

Contemplating community: notes from a singer on the road¹

Robyn Archer

Let me begin by thanking Aunty Joy Murphy for her welcome and I wish to pay my respects to the Wurundjeri and Bunnerong peoples, the traditional owners of this great meeting place where we gather, and to their elders past and present.

As you can imagine, it is a daunting prospect trying to find the right pitch to open a conference like this, filled as it is with genuine expertise and experience of working in and with community. What can I possibly offer? While most of you are considering and drawing from quite specific examples – which each make clear what is meant by thinking of it as a particular community, mostly defined geographically as towns, cities, regions or suburbs – I find myself thinking about the very notion of community and how we still need to be on guard about the term itself. I want to sit with that for a moment.

For a gypsy who is not Romany – that is, not surrounded by fellow travellers – the notion of community is strange. For more than 30 years of rarely spending more than five consecutive nights in any one place, I have very little personal sense of community in a geographical sense. Things that come easy to many members of a community are often quite hard for me. Trying to rent a DVD anywhere, or give a reliable street address without seeming like a criminal, pretty much puts me in a refugee status. Even finding the nearest after-hours grocery shop can be challenging on a day-to-day basis. And as for doctors, forget it! I'm glad I so rarely need one.

It is no surprise, I suppose, that I am starting to think and speak more and more about valuing the ephemeral, about championing the transitory. I am a gypsy traveller without a home and – as most of you know – I am, by trade, a singer. I have learnt, without tuition, to fashion the air coming from my lungs to create sound waves which resonate on your skulls and reach your ears. The actual thing I make is gone the minute it leaves me. Its efficacy relies on memory. Believe me, having the recording is not the same thing, it is just what is left over, as much as we might enjoy those remains for many years afterwards.

Multiple communities

I suppose if I craved a sense of belonging, or felt a need for community, I could try a number of communal avenues – the gay and lesbian community or indeed women in general, although I have never been a club or party goer. Community through gender is a possibility or identifying with Australians anywhere, that might be another form of community. These are both globally connected communities with fairly high levels of shared interests, histories, views and values. But I don't crave these connections. Why? Well, firstly, I enjoy being alone, adventuring alone, letting my nose lead without having to consult anyone. However, the real reason is that I belong to a community that is so widespread and evident that it is actually quite hard to escape, anywhere in the world. This is the community of art and artists. Wherever I am there is evidence of that community; it is my joy, my solace, my sadness, my intellectual engagement on every level. Of course it has been my particular privilege also to connect with individual members of that community all over the world and there are few cities and towns – far and wide – where I would have many friends and colleagues which that community has yielded me. However, it is a community of the intangible. It saturates the world and provides billions of entry points. And it is surely why artists, art, and artistic processes have such a role to play within more geographically defined communities – precisely because we can be, and are, everywhere!

It is always interesting for me to find that in continental Europe there is no sense of community as we know it. It has been explained to me more than once that in France, for instance, the very notion of community would upset the notion of *égalité*; one cannot properly speak of 'gay' rights or 'ethnic' rights, because, of course, the theory there is that everyone has exactly the same rights. Therefore you will not find a Department of Community Arts anywhere in France. What you will find, however, is the survival of President de Gaulle's decentralised model of the arts: throughout France all citizens have access to the very best of dance, theatre and visual arts and attendant programs of education and participation through the Maisons de la Culture, liberally spread throughout the country. This works brilliantly for audiences outside the major cities and also for artists whose audiences are vast and who have an appetite for new work.

This does not mean that art in community doesn't exist in the way it is being discussed at the ReGenerating Community Conference. It just doesn't go by that name; it is largely stimulated by patterns of migration, which are familiar throughout Europe. As the old Empires have struck back, European countries have experienced the influx of large numbers of citizens who, because of the colonial experience, speak the same language, yet their cultures, ethnicities and personal histories have been vastly different from those of French citizens, born and raised in France, for example. In a city like Marseilles there are many art projects which seek to proactively engage the

many North Africans who now live there. And it is the same in Berlin for Turkish ‘guest-workers’ and now for their children who were born there. It is the same in Brussels for migrants from Arabic countries.

Jacques Martial at Parc La Villette

There was nothing accidental in the appointment of the actor and activist Jacques Martial as the first black man ever to head up one of the major cultural institutions in France – as President of Parc La Villette, which is situated in the 19th arrondissement, just inside the walls and very close to one of the main sites of racial explosion. This has possibly been less a case of a community needing regeneration and more about neighbourhoods needing recognition and reconciliation. While his stature as an artist and brilliant advocate would be qualification enough, one sees in his massive exposition on the Outres-Mers (Outlying Dominions), his intent to reach out to the people who live nearby in an effort to bring them inside the cultural activities that the Parc La Villette produces. In the past they may have used the park’s grounds for strolling and playing with the kids while the cultural institutions sited in the park – Cite de la Musique, Cite de la Science, the Grand Halle, etcetera – have been visited only by those from the white European majority. This, then, is a major institution taking as the central theme of its major annual exhibition, the histories and culture of the people who now live closest to that institution; histories and culture that have been, and often still are, in conflict with mainstream France. In 2011 the intention is to focus on disability, also a departure in Parisian art circles.

However, all this is done without overt art and community programs. In France it seems that those who would normally fall outside the statistical norms – in terms of age, race, ethnicity, language and ability – are enticed through manipulations of the mainstream programs, rather than through the creation of special programs outside the mainstream. Whether it works or not on a practical level I cannot say but you can spot the difference in perspective. For a start, geography is not such a consideration – art is everywhere and is funded to be everywhere. This is probably more in line with Article 27 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights, which reads: ‘Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.’

The theory operating in a country such as France is that a community program is not necessary because everyone must have access to art. Art is not just for those who have the location, education, time and money to enjoy it but also for those who don’t have those things. Significantly, art is also thoroughly integrated into school education and so children grow up expecting that art is a natural part of their lives. Now, I don’t want you to think that I believe that community art should be just about taking art to communities, where they become passive audience receptors. I know that is

not the sort of 'community art' that is being discussed at this conference. Of course, we all understand the value of active arts participation in the lives of those who may feel marginalised, or disenfranchised, or despairing, or simply excluded. As an opening speaker I might be expected to do a kind of 'rallying cry' to get things started. However, I only have to look at the program to see that you already have faith in the efficacy of artists, art and artistic processes for participation in the rebuilding of communities and you don't need any such case studies from me. You will get inspirational case studies in bucketloads and they will be superb. Hearts get ready. You will get evidence and statistics and good anecdotes about projects that have brought communities alive again. Head get ready. I just wanted to start by making some comparisons that might serve to question some of the basics

It is also not my role to hold up any particular government policy as being 'heroic'. We can talk about a European ideal but I know that it has taken individual courage from Jacques Martial, for example, to put that into practice. It has also taken individual courage from Frie Leysen, as artistic director in Antwerp and Brussels, and Alain Platel, as a creator in Belgium, and many others like them, to create such models for us to examine. In Australia we have had to argue long and hard for the support of those special programs and I suspect it was because the feeling was that the mainstream programs were not including them. It was, and is still felt – despite many improvements in formal touring programs – that those who are not in big cities simply 'miss out' on most of the artistic output of our artists. Our small population, vast country and the rather remote outer suburbs of big cities clearly make decentralisation much more difficult and more expensive than it is in Europe.

'Artists from the outside' still struggling for recognition

Not much hard thought been given in Australia to the ways in which audiences or artists from 'the outside' might change mainstream programs. We have categories for artistic activities – such as 'major performing companies' and major 'art institutions' but to what extent – even now – do these companies and institutions take their stories, perspectives, artists, and ideas, from the geographic, racial, ethnic, philosophic 'edge'? Indeed not much thought has been given as to what actually constitutes mainstream art. I guess we have now added film and music to visual art, theatre and dance, and all of them amount to more than opera and ballet. But that has probably happened without a lot of thought.

There is a kind of inverse financial principle that art companies who already have the most resources, while being most remote from those who are perennially excluded, get more than small companies that are more likely to get out into communities. Yet we are seeing excellent work from outfits such as Urban Theatre Projects, Big hArt or Back-to-Back. However, there are still not enough of this kind of work for any of us to feel comfortable about ceasing our pleas for the kind of resources which would allow the 'outsiders'

and the 'outlanders' to use art as one of the tools for empowering themselves and their 'communities' (however you might define them).

Mind you, I think Australia has done extremely well with special programs and perspectives. We have come a long way since the inception of the Australia Council, and it later became the first national cultural institution in the world to have a unit dedicated to community art. I still have the gnawing feeling that we would be better off with fewer divisions at the Australia Council in order to ensure that funding can reward jaw-dropping creativity, innovation, hard-won skills and finesse on the one hand, and art in community on the other. That is still the elephant in the room. But it is not the fault of those doing excellent work. Part of the problem is that the more we argue about the utilitarian benefits of the processes of art—either for the profitability of creative industries or the wellbeing and confidence of special sectors of the 'community'—the harder it becomes to argue the case of art for art's sake. We like to champion elite artists and art companies—just as we have a passion for producing elite sportspeople. But as artists we all swim in the same river and 'binary thinking' tends to silt up the river for us all.

One of the best aspects of the Australia Council's 'Community partnerships', for instance, is that it insists on genuine community cultural development as well as excellent art. One of the saddest aspects is that we feel we have to lay out what community cultural development is; to 'insist' on spelling it out like that.

Striving for a holistic approach

Personally I am not sure I can claim to be a 'genuine' CCD practitioner—as officially defined—in any of the activities where art has taken me. However, I know that a holistic approach has always governed my choices, from the inside rather than through the pursuit of any official currency.

Clearly, in my twenties, when I was writing and recording songs like *The Menstruation Blues* and *Old Soft Screw*, I was not driven by a need to have a Top 40 hit but rather by a need to express certain things. My motivation was both personal and political but I can't be sure that this made me a great contributor to 'cultural development'. I realise that my songs were always trying to foster different understandings in the community that surrounded me—albeit unconsciously, not militantly, yet in a very bold and, as it happens, totally fearless manner. Imagine my surprise now when young men come up to me to say they were heavily influenced by those songs because their mothers never stopped playing them. I know the instinct was right and later I was able to devise commercial successes which also served as vehicles for political comment—in shows such as *Pack of Women* or *A Star is Torn*. At the height of my most disciplined achievement in singing—that is the repertoire of Brecht/Eisler/Weill/Dessau and occasionally Muldowney and Zobl—my work was still imbued with a strong political view from the past which always resonated, and still resonates to this minute, every time I

sing that work. While this is a passive audience artform, its content can often inspire or reinforce activism. This seems to have come naturally to me.

It has been similar, too, when I moved into my artistic direction of various festivals. While these were all events in which I had a brief to bring major international arts into each of the cities where I worked, I always brought in community arts projects as well, activating them in the cities and finding ways for the festivals to reach out for participation in regional areas. I have been able to bring all manner of Australian Indigenous art to centre stage – quite literally. These things are all a very natural part of my curatorial process. I did not need a ‘cultural policy’ to order me to do it although I have to admit that my experience as the Chair of the Community Cultural Development Board (CCDB) at the Australian Council did influence me quite a bit.

Maybe there are artists who require the ‘push’ of the special program and many local governments still need a push to value the work their community produces. However, many artists just need a space and an invitation to create innovative work. When Kate Brennan – the CEO of Federation Square where we are now located – asked me to think about something which would use the space here as a showplace for innovation, it did not take us long to come to agreement about how that would also interface with diverse communities in Melbourne. For Kate too it is just a natural part of the way she thinks about the arts. After three years – with no federal or state arts funding, just heaps of genuine support from the City of Melbourne – we have just started to see this year something of the kinds of activities we envisaged. For The Light in Winter project – featuring an interactive light installation – we clicked those who walked in to participate and it came to 50,000 people in four weeks. That event targeted thirteen different communities in and around Melbourne and I *would* call that community cultural development.

The point about that particular project was that it aimed for the very best achievements in the art of twenty-first century lighting and digital interactivity, and, at the same time, and very naturally, it allowed for the participation of diverse communities, some rather fragile, where they could have their say and make their presence with a range of artists and professionals in attendance. In the cases of the most fragile new social networks – such as Afghan, sub-Sudanese, Ethiopian, for instance – I might still not use the word ‘regeneration’ since these are groups actively engaged in establishing new communities, relocated into the sophisticated urban fabric of twenty-first century Melbourne. They have brought building blocks in terms of shared cultural traditions, values and histories, but this is more like generating community rather than regeneration.

The 'regeneration' of developers

Let me pause for a while on that term 'regeneration'. In my view it is a term that is rather thoroughly abused these days because it has become a catch-phrase for developers, especially in Britain. As far as I know, it rose to prominence in the UK and then spread to Canada as a program for 'improving' degraded urban areas. These were most often places of formerly dense concentrations of industrial activity rendered obsolete through more recent technological change. The mid-century surge of demolition was halted in favour of breathing 'new life' into these areas, and the most effective means for doing this was gradually found to be through design and the arts. Now old wrecked buildings responded appealingly to a contemporary design makeovers and this can create new 'arts industries'. There is a lot to be said, for example, for the once deserted wharf area in Quebec, where you now find a stimulating mix of artistic endeavour and student activity. But as much as there are appealing examples we have to acknowledge that cultural banners have often been used to disguise the simple thrust for new development, much of which leaves very little room for art or community despite the rhetoric. It is taking a long time to 'create' community in places such as Docklands here in Melbourne or in new developments in East Perth, Port Adelaide, or the 'eastern corridor' in London. Too often 'regeneration' is used to disguise a developer's paradise. Anna Minton has written an excellent book on this called *Ground control*². As she put it:

... a word which came into use during the 1980s, and means 'rebirth' in Latin. Rather than the more prosaic 'redevelopment', it conjures up the image of the phoenix of Canary Wharf and the new economy rising from the ashes of Docklands and Britain's industrial past. Yet despite the pioneering zeal of their supporters, when they were built Broadgate and Canary Wharf were controversial, perceived as high-security enclaves of wealth surrounded by some of the poorest communities in Britain.

Minton went on to suggest that some of these redevelopments served a purpose, but:

They were also exceptional places—areas where business modelled the area in its own image in what are, after all, financial districts. Now, a generation later, what began specifically to serve the needs of business has become the standard model for the creation of every new place in towns and cities across the country. Previously the government and local councils 'owned' the city on behalf of us, the people. Now more and more of the city is owned by investors, and its central purpose is profit. The credit crunch may have slowed the sell-off, but every former inner-city industrial area is trying to emulate this model, from the waterfronts of Salford Quays and Cardiff to the controversial demolition programmes of the old industrial northern cities. This is the architecture of post-industrial New Labour, a government which witnessed the

largest amount of construction in Britain since the post-war period. But just as the tower blocks and arterial roads of the industrial 1950s and 1960s sliced through cities and communities and failed to stand the test of time, the consequences of many of these grand schemes are disturbing.³

Now I also know that this is not the kind of project that most people here have in mind when they use the term 'regenerating community'. Rather you are likely to be thinking of small fragile systems in danger or under threat – perhaps on the fringes of cities or in remote areas. You are probably thinking of communities which have undergone profound change because of larger movements in cities themselves, in cities around the world, in changing economic fortunes, or through things like climate change or even government priorities. Perhaps there was once a geographic community in which the word community meant so much more than just that geographic location. There may once have been a complex ecosystem of dialogue, decision-making, shared values and quality of life and dignity which that community had the power to articulate and defend. Perhaps that has been lost and it your goal has been to bring it back; to regenerate for a new era some of those things which have been lost; to rectify the sense of failure and isolation, even injustice and exclusion from a fair share of what the majority believes is their twenty-first century birthright.

But Minton is very much on about this too – in the East End, for example – and I have no doubt that in your various ways many of you also encounter the doublespeak of regeneration which may in the end only mean profit for developers and entrepreneurs and very little for the very communities whose health you wish to help restore. Whenever we use big banners such as 'Community' and 'Regeneration' it is always worth being picky about what they really mean in any particular context.

Anne Minton came to Liverpool in 2006 when we ran a program called City in Transition in the lead up to the celebrations of Liverpool being named the European Capital of Culture. She gave some fairly alarming warnings then about the construction of Liverpool One, the biggest of all the private gated shopping/office and residential complexes in the UK (covering what used to be 34 streets of old Liverpool but now controlled by the corporation). Minton lauded the effort being made by local parliamentarian Claire Curtis to save Quiggins – 'an indoor market which had been a cultural icon in the city for a generation, launching the careers of musicians, designers and playwrights.' Minton warned against the privatisation of streets, saying '... we view with very real misgiving the associated proposals to privatise the thoroughfares of the new area and police them with so-called "quartermasters" in what appears to be a bid to sanitise the area'. Unfortunately, her pleas went unheard; the site was forcibly purchased and Quiggins was demolished to make way for Liverpool One. Its opening coincided with Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture, and, predictably, Minton observed, it had 'shrunk down to a monoculture of shopping and spending.'

At the same time, Minton noted, Liverpool *remains* the most deprived district in the country according to the government's Indices of Multiple Deprivation. So, we do need to be alert to some claims that 'culture' unequivocally serves processes of 'regeneration'. Minton is already looking into similar claims for the regeneration of the Eastern Corridor as the 'legacy' project of the 2012 Olympics in London. She claims that it is common knowledge that Olympics will be the largest security operation ever undertaken in the UK and that the new development, Stratford City – a Westfield project – will be one of the highest- security private 'communities' yet built.

Beyond Europe

Turning to something more positive now, I am currently involved in a pitch for a program about a theatre company from Vanuatu, which is celebrating a rather remarkable twentieth anniversary this year. The company, called Won Smolbag, was actually initiated by two white animateurs from Zimbabwe, and while this might sound to the uninformed like a colonial exercise, those two people have worked in exemplary ways to allow the company to develop on its own terms. The company still uses drama as its medium, and is so popular that it has its own TV drama series, but its reach from Vanuatu now extends widely to other islands in the Pacific and it dares to touch on the most dangerous taboos – such as HIV and health, for instance – and issues such as domestic violence which is sometimes advocated by church and state as a legitimate avenue to 'domestic stability'. Clearly this is art working in communities. But is it regeneration or survival?

In Mildura, where I have spent time over the last few years, I could scarcely call the work I do regeneration. Mildura is changing rapidly. It is a genuine candidate to become one of the first major generators of drought refugees in Australia. Alfred Deakin and then Ben Chifley had a dream of creating an Australian Los Angeles in the desert and now families have been there long enough to feel as if they were always there. Yet poor up-river management and climate change have turned the dream into a nightmare. People walk off the land into mental health care – if they haven't taken their own lives – and they are officially counselled to leave the area. Fortunately, a new solar electricity generation 'farm' might take the edge off burgeoning unemployment, yet you would pick Mildura as a town in desperate need of help. But, curiously, regeneration is not the word I would use there. Recently it scored extremely highly in a happiness evaluation, in comparison to other river towns starting to experience the same sense of despair about water from the Murray River or as manna from heaven. This was largely attributed to a sense of wellbeing related to the effectiveness of the arts in their town. It seems that the arts got the jump in Mildura, springing largely from the personal efforts of Stefano di Pieri, his wife Donatella, and a small group of their friends who were determined to ensure that geographic isolation would not prevent them from enjoying good food, music, wine and coffee. They could not contemplate a world devoid of art.

Current arts activity in Mildura has grown and diversified way beyond that small circle of friends, and in the face of gloomy futures, Arts Mildura's suite of five festivals and the activity of its Arts Centre and other institutions – such as the new At Vault – is keeping the spirit alive. Again my plea is less for regeneration and more for maintenance and sustenance. Mildura offers a terrific example of how communities under stress can keep their chin up.

In North East Arnhem Land the plea could never be for regeneration precisely because the culture of the Yolgnu people is incredibly strong and proud. The word regeneration does not describe what they need – it's more like cultural maintenance. What they need is respect and acknowledgment for who they are and what they do. They already have a strong sense of who they are through art and culture; what they now need is the ability to maintain that in their own lands, on their own terms.

Regenerating Canberra

Finally, I turn to my latest project which is located in Canberra and, surprisingly perhaps, this is where the word 'regeneration' probably applies best.

I recently heard that India's founding prime minister, Nehru, remarked at the opening of the northern capital of Chandigar, designed by the architect Le Corbusier, that the planned city 'expressed the nation's hope in its future'. No doubt those who posted the competition for a bold design for the post-Federation capital of Australia shared those sentiments. Yet, for all kinds of reasons, that kind of faith needs to be rebuilt. We need to regenerate pride in the national capital. Of course it was established through the pain of displacement and yet there are now many people who have lived there all their lives. Such people have worked hard to make sure that the city can host a government for all of us and, in the process, some remarkable collecting institutions have been established to house many of the nation's treasures. It takes around 330,000 to make the national government run and there are a further 100,000 people in the city now. That means that Canberra has a population that is roughly equivalent to that of Tasmania. Yet very few people would think of Canberra as a great centre of culture. And we don't have the sense, as a nation, that all the diverse communities of Australia – urban and remote – are represented in Canberra and that all the artistic work we do both in Australia and internationally is showcased there. As I mentioned earlier, The Light in Winter project here in Melbourne's Federation Square drew diverse communities – including some that are still fragile and some that are outlying – into the heart of their city. In a way, it is hard to imagine why new and fragile communities want to be present at the heart of this twenty-first century city. But they do. There is a statement about survival and resilience in this. At this point in time, it is hard to imagine something similar happening in Canberra. There is a deep ambiguity about who owns the city.

So I am just starting to work on a project related to the centenary of Canberra in 2012 and it will run through to 2013. And the challenge is to bring together local, national, and international dimensions and do something that could create new pride in the nation's capital. We need to regenerate a vision of the capital. And, in a way, that brings me back to the start of my journey, talking about the ephemeral and the intangible.

When they worked on their plans for Canberra, the Burley Griffins understood that it was all about symbolism. For them Canberra needed to be more than just a functional seat of government. They wanted it to show the very best of what Australia could be and they wanted it to be a cultural capital. They asserted that it is only through culture and the arts that a nation can assert a claim to greatness. Now it is time to revisit and regenerate that kind of vision. I am very glad that Canberra is a twin city with a Japanese city and with Dili in Timor-Leste because we can start to build international linkages.

It is not lost on me either that regeneration is happening in a literal way on the hills surrounding Canberra following the devastating bushfires of a few years back. On those hills, 100 forests have been planted as part of the National Arboretum project. In this project preference is being given to endangered Australian plants but there are also gardens for the planting of seeds that have been carried from other parts of the world. I like the symbolism of that. I love the vision that extends beyond terms in office of particular governments or even one's own lifetime. In all your endeavours – sung and unsung, large and small, practical and symbolic, finding favour or provoking aggravation and action – you are also working for a vision of the nature we can all be proud of and I hope you will see some kind of reflection of your work in Canberra's centenary celebrations. I wish you all the best in your deliberations.

Robyn Archer is an internationally renowned singer, writer and artistic director who has performed throughout Australia and the world. Her artistic directorships include the National Festival of Australian Theatre in Canberra, the Adelaide Festival in 1998 and 2000 and Melbourne International Arts Festivals in 2002, 2003 and 2004. She was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2000, and holds honorary doctorates from Flinders and Sydney Universities. Robyn is also an adviser to RMIT University's Globalism Research Centre and the Global Cities Institute.

Endnotes

1. This essay is based on the opening address by Robyn Archer to the ReGenerating Community Conference.
2. A. Minton, *Ground control*, Penguin, London, 2009.
3. *ibid*, p. 5.