BIG*h*ART

Art, Equity and Community for People, Place and Policy

BIG*h*ART gold

NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI

LUCKY

DRIVE

RADIO Holiday

Peter Wright, Barry Down, Scott Rankin, Brad Haseman, Mike White, Christina Davies

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Acknowledgements

We extend our heartfelt thanks to many people who have contributed to this report from inception to delivery. It is difficult to identify all of them adequately, and their contributions have been many and varied including being interviewed, and providing access and material support, provocative thinking and cups of tea. We are grateful for the trust placed in us. This report draws on rich veins of thinking and practice over several years. Much of this work has been conducted by staff from Murdoch University and independent researchers. In addition, a number of BIG hART workers have contributed through their work as creative producers across several projects and their different iterations. The writing of the report was led and coordinated by Peter Wright. Barry Down, Scott Rankin, Christina Davies, Brad Haseman and Mike White contributed to writing and reviewing material for the report. The report further draws on five major evaluations of BIG hART's work (Palmer, 2010; Wright, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b), and a synopsis of those reports prepared by Susanne Thurow.

More important than any of these are those project participants who took a risk towards growth through their project involvement. The testament of their lives provides hope, foregrounding both possibility and resilience, and their development and contributions are writ large within this text. Finally, this work has been supported through the Australian Research Council's Linkage Grant Scheme and we are grateful for this support. It has been a productive investment.

We extend a special acknowledgement to the work of the late Mike White.

We need new ideas, we need new ways of doing things and we need a whole new way of approaching each other with much more empathy and understanding. This means that the rest of society really needs to focus on the world of art and culture as a vital source for not only solutions, but also ways of finding solutions… and a whole new concept of what a valuable life really means.

–Uffe Elbaek

1   Background to the report: a quest for understanding

Peter Wright

Young people and those at the margins of society have long been considered to be deficient in some way, and so a problem to be fixed and a drain on scant resources. This form of deficit thinking has permeated much of social policy and is perpetuated by stereotypes and negative media. BIG *h*ART[1] aims to challenge these stereotypes and change the master narrative on these demographics. The stories told both through and about BIG *h*ART speak back to and challenge these singular understandings of the world and strive to reveal the pluralism that permeates everyday contemporary life. The art practices that lie at the heart of BIG *h*ART's work mobilise young people, expand their understandings of themselves, and allow them, through their work, to disrupt the disempowering discourses around them. This report tells part of that story.

This project grew out of long-term working relationships between BIG *h*ART and some key researchers on the team, and reflects a quest for understanding. As an evaluator, and lead researcher on this project, I have been privileged to work closely with BIG *h*ART and observe their work for many years. I have been able to think deeply about their work, why it matters, and what touches so many people and does good work. As someone who cares about learning and transformation I have been able consistently to observe creative solutions to what are perceived of as intractable problems, and evidence that what have recently been described as 'cultural solutions'[2] have powerful roles to play in issues that bedevil contemporary life. I have also been able to observe this form of participatory arts practice in a variety of countries and contexts where

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[1] BIG *h*ART is Australia's leading arts and social change company; producing performative solutions to complex social problems (http://bighart.org/#big/about-big-hart/.

2 See special edition of *Griffith Review* on 'Cultural solutions', https://griffithreview.com/editions/cultural-solutions/

similar issues are experienced, and where creative approaches are increasingly being employed.

Success through the Australian Research Council's Linkage Grant Scheme has meant that this inquiry—reported here—could go beyond single project 'at one point in time' evaluations, and forensically consider a range of projects in a way that offers depth and breadth both over time and across diverse geographic settings. Consequently, this project is the largest and most comprehensive review of BIG *h*ART conducted.

Thoughtful inquiry into these sorts of projects is still its infancy, for a variety of reasons. First, the field is emergent even though arts practice has always been part of the way that humans express and identify who they are and ways of being in the world. Inclusionary arts practice continues to be an important way of gaining and building identity. This search for identity lies at the heart of much of human experience and references one of the most enduring human questions, that is, 'Who am I?'

Second, there exists a privileging of particular forms of inquiry that seek to reduce human experience to – at its worst – computer language that is comprised of ones and zeros. This means that the texture of human experience, that is, the way that we know we are alive, is lost. This common sense of our humanity helps to shape both who we are and our ways of being in the world. Third, practice has been seen as a lesser cousin to theory. Unfortunately, what this lazy thinking misses is that theory is always implicit in practice and practice is always implicit in theory. To paraphrase Kurt Lewin, there is nothing so practical as a good theory (1951).

Fourth, monothematic approaches to research have meant that work that is relational, sensitive to arts practice, context-responsive and dependent, emergent, and both wholehearted and heartfelt has been devalued and considered as lacking in validity.

Fifth, placing this in a wider context, wide-held perceptions of the 'low value' of the arts in the normative economic master story of our times has meant that, important work, such as BIG *h*ART does for the nation, is chronically underfunded. More than this, the lack of security in terms of long-stream income means that organisations such as BIG *h*ART are simply unable to plan for times of deficit, their work is intermittent and project-based, and they depend on the good will of arts workers and others to survive. In other words, the organisation through chronic under-funding is not able to build towards sustainability. For example, BIG *h*ART shares that approximately 65 per cent of their time is spent on chasing

resources to support high-quality work (where grant applications have only a 20 per cent success rate), rather than working with and supporting communities in need. While there are arguments that long-term funding can produce complacency (O'Reilly, Rentschler, & Kirchner, 2014), and that art should exist on the margins (Bishop, 2012), work that makes a demonstrable contribution and is of high value is worthy of support in order to become sustainable. Continuing support for high quality work means that not only is the labour and creative achievements of participants and workers honoured, but the benefits to individuals, communities and the nation are allowed to accrue.

Focusing on BIG hART as an exemplary provider of participatory arts projects means that we can thoughtfully reveal the lessons learnt for failure and success, we can add to knowledge in the field, we can highlight process and product meaning that we can better understand what works for whom, and then increase our ability to find cultural solutions to the wicked problems that contemporary society faces.

The process of the inquiry

The research reported here was conducted in three phases. First, the research team visited each of three communities where BIG hART projects were located. These sites included first, LUCKY based on the northwest coast of Tasmania, Australia's smallest state. Second was GOLD based in western New South Wales but including areas of southwest Queensland, Victoria and South Australia, each project area linked by Australia's largest river scheme – the Murray-Darling river basin. And the third project was located in the geographical and cultural – sometimes troubled – desert heart of Australia, including parts of the southern Northern Territory and northern South Australia; these areas being collectively referred to as the APY Lands.[3] Each project grew out of BIG hART's raison d'être (described in a subsequent chapter), and is informed by its values and principles.

In each of each of these three communities we considered the lived experiences of the project through four lenses: first, the eyes and voices of those participants in it – often, but not always young people; second, the BIG hART arts workers, artists and creative producers who 'made' the work happen though planning, 'teaching', supporting and 'holding'

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3   The APY Lands are a distinctive region comprised of three Indigenous
     language groups of the central desert: Anangu, Pitjantjatjara and
     Yankunytjatjara.

projects from conception to fruition; third, those living in the communities in which the work was located – in other words, those who might be touched by what they see; and fourth, the funders – ranging from service providers to philanthropic organisations – who support the work through the provision of resources. Each of these respondents provided different sets of eyes and voices that helped us better understand the processes used, and outcomes that flowed.

The next ethnographic fieldwork phase of the work enabled us to describe seven broad 'domains' of change arrived at by comparing the responses articulated by respondents with literature in the field (Wright et al., 2013). These domains of change are broad areas, fuzzy around the edges that provide pointers to where we might look for evidence of change. For example, if change is to occur then it would be visible in one or more domains or sites. The challenge is that these domains are not always discrete, and that impacts – or benefits that might accrue from participation in a project – often do not sit neatly in one area or another. In other words, they are often inter-related. This means that productive interactions can occur between them, and they are dynamic in nature. However, in order to know where to look for these outcomes, we must have a place or site of practice to consider.

This set of domains or conceptual organisers were then taken back to each of these participant groups – young people, arts workers, community and funders – in order to confirm their authenticity. In other words, do these make sense to those people who might experience them? In addition, this set of organisers were presented at regional, national and international conferences where feedback was intentionally sought and included.

Feedback about the validity and utility value of these domains in describing elements or foci of change was consistently positive. However, we are profoundly aware that, while the principles that inform the work are consistent, the practices that shape 'delivery' are always in dialogue with the place and nature of the participants themselves; in this sense they are always dynamic in nature. As a team we were also able to observe that there is continuing widespread interest in the nature of the work at local, national and international levels, and it is our ultimate hope that others will critique and extend these domains, thereby enriching understanding and expanding what is possible.

In terms of research methods we interviewed 27 young people who were project participants. In addition we interviewed seven arts workers

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who enabled the work, eight community members who took part in or experienced the work, and those who worked for agencies that funded the work from Alice Springs (the NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI project in the Northern Territory), Griffith in the Murray-Darling Basin (the GOLD project across western NSW, south-west Queensland and northern Victoria) and Tasmania (the LUCKY project). The interviews were designed to give participants the opportunity to reflect retrospectively on their experiences and make sense of them.

The collection of information and thematic analysis started in October 2011 and occurred over a fifteen-month period. In addition, for each interviewee, a narrative portrait describing each person was created (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). We use these portraits both to give voice to participants and to help make the research live. They are powerful because they are the participants' own lived experiences told in the participants' voices.

A word about language

Language is a powerful tool in enabling us to describe what we see, and to make sense of it and share it. Paraphrasing Heidegger's words, 'language is the house in which we live' (Heidegger, 1998). This means that the language we use can create, and also obscure, what we 'see'. Language is also in a state of flux, and can be delimiting as meanings also evolve over time. We do not have far to look, for example, for what Don Watson (2005) describes as 'weasel' words that are used to shift blame and responsibility, or for rhetoric that is used to appropriate language for purposes beyond the original intent.

In the context of this research we have been troubled by, and have attempted to work with, the word 'impact'. 'Impact' as a descriptor in socially engaged or participatory arts has become ubiquitous. It is used as part of the everyday practice of the field, and so has its own life. What has been troubling is that it is used in an uncritical way, and as if impact as a descriptor has *one* single meaning to which everyone agrees. In the same way that 'culture' has many different meanings,[4] so does 'impact'.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the research revealed that impact means different things to different people, and by and large it depends on

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4   In 1952 American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckbohn reported 164 definitions (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952), and there has been no consensus since (Seel, 2000).

your perspective and how close you are to the experience of it. For example, a funder who is responsive to policy and so is 'away' from the participatory arts experience itself responds to different imperatives than a young person who is on the margins of society and is engaged by and participates in the arts experience as a 'maker'.[5] We have worked with this difference by reflecting the broad 'domains' rather than specific 'indicators', and there is still much more work to do in this regard to extend the research conducted here.

In addition, the etymology of 'impact' profoundly references 'force', in many ways being mechanistic and resonating with notions of 'break, or break through'. This notion is counter-intuitive to the participatory arts described here that takes time, is built on relationships of trust, is respectful, and involves the best of human capacities of deep listening, care and attention through positive self-regard. Many years of research on BIG *h*ART reveals that there are 'results' or better still 'outcomes' from the work (rather than 'impact'), and that 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), rather than intervention, better describes the developmental nature of this form of participatory arts. You will see here that we have used the term 'impact' in this text (because it has currency), and also added alternate meanings and descriptors to help extend our understanding further, elaborating what we mean when we see this in practice.

The structure of this report

The report begins with Scott Rankin, as BIG *h*ART's creative director, providing a context for this project. In Chapter 3 Scott describes BIG *h*ART's beginnings and trajectories of development. Chapter 4 describes the BIG *h*ART model and elements that are key to its practice. Chapter 5 considers the element of story in BIG *h*ART – story being key to its processes and products. Chapter 6 furthers understanding of BIG *h*ART's work by describing the attributes and dimensions of community that BIG *h*ART seeks to serve, and what this means for practice. Next, the three projects that were sites for the research are described: LUCKY, GOLD and NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI. A summary for each project is presented (the what), followed by an elaboration (the so what).

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5   In the project we have broadly understood anyone who is inducted through BIG *h*ART's practices to create as a 'maker', and hence an artist. Through being an artist lies the creative possibility to become an author of one's own life through inquiry and expression.

Chapter 8 describes the seven domains of change identified as flowing out of the project as a whole. The first domain, which is key to BIG *h*ART's relational work, psychosocial health and wellbeing being nurtured through arts practice. The important community element of BIG *h*ART's work is then considered, highlighting how communities are built through 'creative spaces'. Narrative portraits are employed to allow project participants to have a voice through this and following sections where we also reveal the way young people develop agency and a sense of efficacy. Flowing out of these attributes and dimensions, the concept of an 'expressive life' (Jones, 2009) is then used to help understand broader benefits to BIG *h*ART's work. The subsequent two domains, constructing productive lives and strengthening capacities and dispositions for learning, bring to our attention principles of the work, what these look like in practice, and the productive conditions that support them.

In Chapter 9 we include the thinking, observations and comments of Mike White from Durham University, UK. As a member of the research team, and building on a lifetime's work in participatory arts, Mike was able to bring an international perspective to the research through comparing this project with his own in the northeast of England.

As a further component of the research we not only considered each project as a stand-alone site of practice, but also how projects were linked and the synergies within and between them through the eyes of our four clusters of research participants, young people in each project, arts workers who supported them, the community around each project, and the funders who provided resources for projects to occur. Through this process, and reflected in Chapter 10, we are able to identify what was key to each.

Chapter 11 provides an overview of the project as a whole and describes the productive conditions that are key to successful practice. Understanding these conditions as enablers allows us to understand what works for whom, and under what conditions. In this way, the productive conditions described in this chapter not only point to exemplary practice, but also provide insight into what participatory arts is, how we might better understand it, and why this matters.

The report then closes with a coda from Scott Rankin. In this coda Scott has a chance to speak back to the research, foregrounding the strengths and limitations of our processes, BIG *h*ART as an organisation with all of its dimensions, and in a poetic and heartfelt way provide wisdom

born from experience, provocations of what is yet to be done, and assurance that this continues to matter.

Finally, we hope you enjoy reading the report as much as we did researching and compiling it.

Postscript

Mike White became profoundly unwell during the life of this project, passing away prematurely towards its end. He will be missed for his intelligence, sense of humour, spirit and good heart. He continues to enrich us still.

2   BIG *h*ART: Interrupting the heritage view of culture

Scott Rankin

Invisibility

Cultural activity in Australia is usually viewed as a kind of dubious pursuit, or seen as peripheral to the real stuff of life. It is permissible as an interest for some more sensitive souls, and is occasionally praised if it reaps rewards on the international stage and acts as a salve on our country's thin-skinned status anxiety. Mostly people are blind to their own addiction to culture, and think of it as a pastime other people in the community perhaps like to indulge in as a kind of recreation.

As human beings, however, we live in a strange bubble of the present, while constructing the past from selective fragments of victorious memory, and projecting ourselves into an imagined future that is coming to us. All of us are caught in this frenzy of imagining so constantly we are hardly aware of it. We indulge in this imagining individually, as families, friends, peer tribes and participants in whole historic narrations. We engage with it through heroism, sport, kinetically, musically, environmentally, artistically and in other iterations. This is the ever-present flow of our cultural life.

For most of our literate centuries, the 'writing' of history has been preoccupied with the 'facts'. Recently, however, we have become more interested in the 'feelings' of history, and we can see this in the rise of verbatim approaches to history telling, or our historical memory. These authors of history tend to legitimise a heritage view of culture. This view implies that somehow the memory and commemoration of great works is the most important cultural practice in the present. We know in some

fragile core of our animal being that the future is not yet real, but we have this precious record of the past, which we cling to.

Perhaps this skews our view of all that cultural activity can be, and this can be seen by examining where the overwhelming majority of our government-funded arts and cultural budget is spent – supporting the propagation and re-exploration of the heritage arts. We spend hugely on reiterating and perhaps reinterpreting and conserving what we already know of the past and how we have already defined it. And we spend a relatively small amount on the unknown, the commissioning of the future in our collective imaginings. Our major orchestras spend more time playing the canon than the work of living composers.

Imaging the future

It could be argued that the commissioning of the future through culture is more essential and more interesting, because it is an expansive pursuit. We experience the future as an idea or an impulse in the present. This impulse may be in our body kinetically, it may come upon us poetically, visually, through innovation, conversation, rumination, contemplation, etc., and it will come alive in our community through our broad discussion of these ideas. Advances in this discussion of ideas rarely come from the funding sinkholes of the heritage arts and institutions. They most often come from the fringes, by those experimenting on the edge, or perhaps those pushed to the edge of the community.

This futurist impulse – to imagine where the cultural current is taking us and what we could make it – is prophetic, is often driven by an impulse for survival, and is an undisciplined cry from the heart. Sometimes this kind of exploration has its genesis in the world of experimental art. More often, however, new ideas about the future are triggered by fringe dwellers and outsiders whose life and times prophetically remind us of better versions of ourselves and our society. Their stories have currency and, when combined with artists and cultural workers who have a practised virtuosity, can trigger a rare and powerfully authentic expression of a future we long for. This is work of consequence, and when mentored and placed in front of varied audiences it can trigger a line of shifts and changes that have strong and important consequences beyond the legitimate beauty of the work itself.

However, the literacies, the resources and the stillness required to imagine and present the future are still mostly circumscribed to the terrain

of privilege. And those who could benefit the most from a re-imagined future are those who are without literacy, resources, time and stillness – outsiders in the community. Often the only thing those who find themselves living as outsiders have left is the gift of their story, which they wear as a cloak for comfort as the likely trajectory of their life unfolds and circumstances beyond their control threaten to blow them away, off the page of our collective narrative and into invisibility.

This invisibility and this transformative potential of story form the central motivating force for BIG hART as a cultural entity. It has proved to be such a powerful, coiled spring of latent creative energy that the company has grown exponentially for the last 21 years. Everyone, skilled or unskilled, can become more involved in forming the story of both the past and the future if the appropriate community dramaturgies are used by skilled arts workers and artists.

Making everyday life visible

I (Scott) have spent a lifetime as a writer and director, but I don't really think of BIG hART as working in 'the arts'. Rather, it deals with the broader current or flow of culture. We can try to ignore this flow of culture, as we sit on our various individual rafts of education, politics, family, community, science, religion, etc. We can row hard against the tide or with it, but its navigation remains inescapable. The rafts are merely cultural vessels to which we cling to stay afloat.

For the last couple of decades, BIG hART has worked within this flow, investigating ideas of narrative and invisibility. By experimenting with the cultural discussion at the centre of life and examining how stories can become visible again, the company has helped reshape dominant assumptions about what the future has to be. This work means responding to a combination of 'rafts': from government and policy, to artists, individuals and communities.

The exciting challenge for the artist is to create work that can withstand the scrutiny of time and still remain potent. A work of art that people love – that is not destroyed by circumstance – is passed on from generation to generation, like our cultural DNA, a kind of fragile miracle.

It may sound counter-intuitive to say I'm not interested in art for art's sake, but I don't think art can exist in that form. To see it like that is to ghettoise it and rob it of its relevance, and ultimately to consign it to the

bin of the past. Poetry is power. The sublime is subversive. And the artist is a servant of her time, not her ego.

BIG *h*ART is interested in making invisible stories visible, in all the important forums, and in thinking of art making as a tool within a broader flow of culture. Seen in this way, our work is an experiment in accelerated consequences. These stories make it possible for us to imagine a fairer future, to re-configure our heritage as a concept to look forward to rather than as a thing confined to the past. That's all.

3   BIG *h*ART: Beginnings and trajectories of development

Scott Rankin

Beginnings

BIG *h*ART sprang to life almost by accident in 1992 in the small industrial town of Burnie on the northwest coast of Tasmania – a town made infamous by Midnight Oil's song of despair 'Burnie':

> … two children in the harbour,
> they play their games storm water drains,
> write their contract in the sand it'll be grey for life …

In 1992, with an arts career progressing well, and having maintained an ongoing commitment to social justice, my gaze and that of a producer friend (John Bakes) shifted towards the possibility of applying the process of making art in acute and targeted ways to particular issues. The issues we had in mind were presenting in the community with some urgency, yet seemed invisible in the media and politically. Our discussions led us to think about the privileges for the creative person of living an expressive life, and the many positive and entwined layers to this creativity: the sense of being able to take action, agency, understanding, response and affirmation and sometimes power; the way in which the arts can illuminate stories that are not visible in the general community; that communities and individuals could be invited into constructing new kinds of narrative, which could be fed into the narration that describes the future and becomes the nation, etc. These were all very grandiose claims, but we were younger and addicted to the possible.

These ideas seemed especially outlandish when I looked at what was then being called 'community art' and noticed how much of the art made under this label seemed deeply compromised by mediocrity and was something of a haven for broken artists as much as for broken people

participating in a project. It was dispiriting. There were of course passionately argued reasons why work made through community processes – though poor in quality – had to be critiqued in a different, more conciliatory way, how these stories belonged to others beyond the artist and how the process was what really mattered. It seemed to me, however, that the most obvious thing was that the artists were failing the community groups they were working with, bringing an intransigent and blocked creative practice to new settings. We were our own worst enemy, jaded, hard-working artists, renaming poor work as brilliant. The more practised and better-funded areas of the arts looked on with condescending smirks at our efforts.

Yet there were unique and important skills being honed in the community cultural development disciplines: new mentoring skills, empathetic skills, authenticity and flexibility, applied art techniques, community diplomacy and much more. It seemed to contain potential new languages beyond the jaded offerings and creative slurry pouring wastefully from mainstream practice. A fresh commitment to virtuosity was needed in this difficult area, using new pallets and disciplines. What seemed promising was a return to a deeper practice, more centred in the whole of life, away from models of art making based on commodity, manufacturing and tourism.

It seemed abundantly clear to us that this community arts practice was frequently encountering communities with very serious survival issues and a very low skills base. Attempts were being made to achieve very big goals for multiple stakeholders, with tiny amounts of funding and very little infrastructure. The arts disciplines that needed to be exercised were intensely difficult. They still required the thousands of hours of practice, but also required a deep pool of inter- and intra-personal skills to work in contexts where these issues were clear.

The timeframes for these projects would also need to be long and would be expensive, yet the pool of funding was always so limited, and the end product a difficult thing to sell (the funding was deliberately structured this way by state and federal bodies). Making art in these contexts was an endeavour that needed brilliant producers, and yet – in this era– there were no producers being trained in the sector. The notion was not even thought of (now of course anyone with a spreadsheet is a producer apparently). It was like a practice built on a foundation of good hearts, the promise of optimism, the smell of an oily rag and the desire to save. Failure was built in, structured, from a policy level down.

Artists working in communities felt and behaved defensively. People were so burnt out and struggling with such important issues that any criticism fell on deaf ears. Ranks closed. There was little interest in change or professional development; people had their heads down just trying to survive. What made it even more difficult was that this intense and taxing creative discipline and the resulting practice was hardly even recognised as more than a sheltered workshop for artists who couldn't cut it in the mainstream. Larger arts companies would sometimes dip in and out, if there seemed to be a buck or some funding kudos in it, ignoring the discipline of community process, like blind giants dancing.

It was in this context, after ten years of trying, that in 1992 the BIG hART model was born. It was an attempt to wrestle with the many layers of the practice, to experiment with the dramaturgies of work in community, and to approach this work with a longing for virtuosity. What was needed was an approach that would signal the significance of this cultural work, and show the consequences of this to the funding stakeholders. Then we could gain access to many different areas of society and reach a broader audience. We could also move beyond being pigeonholed as the arts or, worse still, community arts, something of which deep down we were immensely proud.

The BIG hART experiment was a recognition that unique benefits could be found in both the process of making and the experience of consuming the story. If the process was deep and the artistry strong, the work could be made with such finesse and authenticity that a shift, an illumination, an understanding could be created in key places: portfolios, electorates, media and opinion formers, for example. New hidden stories could be released into the narratives around which individuals, communities and the nation formed. These early experiments gave us the opportunity to define different layers that each BIG hART project would need to work on, and different approaches that would need to be kept in play, like spinning plates in the air.

The first projects

Our very first project happened almost by accident. We were invited to work on a prevention project for young offenders – which was going badly and would have lost its remaining funding – in a regional town on the northwest coast of Tasmania. At the beginning of the project youth workers and police reported one offence per week from the fifteen young

people in the target group. At the conclusion of the project, they recorded only one offence in 10 months.

Although not yet officially named BIG hART, and not yet an incorporated body, the company quickly gained attention through the success of its workshop approach in stemming recidivism amongst this young target group. Participants were engaged enough to deliver creative products in the community. The project attracted independent evaluation – unusual at the time – and this 'outside' independent observation proved useful, with this process soon becoming part of the BIG hART model.

Interestingly, many participants from this initial project have stayed in contact over the years. They have ended up contributing to the community in a variety of ways, from raising children to managing tourism operations, joining the armed forces, working in aged care facilities and so on. The following are two portraits drawn from this first project. For the purposes of this document, the participants' names have been changed.

Portraits from this first project

Nat was a young woman who was feared by the police for her physical strength and capacity for violence (she was the only woman to escape from Risdon Prison). Nat had been essentially locked indoors away from interaction with the public for much of her childhood, and abused both sexually and physically. The family suffered from intergenerational obesity and mental illness. Nat became central to the arts project and to the life of the group. She toured a number of performance pieces with the company, spoke at public functions and went on to employment. Some years later she rang to say hello late one night from an aged care facility where she was working. 'Guess what', she said, 'They've left me in charge of the drugs cabinet!' At the time of the project, a picture of this kind was inconceivable, as the future being predicted for her was framed by failure and perceived danger to the community.

Cynthia was agoraphobic, obese, highly intelligent, socially isolated and bearded. This young woman had every reason to feel rejected and angry. She initially began coming to the workshops after the other participants had left to help with the cleaning up. After a few weeks, Cynthia started arriving while the workshops were in progress. She would cope by sitting under a table and watching. It became clear that she enjoyed confined spaces and, as it turned out, although large, she was extremely flexible. This socially isolated young woman ended up having the main speaking part in a large, touring experimental stage production.

She would begin the show inside a seemingly small road case, which would burst open later during the show and she would roll out. This confined space seemed to give her confidence and calm her nerves. She went on to contribute in many valuable ways to the community.

There were many others, such as Jim, the almost illiterate son of a local detective, who arrested him before the project, and I could go on. Most of the group involved had a story of disengagement and disadvantage, and this came out in numerous, often violent or attention-seeking ways. One of the first workshops for the group involved an exercise on the stage of the local theatre. In the centre was a large stack of china crockery from the local second-hand shops. As the workshop progressed, under the glare of the theatre lights, participants were asked to come forward and break a plate in front of the others. In this context, this extroverted group, known for their vandalism after dark around town, were desperately timid.

Little by little, however, they began to understand the power of this 'staged space', where the transgressive and the flamboyant could meet, where audacity was an asset, where the public demanded controlled shows of violent energy … and so the plates were flung over and over cathartically at the back wall, shattering across the stage in an OH&S nightmare. Their potential and inclination towards anarchic creative energy was both broken open and harnessed. Two of the shows we made together – *GIRL* and *Pandora Slams the Lid* – went on to tour and win awards. Tragically, while the company was on tour with two of its works to the National Festival of Australian Theatre, an ambulance officer in Burnie was murdered by the peer group of this young cast. Had they been at home it is likely they would have been at the same gathering. It proved a salient counterpoint to the contribution to the broader community these young people were making.

Million-dollar kids

Young people such as these could be called million-dollar kids. From the time they first come to the attention of various government departments – at around two years of age – to the time they are spat out of the system at 18 years, they have an additional million or more spent on their wellbeing. These costs to the system include, for example, wages, administration, infrastructure, interventions, repair to premises and OH&S. The system that is supposed to support these young people is often of little avail, and two

decades later the situation is usually much the same, except the figure is far higher. (For example, one young person close to a BIG *h*ART project costs the state 500,000 dollars a year and this will continue for many years to come.)

On the strength of these initial projects and their evaluation, BIG *h*ART began searching for other opportunities and was able to secure substantial non-arts funding to pilot and document further strategies. The skills of arts workers were utilised on targeted projects, which responded to related issues in the community such as domestic violence prevention; HIV/AIDS prevention amongst rural young people who were injecting drug users; re-engagement with school; single teenage mothers in transient relationships and their vulnerable children, etc.

Each of these projects attracted government attention through independent evaluation and consistent use of the media, resulting in increased funding opportunities and growth. This rapid growth and attention required BIG *h*ART to formalise its internal company structure, find a permanent name, and document its purposes and processes.

The company was fortunate in its naivety. There was no formal committee, no status could come from supporting it, and so we were something of a cleanskin. There is far more pressure now for new organisations to resist the entrepreneurial spirit and follow the textbook versions of organisational structure, governance and risk mitigation. Even in 1996 the push had begun towards a sausage machine mentality for small start-ups like BIG *h*ART – imposing a one size fits all, manufacturing approach to management structure in community and arts organisations.

However, BIG *h*ART was fortunate at the time to meet a very elderly semi-retired local lawyer who offered to do the work pro bono. The beautifully Dickensian Mr Crisp was skinny, with a leathery face, enormous cabbage ears and deaf as a post. Suited in double breast and navy pinstripe, a simple swish of his thin silver hair was enough to send a cloud of dandruff wafting across the room. Mr Crisp yelled with the rasping whisper of a man who knew his gasps were numbered. But he was free and, as it turned out, wise. He said he would do the legal work for us on three conditions: our board would be as small as possible, it would meet as infrequently as was legal and our constitution was to be minimal. BIG *h*ART finalised its constitution and incorporation early in 1996, along the lines Mr Crisp required, and we have been grateful ever since.

Gaining prime ministerial support: Martin Bryant and John Howard

1996 was a watershed year. The conservative government was new and in April the world looked on in horror as gunman Martin Bryant went on a senseless killing spree in Port Arthur in the south of Tasmania. The link between Tasmania and violence became collectively lodged in the national consciousness.

A number of the young people involved in BIG *h*ART projects were not dissimilar to Martin Bryant: socially isolated, numb, disconnected from education and hurt. There was a clear sense that if they had access to weapons similar tragedy was possible. Having worked with this group for a number of years, having written up the approaches we were using, and having been evaluated, we were in a unique position to approach the newly elected Prime Minister John Howard MP. The Prime Minister was looking to reach out to Tasmania to try to show strong leadership on the issue of guns and violence –so he was receptive to a positive story of community-driven change.

Perhaps in a first for a small not-for-profit arts organisation, we had found an Australian Public Service mentor who was deeply interested in change and able to guide our approaches to Canberra. We had already decided we wanted to have a bigger impact than just in the local community and, for this goal, we had to try to have input at a policy level. With her guidance we hired what really amounted to a lobbyist to work on our behalf. Our lobbyist approached the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet regarding the Prime Minister meeting some young Tasmanians who were no longer connected to the justice system, but instead were contributing positively to their community.

Prime Minister Howard also agreed to launch BIG *h*ART, our newly incorporated body, and a manual capturing our approach at Parliament House, Canberra. The Prime Minister entered the theatrette in a flurry followed by the media scrum. I remember my partner Rebecca was holding our young son Lockie who was chewing a rusk. The PM stopped momentarily on seeing a baby and Lock offered him a chew of his teething biscuit (astute, as Mr Howard in the first weeks of government had a few teething problems of his own). In the theatrette the PM commented on the confidence of these young people, noting their disadvantaged background and their courage in breaking away from their likely social trajectories.

It was only really in the months and years following that we realised the value of having the imprimatur of the incumbent Prime Minister associated with BIG *h*ART. Being able to say 'launched by Prime Minister John Howard' proved invaluable in opening doors, triggering us to think more strategically about access to government, contribution to policy change, and new approaches to cross-portfolio funding. It helped us avoid a backwater of irrelevance in the safety of the arts and instead to produce projects of scale that punched above their weight and were aimed at multiple audiences.

What developed out of these practices was a model of working at the grassroots; utilising hybrid cultural approaches and non-welfare strategies; working with the local community's strengths; taking the work produced into the public domain through arts festivals and the media, and then targeting the policy domain beyond the arts. The key findings from these projects were then used to bring about more sustained change and information sharing in policy and research contexts.

This was still at a time when little evaluation was done and research on the ground with these kinds of projects was almost unheard of – an arts project was pigeonholed and relegated to a bread and circuses cliché. In breaking out of that mould, BIG *h*ART stumbled on an approach for future endeavours that is still being refined today. Interestingly, in breaking out of that mould, we also avoided the gaze of the sleepy, self-satisfied dinosaur that is 'the arts'. Gazing admiringly at their own adorable little metro-centric-navel, they literally didn't know we were around for ten or more years, and this is the best thing that could have happened. Instead of approaching the kitchen, plate in hand, grateful for a small dollop of funding gruel, we were in the back lane, raiding the mini-skip for piles of leftover funding from all kinds of departments (tipped off by our lobbyist). BIG *h*ART was so lucky to be the bastard child of a hidden affair between structural inequity and arts myopia in the Australia Council.

What's in a name: Capturing the essence of BIG *h*ART

The silent 'h' of *h*ART became a way of symbolising our intention to keep the 'heart' implicit in the values of the company. In other words, we were unashamedly attempting to make a difference through our work; however this 'change' was based in the long-term processes we used in communities through projects that resulted in art being made.

Furthermore, this silent 'h' can be found in the participatory processes used, the advocacy work with policy, the values used in the workshop processes and the company itself, in the work with the community as well as in the viewer's experience of authenticity in the art being made. It also alludes to the company's intention to try to make work of consequence, tied to communities with high needs where change is essential, rather than just making work without a selection criteria. To this degree there was 'heart' in the political nature of the projects and the urgency of the issues being dealt with. The name captures the company's approach across different domains, such as in the arts, in policy discussions, and in cultural solutions within communities.

The 'BIG' component of the company's name is not so much about scale, but rather its consequence. It reflects the company's interest in contributing to society and bringing creativity to the centre of life, the whole of life, rather than relegating it to the realm of hobby, diversion or commodity.

When people say 'BIG Heart' it also alludes to 'the heart of the country' and the iconic place it holds in our collective consciousness, and how there is more we can be taught by the land itself and the First Peoples of this country. When we began twenty years ago, the name resonated with our interest in focusing on rural, regional, remote and isolated communities. It hinted at what we haven't yet been taught by the country we live in as we huddle by the coast, waiting for boats to arrive and take us home to somewhere.

The company name has also always been somewhat enigmatic. We don't dictate how people pronounce it, whether it is said BIG Art, with a silent 'h', or BIG Heart. This proved more and more useful as the company gained recognition across government departments. Departments whose focus was social or community oriented tended to warm to the notion of the 'BIG Heart'. The arts sector and audiences would usually pronounce the name 'BIG Art.' This helped us avoid preconceptions that could pigeonhole our work and gave us useful access to diverse circles; this ambiguity allowed us to diversify our funding sources, without many rivals.

Lastly, 'BIG' also resonates with 'big ideas' and captures the size of the issues that BIG *h*ART is tackling and the scope of the company's attempts to work strategically on projects of scale … and 'BIG' in the sense of the consequences we can expect in placing art differently out in the world.

4   Developing the BIG *h*ART model

Scott Rankin

BIG *h*ART's early projects received positive independent evaluations and we saw that a growing pool of funding options could open up across government if we sharpened our focus. What was it that government wanted to buy for the taxpayer? Could we meet its criteria head on? Instead of thinking of ourselves as an arts company and listening to funding doors slam shut, we began to see that, if we looked at our work in a certain way, governments were crying out to buy what we were delivering.

First, we signed up with a thing called the Government Purchasing Index that listed every single tender and grant governments were offering. We would then think about how our approach could fulfil something that, say, the Defence Department needed in relation to relocating families. Although these ideas didn't often come to fruition, it helped train us in a way of thinking.

The company began to define the non-welfare processes we were using, and the benefits of utilising these community cultural development strategies. It became apparent that, the more strongly we could define and articulate the benefits of these processes around issues of acute concern to government and communities, the more traction we could get in policy forums, funding and the media. This in turn allowed us to approach a variety of departments and funding rounds instead of perpetually reinventing the wheel with each new funding program from heavily siloed government departments. The success, awards and exposure of the company required us to articulate this model in a language other than the arcane, convoluted dogma of the arts and community cultural development.

Our first public attempts to write up the BIG *h*ART model was in the form of a manual, published as a box of seven small books, and a clunky VHS tape that few people watched. The small books were designed to be practical and pocket sized, so that you could refer to them during

workshops, when stuck for new ideas, games and exercises for example. There were other books that began to define other strategies: use of media, staging, policy, communities, etc.

As you read this now, the writing makes it sound like a rigorous and well-thought-out step-by-step process. Rather it was a more spontaneous and haphazard beginning, coupled with creative reflection amongst a small team that began shaping what clumsily became known as 'the BIG hART model: individuals, communities, governments and art'. This creative articulation that developed into the 'model' is comprised of a number of elements that reflect the values, principles and aspirations of BIG hART's work.

Working simultaneously with individuals, communities, and arts fora

BIG hART's experiment as a company is essentially dramaturgical. The same principles we use to tell a story on the stage or in film can be adapted to tell stories in communities, in the media or at a national level. Early on the company identified the layers of change in these longer-term projects that needed to be operating successfully for it to qualify as a BIG hART project – and not just a fine community cultural development project. The layers were: individuals, communities, nationally (policy and media), and the arts.

- **Individuals:** When individuals who are experiencing the effects of an issue make positive changes to the direction of their social trajectory this is a fine thing – and is perhaps the aim of most community projects. However, when there is individual change, these people don't move through the community in isolation; they are part of a range of community systems.
- **Community:** If change occurs, and the individual's story becomes more visible and understood, then their community will need to shift in attitude and behaviour in response, so as to ensure there is less hurt to others in a similar situation in the future. If the community and the individuals make these kinds of transitions this is good community development; however policy makers and opinion formers will also need to change in response.
- **National:** Politicians, advisors, policy makers, academics, evaluators and opinion formers in the media all need to be seen as

additional and important audiences for both the art created and the narrative of the individuals, the community and the project. In a sense this involves thinking about the meta-narrative of the project (dramaturgically) and how it will play out in the public domain – including whether politicians will be able to quote the projects.

Subsequently we've also found it useful to think along two other concurrent dramaturgical lines: the virtuosity of the new art forms we are experimenting with; and the knowledge transfer from more experienced artists and arts workers to workers entering the field.

An illustration of practice

When BIG *h*ART was running a large project in NSW, the then Premier of the state Bob Carr was to be in the region and agreed to launch the project. He was asked if he would participate in filming part of the story by young people as an extra in a pub, having a beer, with well-known actress Deborah Mailman behind the bar. Ironically the premier doesn't drink, but he has a sense of humour and he agreed. There was much running around from his staffers and strict instructions about how little time he would have and how it all had to roll out. In the end the Premier loved the young people in the camera crew and stayed for many takes, leaving late and in a fine mood.

As a result, some months later, he flew to Adelaide to see a large and unusual performance piece which included 'his film' as part of the Adelaide Festival (although he was noticed nodding off during the performance whilst sitting on an uncomfortable second-hand bed borrowed from a homeless shelter, and placed as seating in the middle of a multi-story carpark).

To build on this, BIG *h*ART requested a meeting with the NSW Premier to present a proposal for multi-year core funding from across departments – something that had never happened. Humble organisations like our do not usually get anywhere near busy Premiers; however the combination of art and public service efficiency seemed to catch his eye. And so with a boardroom full of slightly nervous public servants and advisors, the highly rehearsed presentation commenced and two or three minutes in the Premier and his chief of staff Roger Wilkins spoke to each other in German – I think about Mahler – the Premier stood up and said something as blunt as, 'Audacious, but find a way.'

In 21 years of work this has proved BIG *h*ART's most productive and innovative funding model, generating more than three dollars for every one dollar provided by the government annually for over a decade. It stemmed from exploring simultaneous narratives and including different kinds of audiences in a project, and thinking dramaturgically about how often those in public positions long for contact with something real.

The Arts: Creating dialogic spaces

BIG *h*ART is an arts company – and it is good to place the art last after mixing in all the other ingredients to brew a potent authenticity. However the work being made in and with these community groups and individuals must stand on its own merits in the cultural frame, or the whole thing is just the Emperor's New Social Work. It will need to find its own authentic language and dramaturgy for it to be noticed and given the attention good art deserves and attracts. Without this authentic audience response, the rest of the project may well contribute positively, but the art will be part of the problem, eliciting a patronising response that continues to prop up the ghetto of invisibility for the groups involved.

Over time, BIG *h*ART has adopted an ever-changing oral tradition that plays out through mentoring, seminars for government, conferences and information sharing, master classes for collegiate peers, and intense development of career trajectories for arts workers and producers on projects. Perhaps some of this should also be written down; however there is a useful intensity that comes from addressing this professional development informally and deeply in the complexity and heartache of these difficult projects. In a sense this privacy will always keep BIG *h*ART operating at the scale of the 'small group of friends', and that may well be a major strength, in preventing success leading to institutionalisation. The model evolved around a set of ideas and values, assembled with the curatorial elegance of a bumbling bowerbird with a touch of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Being responsive to and grounded in community

One of the strengths of the company has been that it is light on its feet, with very little infrastructure, and so we have been able to respond quickly, delivering the resources that come in, to work in the field, while more or less surviving when funding is lean. It has been important not to lose these values and this essential characteristic of the work only to become another

agency or begin a mini-empire. The beauty is that the income flows straight to the work in the field and we have been very inexpensive to run.

For much of the early projects it wasn't really about being paid. Money went to the grassroots of the project, the art, making it punch above its weight. We were self-funding to a large degree and this brought purity to the motivations for the project, but also made life uncomfortable. People came in for small periods of time as arts consultants on each project and were gone again, continuing their own practice. However inevitably success meant more structures and internal mechanisms, and slowly the middle management grew to meet the size of the projects being delivered. On the whole however these functions continued to be placed where they were needed most: on the ground in communities.

This beginning has shaped the structure and maintained the values of the company. BIG *h*ART remains an anomaly in the arts landscape, bending with the winds and whims of arts language and administrative fads – some good, some not so. Cultural policy at a state and federal level in Australia began its love affair with administration, management, risk aversion and structural self-preservation when BIG *h*ART was focusing its funding strategies away from the cultural sector. It has been amusing to watch as the language of arts administration came to resemble that of manufacturing, with the artist the last to be paid in the food chain, and seen as a little peripheral to the core business of the sector and something to protect the 'arts industry' from.

Like naughty children small organisations are lectured about how they should be administered, with governance and accountability the buzzwords. There was little creative thinking involved as the arts pushed themselves into an 'industry' mould in the hope of gaining some funding clout with governments obsessed with old-fashioned notions of productivity. Obsessive associations were made between art and activities that could legitimise it: box office, tourism, number of hotel beds sold, education, health and wellbeing. Each of these associations have important roles to play; however their pursuit exerted a pressure towards top-down management structures and an approach to art that was inherently anti-creative. An awareness of this was important in developing a networked structure for the company.

Rhizomes and trees: Developing networked structures

BIG hART began to look at how the company was actually operating. It became clear that we weren't running with a top-down 'tree-shaped' model; we were more like a bamboo plant with a complex and ever-shifting root system that ran the company and resulted in our strong and consistent creative productivity. It was much more a rhizome-based structure.

This networked, flatter structure also worked alongside a strong authorial voice in the company through the Creative Director as well as utilising the quiet and observational, reflective input from the board. Values played a large part in the company's life, with trust removing the risk from some approaches, and linking the company's aspirations to the aspirations of individual artists and arts workers. This hasn't always been successful, but on the whole has been highly effective, allowing BIG hART's exponential growth over 21 years. Inevitably though, as the company has got bigger, and as people's personal investment of time and energy and aspiration has increased, there has had to be a shift to new iterations of the rhizome structure – possibly making it more complex rather than less.

BIG hART is by no means a utopia, and sometimes it has been less than ideal; however, it is a place of strong professional and personal development, a place where each person's narrative is important. For example, one of the characteristics of BIG hART has been the fact that the artists who have worked on BIG hART projects over the decades are all engaged in very different explorations in simultaneous careers. BIG hART has taken – as part of its charitable aims – this very targeted direction of using story and ideas and the richness inherent in this diversity of arts practice. There is a strong sense of the transient nature of the company – a kind of community of like-minded people who have coalesced for a time around a series of worthwhile issues, which has a life for a while and then will disappear, when different opportunities arrive for those values to be expressed.

Aspirational teams

Building on the values the company tries to use in projects in the field, there is a commitment to new arts workers, producers and artists coming onto a project both to mentor and to inspire. BIG hART in a sense is nothing, and wants to stay that way. It has little or no infrastructure. Its media tools are quickly out-dated and renewed. It would take a couple of

weeks to pull the organisation apart. However it lives in the experiences and values and tools of those who work on the projects. The corporate or individual memory that they take forward to their future endeavours in the field is BIG *h*ART. While it is operating as an entity it is really a process of strong creative leadership, maximising gift and autonomy and managing change quickly and responsively.

To this end the company tries to invest heavily, both harnessing and where appropriate shaping and being shaped by the skills, values and aspirations of those who come to work with the organisation. Wherever an individual's aspirations and those of the company can align there is shared value and commitment, and productivity and longevity on projects increases markedly. There also seems to be a strong correlation between these factors and the prevention of burnout. A strong sense of meaning builds between people working closely on the projects. It is easy, on these large-scale projects that are dealing with high levels of need, to feel at times awash in hopelessness, and it can be very debilitating. At these times the collegiate approach of the company is highly valued, calling people to the best part of themselves and supporting each other. Sometimes, as in any movement, there are times where this hasn't worked, and people learn from it. An indication of the risk and the value is whenever we've run a mammoth project, have gone way over budget, look like we'll have to fold, and are all exhausted, we make sure we go out for a very expensive dinner, spend what we haven't got … and eat and drink and laugh and cry.

5   The role of story in BIG *h*ART

Scott Rankin

If we regard our lives as being lived 'in the moment', and that the past no longer exists and the future is not yet real, it is useful to think of our 'nation' as an ephemeral thing, as a series of 'narrations'. It is a set of ideas wrapped up in a story that comes from the past, and is written in the present as a way of establishing definitions of what the imagined future may be. There are dominant stories; stories that no longer have currency; stories that are not really that big or important but are growing in stature (think Gallipoli); stories that are deliberately excluded (e.g. the way we dishonour our elderly and let them languish in unseemly and dispiriting nursing homes because we are too scared to face our own mortality); and those stories that are invisible.

Propaganda utilises many of these tools; however art does not lend itself to propaganda because the inward journey, the contemplative journey, the journey of depth tends to expose the propagandist to the audience, rather than trick the audience. Art tends to move away from the static and the impulse to 'conserve', to keep things as they are. The poetic impulse collectively meanders its way towards the sublime, and into 'the new'. This is not a linear progression forward; rather, it is a spiral inward, in tension, deepening, not in single generations alone, but across time and generations. These notions help us understand the way that story is employed by BIG *h*ART

A person's story can be their last remaining valuable asset

In any community, those who have been excluded, whether deliberately or accidently, are often on the bottom rung of the community. Their invisibility has economic consequences. Often their very last asset is their story. It is often valuable, because it acts like a canary in the coalmine. If told in the right way, and placed with the right audiences, these stories can illuminate things we need to know about ourselves and things we need to shift as a society. In other words, these stories have high value and act like 'gifted

consultants' who can help shift society by their input into our ideas about ourselves and our social policies that can change society for the future.

The discussion of these unfolding stories in all forms through song, dance, science, theology, media and sport, each with different entry points, are what we often call culture. It is the very essence of each of our waking hours. Whether we are the kind of person who contemplates it or not, we are all involved in this story making. The narrative litmus test for the health of this discussion is empathy.

Empathy is different to sympathy. It comes from the Greek *empatheia* (*en* – in and *pathos* – feeling). Empathy is deep, involving entering into the life of another. Sympathy is from the Greek *sympatheia* (*syn* – together with and *pathos* – feeling). Sympathy is not so deep. It is still valuable, but it is experienced alongside, rather than empathy which involves entering into the experience. This empathetic response can end invisibility and provide protection for those in the community who have found themselves excluded from the narrative.

Story as a protective mechanism

One of the basic principles of BIG *h*ART's work is that a person's story can act as a protective mechanism, or a restraint on the clumsy damage that society can inflict on some groups through a lack of understanding. If young people know more of the story of older people in a small country town, older people will feel an increased sense of safety. Most people are very tolerant and supportive of their neighbours when there is shared story or circumstance – this is often experienced in times of natural disaster, when people are involved in a common 'story' and have a common set of tasks to achieve.

Illustration: 10 Days on the Island Festival
A BIG *h*ART project in Tasmania called *This is Living* included a performance in four towns across the state for the 10 Days on the Island Festival. It was designed to capture the stories of older people in the community and to value their contribution. These community members are often invisible to younger people, and the idea was also to bring young people in contact with older people. The symbolic pairing became skateboarders and the elderly. Initially this seemed like an uneasy combination of opposites; however by the end of the process older members of the community – some using walking frames – were being

thrown aloft by young people in a mosh pit during the credits after the show. A new visibility had been created between groups.

Artists working in communities can naturally make a strong contribution, by utilising their craft to share stories from fringe dwellers and those demonised in the community. The phrase 'it's much harder to hurt someone if you know their story' was passed down to BIG hART via a residential service in northwest Tasmania for people with disabilities; this phrase has become a defining idea.

It could also be true to say the opposite: 'it is much easier to hurt someone if you know their story'. However, this is true in the 'personal', i.e. to hurt people on an individual level – to make the hurt more pinpoint accurate. BIG hART's approach is to create the opportunity for true stories to be told as a protective mechanism more broadly in society – to generate natural protective values around story. For instance Australia has just witnessed a decade-long storytelling manipulation about refugees by master storytellers in the polity, so as to drive a wedge between groups and gain re-election. These same strategies can be seen to be used in war mongering and in the weapons industry. However, by far the biggest cause of the clumsy harm caused to many is the invisibility of groups in the community, when their real story is excluded from our society's narrative.

Creating broader audiences

The more pressing the issue, the deeper the invisibility, or the more a story is being manipulated by others, the more critical it is for the stories to be broadly and deeply seen, heard or experienced beyond theatre and arts circles. Ideas are still valuable in small circles for triggering new iterations of thinking; however change comes through a groundswell not the chop whipped up on the surface by the wind. The process of change can be supercharged by knowing the different audiences for your work, using the media, involving decision makers and softening key hearts, and this comes from being strategic in thinking and in disseminating the story.

This role can be defined as 'social impact' and 'social impact producers' are attracting philanthropic attention and funding. Their job is to ensure the work is reaching nodes in multi-layered networks that spark further change. This may mean broader general public audiences, but it also means targeted audiences who can respond to a growing groundswell with shifts in the national story and then shifts in policy.

Illustration: Great Hall, Parliament House, Canberra

A large-scale BIG *h*ART project, called Knot @ HOME, examined homelessness in many different forms through the eyes of around 200 young people. There were a number of outputs ranging from festival performances to an 8-part television series and a website. Near the conclusion of the project the company was invited to bring its performance piece involving fifteen young people to Great Hall in Parliament House, Canberra to be the centrepiece of a national awards ceremony for Centrelink (a one-stop-shop for human services in Australia). The award recipients in Centrelink were the best-performing workers (for instance someone who had taken a large number of young people off benefits because they breached the conditions of their welfare payment). Here then was the opportunity for some of the most disengaged young people in the country to describe how they ended up homeless, unemployed, out of school and welfare dependent, to workers, policy makers, ministerial advisors and the relevant Minister, in ways that were highly polished, evocative and supported by the best possible arts resources.

As the evening unfolded and the young people performed, first the chatter quietened, the cutlery was still, then pin-drop silence came over Great Hall for 40 minutes, broken only by the sound of tears amongst the audience of award winners and then followed by a standing ovation. This then created the opportunity for a six-minute, incisive policy statement from BIG *h*ART that clearly articulated to the Minister the predicament faced by these young people and the costs to government – the policy statement being carefully prepared through mentoring with friends of BIG *h*ART in the Australian Public Service. The result was the opportunity to meet with the Minister and discuss the invisibility of this end of the client group, and the structural issues that usually prevented them changing their social trajectory. Their stories of these young people, in this context, were as valuable as that of the 10,000-dollar a day political lobbyist, as this is in effect what they were delivering – policy lobbying of the highest order.

When these high-value stories, created in collaboration with gifted artists, are illuminated well and placed in 'high-value' forums – such as arts festivals – the response is profound, and appreciation cathartically expressed. These stories are 'expressions of self', and one of the strong foundations of BIG *h*ART's work is returning an audience's appreciation of this 'self-expression' to those who are experiencing the issues, and who have expressed it through their story. This in turn can create intense moments that trigger strong new self-appraisal and often require new

choices about who they are in the face of the issues they have experienced; their new-found visibility; a sense of now being included; and having a worthwhile contribution to make. If this process is mentored, these participants in BIG *h*ART projects will often begin to make different choices about changing their social trajectory. This is not some therapeutic magic pill, but rather a natural consequence. It is harnessing one of those moments in life when we instinctively have permission to re-evaluate our identity. This re-evaluation, in turn, gets expressed in choices we make in our social trajectory. Finally, because BIG *h*ART is interested in social and individual change, these moments are then supported and mentored, and as individuals make new choices pathways are created on BIG *h*ART projects to open up new possibilities.

Each of these values, principles, aspirations and practices will be illustrated in this report through three separate BIG *h*ART projects. They provide case studies or rich contexts that can reveal each of these facets of BIG *h*ART at work.

6   Understanding BIG _h_ART's work

Peter Wright

During this research process we have considered three BIG _h_ART projects. Each of these projects was multi-layered with many different dimensions. While they occurred in disparate parts of Australia, across three different states: Tasmania, New South Wales and the Northern Territory, they all share some common attributes. Of these attributes, four are key.

(1) Disadvantage

All communities that BIG _h_ART works in are linked by characteristics of disadvantage. In Tasmania, for example, this includes young people who are marginalised and disenfranchised, as well as older people who are on the margins. In NSW, it includes young people disengaged from community and leading lives that are often discounted in the economic master story of our times. And in the Northern Territory, BIG _h_ART works with Indigenous Australians, who as the first Australians are struggling to reclaim and reaffirm their identity in the context of poor living conditions and life circumstances often beyond their control. While in the latter case, these Australians could be seen as being 'helpless', this is simply not the case. What the research reveals is fertile veins of culture that are evolving and rich with possibility.

      In each site, BIG _h_ART worked with the community, in the community, from the community, and for the community itself. This could be understood to be in service to the community rather than deciding in advance what each project might be. More formally this is both participatory in nature and democracy at work.

(2) A processual approach

Each project followed a similar trajectory that could be understood to occur in six separate phases. In phase one extensive **consultation** occurs. This could be simply described as a process of _deep listening._ In phase two, **opportunities** for engagement are provided through the provision of

extensive consultation and workshops. A key feature of these processes is the 'power of the personal'. What this means is that, once there are some initial project participants, these participants use their personal networks and contacts to draw in others; this process is similar to 'snowballing' used in research methodology (Seidman, 2013). Through engagement comes **participation**. Although engagement and participation are talked about separately, the two are intrinsically linked. For example, we were able to see that personal networks led to new participants attending workshops. And in addition, through participation in the workshops engagement with, and contributions to, the project developed. However, this participation with, and ultimately ownership of, the project, which develops through arts practice, would not occur without engagement in the first place.

In phase four, **skills** are taught and developed through the workshops. Individuals and groups are given skills not only to develop new knowledge and capacities through arts practice, including knowledge of self and cultural knowledges, but also the social skills necessary for these to be applied in a group context. In phase five, as a result of skills developed and practised, **expertise** is developed and employed, leading to phase six, **expression.** In this phase project participants' skills are employed to 'make' artefacts that are placed in the community and other public fora. This has the consequence for participants of developing pride, having their experience 'witnessed', and hence the opportunity to develop both bridging and bonding forms of social capital. Also, more particularly, community life and culture are enriched through the sharing of meaning that is also contained in and expressed through art.

(3) Creativity as an essential element of healthy community

In each project BIG *h*ART seeks to tackle social disadvantage through actively involving people in 'creative expressions of their life and identity within cultural and arts practice', thereby building social cohesion and productive, healthy self-supporting futures. The adopted approach follows a socially inclusive, asset-based community development model that focuses not on deficits or a welfare model, but rather on the strengths and skills already present but unacknowledged in the respective communities seeking to develop and build on these qualities.

(4) A four pillar approach

BIG *h*ART's commitment towards change is built on four related but separate pillars of support:

Individuals: building social and economic participation
In the creative workshops, for example, genuine interest is taken in the participants' stories, personalities and development, which promotes an atmosphere of mutual respect. These workshops do not require any particular skills from the participants to begin with. They are designed to experiment with different art forms in order to find an appropriate medium for each individual to express his or her story.

In this process, strong personal relationships with participants are built and individuals are also linked with professional artists and cultural workers across a wide range of creative workshops. In the context of this relational work, facilitating exchange between participants from different walks of life but with similar experiences of marginalisation helps to dismantle stereotypes, promotes empathy and situates individual experience in a social context, which lessens feelings of isolation and re-engages people with their community. This generative process, building from individuals to small groups, is both bridging and bonding.

In addition, the small group focus (building if necessary from a one-on-one mentoring process) facilitates an artistic exchange with regard to personal stories, their meaning and how they can be translated into high quality art while encouraging individuals to expand their social and professional skills in a supportive environment. This relational work is key to achieving high levels of engagement and maintaining artistic excellence.

This approach is grounded in the belief that every daily act contributes to the constant construction of personal identity and that imagination is essential to this basic selfhood narrative. It allows for critical perspectives on choices and on trying out new models of living and opens up alternative pathways while equipping the individual with purposefulness to organise his or her life and relationships in a more healthy way.

Communities: building connections and capacity for change
To amplify the influence of the project and to enable sustained change in the community, BIG *h*ART actively seeks to form partnerships with local institutions, organisations, individuals and government bodies. Exchange of knowledge and the development of an arts- and culture-based model for sustained community development are key objectives for these

partnerships. This means that when quality artwork is presented to the general community participants experience a positive form of attention and appreciation. For example, performance creates a communicative environment and challenges audiences to reflect on preconceived ideas pertaining to the persons involved who have been up until then relegated to the margins of the community.

In performative terms, when they see 'everyday life' performed as art – in other words 'made special' – audiences are invited to identify with the narrations of 'the other'; this arts practice provides literal and metaphorical space for an individual to belong amid the community. We understand this to be a 'third space' which is in between the individual and community – a space that is animated through art. To amplify the influence of the project and to enable sustained change in the community, BIG *h*ART actively forms partnerships with local institutions, organisations, individuals and government bodies.

Nation: contributing to social policy change
The presentation of the artwork to a wider, national audience in mainstream venues offers a new domain of experience to the individuals, while at the same time raising awareness of issues facing disadvantaged communities. This awareness and public profile is then used by BIG *h*ART in the political domain to push for a policy change that will support the community to tackle its problems and create follow-on effects for other communities facing similar issues.

Art: creating exquisite, high-calibre art outcomes for national and international festivals
Creating art lies at the heart of BIG *h*ART's work. It is a tripartite approach including: (i) a process of enquiry for participants, where issues related to their *being* in the world can be inquired into; (ii) a means of upskilling participants in arts-specific skills and knowledge providing them with both *specific* and *general* expressive and arts-related skills that are task specific and also transferable, strengthening, for example, creative dispositions and capabilities; and (iii) a form of expression that leads to recognition of aesthetic outcomes, endowing the project and participants with status and recognition. This process in turn builds pride and respect and also develops what Stam refers to as 'witnessing publics', who are 'loose collection of individuals, constituted by and through the media, acting as observers of injustices that might otherwise go unreported or unanswered'

(2015, p. 282). Art functions in this way to create openings to understand how others' lived experience is shaped and embodied.

In the next chapter each of the three projects that were research sites are elaborated both as a way of describing each project, and also to contextualise the research that was embedded in each.

7   The arc of practice: LUCKY, GOLD and NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI

Overview of the three projects

Peter Wright

This chapter elaborates each of the three research sites considered for the research. It draws substantially on multi-locale ethnographic fieldwork in each site (Marcus, 1998), evaluation reports on each project (Palmer, 2010; Wright, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b), and a synopsis of those reports prepared by Susanne Thurow.

The three sites where these projects were conducted are geographically diverse. They range from the cool temperate forests and hinterland of northwest Tasmania, through the scrub and water-scarce plains of western NSW, southwestern Queensland and Victoria, to the parched red desert heart of Australia. Each of these places is unique in their sense of place, and distinctive in character. What they have in common are disadvantage or communities doing it tough. For example, LUCKY worked with many young people who were socially excluded or were living challenging lives. In GOLD, many families and communities were living with the extreme pressures that prolonged and intensive drought can bring, which were manifested in family breakdown, ill health and self-harm.

In Australia's desert heart Indigenous Australians were experiencing profound clashes of cultural expectations and values; this disadvantage has grown out of many years of inadequate support and infrastructure, and differing sets of cultural expectations and mores. This means that for these first Australians attempts to reclaim self-respect are not easily realised.

BIG hART seeks to serve these communities by conjointly developing cultural or creative solutions to sometimes intractable social problems. Each of these three projects is now described as a way of providing context for understanding. An overview of the project is presented first, followed by the background to the project. Each project is then unpacked,

highlighting differing elements to it, and what these meant in terms of both process and product.

highlighting differing elements to it, and what these meant in terms of both process and product.

Case study one: LUCKY

Summary

LUCKY was an innovative intergenerational crime prevention and community development project conducted by BIG *h*ART on the northwestern coast of Tasmania which had its beginnings in 2005 and concluded in 2009. Several legacy projects have extended the project's scope well beyond the official funding period of 2006–2009. It has been deemed very successful by participants, evaluating bodies, critics and audiences alike and was lauded for its innovative arts-based approach to community development.

LUCKY was made up of three interlinked projects which all focused strongly on the recording and sharing of oral histories: *Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday*, *This is Living* and *Drive*. The project targeted four marginalised groups that most cultural workers have found hard to engage: struggling teenage mothers and their children, elderly people living in isolated circumstances, and young men at risk of embarking on harmful trajectories. These groups entered the project at different stages: in 2006 young and isolated teenage mothers and their children were engaged in early childhood and creative workshops, continuing BIG *h*ART's pilot project *Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday* by cross-collaborating with shack communities.[6]

This three-generational exchange was widened in 2007 to include elderly people who lived in rural and remote areas. The young mothers interviewed and photographed the elderly participants, and employed their new creative skills to shape the enthralling life stories into intricate mirrors of the Tasmanian community. Their work formed the basis of a major stage performance *This is Living* which also enlisted the support of a group of teenage skaters from Burnie which had been loosely linked to BIG *h*ART through lobbying for a new public skate park.

All three groups worked closely and with great success on this production that addressed issues of isolation, ageing populations, crime, fear of crime and alienation between the generations, but at the same time represented in its fabric a way to overcome and re-imagine these paralysing complexities. Binding the group of young men closer into the project, the third official year of LUCKY fully developed the new strand *Drive* which inquired into the many recorded cases of 'autocides' – single-vehicle, single-driver fatal crashes – on Tasmanian roads. Young men associated with this hazardous practice, and deemed at risk by community workers, engaged in digital media workshops and produced an acclaimed in-depth documentary revealing the toll every single one of these needless deaths has on families, friends, service providers and the community at large.

At its core, LUCKY addressed issues of isolation and disengagement from community. BIG *h*ART successfully set out to assist participants to give shape and voice to their own stories, to divert them from criminal trajectories, to develop new

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6   A shack community is one that has grown informally over time, often loosely based on remote or inaccessible fishing spots and without any formal approvals or infrastructure.

skills to re-imagine alternative pathways and to (re)connect with each other and the community at large. A strong media strategy ensured that the project's reach exceeded its immediate audience and opened up possibilities for participants' continued evolution in the arts sector, while at the same time raising awareness of issues like the changing nature of land use (*Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday*), the ageing population (*This is Living*) and the harmful trajectories some young men are committing themselves to in remote areas (*Drive*). A major legacy of the project is a model for community development based on creative arts practice which BIG *h*ART continues to make widely available to the public.

Background

Tasmania is one of Australia's smallest and economically weakest states. With the Bass Strait isolating it from the mainland, its soils and natural resources beautiful but only allowing for limited utilisation, and its scarce and ageing population hardly forming a sustainable local market, the state has a long history of economic hardship and ensuing social problems.

In 1992/93 the northwestern coastal town of Burnie experienced additional upheaval as the long-established local paper mill 'The Pulp' was sold and radically downsized its personnel after plunges in profit margins and repeated industrial disputes. The town's already high unemployment rate subsequently soared dramatically and many people found themselves suddenly relegated to the very margins of society. Frustration and general disengagement were strong follow-on effects of these events and prompted local artists to establish BIG *h*ART in order to counteract the loss of community cohesion. The overriding objective has since been to model new approaches for rebuilding and sustaining the social and economic potential in regional and remote communities under threat from poverty by raising the quality of life through artistic practice. Although quickly embracing the national landscape, the company has since retained a strong presence in Tasmania, conducting projects on a regular basis with people who experience disadvantage and trauma at the fringes of society.

The LUCKY project was part of this continuing presence and encompassed five years' work on the northwest coast of Tasmania responding to social developments. Dramatic changes among the local youth, with soaring rates of suicide, drug abuse, reckless and violent behaviour and an increasing number of teenage pregnancies, painted a distressing picture for the region's future. BIG *h*ART

addressed those issues with the conviction that young people choose their pastimes according to the choices and opportunities they are given – with the logical conclusion that an improved, vibrant living environment will ultimately alter adopted trajectories and result in a healthier community that enjoys a higher quality of life.

The project

BIG *h*ART took a first step towards creating such an environment by setting up a base in a disused marine shed on the outskirts of Burnie harbour and turning it into the 'Creative Living Centre' – the company's continuous headquarters and major workshop space for the duration of the project. Rather than using council amenities, the shed allowed for a fresh beginning, providing a blank space for the young target groups that they could make their own. The open plan areas allowed accommodation of the recently exiled skate community who were on the lookout for new premises after Burnie City Council closed the public park in favour of auspicious investment plans. Staff members of BIG *h*ART assisted the teenagers in designing and building an interim park while also providing guidance on lobbying and communication strategies for the fight to win back a public park.

The degree of generosity and acceptance that BIG *h*ART showed in this partnership resulted in a positive image for the company among the young target groups, nurturing curiosity and helping to draw in curious participants for the project. Teaming up with local service providers like Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation, No 13 Youth Centre, Community Corrections and Job Net Burnie also directed staff towards young people whom they believed would benefit from participation in the project. These prospective participants all came equipped with an array of social and personal problems which had severely affected their self-esteem and had hindered their productive involvement in the community, at times even leading them to criminal trajectories. BIG *h*ART set out to provide these teenagers with opportunities for personal and social development by way of enhancing community and civic participation, through offering training and education in the arts and arts management, as well as facilitating employment where possible.

A key defining factor in BIG *h*ART's work on LUCKY was that young people were given the opportunity to rise to occasions, being awarded responsibility in spite of their troubled records, thereby giving them the chance to achieve without the burden of a past dragging them down in the esteem of their co-workers.

Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday

In the project's first stage BIG *h*ART provided support for isolated young single mothers and their children by offering workshops in early childhood education in

which the mothers were able to learn about all aspects of the healthy development of their children. There was a major focus on facilitated play sessions in which creativity, trust and bonding between the generations was actively aided. In the belief that healthy families start with strong and self-supportive parents, BIG *h*ART ensured that the teenagers found a supportive environment in order to develop social and professional skills which form the base for strong choices regarding parenting, education and economic participation.

Jemma, one of the regularly participating mothers, testified that this approach enabled participants to redefine their identities when she remarked to an outsider: 'They treated us like equals and looked past all that other "stuff" [that everyone notices].' Finding acceptance and genuine interest in their situation and wellbeing among the BIG *h*ART crew gave the mothers a feeling of visibility, which they had lacked before.

This project provided these young mums with purpose, diversion from harmful everyday routines, and with understanding company that buffeted negative energy – all positive effects that already in themselves helped create a better living environment for the mothers and the people surrounding them. 28 young mothers took part in the early workshops which covered artistic fields like movement and drama, photography and portraiture, textile design, sewing and jewellery making, song writing and sound recording; as well as practical guidance in nutrition, cooking with and for children, early childhood resilience and games.

In order to increase bonding and trust between the young mothers and their children BIG *h*ART took care to offer a wide variety of playful, fun activities that promoted a close interaction between the families, for example toy making, sculpture slams, creating family histories, painting, cartooning, print-making, dancing, lullaby writing and storytelling sessions. The art of play was at the centre of these activities, fostering the development of imagination and resilience in participants and preparing them to engage in widening social circles. Communication skills aiding professional development were additionally focused on in separate sessions including areas like public speaking, voice training and interviewing techniques.

The mothers were further given the opportunity to apply their new skills directly by joining BIG *h*ART artists and other teenagers who were working on the *Radio Holiday* project with shack communities across the northwestern coast of Tasmania. Linking the mothers in artistic practice with a social group that shared similar experiences of alienation on the outskirts of society quickly yielded a lively dialogue from which sprang a compelling array of oral history accounts that captured a lifestyle under threat by the island's changing use of its public lands. The mothers and other marginalised teenagers conducted interviews with 150 'shackies'

from five communities and assisted BIG *h*ART artists to create a series of radio plays which were presented to great acclaim at the 10 Days on the Island Festival in 2005.

   To re-create the unique and rugged atmosphere of the shack communities, BIG *h*ART and participants framed the presentation with visual arts installations mounted in six vintage touring caravans from the 1960s and 70s – each catering to different themes and styles – housing artworks, poems, photos, films and stories, while also performing live music and sound effects from the community. Apart from touring the island as part of the annual festival, the show also played in the communities themselves and was broadcast nationally on ABC before featuring at two festivals on the mainland.

   The objective for the artistic output of *Radio Holiday* was to pilot the making and branding of a tourism product which would attract people to remote Tasmanian communities, thereby enabling these communities to sustain their idiosyncratic lifestyle in the breathtaking Tasmanian scenery in the face of the ever-resurfacing commercial investment plans. Due to its success both in process and outcome, BIG *h*ART ensured that the constructive connection between the two target groups was reinforced in a second working phase which put a stronger focus on the intergenerational aspect of the joint work and sought to create a more empathetic understanding of the needs and struggles of the groups involved. In this subsequent phase, interviews continued, this time in a more dialogical format with some of the 15 mothers assisting with the filming of five 15-minute films. These films included, among others, high-profile national film and TV stars, and later played to packed audiences at the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts in2006 in Federation Square in the heart of the metropolis and in a special outdoor screening as part of the touring circuit of the 2007 10 Days on the Island Festival.

   Aside from the deepening connection between the young mothers and the 'shackies', *Radio Holiday/Drive In Holiday* also provided social and professional engagement for other struggling teenagers. For example, it greatly aided Bruce, a young man suffering from autism spectrum disorder and greatly at odds with formal education settings, to discover for the first time in the arts a social space that was capable of accommodating his needs. In an intensive mentoring process he sponged up knowledge about editing film and audio as well as producing his own music which he then performed as part of the project's team at the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts.

   The beauty of Bruce's story and development shone in his own words when he stated:

> I now have other goals in my life, I want the world to know me not as a stupid person, but as a unique person who is capable of doing things they aren't capable of doing. I have a lot of perspective on life. I have high expectations of myself. I want to be known as someone who is capable of doing a range of different things.

Apart from the immaterial successes of LUCKY (stronger bonding between families and raising the teenagers' self-esteem and respect), participants generated a range of products which testified to their active involvement in the project, including the magazine *Scream Zine*, a website and blog, and silver 'pasta' jewellery that the young mothers presented in 2009 to the Tasmanian Premier and Cabinet in a bid to draw attention to the necessity and value of good service provision for the state's fragile families. Along with this precious tangible token of the dormant potential that can be unlocked within the next generation, the mothers entrusted federal Justice Minister Senator Chris Ellison at a panel discussion on crime prevention with a policy document that outlined their ideas for a social policy reform. The fact that the mothers had been capable of drafting such a document and of presenting it with such gracefulness in a high-profile context testifies to the outstanding success of this first year of the LUCKY project.

Already in those early stages, BIG hART took care to establish a broad base for the project's sustainable outcomes by setting up and maintaining strong networks to local governments, councils and service providers, inviting them into the project and keeping them up to date with the project's progression. This bond ensured that participants gained a positive profile not only with their immediate audiences, but also with local bodies and organisations, which in some cases led to employment opportunities for the teenagers.

A community organisation worker expressed her bafflement at the rapid change she saw in the teenagers after a relatively short time of working with BIG hART:

> When I first met with many of these young women the subject matter of their conversations was going out and getting pissed and doing other stuff that just crushed your hopes for them … now I see them and they talk about going to music festivals, arts exhibitions and their latest show. These are the most far-fetched changes in aspirations and life worlds you could imagine.

The overriding success of BIG hART's approach is also reflected in numbers. None of the constantly involved mothers re-offended, and 80 per cent of participants either joined the workforce or enrolled in further education while many also joined

other service-related groups and activities that aided in overcoming the isolation which had previously driven them towards harmful trajectories.

This is Living

In 2007, the second year of the main funding period, BIG hART expanded the intergenerational focus of the LUCKY project and established contact with a range of elderly persons who lived in regional, rural and remote parts of Tasmania. Members of this group had expressed a feeling of disconnection from the general community which had led to pronounced feelings of vulnerability and fear of becoming the victims of crime.

The idea to team them up with the young mothers in order to record their life stories was based on two underlying assumptions: first, that the direct contact between the two groups (including assumed perpetrators), would reduce the diffuse fear of the elderly, and second, that this intergenerational interaction would open lines of communication between the groups, and create a better understanding of the needs and struggles facing the other group.

Consequently, BIG hART staff arranged meetings in five nursing homes, several seniors' groups and in the houses of some of the elderly – taking the young mothers out of their usual environment in order to meet their new collaborators. In interview and photography sessions facilitated by the young mothers, over one hundred elderly people relived their most joyous, fearful, rewarding and defining moments, capturing the breadth of lives lived to the fullest.

The effect these meetings had on the teenagers was profound, reversing stereotypes long held for example, and creating a tentative bond between the generations. One young woman described the effects these workshops had on her:

> I used to think that old people smelt bad … people think they are just waiting to die. Now I know that they are lovely people with so much to tell … they're just like young people wanting to get out there. They have so much respect. Now I can't wait to be old.

After postproduction of the interviews was finished, the teenagers mounted a photographic exhibition in the Burnie Nursing Home which attracted much interest from the local community. Some of the pictures were published in the regional newspaper which made the fledgling artists and their subjects immensely proud. The profile generated from this also brought interested people in from the community for other reasons than purely the duty of care; this interest, in turn, alleviated the feelings of isolation many of the elderly had previously expressed. Nursing home staff were very pleased with the impact the project had on their residents as they seemed to improve their mental capacities through recounting

their most cherished memories and also became much more energetic and lively through the creative processes. More specifically, 29 of the elderly joined in the photography workshops to learn a new craft, 11 formed a mentoring group for the young mothers, and 14 took part in oral history workshops.

The main output of this second stage of the project was the stage production *This is Living* which saw 144 elderly people, 40 young women and 30 young men forming Tasmania's largest theatre company to explore the issue of quality of life in an ageing population. The press release for the show described it as 'a dark comedy, [which] weaves together the complexities of life and love with local histories of intimacy, photographic memorabilia, haunting music, a layered text and the kinetic art of skateboarding'.

The young mothers' role in the project started to shift at this stage from creating artistic output to mentoring the other participants on creative processes, as well as assisting in the production and presentation of the show. The interviews from the collaboration between the young mothers and the elderly served as stepping-stones to model a story of love, loss and humour onto the stage. This story was further amplified in its local grounding by the use of archival material supplied by the elderly people who performed as chorus on stage along with three professional actors and a group of skateboarders.

The skateboarders' involvement grew from first been drawn into the project through a range of IT workshops in the marine shed focusing on the technical aspects of mounting a theatre show. As the ideas for the stage production matured, a kinetic stage design was agreed to be a suitable backdrop for the show. Different ideas were played out and in the end the show was framed by local boys from the age of 12 to 19 crisscrossing the stage on their skateboards, performing elaborate tricks on the way and presenting skating as a complex art form. This particular aesthetic disrupted the widespread assumption that it was a dangerous and damaging pastime for rowdy and disrespectful kids. The focus, precision, discipline and cooperation necessary from all participants for the successful performance was strongly appreciated by the involved audiences who started to give credit to the locally known 'rogues' for their skills rather than their deficiencies, which had previously been the focus.

The media strategy followed by BIG *h*ART paid off well with an overall of 31 media stories appearing in local and state newspapers and on the web, as well as broadcasts on ABC local and national radio. Here again, the skateboarders assisted the profile of the show by tying in the promotion of the show with their successful lobbying efforts for their new public skate park, which yielded features on Triple J local radio and other commercial radio stations for the LUCKY project.

This is Living had its premiere in 2007 at the Burnie Civic Centre as part of the Burnie Shines Festival. An audience of 400 local people enjoyed four performances, including some of the elderly people who had contributed material to the show, but who had chosen not to take a further role in the production.

Despite the strenuous voyage and hurdles that these elder participants were faced with (bad acoustics and access problems), seeing their perspective on life reflected on a big stage imbued them with great pride and joy. The show was an acknowledged success, winning the Burnie City Council Award for Event of the Year. The performance then went on to perform at the Senior Citizens Week, at Wynard High School and at the Waratah Wynard Council AGM before heading off on a regional tour of Tasmania. This tour was also accompanied by a professionally designed exhibition of the portraits shown in aged care facilities, council buildings and the Wynard High School.

The overwhelmingly positive reviews of the show had a huge effect on the self-respect, confidence and self-esteem of many of the participants who saw their socio-cultural capital enhanced by something that they had dedicated themselves to.

To raise public awareness of the issues of the ageing population and their political and social repercussions, BIG hART also organised a discussion panel that brought local politicians, nursing home residents and project participants together while also ensuring that the project was presented at the annual Local Government Association managers conference. In 2008, the show underwent a further development and was invited by the 10 Days on the Island Festival in 2009 to tour the state. Funding for this tour was leveraged from the Tasmanian state government, the Tasmanian Community Fund, the Australia Council and Tasmanian Regional Arts.

Drive

Drawing young men considered to be 'at risk' into the project became a major objective throughout 2007. With the skaters joining *This is Living*, an early base of participation was established that continued to widen over the course of the year. With multimedia workshops taking place in the marine shed and the interim skate park on site, a lot of contacts evolved organically while some referrals also came from peers and local service providers that worked closely with BIG hART.

As some of the skaters were already working on a film that portrayed the local skate scene by documenting the lobbying process for the new council skate park, there was a general sentiment that work on a second film should engage with a different aspect of Tasmanian youth culture. A consensus was found in the

courageous decision to explore the issues of male adolescence in remote areas and the high rate of 'autocides'[7] on Tasmanian roads.

A core group of 36 young men spent the third year of the LUCKY project producing a 55-minute experimental documentary and a website with supplementary reference material and 69 additional short clips. The films created investigated the fine line between healthy risk taking and dangerous behaviour many of the participants were treading on a daily basis while growing up in an area offering only a very limited range of inspiring pastimes.

The proposal for this third phase of the LUCKY project was received with great interest by local and state sources who supplied additional funds for the film production. Ninety six young men who were all residents of Tasmania's north-west coast intricately linked to the issue of road trauma took part in 257 task-focused workshops which imparted skills in sound recording, film making, interviewing, storytelling and digital media production. These workshops were conducted by a wide range of artists, including film makers, skaters, beat boxers, sound artists, designers, illustrators, dancers and musicians who all added their own signature to the colourful mix that informed the final outcomes of the project's last phase.

In order to shed light on the impact the deaths of their friends had on their community and to bring their stories to the big screen, the young men interviewed over one hundred community members who had been affected by road trauma. The interviewees included mothers, police officers, counsellors, other young men, car manufacturers, emergency officers and five families who generously opened up about the turmoil they had gone through after having lost someone to suicide.

These encounters had a profound effect on the young men and challenged them to consider the wider repercussions of their own behaviour. Reflecting on issues of identity and rites of passage, many participants gained a greater sense of self and the responsibility they would have to take on as adults. The final cut of the film was launched in the second half of 2008 in Burnie to an audience of over 100 people of all ages. The film was then shown in several local screenings to an audience comprising the young men's peers, school children and members of the local communities in rural and remote northwestern Tasmania. Following 12 high-profile promotional events, it was distributed nationally, shown at festivals – including Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney film festivals – and broadcast on the ABC, receiving outstanding feedback and critical acclaim.

On the policy level, BIG hART used the presentation of the film to set conversations in motion with educational departments, policy makers, police, emergency services, health services and mental health services in a bid to develop

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7   Autocide is young men self-harming in single-occupant motor vehicle smashes.

early response patterns that would help young men at risk to deflect from their trajectories.

A special merit that made *Drive* yet another successful part of the LUCKY project was that it challenged the young men to be seen and heard, actively encouraging them to reflect on their trajectories, and to make strong choices about their futures. That many benefited from their involvement with BIG *h*ART was clearly visible in the wrap-up of the project which saw 13 young men who had formerly been at the brink of dropping out of the educational system strongly recommitting themselves, five participants returning to school, two enrolling in the army, 11 gaining casual employment in the media sector and some securing one-off employment with partnering agencies and councils.

In addition, some of the young men remained in close contact with the BIG *h*ART team and acted as regular mentors to high school students in the legacy project *Love Zombies*. This project, together with partner events like Mad Month of Making, helped to invigorate the cultural landscape of remote parts of the north-western coast of Tasmania even after BIG *h*ART's exit-strategy for LUCKY had been completed.

Case study two: GOLD

Summary

GOLD was a crime prevention and community development project conducted by BIG *h*ART in Griffith (NSW) and across the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) – Australia's largest inland river system – that ran from 2006 to 2009. The project targeted two marginalised groups: young people outside mainstream education from Griffith and farming families from rural communities across the MDB severely affected by Australia's worst drought on record. GOLD addressed issues of climate change and water management and their impact on life in rural areas. It did so by pursuing a layered approach. In the first stage of the project, young people were engaged in task-focused creative workshops building and strengthening skills in digital media, communication and filmmaking.

Participants then employed these skills in the second stage of the project to create portraits of the farming families and their daily struggle for financial, emotional and spiritual survival. The creative encounters between the target groups helped alleviate feelings of isolation and alienation, while at the same time reducing negative stereotypes on both sides. A strong media strategy ensured that the narratives gathered in the project were continuously made accessible to the greater (and national) community in the form of media reports, presentations, online content on the project's website and *GOLD-CROP* – a major travelling exhibition and installation.

The project met its three major objectives, all of which helped to divert young people at risk from criminal trajectories: (i) developing literacy as well as other personal and professional skills; (ii) re-engaging the farming families with their communities; and (iii) 'taking drought experiences back to the broader [and national] community' in order to lend a human face to the discourse on climate change and water management in Australia.

Even though these achievements were acknowledged by stakeholders and audiences alike, the project is deemed by some to have fallen short of its potential. The major criticism levelled at the project was its failure to engage in broader ways with Griffith community stakeholders. BIG *h*ART's decision to explore mental health issues among farming families in the MDB as part of the creative work created further unease with some local factions – a sentiment that contributed to a heated debate about BIG *h*ART's role in the aftermath of a farmer's suicide which concentrated on issues of ethical media practices and responsible conflict management.

The project received funding from federal and state government initiatives directed to the arts, education and community development as well as from the Westpac foundation.

Background

The Murray-Darling River Basin covers a region of over one million square kilometres. Communities involved in the project were located in Hillston, Rand, Boree Creek, Talgarno, Trundle, Mildura, Wentworth, Nangiloc, Taralga Springs, Stanthorpe and Goondiwindi as well as the regional town of Griffith. Therefore, the project covered a substantial area of the MDB, stretching from southern Queensland to western New South Wales into Victoria and all the way to the South Australian border. The MDB is Australia's most important agricultural region as it supplies 70 per cent of all water used for irrigation, making it Australia's premier 'food bowl'.

The turn of the century marked a shift in weather patterns unknown to the region since the start of recording in 1891. Due to lack of rainfall, the 20 major rivers crossing the area, including the continent's longest rivers – the Darling, the Murray and the Murrumbidgee – were carrying ever less water which resulted in a drought that lasted over ten years and affected the whole basin. The ecological impact on the delicate ecosystems has been vastly destructive and has been felt all over the region. Among the many issues facing the area in the drought, failing harvests especially contributed to a spiral of community corrosion. As Wright describes, failing harvests and extreme weather conditions result in

> [A] commensurate reduction in income and economic security, gaps in services widen, employment opportunities contract, access to and experiences of education diminish, physical and mental health deteriorates, stress increases, social cohesion weakens, and hope fails. In short, drought diminishes capacity and the human ability to thrive. It is [in] this context that social interaction becomes more easily brutalised and relationships brittle and fragmented which, research proved, was the case among the MDB farming communities. (Wright, 2011a, p. 5)

Consequently, the initial chiefly economic ramifications of the drought soon affected the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the people in the area, which found expression in increased criminal and (self-)harmful behaviour such as domestic violence, depression and substance abuse.

BIG *h*ART's GOLD project set out to address the social dimension of this ecological disaster by targeting people who have been relegated to the margins of their communities by being subject to the previously mentioned dynamic. The first stage of the project focused on young people who had been engaged in anti-social behaviour in the regional centre of Griffith in western New South Wales, and who were either already outside the formal education system or in danger of dropping out very soon. These teenagers came from problematic social backgrounds that

encumbered their relationship to the community at large – a circumstance further exacerbated by the diminishing resources allocated to education and sinking employment prospects.

Although not yet recorded in the judicial system, these teenagers were subject to extensive negative local media coverage and deemed at risk of committing to harmful trajectories. In a country town environment in which the economic and social base had been subject to fast-paced change, but values and attitudes were still being modelled on conservative beliefs of stability and a 'fair go' for everyone diligent and ambitious enough, these young people expressed a strong sense of alienation and isolation from the mainstream community.

The same sentiment of abandonment was expressed by the rural farming families who were among the ones hardest hit by the drought. With their financial future in jeopardy, water allocation dividing the farming communities, and the political debate largely focusing on statistics and abstract models, the families suddenly found themselves isolated in the midst of a fiery debate that seemed to have forgotten about its human dimension. One farmer poignantly expressed this sentiment when he exclaimed: 'Remember us? We grow your food.'

Apart from increasing the urban–regional divide in the minds of the farmers affected and generating negative assessments of townspeople, the frustration progressively vented in the form of violence, substance abuse and mental health issues in the private family circles.

The project

As a company committed to promoting social justice, BIG *h*ART works on the premise that inclusive social structures depend on functioning ecological systems in order to thrive. Climate change and resulting water shortages threaten this balance on an international, long-term scale. The idea to create a project addressing those issues, therefore, evolved organically from the company's mission statement.

In 2003 BIG *h*ART started researching the international commodification of water as the future's most precious resource and the associated challenges for Australia. Conversations were begun in different forums that helped to shape the focus of the future project. In 2004 members of the Griffith City Council followed up on the ideas raised and encouraged BIG *h*ART to conduct the prospective project in their town.

Upon being granted funding under the Attorney General's National Crime Prevention Programme and receiving additional grants from the Australia Council for the Arts and the Westpac Foundation, the project officially launched in July 2006. Chris Saunders, creative producer of BIG *h*ART's then recently completed acclaimed *Northcott Narratives* project in Sydney, joined the team and began to

establish contacts with local service providers and institutions. However, an early setback was caused by a media report that disclosed the amount of funding BIG *h*ART was able to secure for its fledgling project. In a town that struggled to maintain its cultural infrastructure many local arts and social workers felt uneasy about an 'outsider' company taking up what was perceived locally to be such a large part of available resources.

This sentiment continued to be a strong undercurrent in the respective communities of Griffith throughout the project and prevented some partnerships from evolving while indirectly informing others. The effects of this negative perception were partly mitigated by the establishment of a 'reference group' in Griffith comprising representatives of six local and national service providers which met regularly to advise on the project's strategies and networking possibilities. Over the course of the project, BIG *h*ART was consequently able to form partnerships with 62 organisations and institutions, 19 of which committed in a formal way to support the project, with 28 additional individual supporters coming on board.

Despite the fragile connection with established local stakeholders, service providers in Griffith referred a total of 43 young people who showed an active interest in the project – 22 of those formed a core group that stayed involved throughout the three years. Participants were generally between 15 and 19 years old and had attracted the attention of social workers because of their repeated anti-social behaviour (drug abuse and dealing, loitering and minor cases of assault), and clearly struggled with continuous involvement in formal education.

The project employed an early intervention strategy to keep those teenagers out of the judicial system by distracting them from their adopted trajectories, and involving them in informal educational settings which were designed to foster social and professional skills. These settings involved task-focused creative workshops throughout the project that used the teenagers' interest in music, digital media, film and photography to impart practical skills, while also developing social competencies such as communication skills, empathy and discipline.

All in all over 300 creative workshops were conducted from 2006 to 2009 yielding an enormous amount of material, i.e. 33 short films, 22 recorded songs, 1500 curated photographs, 60 recorded interviews comprising 95 hours of exchange between the participants of the project, and 39 stories published online on the project's interactive website.

The creative workshops started in Griffith in March 2006. Music and song writing were key to engaging the first participants. Facilitated song-writing sessions with BIG *h*ART artists provided a creative outlet for the participants, allowing them to tap into their creative potential without the pressure to jump right into confrontational dialogues. The workshop program was soon expanded, first by

photography sessions in town areas chosen by the participants, and then second by film shoots in Griffith. In March 2007 BIG hART decided to move its headquarters from the Griffith Regional Theatre to a shopfront office on the main street, which resulted in an increased public profile for GOLD as people found it easier to cross the threshold into art practice (a shopfront in this case), without having to enter what was for them a culturally alien institution (the theatre).

Meanwhile, the team actively sought to establish contacts with farming families in the basin – on the one hand, by working with consultants in Griffith and in the communities themselves, on the other hand by attending various community events such as an ABC Radio National broadcast in Condobolin, 230 km north of Griffith. It was in this town where the Patton family joined the project after being approached by members of the BIG hART team. Despite the tough situation on their farms, many farmers were enticed by the idea of supporting the teenagers in their bid to take on responsibility for their personal development.

Over the course of the project, 33 farming families from across the MDB were thus involved in the project, with 13 regularly contributing to the creative output. Imparting their experiences and stories to an interested audience was seen as a welcome opportunity to engage in *exchanges* that would help to raise awareness of the issues they were facing. From 2006 to 2009, these farming families repeatedly invited the team and participants onto their farms, opening up the possibility of starting the second stage of the project. This second stage saw the young Griffith teenagers chartering unfamiliar territory, being invited as guests onto the rural, isolated properties and testing their newly developed creative skills on curious yet diffident outsiders.

With the collaboration between farming families and the urban teenagers as the central focus of the project, and with partnerships in Griffith largely not evolving, BIG hART decided to close the shopfront office in Griffith in early 2009. This allowed more resources to be allocated to the visits on rural properties, yet also caused a disengagement of some of the teenagers who were unable to participate in the road trips and who consequently felt abandoned by BIG hART.

The task of profiling the farming families required the young people to decentre and separate from their own backgrounds, to open their minds to a different lifestyle, and develop empathy towards other members of the community. In gently shifting the project's focus to recording the oral history and experience of the farming families, the major role of the teenagers turned from one of self-expression to one of facilitating expression in others – a task that allowed them to experience themselves as productive artists positively contributing to a reinvigoration of communal ties.

The BIG *h*ART team actively reinforced this new self-image by enabling the presentation of the project in various contexts spanning from 9 conferences and 15 community events across the MDB to 12 exhibitions (including a constant travelling work-in-progress version of *GOLD-CROP*) in a range of venues, including the Griffith Regional Arts Gallery (NSW), an old restaurant on Mildura's main street (Victoria), an oval in Talgarno (Victoria), a dry dam in Boree Creek (NSW), the Adelaide Performing Arts Market, Sydney's Carriageworks, the Trundle showground (NSW) and mobile, open-air film screenings on the streets of Griffith. In addition, partnerships with outside institutions enabled selected young project participants to second on the ABC show *The Chaser* and to take part in the Newcastle National Young Writers' Festival, providing them with valuable professional experience and a budding profile in the arts sector.

The ongoing public presentation of the work in urban and regional settings throughout the project generated audiences of about 6200 people, raising awareness of the dire situation farmers found themselves in on Australia's dried up land. To increase engagement across the region, BIG *h*ART also experimented with different engagement tools, such as a photographic competition in 2009.

Building on their tentative relationship, the farmers and teenagers managed to establish a strong basis of trust for their collaboration that allowed the personal cost of the drought to be evocatively foregrounded in the material created. The farmers demonstrated a high willingness to open up about the emotional impacts the drought had on their family life and mental state. A lot of the interviews subsequently revealed that deteriorating capacities to cope with problems on a mental level affected many of the farming families. However, the common behaviour pattern saw families isolating themselves from their communities as they associated the issue with shame and weakness, something that if openly acknowledged would overstretch their capacities for survival.

It was due to this circumstance that BIG *h*ART deliberately decided to address issues of mental health as one of the key concerns of the GOLD project in order to support and contribute to these communities ripped apart by the drought. This decision caused a great deal of controversy in the immediate environment of the project. Concerned community stakeholders challenged the arts company's qualifications to address those issues. BIG *h*ART reacted proactively to these contentions by seeking help from related service providers and schooling staff in first aid mental health provision.

Nevertheless, some community liaison partners continued to bar the team from contacting affected families in their areas. One of these families were the Mitchells from Talgarno who had joined the GOLD project in June 2007. A concerned gatekeeper sought to prevent their further involvement by blocking any

approaches from BIG *h*ART. As a response, and in line with the company's belief that changes within communities cannot be effected without a broad local consensus, BIG *h*ART respected the gatekeeper's viewpoint and refrained from contacting the Mitchells in the ensuing 12-month period.

Working with other families and perceiving the many positive effects of their creative engagement, however, prompted BIG *h*ART to reconsider its adopted stance. In December 2008 the team re-engaged with the Mitchell family who gladly embraced the project again and quickly became one of its driving forces. With more and more stories of hardship from dedicated farmers surfacing across the MDB, formerly isolated families started to reconnect with each other, meeting regularly, venting their frustration in understanding company and finding new strength therein. By way of example, one Queensland farmer expressed his relief in feeling freer to communicate with his peers, stating to the GOLD team: 'All my friends used to talk about the farm or whatever like that. Now we talk about how high a dose of depression tablets you are on. And we're all on depression tablets.'

A further poignant example was that of Ken Mitchell. A farmer by heart, Ken was one of the project's participants who most openly disclosed his problems in coping with his farm's impending financial ruin and displayed a kind generosity in supporting the teenagers' creative endeavours. However, despite the strength and reconnection his attitude had brought back to his family, Ken Mitchell fell prey to his fragile mental state and committed suicide in September 2009. His death was devastating to everyone around him as it not only constituted the loss of a dearly beloved person, but also humanised and clearly marked the toll depression and mental health issues were having on the farming community at large.

These sentiments strongly informed the final presentation of the *GOLD-CROP* exhibition in November 2009 at Sydney's Carriageworks which was dedicated to the memory of Ken and where 31 farmers from 12 families and 7 of the Griffith teenagers celebrated his legacy in an emotional and personal vernissage. The exhibition was mounted on three tonnes of earth from the MDB on which 600 metres of fencing wire held 1200 images offering a window into the in the MDB.

Twenty-five films created in the project invited audiences to step into the farmers' worlds and to appreciate their struggle and persistence on lands that over the last years had yielded only a fraction of the crops necessary to sustain a healthy nation. As a reminder of the quality of life at stake, the opening's catering exclusively featured local produce from the MDB supplied by the farming families. The exhibition was critically acclaimed and received outstanding reviews in local and national media that heightened the public awareness of the farmers' strife and contributed to the project's very successful media strategy.

Strong involvement with the media, however, caused yet another heated debate revolving around the GOLD project. In mid-2009 the Mitchell family as key participants in the project had allowed representatives of the ABC to feature them strongly in a portrait of GOLD for the ABC's current affairs program the *7.30 Report* due to air later in the year. After Ken's suicide, the ethical implications of making public the family's grief and the danger of exploiting it for the sake of ratings and public profile became a contentious topic among people in the MDB. BIG *h*ART's role in encouraging a public discussion on those issues was interpreted by some as irresponsible and hypocritical.

The company defended itself strongly against those accusations and continued to support the Mitchell family in the aftermath of the tragedy. The family eventually decided to approve the broadcast. The report was watched by 159,000 people on national television in December 2009. The report sparked a discussion of mental health support services in remote areas and contributed to the formation of self-help groups in the MDB, thereby creating an important legacy for the project.

As core to the project, the Griffith teenagers benefited strongly from their involvement in the project, with seven members of the core group returning to mainstream education, one gaining admission to TAFE in Melbourne, 10 gaining sustainable employment, and most pursuing their own artistic projects, including writing novels and producing community radio shows.

Case study three: NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI

Summary

NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI was a community development and language maintenance project conducted by BIG *h*ART with Indigenous people in various locations across the Anangu, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara[8] (APY) Lands in central Australia. The project officially ran from 2006 to 2009, and spin-off projects and related performances created a strong legacy far beyond this narrow timeline. The project has been deemed highly successful by participants, evaluating bodies, critics and audiences alike. NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI's main objective was to effect a sustained positive change in various disadvantaged, struggling Indigenous communities by offering local individuals opportunities to engage with their cultural capital in arts-based practice. Following up on the idea of creating a theatre show on Pitjantjatjara history and culture, consultation with community members brought forth five major objectives for the project:

- creating beautiful art in various art forms
- maintenance of the Pitjantjatjara language
- preservation of cultural knowledge
- improvement of general literacy (defined as both the ability to read and write as well as the ability to engage in a culturally meaningful manner with new media and modern technology)
- crime prevention by promoting social cohesion.

With these aims in mind, many workshops in different art forms were conducted, and the products presented to diverse local and national audiences. By engaging with their personal history and the Pitjantjatjara language, young project participants were able to reconnect creatively with their heritage and build positive, strong identities based on experiences of assertion, inclusion, acknowledgement and affirmation. For the older participants, the project provided a platform from which to share stories and cultural practices with the next generation. The generous attitude and fortitude of these elders in sharing the painful as well as the joyous moments of their history, and also conjointly performing their culture to non-Indigenous audiences, allowed NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI to tap deeply into the Australian reconciliation process. This performative and inclusive process both critically probed, as well as re-imagined, it. Through its acclaimed theatre performance NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI was able to reach broad and varied audiences, generating a huge interest in the overall work of the project, which in turn, supported the push for a change in federal Indigenous language policy.

The project received funding and support from a range of foundations, government bodies, corporations, businesses and institutions.

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8   Three Indigenous groups with strong ancestral ties to the land.

Background

BIG *h*ART's complex approach to community development was the blueprint for the design of the NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI project. The seeds from which the project grew were planted in the late 1990s in the artistic collaboration between actor Trevor Jamieson and writer Scott Rankin. Jamieson, a Pitjantjatjara-Spinifex man from south-western Australia, wanted to tell the story of his family, his people, their history and culture which he saw as being in danger of rapidly disintegrating and sliding into the vortex of Western civilisation. After initial relatively unsuccessful theatrical experiments, the artistic collaboration linked up with first-time producer Alex Kelly, gained traction, and expanded into the multilayered community experiment that NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI would ultimately become. Through this process the project came to address the wider issues of language loss and cultural disintegration across the APY Lands in a genuinely intercultural setting.

The story of the Jamieson family lies at the heart of the celebrated *NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI* stage production. The Jamieson family history comprises in a nutshell the challenges Indigenous people of Australia, and especially of the APY Lands, have faced in post–World War II Australia. This story has resonated powerfully with the communities that joined the project and has provided a strong link of identification, helping boost a renaissance of Pitjantjatjara culture and language across the involved communities.

The traditional homelands of the Spinifex people lie in southwestern Australia but, as with many Indigenous peoples in Australia, their history is one of removal and fracturing. Until the 1950s, this language group lived uninhibited by Western influence in the remote and arid parts of the Great Victoria Desert. After World War II, however, the Australian government allowed the British military to conduct nuclear testing in those regions. This decision necessitated the forced removal of the Indigenous population who had forged deep spiritual connections to this particular stretch of land over thousands of years.

Tragically, their removal was marked by communication breakdowns and ill-informed infrastructural decisions, which ultimately led to many Indigenous people being exposed to radiation set free by the nine major atomic bombs detonated in the area between 1953 and 1965; the detonation of these atomic bombs making the area unsuitable for human habitation for millennia to come. Asked about their recollections of that time, traditional owners and residents of the APY Lands speak of the 'black mist' that travelled across the land and caused blindness, cancer and other radiation-induced illnesses.

The displacement and suffering had immense effects on the social structure and emotional wellbeing of the people. For example, the kinship structure so critical

to Indigenous family life was broken up as people were settled in various locations in central and western Australia (such as Ernabella, Docker River, Amata, Kiwikurra and Cundalee) hundreds of kilometres away from their homelands. People were no longer able to follow their law and their long-established ways of life. This also meant that links to country, *Ngura*, integral to the Indigenous identity and cosmology, and determining for example a holistic placement in the world, were broken.

In addition to being deprived of the basis of their identity, people were confronted with a radically new social and economic order marked by alien values and ethics, which induced further stress. These language groups and others like them have strived to integrate these two often opposing systems by adopting some and rejecting other elements of the two cultures. In a challenging way, and symptomatic of cultural match and mismatch, this delicate process has been further situated in an asymmetrical struggle with white authorities, who for the most part framed Indigenous cultures as primitive and uncivilised. This has meant that an affirming and enduring space for practising, celebrating and transmitting Indigenous cultural heritage had been barred, and people shamed for their cultural ties. In addition, the merits of white culture were vigorously promoted among the dispersed population.

Practising and passing on culture in a surrogate context proved difficult and often resulted in discriminatory sanctions that led people to abandon their culture. Simultaneously, integration into the Australian mainstream did not take place. Even with the advent of affirmative government policies, attempts to bridge the divide between Western and Indigenous cultures have failed repeatedly, resulting in a lot of frustration, deep-seated mistrust, and a range of other deleterious outcomes.

Consequently, most Indigenous people have been struggling to adopt a lifestyle that allows them to create meaningful existences in this culturally divided space. Economic hardship, paucity of opportunities, a generally low level of formal education, increasing crime rates, substance abuse, increasing domestic violence, and a substantial loss of traditional cultural knowledge are issues facing today's Indigenous communities on the APY Lands and other parts of Australia.

The project
Alex Kelly, Trevor Jamieson and BIG *h*ART co-founder Scott Rankin came to the APY Lands to unearth material for a major theatre show about the Jamieson family and their history. They consulted with community elders and the Jamiesons' extended family about cultural protocols and gathered vivid first-hand accounts of the events and people they had come to learn about.

This emotional journey of discovery forged strong ties between the artists and the local communities. In 2002 the play *Career Highlights of the Mamu* represented the first stage in the theatrical exploration of the family's story. Alex Kelly's passionate advocacy for social change, and the capacity of the creative team to provide the foundation on which to build the fledgling project, eventually lay the ground for a second major – and successful – stage production. In 2005 Kelly moved to Alice Springs and spent the ensuing 18 months establishing further contacts with community members, organisations and institutions across the APY Lands.

The major objective of this first stage was to meet locals, listen to their stories and first-hand accounts of issues facing their communities, and learn about local ideas on how to tackle those problems. This time-intensive approach was adopted in order to create a project that could generate a high level of communal ownership, empower the people to reflect on and shape their own communities, and build trust as a basis of collaboration.

The philosophy informing this approach holds that solutions to community problems must start with the affected people and that strategies can only work if the locals' support is guaranteed. A defining and novel feature of the project in regards to community development methodology was that Pitjantjatjara culture and language largely informed the way people were working and interacting with each other. This generated a groundswell of support and engagement in the communities. By emphasising the Pitjantjatjara language in that way, the objective of language maintenance was organically foregrounded while at the same time creating a new space for genuine intercultural collaboration.

This powerful process allowed for learning opportunities on various levels, with not only young people broadening their linguistic repertoire, but also non-Indigenous workers being encouraged to adapt flexibly to the foreign cultural setting, and reflect on the practice of cultural diversity. This meant that all participants were required to navigate the pitfalls of intercultural exchange. Thus, not only did the cultural artefacts created over the course of the project (film, music, photography, digital media and theatre) reflect Pitjantjatjara culture, but the process of creation itself was steeped in Indigenous values. It was this important principle that generated the most important legacy of the project, that is, people connecting with their culture in a new way, building strong identities, and asserting themselves flexibly and successfully in a multicultural context.

The phrase 'ngapartji ngapartji' itself is informing. Glossed as 'I give you something. You give me something', it denotes a reciprocal exchange of gifts that create a social framework of mutual obligations. In contrast to Western ideas of trade, here the defining element of exchange is not the material value of the objects

and services traded, but the fact that trading itself establishes bonds that link people to each other – not only in a material way, but also socially, emotionally and spiritually. Consequently, it is deferral of immediate gratification, not a quid pro quo situation that is sought. Embracing such cultural values had a range of repercussions for the design of the project and required a lot of negotiation and learning from artists and participants.

At the heart of the issues people repeatedly identified in the consultations between community and BIG *h*ART lay two causes. First, the alienation between generations, and second, the imminent loss of the Pitjantjatjara language and culture. Since a culture depends on the language it has grown from and evolved with, the power to transmit and preserve that same culture lies with the speakers of that language. Arising from the historical and cultural background as outlined above, loss of traditional culture has been rampant over the years and the number of fluent Pitjantjatjara speakers, especially among the young, has been dwindling.

Milyika (Allison) Carroll voiced her concern to a BIG *h*ART artist when she stated: 'These days children do not understand complex words. These days they are only speaking really basic Pitjantjatjara.' The issue of language loss is not confined to the APY Lands alone, but is a sad feature of most Indigenous communities with Australia, which are experiencing the world's most rapid loss of Indigenous languages since the onset of colonisation.

As the project's touchstone, language maintenance served as a social glue for the local communities in need of a boost in intergenerational relations, between old people who are full of cultural knowledge but marked by the colonial wounds, and a young generation not able to relate to this heritage and aggressively striving for a place in a Western world; a world that keeps failing to accommodate them as productive citizens.

One of the challenges for the BIG *h*ART workers and community members was to find a suitable framework that would capture the imagination of both old and young, and bring them together in a meaningful exchange. The development of a second main stage theatre production taking place in interaction with the remote South Australian community of Ernabella provided a first possible field of interaction. To allow for a more targeted approach to language maintenance, an integrated online language course based on short film clips was developed.

The technological aspect and fun of creating film and digital media appealed to a large number of young people whilst elders were able to pass on language and cultural knowledge in a setting which fostered respect for their wealth of experience. In a series of pilot workshops, artists aligned with BIG *h*ART developed six short film clips on country with a group of youngsters from town camps and remote communities, while elders were providing and advising on the content of the

language lessons. Over the course of the project, this kind of working environment fostered **mutual learning** that allowed participants to experience themselves and others as creative and productive co-workers as well as helping reduce the alienation between the generations. The tangible outcome in the form of film clips put Pitjantjatjara culture on the map of communal life again and was received by the wider community with great vigour.

The two pillars of the project, the Pitjantjatjara language course and the performance piece, kept informing each other throughout the project in order to generate the strongest possible impact towards achieving the project's goals. As a result, the theatre show incorporated many elements of Pitjantjatjara language teaching. This hybrid structure, along with the alacrity and generosity with which the story was offered to non-Indigenous audiences, affected many of its viewers deeply. The power of this emotional connection also meant that, in turn, the interest of various festival directors was sparked. These directors not only supported the presentation of *NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI* in various venues because of its high production values and aesthetics, but also because it embodied a radically new approach to reconciliation within the Australian nation. The increasingly high public profile of the show constituted a vital asset to the project as it resulted in more people showing an active interest in the project (participants, online learners as well as future partners and staff), and enhanced media coverage.

In September 2004 a first official showing of a pilot language lesson produced by Kelly as a creative producer in Coober Pedy was a huge success and motivated more people to join the then budding project. In blocks of three months, workshops were held on country with youth from town camps[9] and remote communities, resulting in a plethora of film material that was written, planned, created and edited by young people from the age of 5 to 18. Many of the films were both uploaded onto the *ninti* website (launched in April 2006) and published on DVD compilations which were distributed by the young people across their communities. BIG *h*ART further assisted these young people to organise community film nights that generated publicity and brought the generations together in informal ways that helped foster reconnection of communal ties.

Especial care was taken by BIG *h*ART to afford these young people as much exposure for their artworks as possible to enhance the experience of appreciation and to promote communication and reflection. For example, a film created by a girl from Docker River exploring the damaging effects of petrol sniffing was screened at

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9   Town camps are communities of mostly Indigenous people situated within or adjacent to an urban area. These camps are usually poorly serviced by authorities, and are often used by people moving between remote and urban centres in order to access health care and other services.

the Remote Film Fest 07 in Alice Springs as well as at a media conference in Sydney. Participants presented the project and their works at conferences and festivals on a regular basis, while a strong media strategy ensured regular coverage on local and national level.

As BIG hART aspires to offer a broad range of opportunities in the arts, workshops were also conducted in other disciplines such as dance, photography, digital storytelling and music. As music has a strong history in the APY Lands, these workshops were especially popular with participant numbers ranging from 50 to 100+ each round. Activities included song writing, performing, voice training, recording and sampling. As well as bringing artists to remote communities to conduct those workshops, BIG hART also partnered with the record label Tracks of the Desert to record and publish project material, e.g. the *Ngurakutu Ara* CD in Pukatja with proceeds going towards purchasing musical equipment for the community.

All songs and other materials recorded in the project have been made available to the communities by way of portable storage media and by uploading material onto publicly accessible computers. In addition, BIG hART has worked closely with the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy and Research of the Australian National University (ANU) which published project material online on its 'Youth Learning' page.[10]

This collaboration was greatly assisted by the work of ANU researchers Dr Inge Kral and Jerry Schwab who advised on the literacy elements of the project and conducted their three-year study 'Lifespan Learning and Literacy in Remote Indigenous Communities 2007–10' in conjunction with the project. Improvement of literacy in both Pitjantjatjara and English was a strong element of the project, but was not especially foregrounded in the workshops themselves.

As many participants had had negative experiences with formal education settings and as shame is a strong inhibitor to participation in Indigenous communities, literacy was playfully integrated into the general workshop activities and in this way project participants were 'trained on the job'. This form of cultural learning tied in with the asset-based approach BIG hART adopted for the project in that the task focus was laid on the story while literacy skills were imparted by way of accessing this story and supporting the individuals in translating it into art. The benefits of this method were clearly measurable in the comparative assessments made at different stages in the project.

The partnership with leading experts on literacy and language development (both on the ground and across Australia) provided an ideal starting point for the

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10   http://caepr.anu.edu.au/projects/Youth-and-Learning

development of the language policy strategy that formed one part of the project's legacy. With the successful launch of the project, over 300 subscribers, numerous clicks to the online language course and extensive publicity, BIG *h*ART was in a strong position to push for a change in federal language policy. Together with representatives of other organisations in the field of Indigenous language maintenance, Alex Kelly succeeded in lobbying politicians to start work on an action plan designed to combat language loss across Australia. This eventually prompted the release of the Commonwealth government's strategy paper *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach* in August 2009.

Alongside the focus on creative workshops, website development and literacy, the creation of the second main stage theatre production was a constant tier of the project. This production proved to be extremely successful and generated immense interest in the project well beyond the perimeters of stakeholders in Indigenous affairs. The story about the Jamieson family remained a strong element of this show. However, the project made this particular story universal by positioning it in the larger cultural context of the sufferings of various groups affected by World War II bombings (including British soldiers and Japanese civilians). In this way, *NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI* gently invited audiences each night to consider issues of reconciliation and healing within the Australian nation. As a catalyst, the show incorporated playful, participatory language lessons, directing attention to the endangered status of Australia's languages and most people's ignorance of them.

Creative developments were organised in the remote community of Ernabella to give people the chance to observe working processes and participate in various capacities on and off stage. Taking on roles as performers or assisting technicians greatly expanded participants' professional and personal skills. This form of involvement was then accredited and acknowledged by an invitation to join the multiple tours of the production to national festivals as paid members of the performance/production team. The recognition of participants' contributions boosted their confidence, strengthened intergenerational relations, broadened horizons and opened up career paths that were formerly deemed unattainable by most participants. The national recognition and the sense that audiences were eager and desperate to know and understand more about Indigenous culture and history was a very important, albeit at times tiring and bewildering, experience for the cast members.

The stage production *NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI* received broad critical acclaim, was seen by over 30,000 people, won several awards and was subject to substantial media coverage. However, the most significant moment in the play's production history remains for most people involved the show's involvement in the sixtieth anniversary of Ernabella Arts in September 2008. After long sojourns into

various parts of Australia, the show was brought back to its country of origin and the people it represented, and subjected to the community's scrutiny. The adventurous endeavour to stage a show designed for main stage venues in an open-air creek bed setting and the negotiation processes with community elders regarding cultural protocols are the subjects of the ABC-funded documentary *Nothing Rhymes with Ngapartji* broadcast nationally in June 2010.

The documentary forms part of a memory basket that BIG *h*ART created in collaboration with project participants documenting achievements, outcomes and challenges encountered over the years. Other physical legacies of the project include the spin-off performance *Nyuntu Ngali*, workshopped in Ernabella in early 2009 before completing seasons at the Adelaide Festival Theatre (November 2009), the Australian Performing Arts Market (February 2010) and the Sydney Theatre Company (May 2010).

As a further project outcome, BIG *h*ART's Namatjira project was also incepted during NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI's lifetime as Elton Wirri (artist and project participant) provided the link to the Hermannsburg community – now recognised as the home of an important Aboriginal art movement – and helped promote BIG *h*ART as a company of credence among elders. To keep the focus on Indigenous language maintenance at the forefront of federal policy decisions, the *NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI* stage production was revived on a smaller scale for a winter season at the Canberra Theatre Centre in July 2012.

It was the non-physical legacies of the project, however, that constitute its most significant achievements. These achievements include a tangible reinvigoration of Indigenous culture and Pitjantjatjara language across the APY Lands, strengthened community ties, the formation of strong affirmative identities among local people, and bringing to Australian eyes a 'good news story' from a place habitually framed as dismal and depressing.

8   Domains of change

Peter Wright

One important element of the research was to highlight areas where we might usefully look for evidence of change. We are also mindful that evidence of change is also a tension within arts-based work or any form of development. It has been our experience, for example, that what constitutes evidence varies; there is a current fetish for metrification, and 'proof' of change in and of itself means very little. Our own preference is to be better able to answer: What works for whom? In what ways, and circumstances? And for whose benefit? (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This line of thinking informs this section of the report.

Through the research we have been able to describe seven domains of change. We have intentionally not named these 'indicators' as the term is often used in a reductive way and indicates a point to be reached. This mechanistic logic implies a form of step-wise or lockstep development – and hence, an end to meet in itself – that makes no sense in participatory arts practice where the social, relational and aesthetic meet. What is clear to us is that disaggregation of practice into variables, to use the formal language of monitoring and evaluation, is be blind to the complicated nature of human change and development, and the ecology of arts practice that is both the field in which change sits and the palette of possibilities that facilitate it. In participatory arts practice change is both the means and the ends where benefits accrue.

Rather we have used the language of 'domains' of change. A domain follows a different logic that we think of as a broad area, rather than a point, recognising that participants both enter and leave projects at different points. A domain of change, as it is used in the development field (Dart & Davies, 2003), is rather a 'place to look', or even a signpost pointing the way. This means that, if change is to occur through project involvement, then it could be apparent across any one of the domains or combinations of these. These domains are purposefully broad as it's possible that individuals experience them differently. Nevertheless domains serve as useful conceptual organisers when looking at BIG *h*ART's work.

Key to this understanding is that these domains are not mutually exclusive, and that they exist in association with each other. For example, as young people

develop agency, they are more likely to experience wellbeing and move towards work of meaning and value. What the research reveals is that there are many paths to change and these domains might be necessary but not necessarily sufficient for change.

Each domain of change is now described in turn and follows a similar format, an introduction followed by the attributes and dimensions of each. Each domain is illustrated by a narrative portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997), and participants' observations and comments that provide evidence for change based on their own lived experience. Then follows the productive conditions we have been able to identify in order for change to be **informed**, **enacted** and **sustained**.

These illustrative portraits were distilled from in-depth interviews conducted with participants and are rendered through their words. While each portrait serves to animate a domain and humanise it, you will also see the way that each also references other domains, in this way revealing the interconnected nature of 'impact' and the complex layers of interconnection that exists. This notion of layers of interconnection is important for understanding BIG *h*ART's (and others') work as there is an ecology of practice that scaffolds young peoples' development, recognising different entry and exit points, and positions and practices that blur life's boundaries in dispersed and dynamic ways.

Enhancing health and wellbeing through networks and relationships

Christina Davies

Introduction

This domain examines the psychosocial processes that need to be generated to positively influence an individual's thoughts and resulting behaviours. The focus is on understanding how participants develop psychologically as they interact in their BIG *h*ART social environment. Psychosocial processes help people become more mentally healthy via self-expression, perspective (the comparison of self to others and therefore seeing things differently), self-determination (the option to choose what they would like to do rather than being told) and building a sense of efficacy, confidence, positive self-image, resilience and belonging. Of interest is the unique manner in which BIG *h*ART is able to work with participants, artists, funders and the community to enhance the psychosocial wellbeing of people involved in its projects. Also of significance is the way BIG *h*ART projects show participants there are options and opportunities available to them by strengthening their capabilities and capacities. In addition, BIG *h*ART makes participants feel secure by creating friendly and safe places to work, with people who care about participant wellbeing, who don't judge and will help participants achieve.

Throughout this study, participants, artists, community members and funders acknowledged the benefits of engaging in projects such as LUCKY, NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI and GOLD. Of particular importance to psychosocial health was the way participants moved from a situation of disconnection to community re-connection by expanding their network of friends and acquaintances, creating positive peer relationships, interacting with artist and community mentors, participating more fully in their community and 'escaping their everyday lives'. According to participants, BIG *h*ART had a positive impact on their life by increasing their:

- confidence
- self-esteem/self-worth
- self-image/self-pride
- hope for the future
- motivation.

Participants also shared that their participation in a BIG *h*ART project led to feelings of:

- happiness
- achievement
- enjoyment
- excitement
- enthusiasm
- belonging
- acceptance
- empowerment.

Each of these were key to participants' psychosocial and emotional development.

In addition, BIG *h*ART projects improved participants' knowledge and skills (especially multi-literacy skills), reduced feelings of isolation and reinforced to participants that they were important. The positive impact of BIG *h*ART projects can be more fully understood through the narrative of Kylie.[11] The narrative is in Kylie's words, from her point of view, and shows how BIG *h*ART's LUCKY project made a difference to her life and the lives of others.

Introducing Kylie
Kylie lives in Tasmania. She is in her twenties and is a mother of three. Kylie started off as a BIG *h*ART participant, but as the project evolved and her confidence grew she went on to help the project team with recruitment, project tasks, cleaning and childcare. Kylie provides a unique perspective into project impact as both a participant and then subsequently as a project worker. She was able to talk about changes she experienced as well as changes she observed in others. This is Kylie's story.

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11   All names used in these portraits are pseudonyms.

The key thing is social connections for those who don't reach out

It was great for socialising for them who didn't get out. It was great for the kids … we made friends. There was a real thing about connecting and sharing our stories. We did jewellery making. I still make jewellery now. I make all my own. The project let parents know that there is things out there for them. They can have opportunities even though they have kids. Like we did our Tourism Certificate through that, everyone got a certificate so now you can be the guide on tour busses and things like that with that qualification. It gave them a qualification and just knowing that you can do something.

One of the people that has really changed is Michelle. She now does a full-time course at TAFE to do aged care. She's doing her second year of that. This is someone who didn't do anything, who has never done anything in her life at all. It's [the project] got her out there and doing something. I think my public speaking improved cause I always got dobbed in to do the speaking. Now I work in a call centre and have to talk to people even more. I do tech support for computers. Which can be fun. We do Apple computers and I had never used one before so it was four weeks training and exams every week.

As a young mum you can feel alone and isolated, looking for help, especially those mums who have always been at home. It's a place you could go and socialise that didn't cost us anything. Sewing as well. I know Kim now sews flat out. We did a big sewing thing. Kim made a blanket for her son that she was really proud of. The hard thing with Kim is that she has never been good at anything and everyone has always put her down for it. But now she knows she can do stuff which is just a big confidence builder as well. The difference for her was the fact that someone was willing to give her a go and to help her to try to do it. Kim had changed so much. Her confidence is heaps better. She is willing to get out there and try to do stuff and not let anyone tell her that she can't. Knowing there are people that care about her and are willing to give her a go and help her has been the biggest thing for her. She's trying to get her driver's licence at the moment. She is continuing to try.

We did a thing where we shared recipes, like on the LUCKY website where you could do it from home or you could use the computer there. For *This is Living* we interviewed the older people in the community for background stories and things like that. To go up to strangers and talk to them was a massive thing for some people. I did a lot of the typing up of the interviews and listening to them and typing them up was amazing, listening to the stories … We thought we had it bad but it was nowhere near as bad as the stories that I heard. Jewellery, sewing, writing, expressing our feelings through the writing, and not being afraid to express ourselves and have other people see it. Mostly through Facebook at lot of us still communicate heaps. Making new friends was important. We keep up to date with what each other is doing, what's going on, things like that. The key thing is social connections for those who don't reach out to have been involved in something where they have had that chance to reach out and know there are people there who are going to listen and not judge what they are saying.

Psychosocial attributes

Kylie's portrait reveals a great deal about the value of building the psychosocial wellbeing of marginalised and disconnected youth through the arts. As mentioned previously, Kylie's story highlights the importance of creating places where young people feel welcome, safe and respected. Kylie's narrative highlights key attributes that help young people in the process of positive mental health and social connection, for example:

1. Listening and avoiding judgment: I am not alone

> 'for those who don't reach out to have been involved in something where they have had that chance to reach out and know there are people there who are going to listen and not judge what they are saying.'

2. Encouraging self-expression, peer support and communication

> 'expressing our feelings through the writing, and not being afraid to express ourselves and have other people see it. Mostly through Facebook at lot of us still communicate heaps. Making new friends was important. We keep up to date with what each other is doing, what's going on, things like that.'

3. Creating caring, helpful spaces: building confidence

> 'The difference for her [Kim] was the fact that someone was willing to give her a go and to help her to try to do it. Kim had changed so much. Her confidence is heaps better. She is willing to get out there and try to do stuff and not let anyone tell her that she can't. Knowing there are people that care about her and are willing to give her a go and help her has been the biggest thing for her. She's trying to get her driver's licence at the moment. She is continuing to try …'

4. Providing creative, interesting and confidence building activities: being active and creative

> 'One of the people that has really changed is Michelle. She now does a full-time course at TAFE to do aged care. She's doing her second year of that. This is someone who didn't do anything, who has never done anything in her life at all. It's [the project] got her out there and doing something …'

> 'Sewing as well. I know Kim now sews flat out. We did a big sewing thing. Kim made a blanket for her son that she was really proud of. The hard thing with Kim is that she has never been good at anything and everyone has always put her down for it. But now she knows she can do stuff which is just a big confidence builder as well.'

5. Facilitating activities to develop knowledge and skills that would give participants options for the future: revealing choices

> 'We did jewellery making. I still make jewellery now. I make all my own …'

> 'The project let parents know that there is things out there for them. They can have opportunities even though they have kids. Like we did our Tourism Certificate through that, everyone got a certificate so now you can be the guide on tour busses and things like that with that qualification. It gave them a qualification and just knowing that you can do something.'

6. Developing opportunities for social networking, friendships and personal growth: building social networks

> 'It was great for socialising for them who didn't get out …'

> 'As a young mum you can feel alone and isolated, looking for help, especially those mums who have always been at home. It's a place you could go and socialise that didn't cost us anything.'

Productive conditions

The following productive conditions provide a scaffold in which change can occur and enable communities to forge the kinds of attributes of psychosocial health described above.

1. **Drawing on local assets, leadership and resources**

    Each of the BIG *h*ART projects described in this report draws on and develops local assets, leadership and resources. The emphasis is on building local capabilities by increasing the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals especially among those most often marginalised from decision making. For example, we were often able to observe young people who came first to projects as participants, then went on to contribute to further project iterations and to provide support borne from lived experiences and engendered through project engagement and participation. In a like manner, local assets were developed through participants having a voice, and speaking their own words. This meant, for many participants, there was a better integration of mind, body and relationships with others.

2. **Reinventing individual identities**

    BIG *h*ART projects involve a set of artistic processes that help individuals improve and enhance their psychosocial wellbeing. It is well established, for example, that social inclusion impacts on one's sense of self and wellbeing. Participants in LUCKY, GOLD and NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI were able to individuate, discover new trajectories, and feel affirmed and recognised within their own communities, and more broadly through media attention and strategic placements in festivals and national television.

3. **Building positive relationships**

    BIG *h*ART fosters positive relationships within and between the participant and the community, therefore promoting values of trust, respect and care. This relational component of the work is key as relationships of trust allow participants both to be 'stretched' and grow, but also to be 'held' as they take risks towards growth. Importantly, across each of the three sites, this occurred most powerfully in the context of others.

4. **Developing a spirit of inclusiveness and respect**

    BIG *h*ART values each participant and encourages them to engage in an artistic process that enhances psychosocial health and social justice. This

meant accepting that participants may not yet have well-developed skills and knowledge, and intentionally working to develop these. In addition, BIG *h*ART accepted that each participant had a contribution to make and was respectful of individuals' rights and identities and the successive approximations they make towards high production standards.

Conclusion

This section, through Kylie's narrative, maps the key factors and attributes of psychosocial wellbeing created by BIG *h*ART projects and highlights the value of engaging young people in creative projects, thereby providing support, knowledge, self-empowerment, hope, perspective and the possibility of a better future.

Building communities through creative spaces
Barry Down

Introduction

This domain examines the cultural and artistic processes that need to be created and more widely sustained in order to build a sense of community, or interdependence between people within a particular place and space. The focus is on understanding how people, often from diverse backgrounds including gender, age, race, class and location, come together to enhance the quality and feel of the relationships between people. Of particular interest is the manner in which collaborative artistic performances can assist communities in the task of enhancing intergenerational relationships, developing a spirit of reciprocity, and preserving local funds of knowledge including oral histories, memories and cultural artefacts.

Put another way, this domain seeks to explain how organisations such as BIG *h*ART are able to mobilise the human, social, cultural and economic resources necessary to build a spirit of community through creative performance. Specifically, it examines how BIG *h*ART processes endeavour to create communities of practice that enable participants to develop a sense of connectedness and feelings of belonging to particular localities. In these times of economic and social insecurity where the values of individualism, consumerism, competitiveness and materialism control all aspects of our lives, there is an urgent need to reinvigorate the role of communities as the cornerstone of human affairs; this domain is key to those processes.

Throughout this study, we heard over and over again from participants about the benefits of engaging in projects such as LUCKY, NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI and GOLD in terms of generating cultural and social meaning for individuals and communities alike. Typically, these projects grow organically out of locally identified and negotiated community issues and concerns. For instance, the LUCKY project in Tasmania identified struggling teenage mothers and their children, elderly people living in isolated circumstances and young men at risk of harm as communal concerns. In the case of the GOLD project in the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) the focus was on crime prevention and community development by engaging with marginalised youth and farming families devastated both emotionally and financially by the impact of climate change, extended periods of drought and severe water shortages.

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The NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI community development and language project conducted with Indigenous people across the Anangu, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in Central Australia attempted to address the damaging fallout caused by the forcible removal of Indigenous peoples from their land after the Second World War. The focus in this project was on preserving the community's language, art, cultural knowledge and social cohesion.

Each of these projects started from the premise that building mutual relationships with participants and communities over time based on the values of trust, respect and care is absolutely pivotal to negotiating joint enterprises together. Furthermore, the participants, their families and the wider community are not viewed as 'deficit' in the sense of being 'the problem'. Rather, it is acknowledged that local communities have their own funds of knowledge or the capabilities, assets and resources to address local concerns. Inherent in this community asset approach is a more empowering notion of community whereby participants not only give shape and voice to their own concerns, but also develop critical agency to generate new understandings, knowledge and skills that enable them to reinvent their identities and create alternative futures.

Thus, when we look closely at the narratives of participants in this study we see emerging evidence of positive impacts on:

- intergenerational engagement and connection
- quantity and quality of relationships
- sense of belonging and connectedness
- peer and family relationships
- collaboration among community members and stakeholders
- awareness of community assets and resources
- civic engagement and spirit of generosity.

In addition to these relational dimensions of community, we also see evidence of how participants are developing new skills, capabilities and dispositions not only to see the world differently and more optimistically, but to challenge some damaging stereotypes, attitudes and behaviours in more productive and creative ways.

We now turn to Christie's narrative to help us better understand, largely from her point of view, how BIG hART's *Radio Holiday* project as one component of LUCKY made a difference in her life and the ways in which she connects to the wider community.

Introducing Christie

> I developed more social skills with people who I would never expected to be friends with.

Christie is a young single mum living on her own, who started her involvement with BIG *h*ART with two small children. She has now an established history with BIG *h*ART, having been involved with three separate projects over three years including elements of LUCKY including *Radio Holiday*. She now has four young children. Her previous life mainly involved staying at home. Christie has learnt photography, developed some sewing and textiles skills, grown in terms of her confidence, and has goals for the future. What Christie's story reveals is how she has been metaphorically 'held' by BIG *h*ART, and how the benefits she describes are generative in nature. Christie, for example, now acts as a mentor to other young mums in BIG *h*ART project work. This is Christie's story told in her own words.

> The number one thing I got from the projects were friendships, I am still friends with the majority of them. I did a lot of public speaking, but I don't really enjoy that. I have become more myself, learnt to be more relaxed around other people, more people skills, there was heaps of that. I also learnt some cooking skills, and some interaction skills with the kids. I give things more of a go now, like trying to develop my refurbishment skills. I have heaps of family support, but many of the young mums don't, they see BIG *h*ART as their own little family. And I was a good support for them. They are an excellent supportive group of people. It was disappointing there was no other funding for the project to continue.
>
> I'd like to see myself with my own little business in 12 months. In LUCKY I learnt some sewing and we made some jewellery. I've now refurbished the kid's toy box, and I bought a table in a garage sale, and I'm going to do it up.
>
> I wasn't doing any creative work before, I just used to stay at home, go to Number 13 [a youth drop-in centre] – got kids off the street, that was pretty much it, but now I have some confidence to have a go. Before BIG *h*ART I didn't really have any goals or look into the future. It was the supportive background [they provided] that made the difference. There was no cost involved, transport was provided, free food. That made the difference.
>
> If I had to sum it up in a few words I'd say that has been one of the greatest highlights of my life. I developed more social skills, with people who I would never expected to be friends with.

Attributes of community

Christie's portrait, and many others like it, reveal a great deal about the value of building a spirit of community by engaging marginalised and disconnected young people through performance arts. Christie's story is a powerful reminder of the importance of creating the places and spaces in communities where young people

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feel welcome, safe and respected. When these conditions are evident, then it is more likely that young people will feel comfortable and willing to engage in creative activities to explore and expand their own personal sense of self and identity as well as their roles as valued citizens and workers. Importantly, Christie's story sheds light on the kinds of attributes of community that appear to help young people in the process of 'becoming somebody', including the following:

1. Creating friendly and welcoming public spaces

'The number one thing I got from the projects were friendships, I am still friends with the majority of them'.

'There was no cost involved, transport was provided, free food, that made the difference'.

2. Providing creative, interesting and socially worthwhile activities

'I also learnt some cooking skills, and some interaction skills with the kids. I give things more of a go now, like trying to develop my refurbishment skills.'

3. Creating imagined futures

'I wasn't doing any creative work before, I just used to stay at home, go to Number 13 – got kids off the street, that was pretty much it, but now I have some confidence to have a go. Before BIG *h*ART I didn't really have any goals or look into the future.'

4. Developing opportunities for social networking, friendships and personal growth

'If I had to sum it up in a few words I'd say that has been one of the greatest highlights of my life. I developed more social skills, with people who I would never expected to be friends with.'

'They [BIG *h*ART] are an excellent supportive group of people.'

'I have heaps of family support, but many of the young mums don't, they see BIG *h*ART as their own little family. And I was a good support for them.'

Amongst these attributes we can see evidence of Christie's renewed confidence and personal growth in terms of her own ability and skills when provided with the appropriate resources, support and opportunities to engage in meaningful activities in a safe and welcoming environment. Issues of respect, trust and care are at the heart of what happens in communities of practice and are clearly evident in the BIG *h*ART projects investigated during this study. Christie's story serves as a powerful reminder of the centrality of relationships in community and what can be achieved

both individually and collectively when these conditions are actively brought into existence and enacted thoughtfully over time.

Productive conditions

The following productive conditions were identified as those that provide a scaffold in which change can occur and can help explain what enables communities to forge the kinds of attributes we have described. In other words, we want to map the kinds of practices capable of building communities in which human flourishing becomes possible for all. Herein lies the essence of BIG hART's community capacity building approach to artistic endeavours. By way of summary, these productive conditions can be organised around the following constellation of elements:

1. **Drawing on local assets, leadership and resources**

   Each of the BIG hART projects described in this report set out to build community by firstly, acknowledging and valuing local histories, language, customs and culture; and secondly, drawing on local assets, leadership and resources. Community renewal is conceived from a capabilities perspective where local residents steer changes rather than relying on paternalistic, top-down policy interventions by outside experts. Central to this approach is the view that communities have a reserve of skills, knowledge, talents, resources and leadership as well as constraints that may limit what is possible. The emphasis is on building local capabilities by increasing the level of community participation especially among those individuals and groups most often marginalised from decision making. This more empowering approach has a deep commitment to the principles and values of local democracy, organic leadership and grassroots initiatives to enable social change.

2. **Reinventing individual and community identities**

   What BIG hART brings to local communities is a set of artistic processes to help individuals and communities to reinvent their cultural identities by moving beyond pathologising policies and practices. Today, youth in particular are portrayed in the mass media as a threat, problem or source of moral panic, and in need of social control. BIG hART, on the other hand, begins from a different starting point by interrupting demeaning and disparaging labels to see individuals and communities in more expansive ways and as having a reservoir of skills, talents and abilities. The intent is to create spaces where individuals and communities can come together to rewrite their identities creatively based on real life experiences, critical dialogue and artistic expression.

3. **Building collaborative community partnerships**

    It should be hardly surprising, therefore, to find that the process of building collaborative community partnerships is absolutely pivotal to the work of BIG *h*ART. We have witnessed in each of our research sites examples of how BIG *h*ART invokes the notion of radical listeners to challenge traditional conceptions of 'expert' status. This involves continually questioning the role of language, labels and scripts in order to build collaborative partnerships based on mutual respect and trust. In other words, they work with the community rather than speaking for them or attempting to own the community renewal process. Whilst the daunting nature of this kind of collaboration is apparent in all three projects we can see evidence of exactly how crucial it is to establishing and maintaining the ongoing viability of community-engaged projects.

4. **Creating spaces for dialogic conversations**

    What holds BIG *h*ART projects together conceptually, artistically, ethically and practically is the centrality of dialogic conversations. Each of the projects in this study, in its own unique way, generated a high level of communal ownership and trust through dialogic conversations. The emphasis is on generating local ownership, building relationships and fostering collective action with a view to enhancing the quality of life of all citizens. There is a continual willingness to talk with local people, listen deeply to their stories, and gather first-hand accounts of the kinds of issues facing their community. These dialogic conversations start from where communities are at as the foundation of creatively imagining alternative, socially just futures.

5. **Acknowledging the centrality of relationships**

    No doubt, relationships founded on the values of trust, respect and care are at the heart of the kind of community building we have described so far. Whilst interpersonal relationships of trust, respect and care are essential ingredients of healthy communities they are by themselves insufficient. Equally important, but often overlooked, is how organisations such as BIG *h*ART are able to connect individual and community concerns to a broader set of relational ideas, issues and questions, among them climate change, drought, unemployment, poverty, crime, parenthood, and drugs and alcohol to name a few. In other words, community-engaged artistic performances enable a form of social criticism whereby individuals and communities can see that their

'personal troubles' are neither unique nor isolated, but are 'public issues' shaped by wider structural and historical forces.

6. **Supporting innovation and risk taking**

    Where community leaders and policy makers are willing to support innovation and risk taking there is a greater chance of finding productive solutions to complex social and economic problems. In communities where traditional top-down approaches do not work, fresh ideas and creative strategies can play a crucial role in reinvigorating the community renewal process. Where communities are willing to provide spaces for dialogue and reflection (point 4) then innovative possibilities become more likely. The importance of BIG *h*ART's ability to inject innovative thinking and creative performances to address locally identified issues cannot be overstated. Operating outside the constraints of traditional bureaucratic control, BIG *h*ART is better placed to tackle the barriers, obstacles and interferences to social change by using creativity, imagination and performance, among them: music, song writing, photography, theatre, digital media and films.

7. **Identifying socially worthwhile community projects**

    In light of the productive conditions just described, it should not be surprising to find that BIG *h*ART is able to produce exhibitions, performances and artefacts of social significance with high production standards. The desire to create 'exquisite, high-calibre art' serves to reinforce the dignity of both the participants and their community. It indicates to individuals and communities that they really do matter, they have a lot to contribute and together they can produce art forms of a world standard. When people are involved in activities that are meaningful, rigorous, inclusive, valued, creative and fun we consistently see evidence across all sites of some profound changes in individual identity and self-worth as well as community interdependence and wellbeing.

8. **Developing a spirit of inclusiveness and respect**

    Underpinning the spirit of community described so far is an inherent belief in the values of human dignity, local democracy, social justice and ethic of care for and about each other. In other words, everybody matters and the success of a community or nation can only be properly measured by the extent that the least advantaged feel included and respected. In this sense, building community through artistic performance is linked to the larger project of creating neighbourhoods and nations where the personal fate of individuals is

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connected to the common good. This is profoundly relational work which recognises that place is where human experience manifests itself in ways that are both enabling and constraining. It is where our culture and identity are shaped. It defines who we are and who we might become.

Conclusion

In the words of one Ernabella woman,

> Namatjira was good for us. But not just good for us, for white people, black people, everyone. That was the first time [the Jamieson family] story was told, the first time they had a theatre, a live performance, with actors and people they knew.

Drawing on the stories of participants like this Ernabella women and Christie, we quickly gain an appreciation of the profound importance of the relational nature of communities as places where our individual and collective sense of self is formed. This section, through the lens of Christie's narrative and others like it, works to map some of the key attributes of community. On this basis we have sought to identify, describe and explain the kinds of productive conditions that need to be created and more widely sustained in order to enhance the quality of life and interdependence between people in particular places. Underpinning this community capability approach is a clear message about the importance of nurturing local knowledge, resources, leadership and ownership by listening deeply and respectfully to what people have to say about their lives and the circumstances in which they find themselves often through no fault of their own. Drawing on these insights, individuals and communities are able to mobilise themselves (with external support) to produce artistic works of social value, meaning and efficacy.

Developing agency and a sense of efficacy
Peter Wright

Introduction

This domain relates to a person's sense of agency, of being able to act upon the world. At its best, the notion of agency highlights the way someone can be confident and purposeful, and act to direct his or her life. What the notion of agency foregrounds is individual choice, freedom and intentionality; it speaks to being purposeful and the benefits that flow including having and taking control in one's life.

This notion of agency can be understood by way of contrast to people who are passive, or have a self-image that invites abuse or manipulation, or the disempowering belief that they should 'give up'. In other words, a lack of agency results in people feeling small, worthless and inadequate with no capacity to change or effect anything in their future; these feelings are described as 'learned helplessness' in psychological terms.

Key to understanding this domain is how learned helplessness with associated feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and an inability to change goes beyond psychology and into social action. It is also important to understand that, while behavioural change can be thought of as individual, and based on logic and rational choice, what this domain reveals is that behavioural change grows out of BIG hART's practices of community, social acceptance, and experiences borne of deep engagement in heart-felt dialogue, creative acts, expression and reflection. In this sense, it is more than simply 'knowing' the facts, but for participants reflects 'beings and doings' that have meaning and value. It is also important to understand that each of these beings and doings and what constitutes meaning and value are culturally bound.

Through BIG hART's projects, and the cultural solutions that they afford, participants are able to be active and feel like they have agency. These feelings of agency build confidence and so lead to transfer into other aspects of participants' lives. Consequently, while motivation to change comes from within, it is profoundly affected by the company of others and the feelings that are engendered. Hence, it is possible to look at this domain for evidence of impact of participatory arts projects where participants move from self-limiting or self-compromising behaviours to those that are self-enhancing and self-affirming through the creative acts that are enabled through arts practice.

Simply put, a creative act is an act of agency rich with possibility that moves beyond directed or duplicated activity that reproduces what is taken as given. So while behavioural change, or doing something differently, is evidence of change, the process of change grows from feelings and the actions that flow. What this means is that we might look for how someone does something differently as evidence of impact of a BIG *h*ART project.

Introducing Maxine

Maxine, a young woman who came into a project, serves to illustrate this domain and how she came to 'do things differently'. As an adjunct, while Maxine's story illustrates agency and also a level of interconnectedness across domains, she is able not only to describe her own experiences of agency development and what this meant, but also how she was able to observe this in others.

> *Step by step changing my life for the better*
>
> The early years of my life were troublesome. I abused alcohol and drugs and I surrounded myself with friends who reinforced this abuse. I went to school until Year 11, when I left and had my first child. It wasn't until I was in my early twenties that Di [a BIG *h*ART worker] asked me to be a part of a BIG *h*ART project, which she described to me as a crime prevention program. At first I was reluctant to participate, but my sister and me went together. In the beginning we would only go unless we went together, but after a while we became confident enough to go on our own. Over the years we have participated in LUCKY, *Radio Holiday*, *Drive* and *This is Living*.
>
> Being involved in these projects changed my life for the better. The people at BIG *h*ART supported me, they got down on my level, they respected me, they never judged me, and they made me confront my life and my choices. These things started to affect me. I started to feel happy about myself and lucky to have children. I started to feel important. I questioned my comfort zone, like the kinds of friends I kept. BIG *h*ART gave me a new circle of friends who were on the straight and narrow – I could disconnect from those other friends of mine. And this meant that slowly, step-by-step, I stopped doing the drugs. I haven't touched marijuana for 6 to 7 years now, and I haven't touched anything else, except alcohol, for 3 to 4 years. I'd say that these BIG *h*ART projects got me started in changing my life for the better. I would never have thought we could do something like this on our own but after a while these projects made us realise that we could go it alone.
>
> And I know these projects have affected other people in a similar way. People who are or used to be involved are on the right track now – they have got jobs, they've got married and they've bought houses. Even I've bought a house now. I've learnt that anything's what you make it.

Maxine's story reveals that agency grows over time, has a number of attributes and is an outcome of a number of factors. Attributes that help reveal agency include:

1. Developing capacity over time

> 'You observe it over time and because you're a part of it … part of the change, um, you … you've got to take a step back sometimes to see it … to actually see the progress you've made, because it's incremental and I … I see a … sort of a … more of a willingness for kids to buy into this this time around.'

2. **Providing opportunities for engagement and participation**

'Curtis dragged me around one day. I got free food, and you guys fed me so I just kept coming. It was just fun and it was always something different'

'there is nothing for teenagers in this town at all. There is nothing for unusual teenagers in this town. You can been part of the ... the cool kids and hang out with each other which is … or lap the street which is completely gay and boring. But this was different ... not usual. You couldn't do this stuff at school or you sort of just had to come across it'.

3. **Working as an artist**

'When we do all those little things and shit; the stop motion things ... time capture or whatever; where you take a picture of whatever they were called and interviews and photos, more photos, more photos. And then kind of went on like that for a while'.

'And I liked them videos of when like you took [us]... all to make that big eye in the middle of like nowhere which could be seen from space'.

4. **Developing self-awareness**

'Most of us have disabilities, one way or another we were all outcastes'.

'they used to get us to do these stupid little games; I suppose trust games and stuff because there is a lot of people aren't trusting, like me'.

5. **Learning and successfully applying a new skill**

'Photography, filming little stuff was kind of fun'.

'I took heaps of photos remember. I went into that junkyard where we were all living at, and I took all those awesome photos and everyone thought they were really good'

6. **Feeling purposeful and confident**

'[GOLD] just gave me interests I didn't know I had. Future plans. I've sort of got my head on'.

'So it was interesting. It probably just gave me options to go to the cities actually. That is about it which come in later. It is the one thing I probably really gained from it'.

'I suppose I give things more of a go now than I would have'.

What this means is that BIG *h*ART creatively works with participants through first providing opportunity. Before anything else, BIG *h*ART provides opportunities that would not exist without their presence. In this case, Maxine's participation and then engagement deepened both over time and through different project phases. What Maxine did not describe here, but was recounted by arts workers, was that Maxine developed from initially being a project participant to acting as a mentor to other young mums in later project phases. So from being an initial recipient of support, Maxine then became a provider, revealing both the generative nature of the practice but also how benefits accrue and reciprocity is enabled.

Next, the ability to act on the world grows from social and physical support, in this case, from support provided by arts workers engaged on projects. Importantly, this support has a number of characteristics. In the first instance it is practical and ranges from providing transport to food. Second, a defining characteristic is that it is non-judgemental and treats project participants as equals with strengths and abilities, not with deficits that need to be remediated. In addition, agency can flow from not only learning 'how' to do something, but from a confidence that the doing will thirdly *count*, that is, what is created will be of value. In this way, and fourthly, acceptance, support and creating combine to build confidence and respect. Put simply, BIG *h*ART's practices create a context where equality is not only an informing principle, but is purposefully enacted.

Third, and linking with learning, is the way that skills were taught and developed. Agency, for example, is enabled by skill development. One young person who participated in GOLD recounted:

> What I've been like given from the project is personal things like communication skills ... before I started GOLD I was pretty isolated ... I didn't communicate properly, I had trouble working with people and one of the major things I got from BIG *h*ART was working with people not just on a physical level but at a creative level. (Sam)

What this young person highlights then in another interconnected way is that social and physical support reduces feelings of isolation, and then links with skill development to provide life-affirming choices. Maxine, for example, makes what can be seen as better health and life enhancing choices. It is also evident that the work is creative in the way that Sam mentions, foregrounding particularly the interconnection between the arts, agency and self-efficacy. In short, arts practices are both a source of agency, and agency at work. This can be understood when we think of how an artist is known by his or her creative act, giving form to feeling for example, and bringing something into being. Importantly, agency is also profoundly

intertwined with participation in the way that agency influences the frequency and depth of participation, and participation increases agency.

A funder also identified agency in an interconnected way. He foreground how he was struck by:

> [s]tories of individual young people who have gone on to do other things ... who have gained a huge amount of confidence from doing this kind of work and it's something that they found meaningful and purposeful so it is good for their personal development and it seems to have energised them around representing community and community issues.

Agency, then, results in and iteratively contributes to gains in motivation, an increase in the quantity and quality of social networks, the confidence to do other things, and feelings of hope, independence, achievement and empowerment. In this domain of change one can look for evidence of project impact through the reconfiguration of experience in terms of what is *see-able* and *say-able*. In short, the arts are a powerful route to agency and self- and social development. The following describes the productive conditions present in BIG *h*ART's practice that enable agency to be developed.

Productive conditions

1. **The creation of high quality artefacts**
   Consistent with the other domains of change are productive conditions that are part of BIG *h*ART's DNA, meaning that that are overlaps, consistencies and resonances across different levels of practice. In particular, agency and feelings of self-worth, respect and efficacy are enabled through art practices and the creative conditions that surround them. What this looked like was reflected in participants' engagement with and personal investment in arts processes and products that were both open-ended but built towards a (or in some cases several) high quality artefact – performance, original music, photography, documentaries, digital stories and the like. These were strategically placed in festivals, local and national, promoted through free-to-air TV and radio, other media platforms, and high-profile public events such as those at Parliament House in Canberra and Federation Square in Melbourne.

2. **The discipline of public performance outcomes**
   Moving towards a public performance outcome meant that the open-ended creative processes BIG *h*ART uses are then directed into successive iterations

of rehearsal in order to have a public viewing of the work. This meant that people had to be present physically, emotionally and psychologically in order for a quality performance to be realised. This discipline was contingent on the quality of relationships formed, and feelings of ensemble and responsibility towards others. In addition, the way that culture was celebrated through performance meant that heritage was animated, with participants being active cultural creators rather than being disengaged or passive receivers.

3. **High-status and quality mentors providing models and support for creative action.**

   Each of the three projects employed various national and international artists who were available, supportive, skilful and accessible. For many participants being able to work with and see these professionals 'at work' provided models of application, humility, status and entré into an arts world previously inaccessible. What participants often gained from this production condition was an understanding of the working life of an arts professional, and in particular the commitment required over sustained periods of time in often challenging working environments to deliver high quality outcomes. And they also learned about the pleasure of association, status gained, and support from faces they knew though media exposure.

4. **Learning in a social-aesthetic space**

   In this productive condition skills were taught in context and at a point of need. For example, a performance in a riverbed at night in a remote community meant that lighting and sound had to be effective, distractions dealt with and relationships built with audiences. At the other end of the scale oral histories had to be collected from informants who often had challenging lives to live. This meant that they had to be engaged, respected, facilitated, and carefully listened and attended to. Each of these elements implied a certain level of sociality, and 'felt' responses that required both awareness and responsiveness.

Conclusion

Agency in a Western cultural context is often privileged and seen by some as a key developmental task for young people. What is often missed, however, is that agency is contingent on opportunity, learning, resources, culture and social equality – it is a journey rather than a point to be reached. What we consistently observed was that BIG *h*ART was concerned with adolescen*TS* rather than adolescen*CE*

(Vagle, 2012), and the social imaginary they employed strengthened agency. What this meant was that difference became an asset rather than a deficit, thereby adding value to young people's lives though what they both lived and embodied. In this sense, BIG *h*ART developed agency as capacity-in-action.

Using participatory arts for an expressive life

Brad Haseman

Introduction

This domain relates to the impact BIG *h*ART's creative processes and artistic outcomes have on young people and their communities. From the outset it is essential to recognise that art making and producing, in its various forms and activities, lies at the centre of BIG *h*ART's approach and it is impossible to separate their theatre productions and artistic products from the community engagement strategies deployed to produce them. In ways which surprise many observers their work refuses to be easily categorised into the 'neat' binaries which for so long have confounded ways of understanding art, culture and community.

BIG *h*ART's work is neither 'high' art nor 'low' art, 'art for art's sake' nor popular culture or a manifestation of the intrinsic value in art over the instrumental application of art for social justice. Indeed all of these categories can be seen in aspects of their work over time, but slips and flows across and between categories produce outcomes which go beyond simplistic binary understandings to create fresh and often unnamed species of creative work. However, the abiding commitment to making art with a rich aesthetic and affective dimension is unwavering and acts as a magnetic north guiding every journey BIG *h*ART makes with a community. This section examines the various dimensions of art, the pivotal domain from which other domains and their impacts flow.

Introducing Kerrie

Kerrie was employed by BIG *h*ART in Alice Springs as a worker on NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI. Kerrie is a strong and independent thinker who was employed on a number of the workshop programs, including music and choir development, even though she had never played music in public before the project. The project was both magical and brutal for her and one in which she 'learned heaps'. Kerrie made a total physical and emotional commitment to the project which she acknowledges gave her 'some really amazing experiences'. After years of working with Indigenous communities and learning their language, NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI has still not settled for her. Some aspects of the experience remain unresolved and she is still working it through three years later. The following narrative portrait illustrates these ideas in her own words.

100

NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI was a remarkable achievement and I felt that participants were aware they were creating something new – recording songs etc. at the time and when the show was touring I found that really profound. The Indigenous participants all say 'we really did something new here, we really created something that had never happened before' and that still rings true to me. There's this whole other story that Australia doesn't know. So while NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI handed white audiences a catharsis on a plate – in some ways it was really simple, honest and brutal – but the complexity of the message was less understood.

But the show was only a part of the outcome, just the shiny bit that everybody remembers, where lots of people clap. The workshops and everything else were the bigger part. The most positive impacts were for the Indigenous participants, the women and young people who during the time of the project became much more confident in speaking their own minds to non-Indigenous people. They tended to socialise better too by the end with much less awkwardness and shyness when they got together. The most important identity building happened for the people of Ernabella in particular, for that community as well as for the individuals themselves. Their identity as show makers or as storytellers, dancers, performers all built in and filtered into the community, and not just through the show.

For me it was important to know the Indigenous language and it was essential to build truly collaborative ideas especially around song writing. In fact the musical outcomes wouldn't have happened if I hadn't spent the time just being with people and learning their language. Knowing the language meant I could give ideas permission and overcome participant shyness. So much of what happened flowed because I was able to spend time in community and with their language.

At the beginning, the workshops were providing profound experiences for non-Indigenous people working on the project but some of us, including me, became frustrated and cynical by the end of the project. There was the feeling that I was never being met halfway by participants especially around logistical details like dates, deadlines and so on.

There were tensions too around family demands which pulled people off task and economic circumstances and welfare dependency was a problem. We had to watch white tutors especially if they were out of touch and came breezing into Indigenous communities thinking they know what the Aboriginals want. This approach doesn't ask participants to accept responsibility, and so they do too much for participants which finally did not enable them. My frustration built as the various parts of the project were seen by some participants and tutors as playtime – not essential, not a life necessity. I believed in and wanted an equal relationship with people but this did not come about as often as it should because there was not an equal investment from all participants.

I can see though that I did something unique with the music and films we recorded. And the collaborative song writing – there were no other young women writing songs. Songs weren't just raps over garage band beats, some of the songs they actually sang in the show were old people's. A core value has emerged I suppose

> – to let ideas breathe and to be able to feed back with improvements to build quality in the work.
>
> Working on NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI gave me the opportunity to have real life experiences with people from a different world view, expand my mind by learning about difference and language, sing in harmony and travel to beautiful places in the desert. But I'm not sure that the story is 100 per cent positive – and was never going to be. While NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI can't change this problem, empowering people is good and the project could and did do that.
>
> Where I've been for about a year is unable to talk about it. I've been deeply frustrated that I've been unable to articulate wisdom or learning or all of these things that people attach to me because of what I've done. It's something that I want and need to learn how to do, to learn how to articulate it all.

Art attributes

This narrative portrait of a core creative worker captures a number of attributes that describe BIG *h*ART's artistic and creative approach to artists, participants, communities and the creation of work. These attributes of art identified from Kerrie's narrative from Alice Springs were echoed over and over again by the workers and young people who engaged in BIG *h*ART projects in Griffith and Tasmania as well. Kellie details the skills, personal investment (she learned to communicate with Indigenous participants in their own language), patience and struggles that arise in projects of this magnitude. These attributes remind us that these projects:

1. Value both the processes of learning through workshops and the quality of the final performances

> 'But the show was only a part of the outcome, just the shiny bit that everybody remembers, where lots of people clap. The workshops and everything else were the bigger part …'

> 'A core value has emerged I suppose – to let ideas breathe and to be able to feed back with improvements to build quality in the work.'

2. Enable a deepening engagement for participants which results in a sense of achievement, pleasure and pride

> 'The Indigenous participants all say "we really did something new here, we really created something that had never happened before" and that still rings true to me …'

> 'The women and young people who during the time of the project became much more confident in speaking their own minds to non-Indigenous people …'

3. Establish challenging developmental and performance goals which extend all participants and make demands of them

> 'I believed in and wanted an equal relationship with people but this did not come about as often as it should because there was not an equal investment from all participants …'

> 'But I'm not sure that the story is 100 per cent positive – and was never going to be. While NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI can't change this problem, empowering people is good and the project could and did do that.'

4. Need community workers and artists with skills, passion, collaborative practice and shared purposes

> 'Working on NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI gave me the opportunity to have real life experiences with people from a different world view, expand my mind by learning about difference and language, sing in harmony and travel to beautiful places in the desert …'

> 'We had to watch white tutors especially if they were out of touch and came breezing into Indigenous communities thinking they know what the Aboriginals want …'

> 'I've been deeply frustrated that I've been unable to articulate wisdom or learning or all of these things that people attach to me because of what I've done. It's something that I want and need to learn how to do, to learn how to articulate it all.'

Finally, these attributes demonstrate that production and presentation of art in and with communities holds both great promise and great anxieties. Across the range of artistic outcomes and processes it is not uncommon to find participants and their communities owning, with great enthusiasm and pleasure, the transformations that accompany working processes which stimulate creativity and the desire to create, self-expression and the positive feelings and pride engendered through accomplishment, the joy of contributing to something worthwhile and feelings of loss when it is over. However, they also remind us that these benefits are not easily won, especially in fragile communities who possess particularly sophisticated strategies to manage outsiders who parachute in to 'help them'. Kerrie talks frankly about the struggles all players (artists and participants) necessarily experienced as they managed and massaged expectations, disappointments, cultural difference and broken promises. In this mix progress can be slow and even go unnoticed. Kerrie captures this perplexing conundrum when, after all the success of NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI, she confides 'Where I've been for about a year is unable to talk about it.'

Productive conditions

It is necessary now to consider the productive conditions which support and maintain these four attributes of BIG *h*ART's art making. These productive conditions are generative; they scaffold the activities of BIG *h*ART to produce a creative environment in which the attributes can be clearly identified and allowed to do their work for the duration of the project. By identifying these productive conditions, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic circumstances that produce the effects and impacts that flow from BIG *h*ART's creative processes and artistic outcomes with communities. These conditions are created around the performance and the creative processes which drove it, the skills, assumptions and attitudes of the artists employed and the nuanced dynamics cultivated to ensure there were open, respectful and fruitful partnerships with individuals and communities.

1. **The performance is high stakes.**

   The BIG *h*ART projects reviewed in this study all set goals which required young people to perform in high stakes settings, where what they did mattered and demanded sustained commitment and skill acquisition from participants. While opportunities to perform came from the performing arts, such as composing, acting, singing and dancing, young people were also challenged to 'perform' in filmmaking, digital storytelling, jewellery making and the visual arts. The forms of presentation were driven by the needs of participants and the projects, and framed by expectations of high quality execution. These high expectations of quality in creation, rehearsal, execution and reflection are modulated by a pragmatism which keeps a tight focus on doing what the team can do well and carefully monitors the scope and ambition of the work – it is important, for example, that performances do not try to do everything.

   Part of the challenge for quality also comes through a commitment to produce work that is valued by that community and society. The themes selected for interrogation always embrace issues of social justice or an uncovering of dangerous social conditions, especially for young people. Unlike much community and cultural development which seeks to raise personal awareness among the participants and audiences, BIG *h*ART's projects chase larger policy targets and unashamedly seek to alter government policy in areas such as Indigenous language policy, water use policy or government support for single mothers. As a result, the intent of each piece of performance is complemented with particular strategies targeting different audiences.

Finally, the stakes are raised in performance because the work is formed with an eye to its aesthetic power. The emotional power of both the form and content of the performance allows participants and audience members to 'feel' their way beyond unthinking attitudes, beyond the statistics, to develop a more complex perspective which challenges easy complacencies.

This insistence on, and seeking of, affective engagement is not only central to the multiple learnings which flow from performances, but also deepens the experience of the work itself, with participants able to report the value of 'belonging to something bigger than yourself'.

2. **The performance becomes a pivot and focus for a range of cultural and creative activities.**

   BIG *h*ART use the driving imperative of performance to stimulate and motivate participants to join the many skill-building opportunities which will eventually see them perform in high-stakes settings. The ability of the performance to drive meaningful learning activities opens up opportunities for young people to acquire a range of skills. These include those needed for the performance itself, but have also included literacy, social and presentational skills, all delivered with a strong arts creativity focus. Early in the life of a project, the menu of workshop offerings is designed to help young people find out what they are interested in. It moves, over time, to skills acquisition programs to strengthen the quality of performance. The requirement for participants to maintain commitments to skills development and step up to meet the rigorous demands of performance produces a creative environment characterised by the dynamics of mutual and shared obligation for both participants and BIG *h*ART staff.

3. **Highly skilled and committed artists engage for an extended period of time.**

   Another productive condition underpinning BIG *h*ART's success is their capacity to attract and employ artists who have sophisticated skills in working in and with communities over an extended period of time. Their particular ability to interact with community groups and to act as artist mentors complements the work of project coordinators in developing new projects and revitalising existing ones.

4. **Authentic partnerships for community engagement and development are formed.**

    One local council officer described BIG *h*ART's work as 'true community participation'. Setting aside for the moment just exactly what 'true' community participation may be, statements like this were repeated regularly during this study and it is clear that BIG *h*ART's approach to community engagement and participation provides a set of productive conditions which amplify the success of their work. This success is evidenced in participants reporting tangible skill development in the arts and arriving at fresh understandings of arts and cultural development in the areas of: improved artistic ability, stronger aesthetic satisfaction, and the recognition that through this work 'art' was demystified and made accessible.

    It is well established that fundamental to building effective partnerships is a deep commitment to dialogue. Dialogue which establishes shared and clear expectations, realistic scope and trusted circuitry is important in BIG *h*ART's management of all partners, but it takes on added nuance and texture when working with young people themselves. In these cases, BIG *h*ART sets out to expand young people's experience and knowledge base by engaging them in something that matters for them personally. The company recognises that greatest growth and productivity starts with the interests of young people but then, gradually and consistently, they sharpen the challenges the young people face. So, for example, the young people will be taken out of the familiar, comfortable and every day and confronted with a carefully calibrated and particular challenge. The priority is not to overwhelm young participants, but rather to allow them to experience the incremental difficulties of the task, the need to step up and into that task, and then the reward that comes from successful resolution and accomplishment.

    This balance is seldom easy to accomplish and there are often precarious moments in every project when young people are torn between their enthusiasm for the project and the increased commitment it requires of them. For example, several arts workers recounted with passion how participant resilience was tested when the project moved from the openness of the workshop process into the relentless rehearsal and production schedule. At that point, some of the participants wanted to step away from the hard slog of the timetables and demands, and the need for them to serve the needs of the larger production. Managing this crisis of commitment and securing the ongoing participation of the young people until the whole work was done

always depends in part upon the quality of the larger partnerships within which this work is occurring.

Conclusion

This chapter reports on the way BIG *h*ART seeks to deepen and enrich the expressive life of young people and their communities – this enrichment being evident in art. At the centre of all BIG *h*ART's work is the recognition that the art and its accompanying aesthetic power is central to both their working processes and successes. Consequently, the works and objects BIG *h*ART creates with communities must necessarily be 'beautiful', for it is from their emotional charge, their feeling force, that other benefits and values flow.

Constructing productive lives: Aspirations and work of value and meaning

Barry Down and Peter Wright

Introduction

Young people today face an increasingly fragile, volatile and uncertain economic environment. Since the mid-1970s, the forces of globalisation, technology and neoliberalism have wreaked profound changes on society and the economy. Nowhere is this more apparent than the youth labour market where the idea of permanent, secure and well-paid work is rapidly disappearing. The evidence indicates that Australia now faces for the first time in its history a situation where most people in the workforce do not have full-time permanent jobs. The shift towards market values and global production systems has led inexorably to flexible labour practices and the intensification of insecurity. These shifts in the global labour market have been exacerbated by the emergence of developing economies in China, India, Russia and Eastern Europe, and recently Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand. Together these economies have added 1.5 billion people to the labour force since 2000. Every country in the world now competes with all others for scarce capital investment and cheap labour supplies. The harsh reality is that only a minority of young people will succeed in the competition for the best jobs. For many young people, especially those living on the margins of society, the main avenue of employment is the service sector characterised by casualised, low-wage, contract and unskilled jobs.

The extent to which these global labour force dynamics impact on individual lives is largely influenced by social class, gender, race and geographic location. All projects involved in this study have occurred in communities where the ravages of broader economic forces have been most acutely felt in terms of diminishing job opportunities and a range of indicators of social disadvantage, such as high levels of unemployment, poor educational participation and retention rates, low school completion and achievement levels, social welfare dependency, high rates of crime and delinquency, poor mental health and illness, youth suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Under these circumstances young people can easily be stigmatised as the 'problem'. Deficit views and victim-blaming discourses often abound as Gen Y are labelled in derogatory and demeaning terms like 'unproductive', 'lazy',

'unmotivated', 'at risk', 'troublemakers', 'irresponsible', 'dumb' and so on. In response, it is hardly surprising to find evidence of anger, anxiety, alienation and anomie as young people experience a heightened sense of despair and hopelessness about their economic futures.

In this domain we seek to identify and describe an alternative set of possibilities made available through creative practices, rethinking the links between the economy and job opportunities for young people. At heart, this involves looking at individual troubles (e.g. unemployment) in relation to key economic, political and social institutions of society, and not merely the personal situation and character of individuals. In this way we can begin to assist young people by developing appropriate system-wide responses that enable them to build the capabilities needed to pursue the kinds of imagined futures (dreams, aspirations, needs and desires) they identify and want to lead. Here, we draw on Amartya Sen's (1992) capabilities approach to understand how BIG *h*ART projects assist young people to: (i) identify the kind of lives they want to lead; (ii) develop the skills and knowledge to do that; and (iii) understand and confront how their political, social and economic conditions enable or constrain them.

By way of summary, there is evidence that BIG *h*ART's work has positive economic impacts in terms of:

- making things of interest to sell thus building entrepreneurial spirit
- enrolling in further education and training courses to enhance skills
- developing employability skills, e.g., public speaking, confidence, team work, creativity, and organisational and planning skills
- enhancing writing and literacy skills
- developing social networks and support structures
- developing motivation and drive.

Introducing Kylie and Rachel

> It's outside of the square and BIG *h*ART came through for them, it gave them confidence. (Kylie and Rachel)

Kylie and Rachel are staff at Personnel Services in Griffith, an NGO based across the Riverina Region of NSW. Personnel Services are a not-for-profit organisation that tenders for placements from the federal government and reports to the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations. As an NGO, Personnel Services works in its community to get its clients jobs and move them towards independent living. What Kylie and Rachel were able to reveal was that two of their clients, also involved in the GOLD project, were able to gain in confidence,

find a 'place' that accepted their differences, develop strong social networks, and move into independent living by getting a job; each profoundly influenced through their project experiences. This is how they described the role of BIG *h*ART in assisting young people into the world of work.

There was some cross-over between participants in GOLD and those who were clients of our service. One focus of the service is seeking to secure employment for those who are traditionally 'hard to place' because of their life circumstance. What we were able to see was the rebuilding of a positive youth identity through GOLD. It was BIG *h*ART's processes that enabled these two young people to connect with others, develop motivation and drive, and move towards successful independent living.

One of the things that said to me the project had an impact was the fact that Jim [pseudonym] put down Chris [Project Creative Producer] as a referee on his resume. This shows that it meant something to him. He obviously made a connection with the people involved in order to do that. Jim has Asperger's so he has never really fitted in. A lot of the time he has been on the end of bullying or a fight, mainly from being different. So that he has made a connection is quite significant, because so many people don't understand him or his personality. That is not an easy thing for him to do.

So now he is working at Target, and there are still barriers. He can't read or write, so there was help needed to get him into that job, with his resume, the induction process, reading safety and hazard signs, etc. That is where we fitted in. And I don't think he would have had the motivation or drive to do that before BIG *h*ART. He has also completed the full six months with National Green Jobs Corp project and graduated from that. That happened after BIG *h*ART and I think that was what gave him the motivation and drive to give these things a go. He now lives out of home and is renting, so he is much more independent, he has his own place and his own job.

Billy [a second client] got into his creativity through BIG *h*ART – he was a very withdrawn person, a bit of a loner. It was hard to engage even to get him to an appointment. He would always walk around with his music in his ears. He wasn't accepted for being different. There were a lot of anger issues with him. He has gone on to working lots of hours at Coles in the deli; we actually exited him from our service because he was well on his way to becoming independent. It helped with his confidence, and using his creativity, he grew into the person he wanted to be. Using his creativity really helped him with his anger issues; he was able to release them and engage his creativity, so a lot of these issues resolved because he got into the things he wanted to be. This certainly wouldn't have done this before [BIG *h*ART].

Billy's case, it was certainly a case of don't judge a book by its cover, he is a big burly bloke. He actually is in a customer service role now, and he is good at it. He has progressed and is living an independent life.

BIG *h*ART provided a safe place – it is somewhere where everyone who is different can be – somewhere where being different is okay, but also knowing that everyone has something else to bring. This demographic has had a lot of prior experiences of people being let down, it is part of their history, but BIG *h*ART really came through for them. What they did was provide access; there are not too many options here [in town]. You can go to the movies, but you need money to do that, and transport; there is only the pensioner or school bus.

> BIG *h*ART offers something outside of the square; it is attractive to young people. It's listening to them, and asking them what they want to do. It's something that has meaning for them.

Attributes of economic impacts

As we listened to Kylie and Rachel describe their experience of working with Jim and Billy we heard their strong belief that all young people no matter what obstacles or barriers they face in life can aspire and achieve if they are provided with appropriate resources, support and opportunities. Both these young males would be typically categorised as 'at risk' and therefore a liability in schools and the wider community. Predictably, these young people often find themselves being pushed out of school and shut out of a precarious labour market. Unsurprisingly, therefore, young people like Jim and Billy are finding it increasingly difficult to negotiate their way into productive work. It is at the critical transition period between formal schooling and getting a job that many young people are abandoned and made accountable for their labour market fates. This reflects a much broader set of market values (e.g. competition, privatisation and individualism) underpinned by a re-emergent neo-Darwinism ('survival of the fittest') in which only the most competent will have jobs and the rest who do not have jobs are either incompetent or undeserving or both. In countering these prevailing deficit views in which young people are seen as bundles of pathologies BIG *h*ART seeks to build a set of counter-narratives by creating opportunities for young people to reinvent themselves as good citizens and smart workers. Drawing on Kylie and Rachel's story we can identify several key attributes necessary to assist young people in negotiating their way into work, among them:

1. Reinventing identities

> 'It was BIG *h*ART's processes that enabled these two young people to connect with others, develop motivation and drive, and move towards successful independent living.'

2. Building social networks and support

> 'One thing that said to me that the project had an impact was that Jim put down Chris [Project Creative Producer] as a referee on his resume. This shows that it meant something to him.'

3. Valuing diversity and difference

> 'Jim has Asperger's so he has never really fitted in. A lot of the time he has been on the end of bullying or a fight, mainly from being different. So that he has made a connection is quite significant, because so many people don't understand him or his personality …'

'BIG *h*ART provided a safe place – it is somewhere where everyone who is different can be – somewhere where being different is okay, but also knowing that everyone has something else to bring.'

4. Providing transitional support arrangements

'So now he is working at Target, and there are still barriers. He can't read or write, so there was help needed to get him into that job, with his resume, the induction process, reading safety and hazard signs, etc. That is where we fitted in. And I don't think he would have had the motivation or drive to do that before BIG *h*ART.'

5. Providing opportunities for creative activities

'Using his creativity really helped him with his anger issues; he was able to release them and engage his creativity, so a lot of these issues resolved because he got into the things he wanted to be. This certainly wouldn't have done this before [BIG *h*ART].'

6. Creating public spaces to enhance access and job opportunities

'This demographic has had a lot of prior experiences of people being let down, it is part of their history, but BIG *h*ART really came through for them. What they did was provide access; there are not too many options here [in town].'

Kylie and Rachel's experience in the field affords an opportunity to see how community-based NGO workers understand the contribution of BIG *h*ART processes to the life experiences and opportunities of marginalised young people like Jim and Billy. They provide a unique service provider view about how the cultural and creative arts practices advocated by BIG *h*ART can assist young people in the process of reinventing themselves as workers and citizens and negotiating their way into paid employment.

Productive conditions

Drawing on these lived experiences, we want to identify and briefly describe some of the productive conditions that enable BIG *h*ART to make a difference in terms of economic effects and transitioning young people into paid work and potential careers.

1.   Challenging 'deficit' thinking

Kylie and Rachel are able to cut through deficit ways of thinking nicely when they state that 'BIG *h*ART provided a safe place – it is somewhere where everyone who is different can be – somewhere where being different is okay, but also knowing that everyone has something else to bring'. Here we have an

unequivocal statement about the pivotal importance of challenging deficit views about young people. If we are going to advance the employment prospects of marginalised youth then there are clear benefits to be gained by starting with a more optimistic and humane view about the potential of young people. As noted earlier, a deficit approach is based on the assumption that young people fail to find jobs because of internal deficits rather than locating the problem with the education system and broader shifts in the global labour market. According to Kylie and Rachel, BIG hART challenges such views by creating a set of cultural practices in which young people are seen 'at promise' whereby their knowledge, experience, language and interests are recognised as assets.

2. **Moving beyond the self-fulfilling prophecy**

    Young people like Jim and Billy are typically streamed into low-level competency-based vocational courses on the basis that they lack intelligence, ability or motivation. Once streamed, future pathways and possibilities are foreclosed as they assume limiting identities (e.g. 'practical', 'non-academic' and 'troublemaker'). BIG hART offers an alternative set of possibilities by acknowledging that are all young people are in the process of *becoming*, therefore, it's a matter of creating the appropriate cultural settings to build confidence, experience, relationships, capabilities and knowledge in more empowering ways. Therefore, it was not surprising to hear about the importance of their involvement in BIG hART projects in terms of building strengths and beginning to imagine their futures in new ways, e.g., 'Really, it has led to my job … where I am now'; 'I just thought, wow, I would like to own my own clothing company'; 'She actually does a full-time course at TAFE now to do her Aged Care [Certificate]'; and 'Now I work in a call centre'. These young people are learning not only to survive but to assert power and control over their lives.

3. **Understanding the complexity of young lives**

    At the heart of Kylie and Rachel's story is an acknowledgment of the complexity of the lives of young people like Jim and Billy. For instance, Jim was dealing with some complex issues related to Asperger's syndrome thus he 'never really fitted in'. As a consequence, he was subjected to bullying and isolation. BIG hART provided a safe space in which he could flourish and, in the words of Kylie and Rachel, the fact 'that he has made a connection is quite significant, because so many people don't understand him or his personality'. BIG hART acknowledges and welcomes young people no matter what their

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circumstances and is willing to work with multiple and complex forms of disadvantage including health, poverty, housing, transience and so on. Furthermore, it acknowledges that these young people often present with incomplete and less than satisfying experiences of schooling as well as the need for care and safety. In these circumstances, the priority is providing innovative practices that engage them in socially worthwhile activities over which they have control and ownership and see relevance.

4. **Developing a capabilities approach**

Given the major shifts in the global economy described earlier, in particular the collapse of the youth labour market, there is a strong case for developing an alternative capabilities approach to education. Whilst skilled jobs still exist, they are only increasing on the margins of new production processes in which technology is increasingly subsuming not only manual labour but the knowledge component of skilled labour. What we have heard throughout this study is that many young people require experiences and knowledge that assist them to build multi-dimensional capabilities such as: social relations and networks; the capability to be a friend and mentor; respect and recognition; self-confidence and self-esteem; aspiration and motivation; health and wellbeing; emotional safety; and voice (Walker, 2006). Once these capabilities are in place, we are much more likely to find a willingness to re-engage in learning, social life and employment.

5. **Connecting to mentors and experts**

In uncertain times there is a risk that far too many young people feel left behind. This is reflected in concerns about the rise of a new 'precariat class' comprised of disaffected youth who have no secure identity or sense of purpose in life other than survival and short-termism and its associated problems of anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation (Standing, 2011). Under these circumstances, helping young people to (re)connect to significant mentors and experts in community-based arts activities becomes vital. Where young people once felt left out, excluded or without direction BIG *h*ART has been able to construct artistic practices that connect, engage and inspire. This was achieved by providing access and connection to mentors and experts who were able to 'develop motivation and drive, and move [participants] towards successful independent living'.

Conclusion

Participants in this study reported a range of economic benefits arising from their involvement with BIG *h*ART projects. These ranged from the acquisition of employability skills related to reading and writing, self-confidence and public speaking, to technical skills such as jewellery making, photography and lighting, to developing social networks and support structures, and confidence to undertake TAFE courses related to specific careers. One of the participants summed up her renewed sense of hope in the following words:

> When I started going to BIG *h*ART I didn't really have any future goals … I suppose because I was young and, you know, didn't really see into the future … You know, but then I just thought, wow, I would like to own my own clothing company … have my own clothing line. It was good.

Strengthening capacities and dispositions for learning

Barry Down

Introduction

This domain explores the ways in which BIG *h*ART processes enhance participants' learning in terms of capabilities, knowledge and life skills. The intent is firstly, to describe the kinds of learning that actually take place, largely from the point of view of the participants, and secondly, to identify the particular cultural, relational, organisational and pedagogical conditions that enable it to happen. It is important to note that BIG *h*ART typically works with young people who are disengaged and alienated from mainstream educational institutions such as schools and university. Unfortunately, increasing numbers of young people no longer look to school as a venue in which the creative spirit can be nurtured as evidenced by a general malaise – low quality work, absenteeism, drug and alcohol abuse, loss of meaning and purpose in education, and cognitive illness. Against this backdrop, BIG *h*ART seeks to create alternative spaces where young people have an opportunity to re-engage in learning and community life through arts-based projects.

Underpinning the BIG *h*ART approach is the view that all young people given the appropriate cultural settings are willing and capable of learning. This approach challenges some deeply entrenched views about intelligence and the willingness of young people to engage in education. It also challenges the view that young people who have dropped out or drifted off from school are somehow deficient in terms of intelligence, assets, strengths, knowledge and resources.

Perhaps the best way to describe BIG *h*ART's approach to learning is through the creation of capabilities. This term offers a rich perspective on how arts-based practices can assist young people to identify the kinds of lives they want to lead; provide them with the skills and knowledge to go about it; and help them understand the cultural, economic and political circumstances that either enable or constrain them. In essence, BIG *h*ART's approach is a form of transformational learning that helps young people move beyond limited and scripted ways of being in the world (e.g. 'at risk', 'lazy', 'low achiever', 'disadvantaged', 'troublesome', 'non-academic', 'single mum', 'unemployed', and so on) to take on more powerful identities as smart workers and active citizens. BIG *h*ART achieves this by humanising relationships and engaging in collective action around relevant,

meaningful and worthwhile community projects. In this environment young people feel safe to take risks and flourish.

As we excavate the narratives of the young people involved in this study we find evidence of a wide range of learning from the acquisition of fundamental life skills including improved social skills, decision making, problem solving and information technology, e.g. audio visual, camera, sound, editing and so on, to imagining new identities and futures. By way of summary, there is evidence of positive impacts in terms of:

- exploring future educational options
- developing confidence to speak publicly
- developing organisational and planning skills
- problem solving and team work
- writing and literacy skills
- developing social skills
- pursuing passions and interests
- developing a sense of self-efficacy.

Whilst basic life skills related to reading, writing and numeracy cannot be taken for granted, the participants in this project are learning a great deal more as they re-create their identities in new and creative ways. For many participants, their involvement in BIG *h*ART has provided the rare and precious opportunity to challenge some often damaging and deficit images of themselves as they begin the journey of re-invention based on a sense of hope and optimism. We gain a sense of how this transformational learning occurs in small but profoundly influential ways through the narrative portrait of Mick, a young man searching for a fresh start.

Introducing Mick
Mick was directed to BIG *h*ART by the police after becoming involved in criminal activity. Mick describes how BIG *h*ART had a positive impact on his life. His involvement in the *Drive* project enabled him to learn a range of important technical skills that he otherwise would not have. Importantly, he was able to think about himself and others in different ways. The ability to think reflectively about life's experiences and events was a powerful learning opportunity. Mick's story reminds us all about the importance of 'hanging in' with troubled young people, no matter what the circumstances. His story also reveals a great deal about the sociability of learning whereby people desire a sense of connectedness around common interests and concerns in order to make a difference.

I became involved with BIG *h*ART after a cop caught me getting into mischief. I was bored and breaking into classrooms at the local school in an attempt to steal and hock their computers. I had a bit of a drug problem. I didn't know what I was doing, or where I was going. I was lost. When she caught me she thought I had nothing else to do and I needed something to keep me out of trouble. They basically told me they were going to take me somewhere, to see if I could learn something from these people. 'Which people?' BIG *h*ART. They told me all about it and I said I'd give it a go.

When I went to BIG *h*ART, they asked if I could paint caravans. I said, 'Sure, I can do that.' Then they asked if I could put lights on caravans. I said, 'Yeah, I can. No worries'. It was my first involvement in a BIG *h*ART show. I've been involved now for six years at a technical level, with sets, lighting and sound. Before BIG *h*ART I couldn't work a video camera, I couldn't even hop on a computer hardly. But they got professionals to come and show me how to do things. When they showed me I just knew how to do it. I've tried to cherish everything they taught me.

Another thing that's made a big impact on me is listening to the stories of people in the shows we put on. The *Drive* project had the biggest impact. I was doing sound for that, and when I was doing that I listened to the stories, and these affected me, especially the Hicks story. He had everything, just got himself and had almost finished apprenticeship, and was working real hard. He fell asleep while behind the steering wheel and hit the back of a truck. It was kind of disturbing hearing about how he was still alive and how he was crushed between the two cars. He lifted his head up and said he was sorry to the truck driver. And when I heard that, it was devastating to me. Just imagine the truck driver. It wasn't his fault. He was just driving round the corner.

I learnt about others too. You've got to really put yourself aside a bit, when you work with other people. I slow myself down a bit and listen to others. It's more about listening to other people.

Learning attributes

Mick's portrait alerts us to some important attributes of learning in BIG *h*ART projects. At heart, learning is a social practice in which individuals come together to understand themselves and the world with a view to improving it. Viewed in this way, BIG *h*ART develops opportunities for young people like Mick to reconnect with learning in ways that honour the civic and democratic purposes of education envisaged by educators such as John Dewey. Such approaches to learning have been described in many ways including democratic, participatory, engaged,

emancipatory and transformational. Based on Mick's portrait we can identify a number of key attributes of this kind of learning.

1. Acknowledging the relational dimensions of learning

'I learnt about others too. You've got to really put yourself aside a bit, when you work with other people. I slow myself down a bit and listen to others. It's more about listening to other people.'

2. Starting from where young people are at

'I didn't know what I was doing, or where I was going. I was lost.'

3. Appreciating the complexity of young lives

'I was bored and breaking into classrooms at the local school in an attempt to steal and hock their computers. I had a bit of a drug problem.'

4. Valuing students' funds of knowledge

'When I went to BIG *h*ART, they asked if I could paint caravans. I said, "Sure, I can do that." Then they asked if I could put lights on caravans. I said, "Yeah, I can. No worries."

5. Working from weakness to strength

'Before BIG *h*ART I couldn't work a video camera, I couldn't even hop on a computer hardly.'

6. Connecting to mentors and experts

'But they got professionals to come and show me how to do things. When they showed me I just knew how to do it. I've tried to cherish everything they taught me.'

7. Investigating real world problems

'Another thing that's made a big impact on me is listening to the stories of people in the shows we put on. The *Drive* project had the biggest impact. I was doing sound for that, and when I was doing that I listened to the stories, and these affected me, especially the Hicks story.'

8. Creating spaces for self-reflection

> 'He lifted his head up and said he was sorry to the truck driver. And when I heard that, it was devastating to me. Just imagine the truck driver. It wasn't his fault. He was just driving round the corner.'

This list is by no means comprehensive but it does provide some important signposts to the kinds of learning young people value. Mick's narrative reminds us that all learners are individuals with unique sets of needs, desires and aspirations. We cannot take anything for granted in terms of what young people bring to the table. Their lives are often complex, messy and unpredictable and these circumstances require a different kind of learning, one grounded in relational trust, mutuality, adult relationships, flexibility and meaningful tasks.

Productive conditions

Following on from Mick's narrative it is now possible to identify and describe some of the productive conditions that enable BIG *h*ART to connect to the lives of young people in ways that enable transformational learning to occur.

1.   **Building relationships that are inclusive, engaging and enabling**

     If learning is to occur, then appropriate cultural processes are required that are inclusive of all (irrespective of circumstances), engaging and enabling. Creating spaces of this kind is no easy task. It requires a consistent set of guiding principles, values and protocols founded on a deep belief in the value of individuals and their capabilities to succeed in careers, family and life. It needs to be linked to a philosophy of learning that challenges the way things are, and as such is able to generate alternative realities and possibilities for the individual and community. This kind of transformational learning is based on a different kind of politics and social imaginary guided by the values of democracy, social justice and social action.

2.   **Creating dialogic spaces for identity work**

     Young people require spaces where they feel safe to explore identities. These spaces privilege the voices of young people, what engages them, what is real, and what is relevant to their lives. In other words, young people have worthwhile things to say and therefore the starting point of all learning is their culture, language, experiences and interests. This requires the creation of dialogic spaces where young people can come together as equals in search of meaning about their world and the things that matter to them. It is a horizontal relationship based on mutual respect between participants and what they bring to the learning encounter.

3. **Interrupting dominant constructions of self and youth identity**

    If learning is to be truly transformational it requires opportunities for young people to interrupt dominant images of self and youth identity. Given the power of mass media and advertising to shape young lives in largely negative ways including racism, sexism, homophobia, materialism and violence, it should be hardly surprising that young people's personal identity and sense of self-worth are often damaged. Transformational learning of the kind advocated by BIG *h*ART endeavours to help young people to re-write their identities as part of an ongoing process of personal and social transformation.

4. **Remaking individual lives in communities of practice**

    Mick's narrative reminds us of the importance of connecting young people to communities of practice. In Mick's case, BIG *h*ART was the last port of call. There was nowhere else for him to go. BIG *h*ART offered Mick a place where he could reconnect to community, to a place where he could develop relationships, feel welcome and belong. What is apparent in Mick's story is the value of linking the process of individual learning to communities of practice based on shared values and a commitment to each other. At the heart of this pedagogical work is a desire to transform inequitable and oppressive institutions and social relations so that individuals can learn, grow and develop to their full potential.

5. **Re-searching local circumstances and practices**

    Underpinning BIG *h*ART projects is a pedagogical approach to knowledge production which is collaborative, generative and localised. This approach to learning eschews the idea that external experts know best. Certainly professional expertise is important, but the starting point is somewhat different because they are invited to work *with* communities rather than *on* them. Rather than imposing top-down solutions BIG *h*ART works with local resources, assets and knowledge to research local problems, issues and questions of direct relevance to communities and this occurs within a context of human relationships.

6. **Learning is collaborative, hands-on and inquiry based**

    Building on the previous point, BIG *h*ART works in ways that engage young people in projects that are collaborative, hands-on and inquiry based. Each of the projects described in this report have been long-term and community-based, requiring a significant amount of time and energy to build rapport

between stakeholders including local, state and federal agencies and professional workers including teachers, nurses, youth workers and council officers.

Conclusion

Participants in this study reported a range of learning from the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills, to technical skills such as sewing, painting, jewellery making, art, sound, set construction, photography and lighting, through to new-found social skills including self-confidence, public speaking, problem solving, and confidence to pursue further education and training. Above all, participants acknowledged the ways in which BIG *h*ART created spaces for young people to engage in truly transformational learning that enabled them to remake their lives and identities for the better. As one participant explained, 'It was big picture learning … they are learning with purpose.'

(Re)inventing identity through cultural practices
Peter Wright

Introduction

In this domain we consider the issues of *identity, cultural learning* and *becoming* and how they might be 'sites' to consider when looking for evidence of impact of BIG *h*ART's work. Each of these concepts are so broad that is almost impossible to consider participatory arts without this domain being tagged. Identity, for example, is an elusive concept and draws on many fields of knowledge and experience marking both place and character; it is layered with meaning that is personal, social, historical and contextual. In this sense, it is significant in participatory arts projects that both reflect the lives of those engaged in it and the place they grow out of.

As a concept, identity has, and continues to have, explanatory power when thinking about people, for example, what is felt, culture and the contexts that shape people, who one is, and the relationships between people and their contexts/cultures, linking both parts and wholes. However, the idea of change and a sense of self – or *becoming* – and the hope that is implicit in it, makes this domain of change an important site to consider even if there is scepticism about whether there is in effect one true or 'authentic' self to become.

Introducing Mike

Through the research we identified the way that identity evolved, changed or developed. For example Mike, whose portrait we share, went from being someone whom people crossed the road to avoid, to someone who provided good quality service in the job he ultimately secured. It was reported to us that shoppers intentionally sought him out as they purchased goods. This newly formed, socially accessible identity was unrecognisable to those who previously knew him.

What is key to this domain and all of the others identified through this project is that there is no one path, or lock-step form of progression within it, nor even one 'ideal' self, and of particular importance is the way identity exists in relationship to others, and how it is constantly being constructed and re-constructed. This reveals the centrality of sociality in BIG *h*ART's work where relationships are built, sustained, and then shared through the art that is created with community.

Key to BIG *h*ART's processes, for example, is the importance of creating art that is placed in various fora, ranging from communities of origin, not matter how small or remote, to national arts festivals or community events. What this means is

that the way participants express who they are is witnessed by others, thereby building, affirming or re-affirming identity.

Implicit in these processes is the importance of others. For example, whenever we think about ourselves or how we live our lives, we are reflecting questions of 'self', and how we know ourselves is profoundly influenced by comparisons we make between ourselves and others. In this understanding, it is possible to argue that there is no sense of self without other people.

In the same way, how we act is also influenced by the way others live their lives. What are 'acceptable' clothes to wear, foods to eat, ways to live and die grow out of the culture we are embedded in or refer to, and can be inclusionary or exclusionary – in this way having both negative and positive consequences. In short, how we live and how we act are complex and are interactions between a personal project of self, and how groups understand themselves.

This means that in terms of impact in this domain we must consider both individuals and groups, in this case community, the nested contexts in which they exist, and the way that art can meaningfully build bridges between them. In each project, participants created work that was then viewed in the communities from where participants came. The art then became the currency of exchange between participants and their community, and because this was of high quality, perceptions of participants changed, in Mike's case from a person to be avoided at all costs, to someone intentionally sought out.

The following portrait of Mike shows both his own changing sense of self from pushing back against what he saw as a 'closed' community where he was a 'misfit', to identifying himself as an artist and celebrating his own point of difference.

> *An opportunity to grow and think from a different perspective*
>
> It was Personnel Employment that sent me to BIG *h*ART. I was out of school, hadn't got a job, had been expelled. I was rebellious. But I needed to survive. I needed to get a job. I remember the first time I walked into the BIG *h*ART shopfront. It was night. 6 o'clock. I remember walking inside and talking to people. There was a vibe that I had never experienced before. In this city, there is a lot of judgment. It's often the first impression and then people make their mind up about you. It's a very close-minded, insular community. I've always felt like an outsider here. I was not social at all. Here, and in school, it's been like your clothes are too tight and there's nowhere to grow. But when I walked into BIG *h*ART, they were friendly.
>
> The people at BIG *h*ART don't judge. The vibe was positive. I didn't have a lot of positivity to my life, so when I walked into BIG *h*ART it was like a moth to a flame. BIG *h*ART has attracted a lot of us misfits, the people who don't fit in. A lot of us couldn't fit into proper schooling, were expelled, left school early, had problems at home. But BIG *h*ART gave us a positive environment, it allowed choice; from being a writer to being involved in film, arts, sculptures, claymation films, and that affected me. I have 70 to 80 paintings. While school is a closed off environment, BIG *h*ART isn't. It gave us an opportunity to grow.
>
> It's built my confidence. I can interact with people, on multiple levels. A 180-degree change to what I used to be. Before BIG *h*ART and the GOLD project, I was not a people person. But in going to the GOLD show and engaging with people regularly in a wide range of activities and projects, you just learn skills to engage with people, work together, and collaborate creatively. To be a better person personally. I mean, to have a conversation like this and not feel like it's a waste of time. I'm getting something out of talking, but before BIG *h*ART I wouldn't have had that. BIG *h*ART allows me to think from a different perspective, and allow me to control my actions. Over time I have become a pacifist rather than getting angry and violent. It's about learning and growing into my true potential.

Mike's story, as one example among many, reveals a change in his sense of self and how he views this positively in contrast to his previous sense of self.

Identity attributes

Flowing on from Mike's experiences and reflected in his portrait, and those of others like him, we can see the following attributes of BIG *h*ART's work playing out in the identity domain.

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1. **Identity is performed.**

   Contemporary understandings of identity highlight that it is performed, and BIG *h*ART provided tools and opportunities for identity to be inquired into, experimented with – in the sense of trying on new identities – and then communicated, or rendered visible, to others. Mike's narrative, for example, reveals that this can have a number of positive consequences. Evidence of change can be revealed in: (i) how participants view themselves, (ii) what they do, and (iii) the way they connect to others. BIG *h*ART provides opportunities for, and shows, how identities are performed; in this case and consistently across projects through providing choices, creative opportunities and support to participate in them. Mike, for example, along with other young people was provided opportunities to be a writer, filmmaker, photographer and painter amongst others: 'from being a writer to being involved in film, arts, sculptures, claymation films, and that affected me …'

   This means new and emergent roles can be engaged and experimented with through creative exploration. These opportunities were provided though workshops with artists, and were supported through mentorship along with high-class materials and equipment. What is significant about these opportunities was that participants' creative dispositions were strengthened and they were encouraged to act as makers. The act of making requires something of the self both as a *mediator* and *maker*, and expressing oneself in relation to others in ways traditionally not available to young people such as Mike.

2. **Identity is emergent.**

   Key to understanding this expression of a new or emergent self is the support provided by arts workers. This support ranged, for example, from pragmatic things like providing transport to workshops or events, providing food at timely points, to the sophisticated ability to know when to push for a new level of commitment towards quality, and when to hold back and provide 'space'. Making art, making time, making relationships, and making things that matter were consistent principles across the three sites.

   Making in this way can be understood as (re)presenting identity. In the most positive sense this allows reimagining and remapping connections to self, community and place –place-making in the sense of finding a place as an antidote to being lost or being dislocated.

3. **Identity is shaped and framed by context and access to cultural resources.**

Knowing how you fit in, or not, is key to identity formation. Mike, for example, saw himself as one of the 'misfits, the people who don't fit in'. Project work enabled him to both see himself, and then be seen, differently.

> 'Over time I have become a pacifist rather than getting angry and violent. It's about learning and growing into my true potential.'

Indigenous young people also do not always have access to their own cultural heritage in a way that enables them to feel a sense of pride and belonging. One community member, for example, recounted:

> 'The project gave them [young people] the opportunity to reconnect and get to know their history through the older generation.'

Identity, then, in this context becomes a choice, a creative selection for purposeful performance. In performing identity, the possibility of the new is embodied allowing it to become of part of an individual and potentially collective experience and psyche, hence linking *being* and *doing* in powerful ways.

Performing or 'writing' a new identity is also an act of agency rich with potential to create and transform; it is a 'shaping of presence' for participants, potentially enabling them to 'be' and 'be seen' differently. Mike's narrative exemplifies this. It is also clear that the arts-based practices employed by BIG *h*ART create a 'third space' that enables participants and others levels of reflection and inquiry. In other words, 'working on' and interpreting what was made or captured for reflection enables meaning making – including what is new or unexpected – to be shared.

This means BIG *h*ART goes beyond a commitment to participation and inclusion to sharing new and emerging ideas or abilities that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, in each of the three projects considered for this research participants revealed stories that reflected many 'truths', making meaningful what otherwise might have remained hidden. In NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI Trevor Jamieson performed his family's story of the British atomic testing at Maralinga, presenting an insider's view and Indigenous perspective on this episode. His family story stood in stark contrast to 'official accounts'.

Young men and those who loved them described in *Drive* – one component of LUCKY – described and represented rites of passage, what it meant, and consequences of risk. And young people, through GOLD, shared images of the ravages of insidious drought on family life in rural and regional

Australia, building bridges across a divide between those who produce and those who then consume food.

In each case, participants' viewpoints offered rich readings that had been hidden or marginalised, meaning that identities were elaborated and made resonant, and in some cases cultural resources were accessed for the first time. These richer readings available through the range of artefacts produced not only enabled and animated participants, but also helped those around them move beyond reductive and stigmatising views. One council member, for example, described: 'I used to cross over the road when I saw [this young person] coming, now we stop and chat'.

Productive conditions

Through considering each of the three sites included in this research we can identify the productive conditions through which identity can be re-imagined, and cultural learning facilitated.

1. **Opportunities for co-creation**

    In the most practical way, BIG *h*ART provided creative opportunities for participation in projects with meaning and authenticity that simply wouldn't have existed without their presence. This was particularly profound in rural and remote locations where geography, transport, facilities and expertise where limited or non-existent. These opportunities were supported by artists who were not only skilled in their arts practice, but able to be 'in service' to others using their experience and knowledge of arts practice to support participant's own creative inquiries and expression. An adjunct to this support was not only high quality processes, but materials and public performance or showing, thereby putting an individual's and collective's art in the world.

2. **Experience in art making**

    What the arts workers bought to each project was a sophisticated understanding of how to make art, the power of the aesthetic, and creative problem solving. More than this was a commitment to making art *with, of, for* and *in* community, meaning that it was authentic and had meaning for those who made it.

3. **High levels of social skills**

    Unconditional positive regard is a term usually attributed to the humanist Carl Rodgers (1980). It basically means that a person is accepted and supported regardless of their social status, level of ability or biography. It is generally

accepted that this notion is important for positive human development and so has particular salience for arts workers who work with marginalised and disenfranchised groups. For example, young people often push back against what they see as attempts at support or care. BIG *h*ART workers through this capacity for relational ways of being and working are able metaphorically to 'hold' someone as they transition to a new sense of self.

4. **Recognition by others**

Changes in identity are contingent on those being recognised by others. BIG *h*ART has a commitment to the quality artefacts developed through creative opportunities being of value and placed in society. These take a variety of forms and range from live theatre productions growing out of a community's own stories, to portraits (taken by participants) in a photography exhibition. This means that stereotypes of particular groups – 'at risk' young people, the elderly – are challenged as audiences can literally see participants in a new light.

5. **Engagement and evocation of affect**

In this attribute participants were engaged through rich personal story. This meant that not only were strong feelings, which illuminated the many dimensions of transitional challenges, evoked, but these were remembered in the ways they resonated as familiar human feelings, human interactions, referencing levels of connected and disconnectedness.

6. **Witnessing publics**

Building on but going beyond public performance is the 'eventness' of the work. This not only engaged participants, allowing them to 'perform' differently in a public way, but affected those who bore witness to them and their experiences. This provided reciprocal benefits. There were changes of public perception and the possibility of action animated through a moral or ethical dimension. In addition, participants were allowed to belong more to the wider community who became a congregation to the work, thereby being united through the public witnessing that occurred.

Conclusion

We now better understand that there are many 'identities' one can have; these are not 'fixed' but are flexible and hence negotiable and, importantly for this project, jointly accomplished with – or sometimes against – others. What this domain

reveals is that art is a powerful way to engage with, inquire into, and express identity.

Identity and culture, individual and social action, and the way that these are afforded through the arts brings collective voice and action, social justice and individuation, and cultural learning into focus. As BIG *h*ART's work shows, participatory arts provide multi-modal forms of inquiry and expression to bear on these formative forces or lived contexts – in terms of advantage and disadvantage – with both a level of criticality, and a way of understanding the complex dynamics. This reveals ways in which participatory arts, and BIG *h*ART in particular, can make a difference to those it touches through depth, inclusivity, and common purpose.

Overall, BIG *h*ART projects are a platform to access, explore and express an individual's cultural identity as well as a way of experiencing other cultures. This domain is particularly significant because it exemplifies cultural learning, with the projects in this sense being understood as *cultural interventions*.

9   Tilery, Stockton, north-east England: An international comparator

Mike White

Introductory comments

Peter Wright

The following chapter was written from an international perspective by Mike White, a member of the research team. Mike was based in the North of England, literally a world away from the isolated and disconnected communities where BIG *h*ART works. However, although distant from Australia in the sense of geography, disconnection and communities in stress show remarkable similarities, making these observations significant. Mike was able to bring to the work his own experience in working in communities under stress in the UK, and also his familiarity with the Australian context (having completed a fellowship in Western Australia and being a regular contributor to the arts and health field here and abroad), and a critical eye informed by his experiences in Northern Ireland and South Africa.

Through this section White takes the research as it has emerged, and considers it against what was enacted in one site of research-guided practice in north-eastern England, a practice developed since 2003. What links each of these disparate communities are: disadvantage, participatory arts as a form of cultural action, and what might make for human flourishing. This means that each of these contexts are sites where we might look for evidence of change, impact or outcomes.

White's contribution reveals the alignment between these domains, the potential continuities and discontinuities, and the importance of context in the domains of change. These productive tensions are critical for project outcomes or impact, and provide some important avenues for future research. In addition, White provides some further deep reflections on each of the domains, including questions of value and measurement, and provides a series of provocations helpful in advancing the field. Finally, White describes the focus of one project and the processes they employed in order to understand impact better.

Background

In responding to the research outcomes generated by this project I have considered it against long-term arts in health programs in the North of England, based mainly in primary school settings, that have modelled healthy social living and developed emotional health in otherwise disadvantaged and stressed communities. The aims of these programs are for children and their families to develop creative ways to flourish and reflect on experience, to generate cultural change in their communities, and to show how, through the making of new traditions, collective arts activity may generate effective health literacy.

Given the longitudinal nature of this work, with some projects running for over ten years, there is an accumulated wealth of data from them demonstrating how arts-led approaches can contribute to mental health and wellbeing. The arts in health practice has helped to shape educational practice on different levels, and the links developed between both arts and health professionals as well as academics and participants are now many and varied. These sustained relationships make for a rather complex network of practitioners, participants and academics seeking a reciprocal understanding about the work. The participatory research originated with mentoring from staff in various departments within Durham University who are affiliated with its Centre for Medical Humanities (CMH), established in 2008.

The arts in health programs are guided by CMH's overarching and interdisciplinary theme of 'human flourishing', and in long-term fieldwork it interprets this theme as a dynamic and socially connected form of wellbeing. Although the demographic of the programs has historically been different from the BIG *h*ART study in being focused on younger children and their families, in recent years we have sought to draw in young people's involvement both as participant volunteers and research aides.

A site of practice

Tilery Primary School in Stockton-on-Tees is the site of a rapidly developing arts in health project with a multicultural focus that is the latest addition to a cluster of school-based arts in heath programs in areas of social disadvantage in Northern England. The arts development at Tilery is envisaged as a long-term project to test a hypothesis that exploring the local history of a neighbourhood and its social and economic relations outwards can build temporal, or vertical, community connectedness. This complements the spatial, or horizontal, community connectedness that has been built in Tilery through the building of a local cultural tradition, an annual lantern parade that commenced in 2008. From 2014, the research-guided phase of practice drew on a range of art forms and additional

interventions to connect the history of the area, including indigenous families and newcomers. The school serves the housing estates that are in nearest proximity to Durham University's Queen's campus where both the medical school and Wolfson Institute for Health Research are based, and so direct connections have developed with those institutions through the arts in health program.

Crucial to the success of the lanterns event each year is the atmosphere generated in the workshop space, which the authors see as being related closely to the characteristics of 'third place' community spaces (as distinct from home or work space) defined by Oldenburg (2000). There has been an ongoing connection with the BIG hART study in respect of 'third place' as a conceptual and imaginative environment where learning and creativity combine in community settings. At the 2012 Tilery lantern workshops some semi-structured interviews, closely based on the methodologies and questions used for interviewing in the BIG hART study, were conducted with a small group of parent volunteers and staff. These interviews with participants affirmed the characteristics of 'third place' that exist in the Tilery workshops. The lantern parades also appear to bring an added depth to the characteristics of 'third place' with regard to how they assist remembrances, empathic insight, capacity building, and improvements in mental and emotional health.

The spectrum of change

In Table 1, I have arranged the seven 'domains of change' highlighted in the BIG hART study in a spectrum, grouped under three impact themes – note 'arts' is placed at the centre – and aligned with White's seven essential principles of arts in community health (2009), which were formulated earlier from an analysis of practice in the UK and three overseas territories. The UK projects were additionally motivated by 'five ways to wellbeing' developed by the New Economics Foundation (Aked, Marks, Cordon, & Thompson, 2008). In addition the 'key ingredients' for successful community-based arts in health projects that were identified at a colloquium at Durham on lantern parades in 2014 are also brought into alignment.

Table 1: Alignment between impact themes, domains of changes and essential principles of arts in community health

Theme 1: Healthier living			Theme 2: Creative expression		Theme 3: Self-actualisation	
Transformative →			← Instrumental		← Transformative	
SEVEN DOMAINS OF CHANGE (BIG hART study)						
Psychosocial health: a sense of efficacy and wellbeing	Community: a sense of belonging and connectedness	Behavioural change: a sense of agency	The arts: leading an expressive life	Economic effect: aspirations and work of value and meaning	Education: strengthening capacities and dispositions	Identity: cultural learning
SEVEN ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF ARTS IN COMMUNITY HEALTH (White, 2009):						
Generate wellbeing	Encourage self-care	Always be responsive	Art as the gift	Foster responsibility	Create congenial space	Support identity and sense of place
FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING (Aked et al 2008):						
Keep active →		← Connect →		← Give →	← Keep learning →	← Notice
SEVEN KEY INGREDIENTS OF SUCCESSFUL LANTERN PARADES (CMH Colloquium 2014):						
Making new traditions	Keeping attention to health and safety	Ensuring inclusivity	Having a motivating aesthetic	Providing quality conditions for shared celebration	Creating congenial space	Transforming of people and places

In some cases an alignment across the domains and their comparators seems clear – 'the arts' and 'identity' provide a strong match. In others the alignment is largely dependent on context – for example, under 'psycho-social health' the experience of the North of England projects is that this outcome is best developed through the creation of new traditions, for example, public celebrations on a healthy community theme that are integrated into a social calendar. Outcomes from the other four 'domains of change' are in our Tilery project very much contingent on the *quality* of communication and creativity generated within the workshop space, and how these integrate participants and help reconcile internal tensions in the multicultural community. We are not yet looking longitudinally for impacts on adult education and employment. Rather we are analysing the children's own feedback assiduously gathered by school staff, and small measures of improvement such as parent-to-parent conversations at the school gates and adult volunteering hours.

A response to the 'domains of change' presented in Wright et al. (2013)

Wright et al. (2013) identified that for the first domain, 'psychosocial health', lasting positive outcomes may not be universal. Therefore we must address through a longitudinal assessment how practice and sustainability at a communal level may mitigate the adverse effects on some individuals. This is a challenge for any goal to build social capital and resilience, which is why discussions of the second domain, community, should reference the concepts of adaptation and 'reciprocity' from what is described and understood as social capital literature.

The movement towards 'respect' in this domain could also be traced through the 'six core strengths' (Perry, 2007) in emotional empathy (commonly used in child development work) which are: being a friend, think before you act, joining in, thinking of others, accepting differences, and respecting yourself and others. The spectrum comparators from the UK given here also highlight 'self-care' as an important contribution of each person to community health. 'Health and safety' is more than simply the protocols of risk assessment but rather the care ethos that should inform the work throughout, creating a climate of continuous positive regard.

More attention could be given to impacts in the third domain of 'behavioural change' that show how creativity can act on the world in health-sustaining ways as this is providing policy makers and funders supporting these projects with outcomes that address complex health issues. The fourth domain of 'the arts' is literally central – and 'expressive life' wherein art is the gift implies a responsibility to act autonomously but with obligation to others. Furthermore, taking participants beyond themselves through the arts is the chance to model alternatives expressed in hypothetical language, the 'what ifs ...' that have been usefully explored in longitudinal ethnographic research of youth in the USA by Shirley Brice-Heath (2001).

The emphasis on literacy in the 'domains of change' model is helpful because reports from the World Health Organization (2008; Kickbusch, Pelikan, Apfel, & Tsouros, 2013) identify literacy as the single biggest determinant of population health at the global level. This might mean that the development of emotional literacy on health issues may help make up for deficits in word or text-based literacy.

Recent research on arts in schools in England by Ros McLellan and others (2012) concludes that children's wellbeing diminishes over time as they progress through school, with positive feelings peaking around Year 6 (aged 10–11), and with girls losing their sense of wellbeing more than boys later on. For pupils at this time of transition, art was cited as the most motivating subject and literacy the least. This

is not only a crucial phase in childhood development, but also important for determining health prospects in later life.

The fifth domain of 'economic effect' needs more attention because again it potentially contains those instrumental benefits that policy makers and funders want to hear about. The sixth domain covers *educational outcomes* well but alerts us to something that seems missing so far in the research. We have a good set of individuated outcomes, but collective outcomes arising from communal activity and the spatial and temporal dimensions in the work are also important in the way that can manifest new traditions and sense of place. Creating a congenial and inclusive atmosphere for the activity is vital and the UK projects suggest there are various facets of learning going on, and that among participants their disposition to engagement is connected both socially and privately with remembrances – that seems to be particularly characteristic of Tilery.

The seventh domain of 'identity and sense of place' is where the Tilery project sits most clearly as it asks through the practice how can we develop a platform to explore and express an individual's cultural identity as well as a way of experiencing other cultures? The approach taken is quite literally a collective journey – which is why it manifests in parades.

The issue raised through the domains of change of what impact means to different cultures is really interesting and offers provocative conclusions for the research report. We must attend to this issue or else any cross-cultural work or international collaboration will founder. The emergence of small cross-national partnerships in arts in health brings additional significance to qualitative, narrative-based evaluation because of the need to respect and reconcile differing cultural nuances in the application of creativity to health. Finding common ground here precedes the challenge of identifying the relative medical and cost benefits across different systems of health education and welfare. The 'healthy living' stories we generate and exchange are the basis for an international practice and make for fascinating evaluation.

Next steps for progressing impact research identified in the spectrum

In future what could help maintain a balance between sociological and clinical investigation would be a closer alliance between the diverse practice of an arts in health field operating within the social determinants of health, the professional discipline of art therapies, and the sharpening vision of medical humanities. Such an alliance could help overcome many of the difficulties and dilemmas that have so far

hampered the development of a credible evidence base for the effectiveness of participatory arts on health.

By clearly focusing on *value in context* and *reflexivity in practice* to determine its meaning, we are offered through the 'domains of change' approach some appropriate evaluation tools that work from the inside out. The 'domains of change' approach sensibly distinguishes between evaluation and research, and by being context-specific rather than practice-specific in assessing the utility of its methodologies, it offers entry points for practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds.

In our experience of developing community-based arts in health projects in Northern England, it has become clear to us that arts in health is not delivered by the artist in isolation but rather through a confluence of inter-professional interests and disciplines. What we should not forget is that arts in health is essentially about relational working, whether it be in healthcare settings, residential care or a community context. In looking for impact, we also should not underestimate the inherent strength of the arts to shape people's world view and influence lifestyle choice, autonomy and social engagement – all of which of course have significant effects on health. An understanding of these impacts requires a closer and more nuanced understanding of the practice itself.

An evaluation study carried out over three years by the Globalism Institute in Melbourne with VicHealth of four community arts programs in both urban and outback Victoria (Mulligan et al., 2006) has a good sense of how artists approach their practice, recognising that some projects may be purposefully short term or may dissipate their energy but the need is to reinvent and regenerate. It notes that artists stress the need for authentic engagement and the use of local stories, and argues this must not be watered down by over-attention to social inclusion as the goal. The emphasis on the relational aspects of arts activity suggests to the report's authors that 'agency' is a better term for encapsulating the fostering of self-determination in community arts: 'our intention in using the term agency over autonomy is to emphasise the irretrievably social character of such activity. Agents are always bound into social relationships, mores and commitments which both enable and constrain action' (2006, p. 133).

Mulligan et al. also argue it may be better to spend more time analysing concepts of community wellbeing generated by arts participation before attempting to demonstrate them. A starting point here is recognition that wellbeing has become a preoccupation of health promotion agencies, and it would be better to distinguish between individualised wellbeing and social patterns of wellbeing through which sustainability can be seen primarily as a process of support and interaction assisted by critical reflection. This study advocates participant-based evaluation, and

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considers that too much focus to date on indicators has led to over-instrumentalised approaches that have overlooked longer-term assessment of benefit. Instead it uses a process it terms 'social mapping' to describe a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, including photo-narrative methods. This generates narratives of meaning that are complex but give depth rather than a shallow breadth of short-term indicators.

The VicHealth study advocates building separate projects into research programs, and this seems akin to the approach adopted in the ARC BIG hART study and the UK comparators, but it is cautious about using a diagram-driven transformation model because 'a crucial strength of the arts is that they can have a multitude of overlapping and interlocking purposes and it is impossible to represent this adequately with a two-dimensional map or matrix' (p. 31). It sees a need to identify wider public outcomes than just event-specific ones, and concludes that its research data suggests that social inclusion appears to be affected in a meaningful way only through long-term ongoing involvement in community arts. One way of showing this possibility is through the lanterns research project that has now been running for ten years in Northern England.

The lanterns research project

In January 2013 the Centre for Medical Humanities as part of our long-term involvement in the health promotion lanterns projects held a Lantern Parade Conversation, a two-day interdisciplinary colloquium at the Wolfson Research Institute on Durham University's Queen's campus which brought together a dynamic mix of community artists, academics, arts managers and leading health professionals, with teaching staff and parent volunteers from two school-based lantern parades. The conversation was made possible through support from the Wolfson and the Institute of Advanced Studies.

It was a contribution to the latter's 2014 theme of 'Light', and its linkage with CMH's core theme of 'human flourishing' produced some rich insights and proved a good example of CMH fulfilling its aim of achieving purposeful interdisciplinary dialogue with a public engagement focus. Of course we were all engaged, but we could not have processed so far in this aim without the adept facilitation of Mary Robson, CMH's Associate Artist for Health and Education. Robson drew everyone out of their professional shells into an open workshop atmosphere akin to that of a lantern-making space where creative conversations flowed. The setting was further enhanced by the sharp shadows of paper cuts from Southwick Primary that covered the windows of the Wolfson's seminar room, temporarily transforming it into a giant lantern. It was a concrete illustration of how a space for reflection on

research can embody the ethos of the practice to be studied, and be more interactive and physical than multimedia presentations.

We felt we got the results we had hoped for as together we came up with an inventory of 'what works' for community-based arts in health events, some philosophical underpinning of the lantern parade phenomenon, the framework for a research bid, and several publications-in-waiting. It was also an opportunity to re-connect with several veteran lantern makers who share a common point of origin in the Welfare State theatre company of the 1980s, and to sense the genealogy of an extraordinary offshoot of community arts practice that now reaches worldwide. By drawing in insights, possibly for the first time, from a wide range of academic disciplines along with the reflexive narratives of participants in these celebratory events, we became indeed a lantern parade ourselves in the course of the conversation.

The conversation was structured in three sessions:

(i)   Framework (how do successful lantern parades evolve?),
(ii)   Covering (what is the philosophical reach of lantern-making activities?), and
(iii)   Illumination (what might research discover that adds value to these events?).

In the first session, we organised our responses to a guiding question of 'what are the key ingredients of annual community-based lantern parades?' into seven clusters that I later ventured might be headed as follows: creating congenial space, having a motivating aesthetic, ensuring inclusivity, making new traditions, keeping attention to health and safety, providing quality conditions for shared celebration, and enabling transformations of people and places.

For the second session CMH Director Professor Martyn Evans gave us a philosophical rumination on light and wonder that spurred us to see lantern events anew in respect of the metaphorical connections and actual relations they create, their unfolding phenomenology in both affect and materiality, and their provocation of wonder and wellbeing. In the final session we laid a pathway (literally) of emergent themes and reflected on the research potential of these in discussion groups under the headings of 'lantern stories', 'the elemental nature of light as both thing and event' and 'inter-relationships of art, community and social context'.

To integrate the arts practice once again into the tenor and trajectory of the colloquium, Robson worked with artist Gilly Rogers and several adult volunteers from the Tilery housing estates to make a 'cocoon' lantern for the occasion that encapsulated (literally) the spirit of the conversation and revelations to come.

Delegates added their own delicate tissue-paper paper-cuts, and the completed lantern was gifted to Tilery Primary. This gift was also a response to the imminent challenge of the 2014 parade being unavoidably postponed due to a major refurbishment of the school, so the cocoon was designed to hold the aspirations of this now traditional event until its imago could emerge in the next manifestation.

The cocoon then became the focal point of a ceremony in the school grounds in February 2014 to commemorate this blip in the timeline and assure the children and their families that lanterns will continue to mark their social wellbeing and the diversity of their community. This intimate interweaving of research and practice generating a distinctive narrative is becoming characteristic of the community-based arts in health work developed through the Centre for Medical Humanities. It augurs well for innovative research in 'domains of change'.

10   Impact across three sites: Depth and breadth

Christina Davies

This chapter provides a within and cross-case analysis of the research as a whole. This means that it takes what the research has revealed and considers it from the perspective of the four different groups identified through the research design, that is, those participants who experienced the work and were the focus of it, those who supported the work (the arts workers), those who were witness to it (community), and those who funded it. Next we consider each of the three projects, or research sites, to reveal what was most reported by way of impact or results, then aggregate all three projects together and consider them in total through each of the four 'lenses' described.

Impact by group: Different people, aspirations, and synergistic impact?

BIG hART partners with artists and communities to initiate and conjointly develop projects that engage and empower participants and transform communities. The resulting impact is trans-dimensional and sits within a complex web of interacting domains and dimensions. As highlighted by participants, artists, funders and community members from the three different data collection sites (Alice Springs, the NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI project; Griffith, the GOLD project; and Tasmania, the LUCKY project); the arts, especially BIG hART projects, are a powerful means of 'connecting the disconnected', changing beliefs and creating an environment conducive to engaging with others.

But how is impact viewed by participants, artists, funders and the community? Does context and project influence the nature and type of impact? Is there agreement about what is important? Do participants, artists, funders and the community, within and between projects, want the same things or do BIG hART projects work despite different groups having different beliefs, motivations and valuing different types of impact? By looking at the top ten types of impact for each group and for each project, this chapter explores the similarities, differences and intersection of perspectives to understand arts-related impact more fully.

Project participants – the key focus of all BIG *h*ART projects – identified confidence as the most important impact resulting from participating in a BIG *h*ART project, whereas for artists, funders and community members it was 'engagement with the community'. In addition, as shown in Figure 1, when impact was overlayed by type of group, engagement with the community was the only impact dimension that participants, artists, funders and community members agreed on and highlighted as important.

Perhaps not surprisingly, **participants** were most interested in how the arts influenced *their* lives. This can be understood in terms of 'self' being at the centre of one's life with progressive forms of engagement flowing from this place. It is also important to understand that the strong emphasis on individuation is culturally determined, and was not always consistent. For participants, the overarching domains of 'community', 'psychosocial health' and 'learning' were prominent. Arts practice, as both the means of engagement, vehicle for change and expressions of it, was seen to result in friendships, positive peer relationships and reduced feelings of isolation. Participants, for example, focused on how the arts improved their communication skills, language and literacy abilities and empowered them. One young participant described the impact of BIG *h*ART in this way:

> I've made heaps of friends, you know, still friends with a majority of them. Friendships, becoming more myself and relaxed around everyone, public speaking, becoming a very people person cause I did heaps of public speaking ... umm, I give things more if a go than I would have. (female participant)

The views of participants and others intersected in a variety of ways, all of which resulted in participants being lifted towards a more meaningful, satisfying and fulfilling life. Participants and funders both agreed on the importance of making participants feel supported. In addition, participants, funders and artists focused on the significance of increased confidence, while participants, community members, and artists talked about higher levels of self-esteem and self-worth being a consequence of BIG *h*ART engagement. From the perspective of participants and community members, the knowledge and skills gained were an invaluable result of project participation.

In contrast to participants, **artists** focused on the overarching domains of 'community' and 'psychosocial health', as well as 'art', 'economics' and 'identity and culture'. To artists, a central impact of BIG *h*ART projects was their ability to show disengaged young people another way of *seeing* and *being* in the world by unleashing participant creativity, self-expression, developing arts-based skills and

the confidence to use these skills to undertake new projects and courses. One artist described this motivation in the following way:

> We engage their minds creatively at a point where they are dropping out of school and are pretty disinterested ... it's about giving them something that keeps them ... it's not just about keeping them occupied, it's about them striving and having something that's interesting that's not just keeping them occupied and out of trouble, but actually expanding their experience and knowledge base and breaking open that membrane, you know, that can just keep you ignorant to anything out of your experience. It's about taking them out of their space and into another space. I challenge them to step it up a notch. (male artist)

The continuities and discontinuities of motivation and impacts are presented graphically in Figure 1.
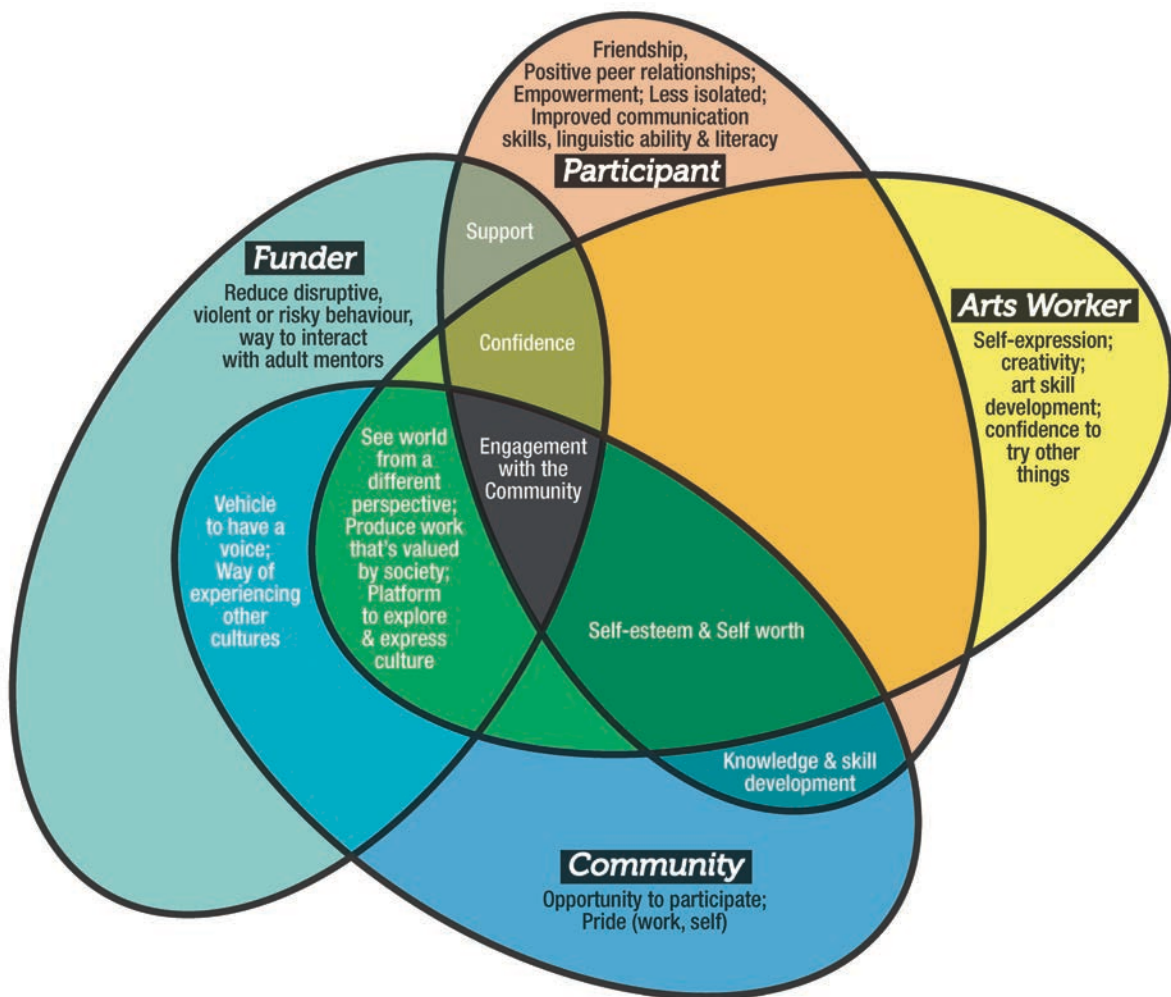

Figure 1: Impact by type of group (participant, artist, funder and community member)

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As revealed in Figure 1, the views of artists intersected with participants in relation to psychosocial health. Artists, funders and community members also had a common interest in producing works of art that are *valued* by society, exploring and expressing culture through the arts and helping participants see the world from a different perspective.

Overall, **funders** were motivated by a number of factors including community development, social issues, youth potential and empowerment. Funders focused on the domains of 'community', 'psychosocial health', 'agency and behavioural change', 'art' and 'identity/culture' and saw a major impact of BIG *h*ART projects being their ability to connect participants with mentors and reduce disruptive, violent or risky behaviours. A key funder of one project identified that

> Regional development is more than concrete and jobs. The wellbeing of our people and the confidence of our young people, their entrepreneurship and belief in themselves is critically important to our future. There are big issues here statistically regarding things like avoidable chronic disease, youth suicide, literacy and the binge drinking culture. (male funder)

Community members focused on the domains of 'community', 'psychosocial health', 'art', 'learning' and 'identity/culture', and highlighted the way BIG *h*ART projects gave participants the opportunity to do something/participate and create something they could be proud of. For example, one community member suggested:

> Participants enjoyed themselves. It's a bit of a discovery for some people. Their self-confidence can grow and their belief and self-trust in themselves where they may not have had a lot before. It was important for them that they got a bit of balance into their lives, as a mother, but also as a member of the community that could be valued for their performances, writing and art. (male community member)

As previously discussed, funders and community members shared the views of participants and arts workers on a number of impact dimensions, but mostly funders and community members highlighted the ability of BIG *h*ART projects to give participants a *voice* and act as a means of *challenging* and *changing* stereotypes and attitudes by engaging with a range of people and experiencing other cultures. For example:

A lot of people have got this suspicious attitude or a very go away attitude but the closer you get to the coal face it's like, well, oh, this [young] person's not actually bad. They're actually not bad people. The closer you get to the facts or the people the less fear you have. So, I suppose, the more you engage yourself with difference then maybe you're better to then engage yourself on a national or international scale ... whether it be people or projects require you to contextualise what you are looking at, have an understanding of history ... you got to think a lot harder. (male community member)

Impact by project (Alice Springs, Griffith, Tasmania)

For people in Alice Springs and the APY Lands the 'most important' impact resulting from a BIG *h*ART project was that it was a 'platform to explore and express culture', for those in Griffith it 'reduced participant isolation' and for those in Tasmania it helped participants to 'see the world from a different, more positive, perspective'. As shown in Figure 2, when impact was overlayed by type of project, 'engagement with community' and 'confidence' were the only impact dimensions that people from the three different projects consistently agreed on and highlighted as being important.
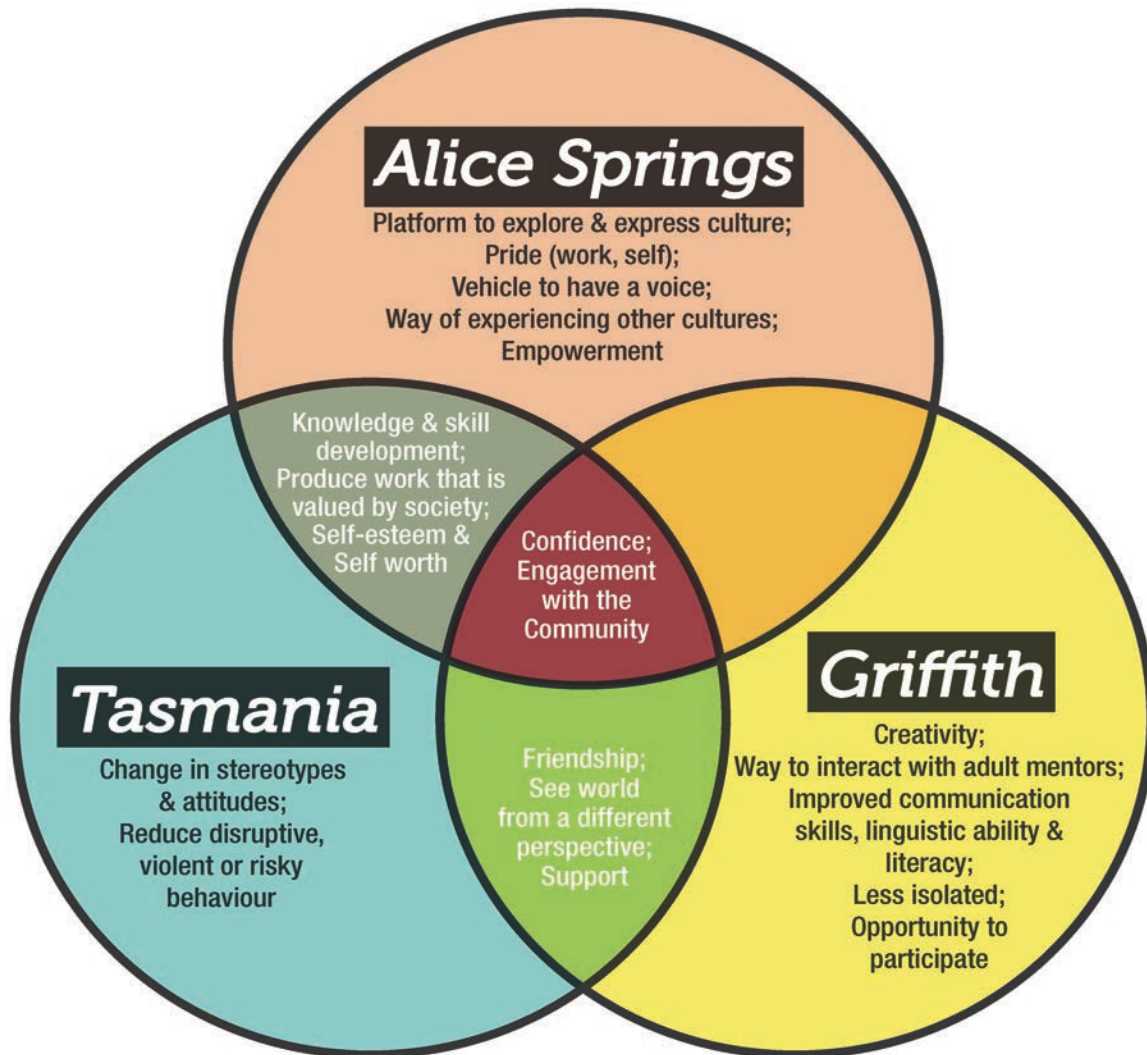
Figure 2: Impact by project (Alice Springs, Griffith, Tasmania)

For interviewees from Alice Springs and Ernabella – the NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI project – the overarching domains of 'identity and culture', 'community', 'psychosocial health', 'the arts' and 'learning' were prominent. For these project participants and community members, these five domains represented both local concerns and an Indigenous perspective, and the ways that these intersected with the arts. Arts practice, in this case, was a platform to explore and express culture and was a way for others in society to experience their culture. In addition, arts practice led to the development of new knowledge/skills, empowered participants, filled them with pride, and was a vehicle to have a voice. The work produced was valued by others in society. This positive community engagement increased participant confidence, self-esteem and feelings of self-worth.

The overarching domains of 'community, 'psychosocial health', 'agency and behavioural change', 'the arts' and 'learning' were significant for Tasmanian

interviewees. The views of respondents from Alice Springs intersected with those from Tasmania – the LUCKY project – in terms of the importance of knowledge/skill development, producing work that is valued by society, community engagement, increased participant confidence, self-esteem and self-worth. The ability of the arts to change stereotypes/attitudes and reduce disruptive/violent/risky behaviour was seen as an essential impact of BIG *h*ART projects in Tasmania. In addition, friendships, seeing the world from a different perspective and making participants feel supported were also thought to be crucial impacts that overlapped with Griffith, the base for the GOLD project. Based across the Murray-Darling Basin, GOLD interviewees saw BIG *h*ART projects as providing participants with the opportunity to engage with the community, participate in something creative, and interact with adult mentors. As a result, participant confidence, creativity, communication skills, linguistic ability and literacy were improved while feelings of isolation were reduced.

Conclusion

Context, personal experience and an individual's biography shape and form attitudes, opinions and behaviours. This also appears to be the case for assessments of impact. By comparing and contrasting the views of participants, artists, funders and community members and then by comparing and contrasting views by the three different BIG *h*ART projects, it was apparent that different people and different projects did indeed value different impacts.

Project outcomes, or impact, were found to have benefits that accrued at both the level of the community and that of the individual. Key to understanding differences in these outcomes – their continuities and discontinuities – the research revealed the influences of interviewee motivations, perspectives, history and place. What is currently missing is shared understandings that serve to clarify what different stakeholders experience and mean. Therefore, these findings should be considered when BIG *h*ART and other arts organisations are pitching projects, looking for funding, trying to recruit participants and deliver robust projects.

11   Productive conditions, benefits, risks and possibilities

Peter Wright

Introduction

What is clear to those who consider the work of BIG *h*ART or similar participatory arts companies is that the work is complex and layered. The results of the work accrue over time and in multifarious ways; put differently, there are many trajectories through it and beneficial outcomes. One useful way to think about this work is as an ecology of practice with many elements going to make up a whole – the whole being greater than the sum of its parts – and the *interaction* between them is key. In the same way that the ecosystem of a riverbank is comprised of the trees, shrubs and plants, the soil that sustains them, the sun and the river itself, so too this form of arts practice depends on resources to do the work, participants in it, those who might be touched by it, and those who enable it.

The metaphor also holds true when we understand that a system such as a riverbank depends on the interaction between those disparate elements for its survival and is also *dynamic* in nature. It is also important to understand that ecological systems are not a nested series of Russian dolls, but rather a complex series of entanglements that can be disperse, dynamic and sometimes contested.

Drawing across all seven domains identified for the research we are able to describe the productive conditions that support BIG *h*ART's award-winning work. More than just a loose set of associations that are permissive in nature, these conditions are those that allow for divergence across projects, but also are critical in producing work that counts. Importantly, these conditions are not causal in nature but through their presence high quality work emerges that is co-emergent and concomitant. In this sense they both allow for change but also provide an understanding of congruence across participatory arts-based work. These conditions have been developed by BIG *h*ART from many years of trial and error as well as successful practice.

We also understand that these conditions are implicit in many other projects; however, they are often only described in piecemeal ways. Describing these here

allows others to reflect on, critique and contribute to this conversation in thoughtful ways and move us towards shared understandings.

Productive conditions of BIG *h*ART's practice

Recognising that successful project outcomes are interactions between place, context and person, and given BIG *h*ART's exemplary practice, we can consider these productive conditions as markers of quality participatory arts practice. The notion of productive conditions is also important because they describe what is necessary, but not sufficient, in terms of providing a scaffold in which change can occur. It is a mistake, for example, to assume that there is a stepwise causality. Simply providing a venue doesn't mean that people will visit, in the same way that having the ingredients does not mean that a cake will be baked. This is particularly important in projects of arts-infused social change where the minutiae of outcomes cannot be predetermined in reliable, knowable or predictable ways because they are contingent on human experience.

This means that 'impact' or what people experience is dependent on how participants engage and participate in projects, and their experience can vary depending on their own biographies, values and the meanings they attribute to them. Paradoxically, the power that comes from BIG *h*ART's responsiveness to what participants bring to the projects – in this way being authentic to them, and so 'particular' – is often perceived as a limitation in scientistic world views.

What we have been able to distil from the research is that productive conditions for BIG *h*ART's exemplary participatory arts practice have the following attributes and dimensions.

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Informed by the following values and principles:

I.   values that promote *individual and social growth*
II.   values of *inclusiveness and respect*
III.   *humanistic* principles
IV.   *relational* in nature
V.   being *grounded* in community

Enacted though:

VI.   provision of *opportunities*
VII.   provision of *resources* – including financial, physical, material, and varying forms of knowledge and expertise located in arts workers, creative producers and partners
VIII.   *embodiment* of social justice principles
IX.   a focus on *identity* work – individual and community
X.   *creative workshops* that have meaning and authenticity
XI.   animation of the *imagination*
XII.   actively *'teaching'* skills that are engaging to participants
XIII.   *support* – notions of 'holding' participants as they grow and change
XIV.   a focus on *innovation and risk taking*, stretching participants beyond what has been taken for granted.

Sustained though:

XV.   collaborative *community partnerships*
XVI.   projects that are *socially worthwhile* to those who are in them, see them or might be touched by them
XVII.   projects that culminate in a *public event* with the artefacts developed strategically placed in community
XVIII.   a *developmental approach*
XIX.   *quality* in both process and product.

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In other words, opportunities are provided that have certain characteristics. These opportunities foreground (but are not limited to) experience in art making that is supported through high levels of social skills; with a consequence being recognition by others. In addition, these opportunities are infused by humanitarian values and principles, and the facilitation of others and the behaviours they elicit are grounded in relational forms of art making, or, put more simply, participants working as artists. Finally, there are key moments within this social-aesthetic frame that are important for change to occur. In other words, art making and learning combine to teach and animate, provide perspective and insights, and lead to different ways of being in the world, each of which provide a call to action with an ethical or moral dimension.

12   Coda: BIG *h*ART speaking back to the research

Scott Rankin

A personal reflection: these large projects at the time can be all consuming, lasting years at a time, in difficult settings with limited resources. They require a kind of vanity of belief, a belief that they are more than the sum of their parts, that they have value, that they are offering something positive to those involved, that the idea behind the project and the combination of art making with the other layers of the project is valuable. Once the project has finished there can be a strange pendulum swing, a sense of doubt creeps in, wanting to move on, not look back. Conversely there can also be a sense of wanting to preserve the project and document it, not to let it slip away, only to have the wheel reinvented in the future.

Yet the projects themselves don't really exit. Permanence is over-rated. The projects have their life in the flow of culture and identity. They lodge in the lives of others – participants, audiences, communities, artists, etc. And they exist also in some of the better poetics of the project. An idea rendered artfully may deepen and grow, if the artisanship has integrity, and remain as part of an expanding vocabulary of memory, not only amongst the participants or the audiences, but in the present to new audiences. The poetics of the project may become a kind of beacon, a channel marker in the cultural flow that others may use as they create their own community projects and art, flowing on from the project, a kind of memory in the present.

Statistics and evaluations don't usually work in that way. They are often reminders that things didn't go wrong; that projects were completed in such a way as to mitigate against risk; they are often useful only as a moment in time, and can even become a target for cynicism.

The process of having such committed and long-term observers looking at these three projects has thrown a new light on this idea of permanence. There is a certain poetics of observation at work here. These three projects inspired many others. NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI helped give rise to the permissions for the five-year Namatjira project, which grew into a deepening relationship with the Namatjira family. The Yijala Yala project in the Pilbara flowed from both of these. Museum of the Long Weekend, the Acoustic Life of Sheds, We Vote Soon, and a raft of other projects

flowed from the free-form flow of the LUCKY project. Similarly the scope of GOLD across vast geography has shaped thinking. So to have a permanent sense of observation alongside and inside as well as outside BIG *h*ART looking at a cross-section of the work at the same time as new projects have been delivered has been a unique opportunity, creating reflection within the work that wouldn't otherwise be there.

Sustainability is a flash-in-the-pan weasel word that is clearly only applied in certain settings where people are usually scrambling for justification. It can actually mean anything, but usually means nothing. Imagine if everything was sustainable, we'd be burdened by the past and be struggling to respond to a changing future. Do we want our poor practice to be sustained, or our guesswork? Failure is essential. It is the compost in the soil of education. A lack of sustainability is what can make these approaches to work in community nutrient rich. Sustainability often means creating the opportunity to build dependency and keep the snout in the trough a little longer. Instead it can be useful to see where these project really live and breathe – in the lives of different audiences and participants who are learning from them in different ways. They sit within the flow of cultural change, in the life and memories of communities and individuals. In this context documentation, reflection, rumination, nostalgia, statistics, aesthetics and poetics can create an artefact for carrying forward the ideas behind projects that shouldn't be sustained, but can influence others in their work.

At the end of the NGAPARTJI NGAPARTJI documentary *Nothing Rhymes with Ngapartji* a wise old man from Ernabella (who has since passed on) says by way of advice to Trevor Jamieson: 'Trevor, talk about the life. Talk about the language and the culture.' There is something in this. The life. Not 'how things were' necessarily, but the life that runs through things, and through how things will be. Talk about it. Talk about the change inherent in sustainability. Sustainability is another word for change, and yet we use it as another way of thinking about permanence.

If the words in this document are to be useful they should be used to avoid dogma, to reflect and dream new approaches to this kind of work. Community diplomacy, encouraging thriving and flourishing pockets to emerge in communities through working within the flow of culture, sits well with the idea of domains, or areas or 'estates' – whole ecologies – where change takes place. Nothing is in stasis, and in this work everyone in a community has a responsibility to work with change. Whether you run the local newsagent or caryard or you're an artist; you are part of the future life of the community. The domains outlined here by the researchers, through spending time with these BIG *h*ART projects and the communities that invited us in, are valuable ways of thinking about and approaching work of this nature.

Change is often precipitated through 'a small group of committed friends' rather than through mass strategy. It is easy to undervalue the strength of a small group of friends/workers/artists over a large organisation. However a crystal clear idea, a deep commitment, a kind of savvy and working as friends 'with a secret' can be very effective in triggering change. The intensity of it, the shorthand, the maturity it requires, the reward, is 'the life'. It is meaningful. It is poetic. It lives not in dogma but in those who shift their identity through involvement, through the change in the flow of culture.

We are awash in the white noise of media, old, new, social, creating tangles of time-consuming networks and information, all demanding a response or deletion. Billions of emails every day are flicked between us information gluttons and only a small percentage require a response. The superficiality of 'like' is often a way of not taking action. This white noise keeps us switched on, unable to say 'no', prostituting the small amount of time our brains are awake and perceptive to receive new ways ideas, ways of thinking, ways of maturing, ways of giving and receiving. We are promiscuous with our receptive hearts and minds, fearing that if they are open and listening that nothing may come and that nothingness is a harbinger for frightening mortality. And so over-achieving is the new achieving, and we are rarely quiet enough or focused enough to be able to discern and decipher – which are so important to community diplomacy. Instead we get sucked to the left or the right, to the binary, into the noise and our own group vanity.

However, change, which can be such a dangerous thing to play with, happens in and through relationships. Change for the better depends on discernment and the ability to decipher. It has more to do with poetry than intervention; more to do with narrative; more to do with imagining a future diplomatically, and describing it in a story, so a community can move towards it. In social settings this needs to be balanced with how the narrative is getting told, who is included in it, and how a tribe is being formed around it. Something as complex as contributing to change through community development around these issues of social invisibility works very well amongst a small group of committed friends, and this is the basis of BIG *h*ART's work. This work can be described as a series of domains, which are overlaid in a rhizomic manner, defying reduction, but never locked into a dogmatic approach. Next time BIG *h*ART's work is examined, some core things will be the same, and some will no doubt be different. And like the truths and observations in this monograph, many of the deepest things will come from the acute perceptions of those who quietly explored the projects, asked the questions and brought the filter of their research to these projects.

For this reason BIG *h*ART would like to thank the researchers and others who have taken an academic and a poetic interest in this work and diligently applied

themselves to its analysis, sometimes following projects in difficult locations over many years.

Scott Rankin

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