

Regional Arts Victoria's 2009 Symposium

Geelong Sat 3 October

Plenary Address: Lindy Allen

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Good morning everyone and welcome to Regional Arts Victoria's second biennial Symposium examining The Role of the Arts in Times of crisis. I would like to begin by acknowledging the Wathaurong people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present and acknowledge the cultural and spiritual relationship that continues today.

William Blake wrote in 'The Lesser Arts' in 1882, "I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few or freedom for a few."

In recent years we have all become focused on the role of the arts in health and well being, community building, community vitality, economic development and tourism. Farmers have discovered that cows who listen to the Opera produce more milk. In secondary schools, students who are actively involved in music tend to improve their performance in non-arts subjects. These kinds of outcomes are both a blessing and a curse. We are all guilty of writing grant applications that will promise the outcome du jour – whether that be shifting working culture within monolithic bureaucracies or reducing reported cases of underage drinking. It seems we may have forgotten a very simple truth which is that creativity is good for you.

Creativity is an end in itself. It nourishes your soul. When I think about the last time I created something my soul feels healthy, my heart lighter and I do actually feel lucky to be alive.

I heard writer and consultant Francois Matarasso on Radio National recently talking about a dance project in Columbia that he is evaluating. 'School of the Body' has been going for about 12 years and works mainly with 12-16 year olds that come from difficult backgrounds – many are refugees from within their own country. These young people attend 3 x 3 hour dance sessions each week. Much is covered beyond dance including nutrition and sexuality, but the core of the program is creative dance. The aim is not to transform the participants into professional dancers, but to help them learn the beauty, strength and dignity of the body. Matarasso speaks about the purity of many community-based arts programs that are less outcome-focussed than they are about teaching that arts is part of life, that it is fundamental to making us rounded people.

We are all too familiar with the shattering events of late January/ early February in Victoria. Several arts projects emerged almost immediately and spontaneously. Many of these were driven by people who had never been part of an arts organisation and wouldn't instinctively have considered themselves "arty" in any way. The CFA volunteer who got involved in the leaf project who said, "I had seen fire destroy so much, this was my way of reminding myself that fire could be used to make something beautiful."

I would like to digress a little and talk about the current state of the planet. I think all of us in this room would accept that the clock is ticking, global warming is a reality, food production

is looming as a hidden time bomb that no-one wants to address and economic liberalism, the philosophy that supports and promotes capitalism, has finally been revealed, through the Global Financial Crisis, as unsustainable. It is not possible for large first world companies to continue to return exponentially larger profits to their shareholders without gutting third world countries, or indeed, third-world suburbs in their own countries.

It is time we all considered a new measure to assess the health and welfare of ours and other nations. Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, is a blunt instrument. It might have served first world countries well in the heady decades before the GFC, but the televisions-per-head of capita rule of thumb is not going to equip us to become responsive and responsible individuals, communities and countries as we tackle the single greatest challenge of our time, global warming.

I was interested to read in *The Age* this week, in an article by Leon Gettler, that the French President Nicolas Sarkozy proposes to report on his country's annual progress through a 'happiness' index. Researcher Joseph Stiglitz supports this idea arguing that, "If we have the wrong metrics, we will strive for the wrong things." Sarkozy's critics, of course, have had a field day. The biggest problem seems to be that happiness is very hard to measure. The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan has had a gross national happiness index for some years but by some measures of national happiness, such as the number of outward bound refugees per head of population, this index has not had a profoundly positive impact on general wellbeing.

Gettler's article got me thinking though. If we pick up on the notion that we need indices that support the kind of connected, responsive and responsible communities who may just survive global warming, what indices might work? If happiness is a bit hard to measure, what about creativity?

Creativity is the thread that connects people and, taking one more small step of logic, connecting communities. Without creativity we will be dysfunctional as individuals and communities. With creativity, we are functional, we care about each other and about the world we live in, we actively want to make a positive difference.

There are all sorts of ways creativity could be measured. Think about a regional town you know well, how many galleries are there? Is there a performing arts centre or perhaps a small theatre, a volunteer managed hall that can put on plays? Does the local school have a music program? How many bands are there in town? Brass bands, rock bands, string bands? Is there a choir, a dance school, a local festival, a poet's night, workshops in various forms of arts practice? How many artists live in your town? On a scale of 100, do you think you might easily rate your town's creativity?

And what about the impact of this creativity. Again, that's not hard to measure. Look at the high school graduating class of five years ago – ask them a few basic questions that might reveal if they are connected, responsive and responsible community members. Are they in a job they enjoy? Are they happy in their key relationships? If they had to choose between a greater income and a more connected community, which one would they choose?

I would like to leave you with one last question: If, in ten year's time, Australia's development was measured not in terms of its GDP but in terms of a creativity index, and if that score was 99.6 out of 100, what would be different? Would there be fewer music lessons in schools or more? Would there be fewer exhibitions or more? Would there be greater Australian dramatic content on television? Would there be a Federal Department of Creativity with a budget equal to that of Defense? Would people choose woodcarving over golf? Would we have a greater tolerance of religious difference? Would all small communities have seed collection programs, community gardens and communal kitchens? Would Sam Newman finally have sunk without a trace?

And if we were a highly creative country, how might we be dealing with major crisis?