by particular principles and ethics. This changed the way art was experienced; the audience was not as much at a distance and were now engaged in creating meaning based on alternative contexts. Lippard speaks of community arts and cultural animation within a frame of public art and notions of place, as a way to stimulate local dialogue, with artist seeing themselves as facilitators of community and ideas, rather than interpreters.²³

Art by community

In the 1990s in Australia, new voices began to emerge as art makers and as recipients of arts funding. Multicultural arts and indigenous arts were now on the agenda, with policy makers forced to recognise other essentially Australian aesthetics that had been previously overlooked by the mainstream. The criteria of 'artistic excellence' had to once again be redefined with work that was now being more clearly created *by* community. As indicated earlier, this involved a conceptual shift that challenged more literal art forms; with new voices being heard and new cultural forms acknowledged. The shift from 'community art' to 'community cultural development' eventually resulted in reorganisation at the Australia Council, when a new 'community partnerships' program replaced the earlier program administered by the now-abolished Community Cultural Development Board. While many practitioners worried that the new program might be little more than a marketing strategy for the Australia Council, the shift is now widely seen as reaching beyond, and perhaps deeper, than the program run by the CCD Board. The Australia Council notes that its primary role is to help to articulate the 'national story', and now that story is clearly about cultural pluralism. This involves redefining who an art maker is and who creates culture. The new focus on community partnerships reflects a move away from short-term 'one-off' projects. There are now new collaboration models, inter-sectoral partnerships including non-arts organisations, new entrepreneurial models with diversified and self generated revenue sources, and longer term projects embedded in community in order to build local capacity. There is a new rhetoric of helping to build self-reliant and resilient communities.

'Community partnerships' appears to be more than just a new funding model because it suggests a movement away from formal art traditions and an embedding of practice deeper into institutional culture. It is hoped that partnerships involving non-arts organisations – in areas such as health, education, or housing – will serve to embed CCD principles more deeply within society. However, the challenge, once again, is to define aesthetic integrity within a practice that often gets lost in its social policy rhetoric. Without a strong commitment to artistic processes and outcomes, the merits of creative collaborations and their 'social impacts' will suffer. While the expanded mandate of Australia Council within the field of 'community partnerships' does not necessarily mean that artistic integrity will suffer, there is a clear danger of diffusion. The artist is expected to be at the service

of a community and become a community development practitioner. The emphasis is less on creative outcomes and more about 'capacity building' for communities.

Once again we can turn to conventional art history to get a better understanding of the new challenges facing socially engaged art in Australia. In promoting a model for socially engaged art that emphasises dialogue without diminishing a critical reliance on the inspirational vision or direction of the artist, we need to look at art movements that have had the capacity to shock us out of complacency and see the world anew. This brings us to artists who, in words of Clinescu, have seen art as 'the most immediate and fastest way to social, political, and economic reform.'²⁴ Twentieth century avant-garde – from Dadaist irrationalism to the constructed situations in the Situationist International²⁵ – falls within the tradition of the previously discussed movement, Modernism. It shared with Modernism the aim of changing culture, attitudes and mentalities, and individual and social living conditions. Artists in the avant-garde tradition reacted against authority, including working without funding, and they sought to engage with a broad audience in this reactive stance. Within the tradition there was also Fluxus, which encouraged a 'do-it-yourself aesthetic' which valued simplicity over complexity. Fluxus included a strong current of anti-commercialism and an anti-art sensibility, disparaging the conventional consumerist art world in favour of creative processes. Working with materials at hand, from the local context, Fluxus artists were collaborators and they certainly shared principles inherent in contemporary socially engaged art. Once again, we can focus on an acknowledged art tradition that has challenged notions of 'high art'. A number of contemporary art critics – such as Grant Kester, Lucy Lippard, Claire Bishop or Hal Foster²⁶ – have discussed art traditions that fit within an unconventional niche of 'political' or 'activist' art. However, they have been interested in the reputation of the individual artist and less the aesthetics of the more dispersed authorship in the community context.

Within the field of socially engaged art much debate has focused on process versus product, and ethical issues related to the spectacle or perceived exploitation of sensitive populations, as well as the debates about intrinsic and instrumental benefits of participatory art practices. There is growing discussion about the aesthetic quality of collaborative art forms. However, the field's practitioners and informed critics are often disregarded as 'bleeding hearts', or, worse still, propagandists for the political left. It is frustrating that a whole field of practice can be so easily disregarded within the contemporary art world. Like activist art as an organising tool and a source of aesthetic expression, Lippard explains 'advocacy criticism' is subjective to the writer's political views and the social context:

What I am calling and advocacy critic ... works from a communal base to identify and criticise the existing social structures as means to locate and evaluate the social and aesthetic effect of the art.²⁷

Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' also describes artistic practices that consider human relations and social contexts. Each of the defined styles, discussed above, had moved away from the private space, stage or the object. These attempts at redefinition sought to not only democratise the arts, but challenged elitism and the how aesthetics were considered.

This brings us, finally, to the third process – beyond cultural intrusion or transmission and a focus on creativity – to an emphasis on dialogue. In this process, culture involves both the communication of 'inherited meanings' and well as the creation of new meaning. Authentic experiences of cultural dialogue can provide the means for communicating values, traditions, beliefs and experiences, which can result in better understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Exchange can affect the way we create meaning within our own culture and provide an opportunity for new hybrid art forms. While mainstream notions of 'social inclusion' have become popular on political agendas, the concepts of cultural democracy and mainstream diversification reflect developments within contemporary art practice.²⁸ In a pluralist society, it is only ethical that value be given to self-determination – that is, the ability to control the trajectory of one's own culture – and this can also promote reflection on diverse traditions and beliefs.

Cultural dialogue is both the opportunity and means for mutually beneficial communication among people of different cultures. The value this places on dialogue, then, is based on the premise that to be able to live together well, people need to be able to communicate and understand one another's culture. As Terry McKinley has put it:

Cultural diversity should be respected, but what is most desirable is a flourishing, interactive diversity, in which people of differing cultures are able to communicate their values, beliefs and traditions to one another in an atmosphere of mutual respect and learning.²⁹

McKinley's work with UNESCO illustrates the value of socially engaged arts practice that provides an opportunity for this kind of exchange, leading to new forms of cultural transmission and new, hybrid, art forms developed between traditional and contemporary cultures. Cultural dialogue and exchange – like artistic merit, transmission and creativity – should be seen key factors in socially engaged arts practices.

Conclusions

In the attempt to theorise the field of socially engaged arts, within a context of the arts more broadly – rather than solely focus on its instrumental outcomes – this paper has provided three new perspectives: 1) a perspective gained from art history, 2) a perspective gained from the examining evolution of practices related to 'cultural development', and 3) a perspective gained from analysing shifts in policy and practice at the Australia Council for the Arts. From the perspective of art history, we have seen that an understanding of social realism, Modern art, avant-garde art and activist art

helps to provide a broader reference for shifting practices, emphasising the important creative role of the artist. An examination of changing practices in relation to 'cultural development' reveals the shift from cultural intrusion to creativity *per se* to the emphasis on dialogue. The paper has not endeavoured to present a preferred model of practice, but it has tracked the arts funding trajectory over the past three decades in Australia, which has moved from 'community art' to 'community cultural development' to 'community partnerships'.

Due to a lack of resources and, perhaps, confidence, socially engaged art in Australia has traditionally lacked formal critical self-reflection. However, the problem is more than just a lack of time and resources because many practitioners probably fear that even talking about creativity could result in the loss of its inherent ephemeral and organic processes; that the underground will become exploited and misappropriated by the mainstream. This is an unwarranted fear and we need to be more aware that practice has been, and will continue to be, informed by policy, while policy will continue to be informed by practice. Socially engaged arts practice has existed for centuries, largely outside funding paradigms, and it will continue this way into the future. Artists and communities will continue to engage in practice which addresses complex global issues at the local level through creative engagement activities. It is this type of self-determination – through processes of creativity – which has been driving human development since the beginning of time.

Marnie Badham is an artist researcher in socially engaged arts practice in Australia and Canada, and the inaugural PhD candidate at the Centre for Cultural Partnerships at the University of Melbourne, where her practice-led research investigates the concept of cultural democracy through creative engagement interventions. Her creative projects draw attention to local social justice issues, address issues of place-based and social stigma, and are committed to the expression of cultural identity in marginalised communities.

Endnotes

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