

Regional Arts Victoria's 2009 Symposium

Geelong Sat 3 October

Plenary Session 1: What role can the arts play in major crisis?

Facilitator: Jill Singer

Panel Members

- Julie Millowick (JM), senior lecturer in Photojournalism at Latrobe University's Bendigo campus; vice-president of MAP; president of the Ballarat Photo Biennale,
- Todd Harper (TH), CEO of VicHealth; Executive Director Quit Victoria
- Caroline Martin (CM); Manager Bunjilaka Aboriginal and Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum; senior indigenous policy advisor for the Department of Education and Human Services
- Bruce Esplin (BE); Victorian Emergency Services Commissioner
- Anne Dunn (AD); Consultant; Commissioner - Public Service Board (NT); Director - Department of Local Government (NT); Chief Executive Officer of the Departments of Arts & Cultural Heritage and Family & Community Services (NT); CEO, City of Port Phillip

Jill Singer (JS): Today [we are] looking at the arts in the role of responding to crisis; we are going to be hearing from Bruce Esplin and the role of Emergency Services. The sorts of crises he sees are a myriad, we have had bushfires with increasing regularity, as you look across the world it seems we are going to hell in a hand basket with typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis. There will be all sorts of theories about this, but the results are catastrophic to humanity and how we respond to that is very important. Today we are going to be looking at how arts practitioners and NGOs work hand in hand with the frontline troops out there offering the necessities – food, water, shelter. Where do the arts fit into this and how does it all come together?

JM: Well, let me talk a little bit about MAP [Many Australian Photographers]. We are a group of very passionate and committed documentary photographers, working in a completely voluntary capacity and giving a voice to people who don't necessarily have one. Today I want to speak about our drought project, Beyond Reasonable Drought. We began just before 2000 when there was still cynicism in the media that the country was in drought. In fact there was a drought and that it was worse than usual.

We all work as professional photographers and as we criss-cross the country on our jobs we saw first-hand what was happening out there and the impact it was having on the landscape and the psyche of the nation and we decided to do something about it. We can't work like this without working in co-operation with whoever it is that we photograph. We don't want to rip people off, we don't want to exploit anyone and there is absolutely no photoshopping in our imagery; it is as shot.

We undertook the project over a long period of time and it culminated last year (2008) in a touring exhibition that addresses every aspect of the drought. It's a very public way of addressing crisis. However, what I really want to say today is that you can't actually do that if you are in crisis yourself. Every one of us will have a crisis in our lifetime, some of us several, and when you are in that situation you don't have a voice, because you can't actually communicate what you are feeling in the normal way, with your mouth, because it's too deep, it's too terrible.

Sometimes when you are in crisis one of the major ways out is to listen to your heart, to listen to your head, and maybe when you are listening to both of those it's your soul, and then translate whatever it is that you are feeling, whatever it is that you are seeing, whatever it is that you are experiencing, into something tangible that can be communicated to other people.

You know there is an extraordinary saying in the Gnostic gospels that was translated by Elaine Pagels and that is "If you bring forth what is in you it will save you, if you do not bring forth what is in you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you". So if we think about that in the personal sense and act on it and then extend on that into the political, into the global, we are not only going to be complete human beings but we are going to be really complete global communities.

TH: Some of you may be wondering about the connection between arts and VicHealth. When it was established 22 years ago, part of the remit of the organisation was to promote good health through cultural means - through sport and through the arts, and I think over time what we've seen out of that partnership, particularly with the arts, is a focus on how the arts can play a positive role in promoting good mental health, promoting social participation, social networks, and providing a creative outlet for our societies. In times of crisis, those things become increasingly important.

We know for example that in the aftermath of the Ash Wednesday bushfires that the arts provided a real engine for the growth in the terrible aftermath and we expect to see the same in Victoria with the more recent bushfires. Why is this important?

We know that fundamentally, social participation, social connection, and social engagement are vital in terms of promoting mental health, and on the flipside isolation, lack of engagement, and lost opportunities for participation are significant risk factors for mental health, particularly depression and anxiety. If we remember the range of emotions that we witnessed after the bushfires earlier this year, I am sure you can understand why rebuilding those social networks in the long term is as important as the emergency infrastructure that goes into those communities in the early stages. So having an appreciation of that gives us some clue as to how we can start rebuilding communities after disasters many years down the track, and continue to provide opportunities for the voice, for the participation, for the redevelopment of a sense of identity, a sense of purpose as well as those social connections which are particularly important.

As someone who grew up in Tasmania during the events of Port Arthur I can reflect on the experiences of that time. Tasmania is a very small community, an event like that really saps at your confidence, it really challenges your beliefs – you question which values your community hold that are particularly important to you. That's when some of the community building networking opportunities become so vitally important and the arts is a significant part of that.

VicHealth, through our investment in sports and the arts, is looking for an opportunity to contribute back into the communities affected by bushfire and those affected by fire over time and I think it's a process that requires extensive consultation. We did some work immediately after the fires which, through consultation with local communities, suggested to us that then was not the time to look at those more long term arts-led initiatives, there were more short term priorities that needed to be attended to. But over time I think we will start to see the contribution of culture start to play an important role in those communities.

CM: Today I am speaking from the perspective of a people that have suffered trauma for over 200 years. However, despite the impact of non-aboriginal settlement to Australia, Aboriginal culture has survived and is thriving. One reason we are able to thrive is because of Bunjilaka at Melbourne Museum, of which I am the current manager. We have a lot of cultural material from South-Eastern Australia and Victoria and while in the past museums didn't really recognise the living culture of Aboriginal people, Bunjilaka in its 10 years history certainly has. It provides an opportunity for Aboriginal people to connect in with their cultural material.

I could provide lots of experiences of how we connect with Aboriginal communities through art, one of which is a magnificent project that the Aboriginal community and Regional Arts Victoria (RAV) funded and supported. It was magnificent in scope, it was the Possum Skin Cloak Project. If you don't know of possum skin cloaks, they are actually unique to South-Eastern Australia. Aboriginal people wore them because it's so cold here, but what's so significant about those cloaks is that they are not unlike a dot painting, they tell the story of the person and their connection to country.

There are five historical possum skin cloaks left in the world, Australia has two of them and Melbourne museum has them both. There is one on permanent display from the Lake Conda community and was collected in 1872. It has the most magnificent designs and tells the story of the water ways, the oceans and the volcanos in the western districts. The reason there isn't any more of them is because Aboriginal people were buried in their cloaks.

Before the Commonwealth Games I was sitting on the committee for the Aboriginal component of the opening ceremony and we wanted to ensure that Victorian Aboriginal culture was a significant focal point in the opening ceremony and also to ensure a legacy and that legacy was the possum skin cloaks. RAV in collaboration with four very significant Aboriginal artists went about working with the 38 different language groups which make up the Victorian Aboriginal community to make new cloaks. Our communities now have their own cloaks and the significant part about

that is that those cloaks now provide those communities a with an on-going opportunity for pride in the past but also in the future.

The cloaks are used for lots of ceremonial purposes; for welcome to country and for burials. The cloaks also allowed a significant elder of each of those communities to participate in the opening ceremony by wearing the cloaks that represented those 38 language groups and I'm very proud that my mother was one of those elders. I'll conclude by saying that what we have already today by listening to others, is that trauma is actually universal and no-ones trauma is bigger or better or sadder than another's.

BE: I guess you are wondering why the Emergency Services is here at an art function and I guess it's because we have, at least in some peoples minds, a connection and a warmth towards art.

To answer a question that came from the audience asking how long it will take people to heal from the 7th of February, I would have to say in some cases it won't happen. In my experience, and certainly in the psychologists that work in disaster recovery, six months is a really bad point in the recovery process. When the adrenalin's worn off and the fatigue has grown to a substantial level and people are facing the stark reality of what lies ahead – it's a dangerous time.

Unfortunately, I think everybody is told time will heal all and I don't believe that's the case, certainly not with without interventions of some description, certainly not without significant community support. The example I give is the absolute privilege I had be involved in launching an online documentary that ABC put together on the 1939 fires, *Black Friday*. I got to meet some of the survivors of that fire and some of those people who think back to that time or think back through history - great depression, great world war and the most horrific fire - a community that didn't have any of the support mechanisms that we have today. A community that didn't even recognise the need for psycho-social support where people who had been through tragedies had never spoken of their experience. These were peoples who legs were fused together by being burnt, who lost their parents, who made decisions which subsequently resulted in people perishing and the trauma that was overwhelming.

The producer who put that documentary together somehow managed to get these people to actually talk and in the twilight of their lives I think they got just a little bit of closure. At the screening of the video the emotion was overwhelming in the room. There were more tears than you imagine, I think you could have just about broken the drought at that time. But what it did do was highlight that without intervention, tools and a much broader understanding in our society of the need to work with people who have been through these experiences, they'll carry them for the rest of their lives.

I'm going tread into to very dangerous turf here and talk about the relationship between sport and art. I think that they both have a similar function; they provide respite from the circumstances people find themselves in. I would argue that in

sports case, it's fleeting and I'd instance the Kinglake Football Club. That became such a rallying point for Kinglake, but the season's finished now, and it now needs to be replaced with something else. Art on the other hand in all the various forms that it can take is for the future, it's forever. If we do it well it becomes something that captures our cultural history and is there for all to look at in the future. I think we in government should work harder to get funding for these kinds of initiatives because they make a difference that lasts. They don't just make a difference for the three months of the football season.

My final point today is about the language we use, and I have heard it used today already. We ran a media conference every morning for about three weeks after the fires and I had a lot of trouble getting the media to stop using the term 'victim' and start using the term 'survivor'. It's not just for semantic reasons; survivors have got to make their own decision and the role of government is to support people to make their own decisions. If they do make a decision that turns out not to be the best one, then we need to be there to stand beside them again to let them make it again at the time and in the way that suits them. I think permission to make decisions is part of rebuilding. If decision-making is taken away from you then you really become a victim. I think that's the challenge.

AD: Well, I rest my case. You know there is something really special about Victoria, I just have to tell you this, it is different from every other state and I don't understand the history enough to know why this is true. But I know it (is); nobody else has got an Emergency Services Commissioner, nobody else has got a VicHealth - I said the other day why isn't VicHealth running the country for goodness sake? But you know the commitment in this state to community and creativity is extraordinary, so first of all I want to acknowledge that because I think that it is a really important part of how the healing happens here.

I am a practising artist; my life's work has been (to) get particular bureaucracies to understand the role of creativity in transforming, healing and developing community. I don't suppose everything is perfect in Victoria but I do get this sense of achievement here, that you know how important it is and how it happens. I particularly want to acknowledge the financial investment that VicHealth make in this area, that they see it as mainstream business.

I've just completed a national consultation for Regional Arts Australia asking communities what's important, what are the urgent and pressing needs in their community? They said all the things you would imagine, they are terrified of suicide, depressed because of drought and floods and the way the landscape and the community is changing. They are frightened about the future because nobody will talk about what the future of regional Australia is.

These are the things that people are talking about and in the talking they are saying how will we move forward? So I am thinking about all these wonderful things that have been happening and we know that part of that future is engaging people in

creative activities but it's also engaging systems and bureaucracies in understanding the importance of these activities.

But there is one more thing. I was listening to Jonathon Welch last night, talking about his work with the *Choir of Hope and Inspiration*. He described the importance of people being together, so what is it about creativity that helps people to heal? Some of it's about telling your story or your truth and in doing so the healing starts. But actually there were a couple of other really critical things that finally dawned on me when I was listening to him. One, it only happens with facilitation, it's not just the art it's the RADOs, it's the community arts workers, it's the bushfire project officers, it's the Jonathon Welch's. That choir is his capacity to help people to see beyond what they can currently imagine, and whether that is giving people grant information or conducting a choir or anything in between that, it's that imagination of a positive future that the arts worker can provide.

The other thing he said that I thought was really critical was about striving for excellence. It's not just about dabbling around with a bit of paint, or singing a few rounds, it is about helping people to aspire to be the best they can possibly be. Excellence is a key part of the healing process.

JS: Have you got any advice for artists and arts organisations or groups on how to deal sensitively with communities in crisis?

BE: Well firstly I'd say don't deal with it sensitively because you won't get anywhere. The second thing I'd say is don't give up.

I guess where I have seen this approach be really successful is where it has been driven by a strong local, and it's not always somebody who has a formal position in the community but someone who emerges because of the need, plays an incredible role for a year and then disappears again. So I think it's recognising that there is not one solution that can apply in every situation.

Different ways will emerge just almost naturally, but don't be too sensitive about it, because my side of the fence is not all that sensitive sometimes, and you just won't get through, you won't penetrate. I think don't give in; I've seen amazing examples of communities taking on the Premier and the government and the whole emergency services structure and they have just kept on and they have won at the end of the day.

A really inspiring example is of those people who are now connected in to the emergency services structures. There was a community member at Ferny Creek in the Dandenongs who was violently concerned after three people died in 1997 and she and her three friends became the most powerful lobbyists I have ever seen. She is now the secretary of the local volunteer fire brigade (they were sworn enemies years ago), and has built new relationships and opened up what is, in some places, a very traditional old men's club into being something quite different. That's what can happen when people persist and don't give up.

Don't be too shy about how hard you fight, but find your allies, know where your allies are and build that critical mass of people who want to go down the same journey with you and you'll win at the end of the day. Know who you can go to for help and use Jon Faine or whoever is your personal favourite and get on the radio, talk it up, get that critical mass of public opinion on your side and you'll be amazed at what you can achieve.

TH: VicHealth's values are 'brave, just and creative' and sometimes that takes us into some fairly interesting places, particularly when it comes to the arts and various projects.

There was a terrific project which shows that creativity comes in many forms. An arts worker was working with a group of refugees who had a deep distrust of police authority resulting from their horrific experience of refugee camps in Africa. They had a great passion for hotting up cars and so a project was created to work with the local police to hot up cars and paint them the most bizarre and wonderful colours as a way of building trust and connection with the community. We have to look in perhaps all the wrong places to find the right answers to bridge creativity, particularly for those groups who are perhaps the most disadvantaged in our community.

BE: I think as a society we have been afraid of making mistakes, and because we are afraid of making mistakes we don't take chances. The things that might really be earth shattering in the change they could make just don't get looked at. I think we have got to tolerate that when people try things they occasionally make mistakes, there is nothing wrong with that; that doesn't mean you are a failure.

AD: I think bravery, one of VicHealth's core values, is one thing that we need to value in people and have a lot of it ourselves. We are not psychologists, we are not social workers, we are arts workers but we have to develop the skills to stand with people while they have pain and are vulnerable.