

BUILDING COMMUNITY PRIDE AND IDENTITY

THE ARTS RIPPLE EFFECT
VALUING THE ARTS IN COMMUNITIES



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Technology is changing the way we construct our social relationships but it has not done away with our very human need to form physical communities that we feel connected to. Research from the US, UK, and Australia has found that the arts can help create social and cultural bonds within communities.⁴

Arts-based engagement can promote cooperation, awareness of local issues and the reduction of social isolation, all of which contributes to a shared sense of community pride and identity.⁵

“Creative projects aimed at enriching a sense of community identity...can not only affirm the value of social and cultural diversity but also allow for an avowal of the importance of community in an uncertain world.”⁶

The research indicates the value of acknowledging different ‘community identities’. Communities that are able to embrace diversity, creative expression and cultural activity are richer, stronger and more able to deal with social challenges.⁷

The community’s need to engage can be illustrated in many ways, such as the explosion of community festivals,⁸ the enormous popularity of community and live music events, cinema, public libraries and other cultural institutions.⁹

“Festivals are pivotal dates on the annual calendars of towns and villages: they bring together scattered farm folk, young and old and disparate subcultures: they blend attitudes, enlarge social networks and encourage improvements in social cohesion.”¹⁰

⁴ Bamford A. (2006). *The Wow Factor: Global research compendium on the impact of the arts in education*. Germany: Waxmann.

⁵ McQueen-Thomson D, James P & Ziaguras C. (2004). *Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing Through Community and Cultural Development: A Review of Literature Focusing on Community Festivals and Celebrations*. Melbourne: VicHealth & RMIT University.

⁶ Mulligan M & Smith P. (2009). ‘Art, Governance and the Turn into Community: Putting Art at the Heart of Local Government.’ *ReGenerating Community Conference Papers*. Melbourne: Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University. Available at <http://mams.rmit.edu.au/fc1d0uu0zhpm1.pdf>

⁷ Arts Victoria. (2013). *Making Art With Communities: A Work Guide*. Melbourne: Arts Victoria, VicHealth, & Castanet.

⁸ Phipps P & Slater L. (2010). *Indigenous Cultural Festivals: Evaluating Impact on Community Health and Wellbeing: A report to the Telstra Foundation on Indigenous Festivals 2007–2010*. Melbourne: Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University, p 8.

⁹ Gibson C & Stewart A. (2009). *Reinventing Rural Places: The extent and impact of festivals in rural and regional Australia*. Wollongong: University of Wollongong, p 12.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 5.

CREATING BELONGING: ANTI-RACISM ACTION BAND (A.R.A.B.) – NORTHERN TRAX

Anti-Racism Action Band (A.R.A.B.) was established as a creative outlet for Arabic young people in Melbourne's outer north. It aimed to challenge racial tensions and promote social inclusion while imparting performance, event management, social and life skills and crucial employment pathways for participants. A.R.A.B. quickly opened its door to youth from all cultural backgrounds as a proactive way to address racism. The area was lacking in opportunities for young people to engage with the performing arts and local young people were really enthusiastic to get involved. A.R.A.B. participants were given the opportunity to share positive representations of their culture and social lives.

A.R.A.B.'s major production in 2010 was Northern Trax, a series of performance events in and around Melbourne's Flinders Street Station. Northern Trax was staged as part of the 2010 Melbourne International Arts Festival. The centrepiece was an original theatre piece performed in Degraives St underpass that told the story of a contentious cross-



A.R.A.B. performers dance installation Flinders Street Station, Northern Trax (2010) Melbourne Festival

cultural marriage. Northern Trax also included a series of seemingly spontaneous 'flash mob' dance and music performances around the northern train line platforms and concourses at Flinders Street Station.

"They've given me the chance to go places I never thought I would go, I've performed places I never thought I'd perform. I was one of the trouble makers and now one of the stars of the show" (Northern Trax Participant)¹¹

The show involved public rehearsals with 150 teenagers, representing 50 different cultural groups and 40 different religious identities. The young performers were required to work together as a group, and the interaction between participants from a wide range of cultural backgrounds was an important outcome of the project.

"We're all different people but when we're together we love the same thing, you know, like dance" (Northern Trax Participant)¹²

An earlier evaluation of the A.R.A.B program found that participants reported they had a better understanding of people from other cultures and backgrounds after being involved in A.R.A.B. productions.¹³ One of the major successes of A.R.A.B initiative was found to be the noticeable difference in levels of self-esteem and confidence among the participants, along with a new understanding and tolerance of difference as reported by the staff at their schools, tutors, school partners and the students themselves.¹⁴

<http://arab-vass.com/main-work/northern-tracks/>

¹¹ Anti Racism Action Band. (2009). *Northern Trax A Snapshot of Anti Racism Action Band*. Available at <http://vimeo.com/21630655>

¹² Anti Racism Action Band. (2009). *Northern Trax A Snapshot of Anti Racism Action Band*. Available at <http://vimeo.com/21630655>

¹³ Halifax & Rodriguez. (2006). *A.R.A.B. Evaluation Research and Report* [online], p 29. Available at <http://arab-vass.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/18/files/2010/07/EvaluationDocument.pdf>

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 33.

CASE STUDY: MOUTH TO MOUNTAIN

The **Mouth to Mountain** project was part of the City of Greater Geelong's *Connecting Identities* program developed under the artistic directorship of Meme McDonald.



Mouth to Mountain (2009) Fire pit installations You Yangs. Photo: Glenn Romanis

<http://www.geelongaustralia.com.au/connectingidentities/>

The project aimed to articulate a sense of place and identity through artistic processes; respond to the rapid change across the greater Geelong area; increase connectedness between Council departments and across the municipality; and develop and present expressions of local culture that inform and influence council planning and development initiatives.¹⁵

On 9 May 2010, from dawn at the mouth of the Barwon River to sunset at the You Yangs, twelve ambassadors representing the twelve municipal wards carried water in a 54km relay – kayaking, on horseback, by train, in utes, on bikes and on foot.

Approximately 2,200 people joined the relay at various locations along the way. Sculptures, artworks and music marked the journey through iconic locations arriving at dusk for a celebration at Big Rock, in the You Yangs mountain range. The dusk celebration culminated in a pilot performance of the **Mouth to Mountain** Contemporary Songline; an original 40-minute musical composition that reflected the changing landscape from the mouth of the Barwon River across country and city to the top of the You Yangs.

The **Mouth to Mountain** journey was built over a year of engagement between artists and communities throughout Geelong. It resulted in the creation of 30 artworks and six performances including fire pit installations by Indigenous artist

Glenn Romanis, dramatic large scale nests by Michelle Fifer-Spooner, a sculpture by lead artist Richard Thomas and 12 'story vessel' sculptures, each made by local sculptors, representing the twelve municipal wards.

More than 800 members of the Geelong community assisted in developing **Mouth to Mountain** on a voluntary basis. These included: 96 relay ambassadors, over 300 people from across the 12 municipal wards who participated in story-vessel workshops; 200 students from nine different primary schools who helped to create artworks and music for the event; and many volunteers and helpers who performed a multitude of tasks leading up to the day.

Participants reported that they felt inspired to be part of such a monumental public performance.¹⁶

Due to ongoing requests from many individuals, community organisations and artists, plans are now underway to develop the **Mouth to Mountain** pilot concept into a 24 hour biennial community arts pilgrimage, commencing in May 2014.

Mouth to Mountain reflected Geelong communities; honouring the past, acknowledging the present and visioning the future. It demonstrated that *“creative projects that can capture and celebrate a diversity of stories related to life in communities will build a more inclusive sense of community identity and also allow for many more voices to be heard.”*¹⁷

¹⁵ http://www.geelongaustralia.com.au/connectingidentities/project_objectives.html

¹⁶ Mulligan M & Smith P. (2009). 'Art, Governance and the Turn into Community: Putting Art at the Heart of Local Government.' *ReGenerating Community Conference Papers*. Melbourne: Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University. Available at <http://mams.rmit.edu.au/fc1d0uu0zhpm1.pdf>

¹⁷ Ibid.

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