

# PARTICIPATION FORUM 2012

A one day event exploring refugee and migrant young people's connection to community arts





### Acknowledgements

The pARTicipation Forum was produced by the Centre for Multicultural Youth in association with the Footscray Community Arts Centre

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### Forum Young Experts

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Dave Nguyen, Loretta Mui

### Performers

Flemington Theatre Group and Western Edge Youth Arts presented an excerpt from Black Face White Mask

Alia Gabres (Centre for Poetics and Justice)

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This report can be downloaded at <http://www.cmy.net.au/participationforum>

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### Funders

VicHealth  
City of Brimbank  
City of Maribryngong

Many thanks to all who contributed to make this an exciting event! This includes over 30 people who attended consultation sessions to input into the day's program. Special thanks goes to the Western Youth Arts Network (WYAN) and WYAN Coordinator Charlotte Hilder.

### Summary

“The forum is exciting – for me it about exploring ways to be accountable and transparent as well as building new language and ways to work to empower ourselves as workers or participants in community arts practice” said Loretta Mui, Forum Youth Expert

Can art be a tool for social change? How do you measure success in the arts amongst people amongst people from refugee backgrounds? What is high quality community art – and who defines it?



These were some of the queries discussed at the pARTicipation Forum on Friday, 1 June 2012 at the Footscray Community Arts Centre.

Produced by the Centre for Multicultural Youth in association with the Footscray Community Arts Centre, the pARTicipation Forum brought together 152 artists, community arts producers, young people, government personnel, funders and arts advisors to explore community arts that engage young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

The Forum represented a rare opportunity to critically explore key issues within the community arts sector, including arts access and opportunity for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, as well as the thornier issues of representation, terminology and power.

CMY staged the first pARTicipation Forum in 2010, the impetus being the recognition that young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds frequently “experience barriers that limit their participation in, and access to, cultural programs, venues and events and that there is a divide between participation in community arts projects and mainstream arts pathways” (pARTicipation Forum 2010 report, authored by the 2010 Forum Producer Paola Bilbrough – the report can be downloaded at <http://www.cmy.net.au/participationforum>).

With the aim of creating a biannual opportunity for ongoing discussion CMY sought funding from VicHealth, the City of Brimbank and the City of Maribyrnong to stage a second pARTicipation Forum in 2012.

CMY conducted extensive consultations within the community arts and related sectors to devise the 2012 program. A group of Forum Youth Experts, all under 25 years of age, with experience in community arts projects and from refugee or migrant backgrounds were invited to assist with the planning and production of the Forum. Two community meetings were held to discuss key issues and objectives. Forum attendees were also asked to nominate their key issues via the registration form.

*"IT'S TIME FOR THOSE OF US AT THE COALFACE TO REMIND OURSELVES, AND OTHERS, JUST WHY OUR WORK AS COMMUNITY ARTS WORKERS IS SO VITALLY IMPORTANT. GATHERING TO TALK, DEBATE, REFLECT AND EVEN DISAGREE, IS WHAT KEEPS THE METABOLIC ENGINES OF OUR SECTOR BURNING."*

JENNIFER BARRY  
DIRECTOR AND CEO  
FOOTSCRAY COMMUNITY  
ARTS CENTRE



The program was comprised of performances, panel conversations, smaller break out discussions and a 'poetic intervention'. It intended to provide an opportunity for discussion and reflection with the aim of stimulating critical dialogue and the initiation of practical strategies for the future. There were also opportunities to listen to others and to engage creatively in the day.

Key issues chosen to be of focus for the main stage were:

- Funding – mainly relationships and the financial challenges in an unstable global setting
- The thoughts and experiences of young people as they develop an artistic critical practice
- Utilising art as a platform to discuss key issues for young migrants
- Developing critical language for the community arts.

Eight smaller discussion sessions were designed to provide more in depth input for Forum attendees on:

- Staging community arts in geographically remote areas
- Sustainability in the arts
- Strategies to develop a community network
- Art as a tool for change
- Pathways for young people

As well as opportunities for creative production such as the creation of a collaborative poem for the day and 'Awesome Arts projects...in 40 minutes'.

The pARTicipation Forum attracted 152 attendees, of which 51 were Artists/practitioners, 22 were young people, 45 represented not for profit organisations, 8 were academics, 21 worked in

government (overwhelmingly local) and 5 were from funding organisations. 31% forum attendees completed an online evaluation form which elicited feedback on organisation, format, highlights, best and worst sessions and further comments. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with the most appreciation being for the opportunity to hear young people talk critically about their practice, experiences and philosophy. One recommendation was that the day needed to provide more opportunity for smaller group discussion in order to allow for in depth discussion and progression of strategies. The programming of four panel conversations, the size of the gathering - an increase of 31% - and the choice of a venue that could only provide auditorium seating worked against the opportunity for more intimate discussion.

The main recommendation from the forum affirmed the 2010 pARTicipation Forum recommendation of the establishment of a community arts network (with an online presence accessible to young people and professionals) that engages with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. The need for more opportunities for in depth discussion also became apparent from feedback at the forum and the evaluation.

This report covers:

- Aims and Objectives
- Planning
- Outcomes
- Evaluations
- Recommendations

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The 2012 Forum's aims and objectives remained essentially the same as the 2010 Forum with the additional aims of furthering the discussions, networks and outcomes previously achieved.

### Aims:

- Increase the capacity of the cultural sector to enhance migrant and refugee young people's access to, and participation in, cultural venues and events.
- Create greater understanding and awareness among representatives engaged in the cultural sectors about the challenges and opportunities facing young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.
- Increase understanding of the benefits of arts participation to migrant and refugee young people's well-being, confidence, social connectedness and overall health outcomes.
- Increase commitment to further develop best practice models with the community arts sector with the aim of improving migrant and refugee young people's participation in, experience of, and access to, cultural venues, programs and events.

### Forum objectives were to:

- Provide an opportunity for stakeholders to share and transfer knowledge and experiences and identify strategies to order to enhance migrant and refugee young people's access to, and participation in, cultural venues and events
- Develop recommendations for next-step strategies to foster partnerships and enhance professional development opportunities for employees in the cultural sector.
- Build upon the discussions and networks achieved by the 2010 pARTicipation Forum
- Reflect best practice models in the consultation, devising and production of the participation Forum

### In addition, the 2012 Forum aimed to advance the success of the 2010 Forum by:

- Providing more opportunity for young people to present and speak at the Forum
- Increasing attendance
- Increasing regional representation.
- Increasing the engagement of funders and arts advisors.

## PLANNING

The 2012 pARTicipation Forum involved an extensive pre-Forum consultation process that aimed to develop a one day program that reflected the needs and concerns of those attending as well as encourage registration from a broad cross section of community members across Victoria.

### Youth Experts:

In keeping with the CMY's ethos of employing young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds as consultants and producers six young people were engaged as Forum Youth Experts. The Young Experts were all under 25, from refugee or migrant backgrounds and had all participated in community arts projects.

The experiences of the 2012 Youth Experts in community art included the following projects and organisations: Flemington Theatre Company, Ladies of Colour Agency (LOCA), SYN Media, A.R.A.B., MASSIVE hip hop choir, Youthworx Media and CMY's Arts and Culture projects Seeding Light, Route 96, Snapshots from Oz, Artist In Residence and Next Generation Media.

They were consulted on the program's content and participated by either performing, speaking on a panel session and/or co-facilitating workshops aligned to their interests and expertise.

### Key concerns included:

- How can we make long-term, working connections with funding bodies and organisations and secure more support for programs for CALD communities and what possibilities/options are there to work closely or collaborate with organisations?
- Is it cause for concern that most community arts/community sector organisations and funding bodies are predominantly 'white'- (e.g. People of colour are not able to access these opportunities to lead, work with their own communities in paid roles as easily as their white counterparts-leading them to work mainly as volunteers) How can we create cultural change around this?



While for the Forum some of the Young Experts were seeking:

- Having more challenging conversations in which workers, participants- everyone can contribute and strengthen community arts in an uncertain future
- I would like to get hear the perspectives of other community members and facilitators, as well as gain more insight into practical ways to apply people's ideas, such as making plans of action, devising models and other ways to approach the issues that get brought up in the forum.

### Community Consultations:

Consultation meetings were held prior to the Forum. A meeting took place at Footscray Community Arts Centre with community artists and arts producers who are members of the Western Youth Arts Network (WYAN). A second meeting expanded to include young people and funders as well as community artists and arts producers and was staged at CMY's central office in Carlton.

Respondents were asked to consider their dream community arts forum and to respond to the following questions:

- What is the key question you would bring to the forum?
- What's the dominant feeling you would like to feel at the forum?
- What is the key thing you would take away from the forum?
- How do you want the forum to influence your practice in the next two years?

Participants were then asked to present what they perceived as the critical issues of the community arts sector that engage with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Key issues that emerged from the consultations were:

### Young People

- What matters to young people? Young people defining their arts practice in conversation with other young people.
- How to empower young people?
- Providing access to more opportunities to young people – providing connections, where to point young people to? Possibility of community

arts website.

- How do we move away from defining young people?
- How to create opportunity in art for all young people, regardless of geographic location such as Melbourne's South-East?
- How to be honest and truthful about your project? Making it relevant to young people. Going beyond the imposed aim to deliver positive messages.
- How can we reach young people?
- How to create better structures for young people to participate in all levels of decision making
- Why do we separate CALD, indigenous and mainstream?
- What is in it for us? What do young artists get from the project?

### Pathways

- Pathways – what is there out there for young people?

### Sharing resources and processes

- How to effectively share the process of creating community art.
- How can we use networks to bring others in?
- How to provide space for arts practice for young people (studios etc), especially in outer metropolitan suburbs?
- Creating interactive models to work through ideas

### Evaluation

- Measuring the meaning of success to community
- How can you develop a critical process within community arts practice, with young people and arts producers?
- How to evaluate community arts? How can young people evaluate the arts?
- How can we raise the quality of community arts?

### Community

- How to reach parents and community. How can we involve parents? (Particularly limited project resources)
- How to encourage parents to support young people doing community arts

### *Art as activism*

- Is community art activism?

### *Art as art*

- Giving recognition to the art in community art – separation between community and mainstream art

### *Innovation and Progression*

- How to avoid redundancy and duplication in project devising? How to encourage collaboration?

### *Sustainability*

- How to ensure ongoing pathways/ support beyond a project?
- How do we make projects sustainable?
- How can we make more connections between funding bodies and organisations and make programs more sustainable?

### *Funders and Funding*

- How do you make it relevant to young people with potential conflicting pressures from funders?
- How to produce projects flexible to young people's needs and desires when projects are pre-determined by funding?
- How do people on the ground influence funders?
- How do we facilitate young people into leadership roles/pathways into being an artist beyond a project's funding parameters?
- Why do we have to tailor projects to funding needs when it should be tailored to the young people?
- How to create more dialogue/ transparency between funding bodies and arts organisations/producers to ensure appropriate needs are met for young people

### **Brimbank Arts Up! Consultations:**

In addition to the above consultations CMY, with the support of the City of Brimbank, staged Brimbank Arts Up! workshops in the lead up to the Forum. One aimed at young people and one aimed at workers in the area. They sought to provide an opportunity for local networking and facilitate the effective representation at the Forum of Brimbank's community arts programs, personnel and priority needs.

Key points from the Brimbank Arts Up!

Workshops were:

- The challenge to connect with young people interested in the arts in an area as geographically as extensive as Brimbank.
- The need for venues for arts in Brimbank.
- The importance of local universities and community services partnering on research and evaluation.
- Strategies to engage with young people and encourage participation. The staging of regular events within the community allows young people the opportunity to witness arts events and consider engagement. It also provides parents with the opportunity for parents to become familiar with the concept of arts participation and support young people to engage.
- How the 'Youth' label on events can deter young people from engaging, as can the 'CALD' label which 'plays on the invisibility of white people'.
- The challenge, with minimal resources, of promoting arts events widely enough so young people are aware of events and opportunities.

### **Registration:**

Forum attendees were asked to offer, upon online registration, two key critical issues that they saw pertinent to this field and which were their priority discussion issues. Additional issues to those listed above included:

- How can white community arts workers work with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to create genuinely youth-led projects?
- Ways of working effectively and ethically with young people who have experienced trauma/cultural sensitivity

### **Programming:**

The program was then the aim of reflecting the above consultation information, offering a diverse program that would have broad appeal, creating diversity of activity during the day and drawing upon available talent as speakers and performers.

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## **OUTCOMES**

### **Attendance**

It was expected that approximately 110 people would attend the 2012 Forum. 152 people ended up attending on the day.

*Forum attendees only:*

Artists/practitioners: 38  
Young people: 2  
Not for profit representatives: 38  
Government representatives: 21  
Academics: 8

*Presenters/speakers (the majority of whom also participated as forum attendees):*

Artists/practitioners/arts orgs: 13  
Young people: 20  
Not for profit representatives: 7  
Funding representatives: 5

**Representation**

Organisations represented at the Forum were:

- Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
- Arts Victoria
- Australian Communities Foundation
- Barkly Arts
- Bounczn
- Brimbank City Council
- City of Ballarat
- City of Casey
- City of Maribyrnong
- City of Melbourne
- City of Whittlesea (Youth Services)
- City of Wodonga
- City of Yarra
- Centre for Multicultural Youth
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)
- Dream on Youths
- Express Media
- Fitzroy Adventure Playground
- Hanover Welfare Services
- Inner Melbourne VET Cluster
- Islamic Council of Victoria
- Jesuit Social Services
- Massive Hip Hop Choir/Barkly Arts
- Melton Youth Services
- Moonee valley City Council
- Mount Alexander Shire council
- Multicultural Arts Victoria
- Museum Australia (Victoria)
- Peril Magazine
- Relatewell
- Torch project
- Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre
- Signal (City of Melbourne)

- Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)
- Victoria University
- The Victorian Arts Centre
- Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency
- Young People and the Arts Australia
- Youthworx
- Western Edge Youth Arts/Flemington Theatre Group
- Women's Circus
- WYPIN

Presenters and Facilitators were drawn from:

- Arts Victoria
- Australia Council for the Arts
- Brimbank City Council
- Centre for Poetics and Justice
- City of Melbourne
- City of Melton
- City of Whittlesea
- Crooked Rib Art
- Footprints Enterprises Inc
- Footscray Community Arts Centre
- Ladies of Colour Agency (LOCA)
- Massive Hip Hop Choir/Barkly Arts
- Multicultural Arts Victoria
- RE Ross Trust
- RISE
- VicHealth
- Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne
- Youthworx
- Word and Mouth
- Western Edge Youth Arts/Flemington Theatre Group

The 2012 Forum attracted a large contingent of community arts producers in the not for profit sector and the government sectors. CMY would have liked to increase the participation of young people, funders and arts advisors in order to extend the circle of conversation to all those engaged in the sector.

Staging the Forum during a school holiday was not a possibility due to the CMY Arts and Culture program finishing at the end of June. The Forum was successful in engaging young people as Youth Experts, speakers, performers and/or attendees with 22 young people attending. The morning program was overwhelmingly

*IT WAS ABOUT CREATING A VOICE IN OUR COMMUNITY ABOUT ISSUES THAT WERE RELEVANT TO US."*

presented by young people and was generally considered by Forum attendees as the most engaging part of the program. It is hoped that the next pARTicipation Forum is able to be staged on a date that is more accessible to young people generally.

In the planning stages a number of strategies were considered in order to increase arts decision makers' presence. These included staging a meeting with Youth Experts and arts decision makers post Forum to discuss the key recommendations of the 2012 Forum Report; hosting an arts decision maker's breakfast at the Forum; and inviting a panel of arts decision makers and funders to speak at a panel discussion. Due to time limitations, both on the day and post the Forum, it was decided that a panel discussion on funding, a key issue for young people and arts producers, was the best option to engage funders.

#### **The Forum**

The pARTicipation Forum was comprised of performances, panel discussions, break out 'Brainstormin' sessions' for smaller group discussions and a 'poetic intervention'. The program aimed to facilitate the engagement of a diverse audience with the overall aims of stimulating critical dialogue and initiating practical strategies for the future.

#### *Performance: Black Face White Mask*

*Performers:* Munira Younis, Daniel Haile Michael, Solomon Salew, Legrand Anderson, Maki Issa, and Abraham Herasan (Flemington Theatre Group)

Western Edge Youth Arts' Flemington Theatre Group performed a fifteen minute excerpt from their play Black Face White Mask, written collaboratively with directors Dave Kelman and Dave Nguyen.

Black Face White Mask follows the stories of young African Australians and explores the complexity of the cultural politics in which they live. The play had a successful season in 2010 and will be remounted in July at the mainstream venue Malthouse Theatre.



#### *Conversation: Creating Cultural Politics*

*Facilitator:* Dave Nguyen

*Speakers:* Munira Younis, Daniel Haile Michael, Solomon Salew, Legrand Anderson, Maki Issa, and Abraham Herasan (Flemington Theatre Group)

The Flemington Theatre Group performers remained on stage for a conversation between themselves and the Forum audience about their aim in producing theatre work exploring their shared experiences of identity and belonging.

The Flemington Theatre Group has been working together over the last three years with some members having a history with Western Edge Youth Arts for over 7 years. The nine group members met when in high school after a long history of participation with Western Edge Youth Arts projects to create the play Black Face White Mask and after it's successful first season, chose to continue as an ensemble to reflect their experiences as pre-dominantly young African people living in Melbourne's inner west.

Members spoke about the impetus for their work being to create stories "relevant to us and relevant to our community". A shared understanding as migrants of an emerging community as to the need for "our community to work out what it meant to be African Australian in our community, to define what our identity in the community is" underlay the choice of the factual



Loretta Mui  
LOCA

*“IF YOU PUT LIGHT IN A DARK PLACE THEN EVIL WILL BE LESS LIKELY TO PERFORM”*

*– EMMANUEL JAL*

material utilised in the fictional scenarios. The marginalisation of cultural communities within the mainstream provided fuel for taking the stage: “When an issue happens you never hear the voice of the community, you hear it from ‘experts’. We wanted to tell our story instead of some researcher who treats us like a guinea pig.

The theatre is chosen from the materials of their lives with “Every scene in the play is anecdotal, everything’s happened to someone we know or one of us.” Members emphasized the importance of the content in their art making process and the responsibilities in engaging and reflecting specific communities and their communal experiences. Forum attendees were however alert to the techniques that the Flemington Theatre Group utilize in order to reach diverse audiences. Comedy is a key strategy, devised to effectively engage non-African audiences in productive responses to the material: “Our aim wasn’t to tell a sad story and have the audience feel sorry for us for 45 minutes then go back to their daily lives and forget about our stories.” The overall aim being to “to develop a consciousness among the African and wider community.”

*Panel Discussion: Racism, Rivalry and Rising Up*

Speakers: Penne Thornton (Multicultural Arts Victoria), Sarah Williams (Footprints Enterprises Inc), Masimba Hungwe (Dark \$.Paid), Ezeldin Deng (SudMedia), Veronica Barr (Bentiu Community Leader), Krystal Wani (Footprints Enterprises Inc).

Multicultural Arts Victoria and Footprints Enterprises Inc joined forces to present a discussion on ‘How do you measure success in arts work amongst people from former refugee backgrounds?’ by using as a springboard their recent staging of the Emmanuel Jal Tour and the Ubuntu Stage.

The Emmanuel Jal Tour was staged by StraightUp and gave MAV and Footprints the opportunity to host youth community engagement events with the international singer and activist taking time off his packed Australian tour to engage with local communities. Two ‘Emmanuel Jal Lions and Luminaries youth forums’ were staged in the east and west of Melbourne, aimed

at involving and engaging youth leaders in African communities. Following the forum in the western suburb Footscray, Emmanuel opened the stage and performed alongside young and emerging artists at the African youth street festival Ashiki Afrika. Young people identified key issues to discuss in the forums with Emmanuel Jal:

**RACISM**

Young people discussed the different forms of racism and the way they are expressed and their opinion that mostly they don’t have a voice against it.

**RIVALRY**

Young people of African background were keen to address ‘shadism’ and tribalism with their community. There was a lot of talk of fellow Africans not uniting on similar causes, and even different tribes of the same country continuing rivalry in a new environment. Some people commented that this form of internal racism or rivalry was holding them back even more than the external forces.

**RISING UP**

The forums aimed to be a platform for young people to be heard and discuss these topics together and to share this time with Emmanuel Jal, someone who has risen up against all odds and who can comment and share as someone who has faced all these things. Jal is often used to addressing people in the west who are unaware of his background and of the things he has been through. Here he was surrounded largely by other Sudanese youth who do have an understanding of his background, may share some of the same stories and have faced similar things.

Masimba Hungwe talked about the nature of racism in Australia which he identifies as being ‘structural racism’ that prevents people from accessing jobs and other opportunities: “The Australian society has a way of keeping racism out of the topics that are spoken about. Street level racism is easier to resist but systematic racism makes it harder to have a voice.” He added that it is easier to be resilient against out right racism, then with structural racism. Arts projects are seen as a way to generate a platform for young people to have a voice about such issues.

*“THROUGH THOSE PROJECTS I FEEL THAT I ESTABLISHED MY IDENTITY AND GREW WITHIN MYSELF AND GREW TO BE INVOLVED IN MY COMMUNITY AS WELL. YOU GROW AS A PERSON AND I THINK THAT’S VERY IMPORTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT AS A MEASURE OF SUCCESS FOR A PROJECT.”*

In terms of measuring success of these two programs, feedback was very positive with a lot of expressed interest in the community in attending the events. Much thought was given to format with the aim of keeping the events intimate – this meant that some people missed out in attending. There was a lot of local talent performing at the events and Sarah made the comment that, “We don’t have to look overseas for success stories.”

Speakers spoke of how it is “Often hard to see the bigger picture in what we’re trying to achieve after the piece of art is completed.” Outcomes included showing a “picture for what an inclusive community can look like” while “Participation means that we’re partaking socially with each other.” They discussed how “Identity is a huge theme that comes up in these projects” with young people having “journeyed through identity crisis” and working to “move beyond the label ‘refugee’ in the arts”. In the mainstream there prevails the idea of ‘once a refugee, always a refugee’ but the young speakers wanted their transformation acknowledged and that “yes, I’m a refugee but my project’s not about that”.



The speakers argued for the value of arts, that “arts can be liberating for people”.

Veronica Barr talked of her own personal journey. She came to Australia in 2003 and “Through those projects I feel that I established my identity and grew within myself and grew to be involved in my community as well. You grow as a person and I think that’s very important to acknowledge that as a measure of success for a project.” Speaking generally she said that, “I believe that success should be measured based on whether the project have achieved the objectives they (the participants) set out to achieve.” Sarah added that her measure of success is “how well am I listening to the community artists.”

There were the comments that the government should create more awareness in the general community around funding opportunities and processes for communities to create their own events.

The audience question of “Who defines the objectives and what are the objectives?” was met with “The team should be responsible for developing the objectives and the young people should be very much part of that process’. Newly arrived young people might not actually be aware of what’s out there and what’s possible to achieve. You need to work alongside them and making sure you listen.”

One challenge for projects can be the difficulty in young people knowing what they want and the speakers believe that it’s important not to develop work for young people, but to work along side young people and engage in active listening, encouragement and validating their opinion. What they want will always change and that is part of the process. They made the comment that often having people listen to them can be a foreign concept for them.

The importance of partnerships to community arts projects was affirmed. Community partnerships are essential for success and it’s important for youth arts organisations to work with, and communicate effectively with, culturally specific organisations in order to ensure a successful process. This “prevents the project from doing more harm than

good” and “provides accurate insight” with “developing community confidence in project and building rapport with community is essential.”

The consensus from the panel was that “Gaining the trust within the community to work alongside each other to discern what the community believes is the best way to tackle the issues.”

### *Poetry in Action*

Local poet and performance artist Alia Gabres was invited as an artist in residence to create a ‘poetic intervention’ for the day so that we could witness the making of art in action. Alia is the co-director of the Centre for Poetics and Justice, a not-for-profit organisation focus on using poetry as a form of literary education, self expression and social engagement for marginalised peoples.

Forum attendees were invited by Alia to create collectively, during the Brainstormin’ session, a poem that would reflect the day. Alia’s video performance of her poem ‘She cotton summer dresses’ was screened and demonstrated the powerful effectiveness of the spoken word.

Readers can watch the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmkkMkZYrQ4>

### *Conversation: Developing a critical practice as a young artist*

*Facilitator:* Dave Nguyen

*Speakers:* Lia Incognita, Raina and Loretta Mui (Ladies of Colour Agency); Mazna Komba, Solomon Salew, Maki Issa (Flemington Theatre Group); Sumaya Asvat and Reeham Hakem (Crooked Rib Art)

The programmers were keen to foreground young people’s relationship to their art making at the Forum. They invited three groups - disparate in their relationship to community art, mediums and audiences but sharing commonalities in being young, artists working in collectives and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds that often marginalised by ‘mainstream’ Australia - to discuss, in conversation with each other, their approaches to collective art making, their explorations of cultural identities and issues of representation as young culturally and linguistically diverse people.

*Ladies of Colour Agency (LOCA)* identifies as a queer activist cabaret troupe/collective with an ‘anti-oppressive objective’. Born out of university student activism, Loretta, Raina and Lia Incognita established LOCA as a response to the members’ experience of racism and their identification of gaps within the activist and feminist scenes. They share their experiences as queer women of colour and seek to influence the queer and feminist movements. After initially considering staging an anti-racism forum, then a ‘zine, cabaret was chosen as a medium that the LOCA members felt would effectively communicate their ideas in an entertaining way and therefore make audiences receptive to their work. They didn’t want to “talk at people” but wanted to use the “distance of a stage”.

LOCA are “self defined, self directed and self determined”. They chose to operate outside of funding structures, allowing LOCA the freedom as an “unfunded collective telling own stories”. The group discussed how “multicultural arts organisations can often play to white audiences” which are “mediated by white professionals”. It also allows them to respond to different contexts and audiences. They discussed their process - “We have a space that is very safe for us to be vulnerable” that enables them to express their shared lived experiences.

*“HOW YOU TELL THESE STORIES IS VERY IMPORTANT. YOU MUST NOT MISREPRESENT THE COMMUNITIES’ STORIES.”*

The women stated: “We want to represent ourselves, we don’t want to talk about other people’s stories, it’s ours we want to explore”. While their material is based on their own experiences they engage in a ‘peer reflective practice’ that means “we are accountable to each other”.

LOCA also discussed their relationships with audiences – who often reflect the various communities – queer, people of colour, women, feminists – that they are part of but don’t seek to necessarily be the voice of. Audiences have also included more generalist theatre goers with one example being the Adelaide 2009 Fringe Festival audience whose members left in a row as a LOCA performer dismembered an Australian flag during her performance. That event led to much negative publicity and LOCA being banned from their Adelaide venue. LOCA members discussed their response to the controversy – a media ban which sought to let the performance speak for itself.

*The Flemington Theatre Group* is produced by Western Youth Arts. Performers Mazna Komba, Solomon Salew and Maki Issa discussed their most recent production, *Zumunda* which enjoyed an audience of

over three hundred people, the majority of whom were drawn from their communities in Flemington.

In *Zumunda* the group created an invented African country which enabled them creative freedom to frame issues pertinent to the local Melbourne African community and relieved them of the burden of representing, and being held accountable, to a fixed African country’s identity, “This way people can’t say ‘This doesn’t happen in my country’. It gave us a chance to play around with it and represent a culture in a way that is funny and insightful for our audience” (Maki Issa).

Maki discussed their process of collective script writing that aim to “tell our stories and the stories of our community. How you tell these stories is very important. You must not misrepresent the communities’ stories. You want them to be able to see themselves in it. It’s not just about showing, it’s about how you show it.”

As a result script development, with theatre directors Dave Kelman and Nguyen, is a long, involved – and frequently turbulent – process. Maki believes “We want our stories



*“NARRATIVE ABOUT CULTURE – THE SHOW IS THE COMMUNITY. WE CAN GENERATE, EDUCATE AND GENERATE DISCUSSION ABOUT THE ISSUES THEY FACE”.*

to assist with healing in our communities”. Yet, as Solomon described, the vehicle needs to be an effective one and comedy is frequently employed to “help our audiences to enjoy the show and be able to hear the seriousness and complexity of our messages.” The plays aimed to both reflect a community to a community but also educate “the wider community on issues that affect us, stories that would invite them into our community. It’s about building the bridge between communities.”

The group situate their stories within a field of complexity and delve into what is not easily apparent: “We are looking for the hidden stories – the mothers and daughters of the soldiers”. (Maki Issa) and explore the issue of cultural differences within migrant communities, “We look at cultural barriers that are complex – in Zamunda the lead characters could not marry due to cultural differences – while they are both African”.

The process of playwriting was complicated on a number of levels. While the Flemington Theatre Group embrace the onus of representation of the local communities they reflect – “Actual stories plus cultural stories = community representation” as Solomon coined - they need to “consider individual wants and needs of artists balanced with the communities’ needs.” Through a joint process, Mazna explained, “All ideas were valued but we had to use a critical process to work out what to keep and what to throw away” with the end result being “one whole identity with different facets making the whole.” The group also utilised the process of one of ongoing discovery, “being true to who you are even if you haven’t discovered that person yet” as Solomon Salew remarked. Maki Issa summed up the group’s purpose: “Narrative about culture – the show is the community. We can generate, educate and generate discussion about the issues they face”.

They then presented ‘The Flemington Manifesto’ a recent product of the company’s engagement with a research project at the University of Melbourne.

**THE FLEMINGTON MANIFESTO**

Strong me – I am a citizen of the world  
Weaker me – I am an African-Australian  
Amongst Africans in Australia – I am African

Overseas – I am an Aussie.

Our theatre is our voice.  
Our theatre is grassroots:  
we want to speak, not be spoken for.

Our theatre is the stories that link us to our past but it is always evolving, deciphering transitional, Afro-Australian Identity. It is descriptive of both self and culture.

Our theatre is ‘real’ – in the sense that it is emotionally truthful and beautifully honest so you can recognise yourself in it. It brings what real people want to see to life.

Our theatre is comedy: the intense scene is when you hold your breath. Comedy gives you a break from thinking: you can breathe and laugh.

Our theatre is a mirror reflecting the community: taking the fictional stories of our community and reflecting them back, representing different sections of the community and treating them with respect.

Our process is based on a strictly ethical and critical construction of story (and how that story is told): take a theme, story-tell, create pictures, share stories, and weave stories into a bigger narrative. The rehearsal space is a space outside conventional thinking. It is a space of critique, discovery and mental freedom.

Our process is story and meaning over form.

Our theatre is meaningful and educational for our people and for the wider community. It is a social commentary. It doesn’t have a closed meaning: it is open to interpretation but it can’t be misleading – we don’t want fabrication or stereotypical perspectives. We can show challenges and problems and we are not afraid to portray negative aspects of our community but it must always be insightful.

Our theatre is inspirational and aspirational -- we want to inspire other young people in the community.

(Flemington Theatre Group. May 2012)

Reeham Hakem and Sumaya Asvat talked on behalf of their Muslim women’s art collective *Crooked Rib Art (CRA)*. This group of ten young women come from a

*“ART IS NOT NECESSARILY  
OUR DAY JOB BUT WE  
STRONGLY BELIEVE IN HOW  
WE CAN PASS THE MESSAGE  
THROUGH POWERFUL ART”.*

diverse range of ethnic and professional backgrounds. As Reeham put it, “Art is not necessarily our day job but we strongly believe in how we can pass the message through powerful art”. The group originated out of a Community Cultural Development project produced by the City of Melbourne in 2007. It then became an independent entity and has continued to produce art both as a collective and in collaboration with communities.

Reeham briefly gave an overview of the community art projects that Crooked Rib Art have been a part of, which include their original mural project with UK artist Mohammed Ali (AerosolArabic) which they strove to make relevant to everyone in Melbourne, not just Muslim people; a White Ribbon Campaign Project Not Violent Not Silent, a Melbourne inner city mural project that addressed issues of domestic violence; a project with high school kids which elicited Reeham remarking that “When you make art with them, you don’t even have to talk about your faith, they just see you as you are”; and No Added Sugar, a Sydney project at Casula Powerhouse where for the first time CRA worked with other young Muslim women, which presented an “opportunity to explore issues through art that people don’t usually ask Muslim women, or expect of Muslim women.”

Crooked Rib Art members aim to choose the content of what they engage in by taking control of what they want to talk about. In doing so they frequently challenge the mainstream’s obsession with Muslim women’s headgear - CRA members frequently joke about dealing with issues beyond the veil to include those ‘next to, above, beside and in front of’ the veil!

CRA members have discovered that ‘the power is in the process’. Yearlong creative workshops within a community arts context reveal what the inner issues of a community are and provide the opportunity for two-way learning between artists and community members.

Consultative processes within Crooked Rib Art are necessarily complicated by having a ten person collective. While the group is united by one goal, which is to challenge perceptions of what it means to be young, female and Muslim, the individual

members have different backgrounds and stories. As such they recognise that they are not intending to represent ‘the’ Muslim community: “there are hundreds of communities but we are just representing ourselves as Muslim women”.

LOCA, CRA and The Flemington Theatre Company then took questions from Forum attendees.

One attendee asked the groups to discuss more extensively the complex issues around representing community/communities. Both CRA and Flemington Theatre Company discussed the responsibilities of representation and that representation “while staying true to your artistic practice is an issue”.

LOCA discussed the ‘overall whiteness of the art world’ and that “assumptions are made that because you are from a minority community that you represent your community when you make art.” One Forum attendee reminded LOCA that they however chosen to identify on the basis of colour in their group’s name. LOCA responded that they chose the name firstly for the acronym, “white bureaucracy gives acronyms and labels to describe minority groups. We chose our on label and acronym.”

A discussion ensued on the difference between identifying with a group and actively representing them. Reeham and Sumaya talked about how wearing a scarf means that “people are going to call you up to represent your faith” and that whenever they “try to represent ourselves (we end up being seen to) represent the community”.

The Flemington Theatre Company was asked how they interacted with elders and parents. They discussed how they perform community shows within their communities for free and that there is no requirement for publicity beyond word of mouth. Elders have come to value theatre making as an activity “They are now seeing theatre as a way of staying off the street” and have developed a sense of ownership as a community to the youth theatre group: “They say you’re ours!”

Crooked Rib Art also addressed the issue of engaging elders, describing how they engage the mothers in order to obtain space with the young women with whom they are working with.



## *Brainstormin' Sessions*

Forum attendees were invited to join one of eight breakout workshop sessions.

### *Art Pathways for Young People: What next?*

*Facilitators:* Penne Thornton (Youthworx Media) and Robbie McEwan (Youthworx Media) and Sumedha Verma (Forum Young Expert)

The group first discussed the notion of pathways and the aims of participatory arts practice. With agreement that there are different valuable outcomes of participatory arts projects, the importance of a multiplicity of pathways was affirmed and the idea of pathways as a linear, career-focused progression from 'participant artist' to 'professional artist' was rejected. Some areas important for pathway planning and support identified by the group included:

- Health and wellbeing
- Employment and career
- Housing
- Education/training
- Empowerment and political efficacy
- Funding/grants
- Social inclusion

A brainstorm of characteristics considered 'best practice' for a participatory arts project with regard to pathways included.- Speak to the participants early on to ascertain what each person wants to get out of the process. Some people get involved in arts projects as a purely social activity. Others aspire to build a career around art making. Don't assume you know who is who or why participants are there. Only after you've done this can you start to create meaningful pathways.

- Define 'success' with the group. Success doesn't have to mean becoming a full time 'professional artist'. Perhaps success can be measured in a number of different ways that focus on the experience of artists, the audience, and quality of life rather than economics.

- Build pathway support into your program at the design stage. Allocate resources to it. If you're low on cash, allocate some time and energy to research and build relationships with other organisation that might already be funded to provide services

to your program participants. These could include mentoring organisations, health and counselling services, employment services, housing services, training and careers guidance services etc.

- Do not finish your project on the last day and walk away. Try to design your project in a way that provides a little support for participants after the project has finished. This could mean employing a worker who has been on the project for one day a fortnight for a few months in order to maintain contact and provide guidance to participants.

- Facilitate discussion throughout and especially at the end of a project where participants are able to reflect on what they've achieved, what it means and where they want to go with things in the future. It's important that we have these discussions in a genuine way, not just for the purposes of an evaluation outcome.

### *Can Art Be a Tool For Social Change?*

How hip hop culture and poetry can inspire people to create meaning and connection beyond a 'project/workshop/outcome/funding round'?

*Facilitators:* Mary Quinsacara (Steady Buildin Community), Yung Philly (Forum Youth Expert), Luka Lesson (Centre for Poetics and Justice)



*“HOW DOES ART CHANGE SOCIETY? THE MORE WE TALK AND MORE WE REALISE HOW SOCIAL CHANGE COMES ABOUT IS MORE ALONGSIDE A YOUNG PERSON, IN ORDER TO HELP THEM REALISE THEIR OWN VOICE, RATHER THAN LARGE GROUPS”.*

The three facilitators, all artists in their own right, see themselves as the makers of their own industry who self-determine what they want to do. Impetus for the workshop was to convey the facilitators' philosophy of creating sustainable connections in community as people who are arts practitioners but also artists. Steady Buildin Community is a new initiative across Australia bringing together artists in their own right who are proactive about their own futures and building the hip hop community and industry.

“How does art change society? The more we talk and more we realise how social change comes about is more alongside a young person, in order to help them realise their own voice, rather than large groups”. The observation was made that organisations can treat young creative people as if they are not arts practitioners.

The issue of the influence of funding was discussed – while “Funders come to us to boost our work, not to make it or break it”, what a funding focus can mean is “is having a glossy magazine, describing outcomes, great photos but unfortunately when the funding finishes relationships finish.” One example of this is within remote Indigenous communities when “amazing people come in with amazing I.T, for example recording gear, skills and then leaving and then the suicide rates in communities builds as young people don't have access, same support structure etc.”

The speakers “Would prefer to let funding join us when we have established our working philosophy rather than searching for it from beginning, or applying for funding and then handing out program fliers for young people to join.”

The crucial role of mentoring arose. The speakers discussed the benefits of being freelance artists, unrestricted by being part of large organisations, where they can “can chat to people on Facebook, share in their lives, invite them to our event, be in it for the long term.” They observed that “Talent gets developed over years, mentors mentor new mentors who then go on to mentor....”

The lack of sustainability in projects results in the response from community “the project is finished now, now what are we

going to do?” which “slows ability to effect change as motivation and community dissipates.” What individual artists can achieve, outside of these limitations, is avoid “fucking around with communities.” However, the problem remains: “A program tells us we need to make these people feel like family but family is long-term.”

The path of “Going from a community project to a professional band, how do you get out of that bubble to going to a wider audience?” was discussed with the example of local outfit MASSIVE Hip Hop Choir which Yung Philly performs in. They have “have performed at heaps of community stuff but would like to move to ‘mainstream’ in order to get their message/music out there.”

In the USA a different model exists where Poetry Slams are staged “and funded by ticket sales by people going to see a show rather than funding submissions.”

Forum attendees joined in the discussion with funding, sustainability, artist burnout and the mentoring of young people continuing to be key themes. The issue of the treatment of the community artists was raised, “There is a question of then having to choose to volunteer but our work is so undervalued, paid inadequately. There is a strong focus on community workers advocating for others but not advocating for themselves i.e. to be paid.” The emotional effects of engaging with communities on artist's can be negatively felt with depression and burn out resulting.

*YET THERE “NEEDS TO BE A FOCUS TO HELP NEW BEGINNERS TO START UP” AS “IF YOU DON’T AGREE WHEN SOMETHING IS APPROPRIATE E.G. GOVERNMENT APPROACHES, IT IS RECOMMENDED TO FACE THAT AND OFTEN COMMUNITIES ARE NOT EXPOSED TO THAT, WE KEEP THEM IN A BUBBLE ALSO BY NOT LEARNING THESE PROCESSES.”*

Funding by corporations was mooted and the idea of approaching funders for longer funding was explored. However, it was stated, “Ongoing funding only really trusts you to apply for funding that is small for little projects, you can’t apply for funding e.g. for a year to sustain all of your projects and pay workers.” One belief was that “How you value young people is by paying them, they are not just community members performing.”

The challenge of empowering young people to engage with the means of producing arts projects was an issue: “Who is it up to, to learn the lingo? E.g. risk management – government needs to take on responsibility to teach young people not just young people needing to learn these terms.” Yet there “Needs to be a focus to help new beginners to start up” as “If you don’t agree when something is appropriate e.g. government approaches, it is recommended to face that and often communities are not exposed to that, we keep them in a bubble also by not learning these processes.”

One attendee was “surprised to hear how many programs there are rather than uniting together with a sustainable element.” It was commented that while “In Melbourne there’s lots of programs, I wish there would be places where young people can hang out and know they are regularly there.” MAV and the Arts Centre’s Dig Deep were offered as a model of a long-term mentoring model, beyond a weekly workshop in consultation with young people.

Coming back to the session’s original theme it was stated that, “When it comes to art as social change people need to take responsibility of making the message accessible.”

The need for artists in community to be “super resourceful, busting out of ‘delivery approach, recruitment’ etc” was affirmed with artists needing to ask self, “How am I best going to make the situation work? Need to be adaptive in arts work rather than just goals focussed.”

A final comment was “These forums are a great way to meet each other and work together, create partnerships.”

### *Poetic Intervention*

Facilitator: Alia Gabres (Centre for Poetics and Justice)

A group of nine participants joined Alia. Some of the talking points raised in the forum were explored further by the group in order to select a theme for a poetry piece. The discussion began with the concept that “we don’t need to empower people to express themselves but rather support and facilitate the process in whatever artistic medium it flows organically as this will create a relationship built on integrity and sincerity, allowing us to move from the ‘Us and Them’ format to a real place of connection and universal truths. The place of ‘Us’. That is where community arts can truly thrive.” Once the group was in agreement about the theme they decided the best format was to write a few lines each reflecting on the concept of ‘Us and Them’. When those lines were pulled together a group performance piece was constructed and performed before the rest of the forum.

### *Network!*

Creating an online network for young people and cultural development workers

Facilitators: Florence Au-Yeung (Forum Youth Expert), Charlotte Hilder (Brimbank City Council)

The group had an in-depth planning session on designing an online network.

- Input included that it needed to be youth friendly, list current project opportunities (with accessible online application forms where relevant) and be linked to social networking sites.
- Potential funders were nominated as being potentially the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, VicHealth). Crowd funding could also be utilized.
- Audiences needed to include producers, organisations, practitioners, and young people
- There needed to be research and resources content
- The site could be an archive of past projects for reference
- Would the network be Melbourne only or Victoria wide or Australia wide?
- Project evaluation online could provide a feedback opportunity for young

people.

- An Online Forum will provide an opportunity to discuss and evaluate a project, although this would require evaluation.
- Policies would need to be developed to manage internal/external communications
- Crowd funding the website
- The site could bring together peak arts organisations such as YPAA, Arts Victoria, VicHealth, MAV, CCD Network, Local Council Agencies and community organisations.

*Can there be sustainability in community arts?*

Should arts programs be sustainable? What is sustainability? How can it be achieved?

Facilitators: Ruth Komersaroff (Arts Victoria), Kirsty Baird from the City of Yarra

Ruth presented on a community arts project she is currently engaged in. It is a renewal program to facilitate a community developing the change it identifies as needing, such as developing a sense of pride of place, engaging hard to reach communities and creating exploration.

She discussed the importance of developing partnerships across government departments and inviting diverse cohorts of people - transport, police, community arts, community members, local council and professional artists to 'creative visioning sessions'. The outcome of these processes resulted in strong support from community and local council. The project benefited from substantial financial commitment from local and state government while the artist engaged in listening to the community by staging workshops with up to 300 community members.

In terms of measuring success and sustainability the factors of long term vitality, quality of the art and the effectiveness of having a partnerships approach were key. Evaluating the project took into account the raising of the profile of arts in the community and the empowerment of community.

There was discussion of arts as a sector advocating more for itself and what it offers – empowerment, skill sharing in communities and the need to pay for

services from the community, including performances and artwork.

Kirsty initiated a discussion of the role of social enterprises. With the launch of Victoria Park as an arts venue there had been Indigenous community workshops where local Indigenous people were trained to provide history tours of Fitzroy. Such an initiative can be sustained by community members as a social enterprise with economics as a sustaining mechanism. The City of Yarra has staged free training and information on social enterprise to local members generally. One goal could be to build a social enterprise at the end of a



community arts project as a stepping stone to future sustainability. Other pathways can be study options for participants.

*Most awesome arts projects – Young people devise arts projects in... 40 minutes!*

Facilitators: Rubaba Haider (Forum Youth Expert), Loretta Mui (Forum Youth Expert)

While the original aim of this session was to offer young Forum attendees the opportunity to come together spontaneously and brainstorm a community arts project, the session became an opportunity for people to discuss what they are seeking in community arts projects and included:

- Building projects around participants skills, rather than the other way round
- Mentoring for participants
- Programs facilitated by young people
- Unlimited access to galleries, exhibitions, art materials, mediums etc
- Participants seen as free/individuals

rather than labeled 'CALD' and 'Refugee'

- Rich mix of cultures including white people
- Organisational collaboration
- Public spaces available for workshops/ installations
- Youth calendar to increase awareness of what is being staged so as to avoid duplication
- Facebook pages and other social networking sites to communicate what is on to young people who can look for projects in areas of interest
- On-going support and contact for young people and emerging artists
- Good art(whatever that means)- good aesthetics
- Specific support- for existing projects, grass roots initiatives
- \$\$\$\$
- Utilising skills already in communities
- Co-creation
- Connections/relationships
- Better power relationships
- Space (around communities)
- Engagement and relationship building before project design
- Social value
- Relevance
- Mentorship
- Openness/ learning

Suggestions on how to achieve the above included:

- Better communication between organisations
- Projects that embrace technology
- Statewide collaboration of organisations during Refugee Week
- Breaking down of stereotypes
- A Youth Arts festival
- Youth centered workshops
- Free space, free reign for young people
- Free access to workshop and material
- Free tickets to shows
- Youth space at the National Gallery of Victoria to perform/workshop/mentor
- A statewide youth organisation for the arts

### *Art off the latte track*

Art off the latte track - the challenges of doing regional and/or outer metropolitan arts with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds).

*Facilitators:* Suzi Cordell (Multicultural Arts Victoria), Sean Kavanagh (Melton Shire Council), Jamie Lea (Word and Mouth Shepparton)

This workshop drew a lot of diverse people, culturally and professionally and they soon discovered that the topic was vast and time to discuss limited.

Talking points included:

- Communication and partners – how to provide a supportive structure and the value of looking at models that work.
- What are the issues around access to arts? – Transport, money, disability, etc....
- Breaking down barriers and addressing racism to create inclusiveness
- Young people as story tellers – can we change the world?!

'Burning issues' included:

Although some of the issues of engaging young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are similar wherever you are – regional or outer metropolitan areas - working in the arts with young people away from all the resources of a city presents its own set of challenges and also particular rewards.

Many new arrivals gravitate to these areas for work opportunities, cheaper housing, and proximity to other community members. Often the arts workers are faced with issues of young people coming from trauma and facing settlement challenges. Living in a more isolated regional centre increases the sense of disconnectedness and a sense of particular groups "sticking to their own"

Parents and priorities and consent: How to work with parents and families and cultural groups to gain their trust and consent.

Models, goals and sustainability: that are meaningful and appropriate, what is best practice? The group discussed the need to look at models that are working successfully or being trialled in regional areas such as public art work leading to social enterprise so the project has sustainability.

Positive social change and how to support the participants throughout the project was illustrated by Suzi discussing a model



she is currently engaged on, the Gurtji Narruk project in Shepparton. She gave an overview, in itself a large topic, of how the project was developed, leadership by young people, engaging supporters and partners to sustain project as well as storytelling and accountability.

Access: Not just the basic issues of transport and space for art but also in connecting with young people who are often 'hidden' and that it is not easy for them to access opportunities for a variety of reason ( parents, schools, language, skills development etc.). The effort and time in connecting with young people can be extensive and yet not resourced.

Many of the challenges of community arts are heightened in more remote areas. Issue of finding artists and mentors appropriate to working with young people from CALD backgrounds; challenge of engagement and leadership within the community and the need for 'slow and steady' relationships to engender leadership; cultural and gender sensitivity needs, for example working with girls, transgender people, very diverse cultural groups, CALD young people with sexual identity issues; challenge of working with regional local government and getting the right people 'around the table'; need to explore different art forms that speak across cultures and generations.....

### *Why Art?*

How can we encourage families and workers to support young people in arts participation?' Screening of an excerpt from video 'Why Art?'

*Facilitators:* Reeham Hakem (CMY 2011 Artist in Residence), Fei-Mok (CMY Artist in Residence participant) and Abdi Aden (City of Whittlesea)

Artist Reeham Hakem gave a context to the recent production of the 17 minute video 'Why Art?'. The video was produced by a recent Artist in Residence project, funded by the City of Melbourne, which gave CMY the opportunity to invite young people to explore, with the facilitation of an artist, an area of community arts and migrant and refugee of critical interest to them. The group decided to produce a video that explored the value of arts participation for

young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and touch on some of the obstacles of to their access, such as lack of support from parents and local youth services in valuing the arts. The group wanted to produce the video as a 'taster' for a proposal for a larger project would include production of a longer film and a budget for community outreach work into communities.

After the video's screening Forum attendees were invited to give their feedback and ideas on how to distribute the film to diverse audiences. Ideas included that the video be sent to local councils, funding bodies and schools.

The comment was offered that "actually to convince parents you need to have the personal relationship – but showing the DVD, or excerpts of it could help." Additional comments were that the material needs to "showcase what the young people can do through arts" and that the addition of "more voices of parents of the benefits – Etina's mum is a powerful section" would be beneficial.

There was the suggestion on producing a 'How Art' website or Facebook that would list all the opportunities for young people. Another promotional idea was uploading a five minute version of the video on YouTube and producing on five minute version for parents and one for young people.

### **Panel Discussion: Funding**

*Facilitators:* Andy Miller (Arts Victoria) and Florence Au-Yeung (Forum Young Expert)

*Speakers:* Alison McLaren (Australia Council of the Arts), Michelle Ely (City of Melbourne), Louise Kuramoto (RE Ross Trust), Jim Rimmer (VicHealth)

- Funding post GFC - time for doom or ingenuity?
- How can we increase dialogue between funders, arts producers and young people?'

Michelle at the City of Melbourne:

- Believes that funding the arts is a little bit like funding roads –it's essential. Artists need support and that was demonstrated by a Macquarie University report that revealed that

artists in Australia are amongst the most highly educated but also the most poorly paid.

- At the City of Melbourne the approach is “Give us your best ideas and anything across the disciplines.” Recently the art categories have been streamlined in the acknowledgement “that artists want money and they don’t want to look at categories.”

Alison from Australia Council of Australia:

- Young people are invited to apply for all Australia Council funding but Community Partnerships funds community arts. Programs such as ArtsStart and Jump Start, Splendid and artist run initiatives aim to support young artists.
- The organisation wants to have relationships with the people they fund and aim to incorporate comments from community and raise issues internally with the aim of constantly evolving their funding.
- They do fund projects again as long as there has been development with community. Young people and emerging communities are a key focus.
- They also seek input by public dialogue such as the community arts event at Opera House in 2011 with lots of people contributing online through social networking.
- The Australia Council recognises that it’s very important that when they go into communities “they don’t cause harm” which is why the Australia Council required support letters and appropriate selection criteria.

Jim Rimmer from VicHealth:

- Their rationale for funding the arts is that self esteem have a big effect on health and arts can play a significant role in creating a sense of community belonging. Consequently most of VicHealth’s work has a social inequalities lens. “When communities are under stress people turn to local community bonds so it’s important to strengthen local community bonds.” They like to see arts activities embedded in different levels of community – it’s important not to build afresh but injecting new resources into an existing infrastructure.
- Jim pointed out that all the speakers have different organisational structures - VicHealth likes to work closely with the organisations they fund on the projects so that the outcomes are greater.
- In terms of creating dialogue, “funders

are humans so as individual agency staff we read about art a lot, the more familiar we are with your work the greater we are likely to fund your projects. This is not about cliqueness, it’s about the more familiar we are with your work then the more assured we are of the success of your work.” In addition the research and evaluation component of VicHealth is important.



Louise from RE Ross Trust:

- The trust gives away \$3 million a year across different issues its doesn’t have a specific arts impact area but they will fund projects that use art as a tool rather than an outcome as ‘art as art’s sake’. The open grant round is when they often come across new organisations and through the funding there you can demonstrate to the funder your impact on the community.
- Communicate to RE Ross Trust that you build the relationships through the life cycle of the project. That will increase your chance of getting larger grants. Invite funders to events but don’t get discouraged when they can’t attend due to their competing priorities.
- RE Ross Trust are generalists – knowing a little bit about a lot of things so grant seekers need to communicate their proposed impact on the community, why your project would be better off being funded than the other projects seeking funds. Refer to how you are building on other projects you have staged.
- Louise commented that the Global Financial Crisis has been “tough and wont get better and philanthropy has always been competitive so focus on merits of your project.”

Conversation then opened up to the floor with one attendee saying the Australia



**“HOW CAN WE DESCRIBE  
THE COLLABORATIVE ART  
BEYOND ADVOCATING  
FOR THE COMMUNITY WE  
ENGAGE WITH? IF IT’S BAD  
ART, WON’T THERE BE BAD  
COMMUNITY OUTCOMES?”**

Council’s Jump Start application is challenging for some English as a Second Language young people. Alison explained that applicants can submit applications in different language and that Australia Council personnel provide much phone support so applicants can make efficient applications. She agreed that while some of the language has been simplified “there is a way to go”.

A young attendee asked whether young people get engaged with funders to advise them. The City of Melbourne “does by having a young person observe the process one year and the following year they are engaged in the process.” Arts Victoria have a Youth Advisory Group and are going to have a ‘Director’s Conversation’ with directors “being interrogated by young people” said Andy Miller. VicHealth and RE Ross Trust don’t have youth input into their funding but VicHealth is interested in doing this in the future.

**Panel Discussion: Critiquing  
Community Art**

What is high quality community art? How do we define it and talk about it? Is social worthiness enough? Who determines what is good and what isn’t?

*Facilitator:* Dr Marnie Badham, Artist and Research Fellow (University of Melbourne)

*Speakers:* Jennifer Barry, (CEO/Director of Footscray Community Arts Centre), Dominic Golding (RISE), Liss Gabb (Barkly Arts Centre), Dave Kelman (Western Edge Youth Arts).

Marnie Badham gave a brief overview of the thirty-year history of community arts in Australia, an activity that “that resembles political and social activity but is distinguished by its artistic sensibility.”

Despite this history “we have been unable to define a particular style, form or aesthetic, but like any art form - it is approached by particular principles and ethics. These principles have shifted over the last few decades from the democratization of culture - a ‘welfare approach’ of helping disadvantaged communities, to the embracing of cultural democracy- the recognition of unique,

valuable and plural communities’ right to control of the creation and trajectory of their own culture.”

She outlined the diverse movements that gave birth to community arts, remarking on the complexity of the field: “Community arts refers to a range of practices that involve creative collaborations between artists and people in communities of both place and interest: expressing identity, telling stories, building creative capacity, and participating directly in the development of their culture(s)” and complicated by the fact that the “practice is not only driven by artistic goals, but content is also developed largely in response to contemporary circumstances: post colonization, mass migration, citizen disengagement, and more recently, climate change.”

Consequently “community art is deeply entrenched as a cultural strategy to address these global concerns on a local level, engaging communities in local discourse. Community arts are becoming more complex, often involving multiple non-arts partners, longer term and larger scale projects with ambitious and specific social goals.” Public funding, highly competitive has resulted in “The question of evaluation becomes a key site for debate about the value and impact of community arts practice.”

Meanwhile, “what about the art? The field does not sit outside of contemporary arts criticism....” But “How can we describe the collaborative art beyond advocating for the community we engage with? If it’s bad art, won’t there be bad community outcomes? Isn’t the work meaningful because of the creativity, authenticity, and risk embedded in the processes and content of the works of self expression? Is it dangerous to separate the aesthetics and ethics of engagement?”

The concept of ‘Community’ is not an unproblematic one but people appear unable to speak of in terms other than positive and consequently people can have a difficult time critiquing community art.

Marnie believes that the field lacks critical discourse and asked the speakers to address some of the below questions:



- What are the shared principles in community art practice?
- What are some elements of community art with high artistic merit?
- Are social worthiness and public value enough?
- What happens when community art is used by governments/institutions instead of being driven by artists and communities?
- Who determines what good community art is and what isn't?
- Can we build a consensus around some of these ideas or is the field too diverse and subjective?
- How do we build a critical discourse for the field?

*"I DON'T MAKE COMMUNITY ART, I MAKE ART WITH COMMUNITIES. THE PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE THE MAKING OF GOOD ART, GUIDE THE MAKING OF ART WITH COMMUNITIES"*

Each speaker briefly outlined their approach to community art before engaging in a joint discussion together and with the audience.

Jennifer Barry discussed her issue with "words like 'good, bad, excellence' as they are all subjective". Her desire is to see the absolution of the need for these terms in community arts. At FCAC the focus is on the art. While Jennifer recognises that there are a lot of social benefits to community arts the focus is still on the arts practice and it doesn't matter how an artist defines self, either as a community artist or not, but what is more important are the ideas of artist. She referred to a recent arts review of FCAC show in The Age newspaper that stated 'that is not professional art, that is community art' as exemplifying an 'unhelpful bipolar continuum' that doesn't recognise that "Artists are part of the community. Truck drivers are too. It's a bit of a construct".

Dominic Golding is an art coordinator at RISE, 'a refugee support group managed by refugees, survivors and ex-detainees' that is characterised by being a grass roots driven organisation. Dominic's approach to art is underpinned by an advocacy point of

view that is informed by a critical analysis of government structures, social justice and anti racism initiatives. RISE, Dominic outlined, "looks at ways that young people from refugee backgrounds are no longer refugees. Once they get their citizenship that should be end of story. The power structures of Australia, including the art world, focus at our narratives only as refugees not as citizens". At RISE artists are "more like mentors and the organisation doesn't dictate how projects are run". RISE's work in the arts is "encapsulated by how our stories are part of the Australian fabric".

Liss Gabb launched energetically into what she sees as bad community art: "I hate community art mosaics and most of them are bad because I see nothing of the community in them, I see little of the people working on them. All that is shows is 'that a bad mosaic artist was here'". Liss's approach is that "I don't make community art, I make art with communities. The principles that guide the making of good art, guide the making of art with communities" and outlined these to be "That is needs to communicate something of value – an idea, a philosophy; It has to demonstrate skill and craft and do it in a way that the audience can perceive that skill and craft; and it has to be made with an audience in mind. Good art is made to connect with an audience."

She referenced Barkly Arts Centre's MASSIVE Choir performance in 2011 and how it reflected these principles and talked about the reception of an art project with young pan-African men and remarked that "they engage with the art when it's good". Liss asked, "Who decides what good art is? We do as creators and consumers of art and that "You have a contract with audience. You need to empower audiences to critique art."



Mazra Komba  
Hemoglobin Disease

**“YOU NEED TO HAVE A LONG TERM COMMITMENT WITH COMMUNITY. HOW CAN YOU CRITIQUE MEANING OF A SIX WEEK PROJECT?”**

Dave Kelman, not known to shy away from controversy, made a stand for mosaics, referencing a particular beautiful one at his beachside home of Torquay. For Dave, “Community - you sure know when its there. It was there when we did this gig Zamunda. Three hundred people, the place was heaving. There is a community with things in common and we don’t have that in my favourite place Torquay where it’s consumerism (that is the focus). When art talks to community, community responds”. He asked, “What sort of art is community art? Those of you are doing art and it’s not for community, then what are you doing?” he asserted to audience laughter.

He addressed the eternal question of “What is good art and what is bad art?” with “its context.” He echoed Liss Gabb’s point of the necessity of community art employing craft and skill but “We who make it know how hard it is. You do have to struggle for it and we need to acknowledge the work within it. Its meaning comes out of its context....More often we should look for anthropology...the meaning of art is the use to which it is put. Back to Zamunda, people were talking through the show – not because it was bad... they were talking about it because they were relating to it. I think what it was doing was generating real reflection in the community and they were asking ‘What are we doing, who are we, how are we relating?’ The function of art is to generate deep reflection on how we are.”

Dave continued, “There is no question that our work is marginalised by a self-perpetuating mainstream. We need to challenge that”. He made a reference to one of the speakers of the funding panel saying that funders fund the people and arts organisations they know. For Dave the question is “What about the people you don’t know about?”

Marnie joined in with the reflection that she was hearing from the panel speakers “let’s break down the dichotomy between professional and community art. Let’s acknowledge the ideas within the art. Meaning comes out of context. Community art in context has deep meaning, reflecting back to the community.”

Dominic offered the idea that “We as community artists should work as a

museum curator to go to into a community and extract stories and putting that up in a manner that anyone can see, and anyone can interact. Advocate for a better sense of professionalism, our art is just as good as Stephen Spielberg...”

For Jennifer however “the more we say ‘we are just as good’ part of me wants to say ‘forget them, get on with it, and do it! They are us and we are they. The more we do ‘us and them’ then we put ourselves in corner.”

Dave disagreed however “there is an ‘us and them’, they have best venues etc and we just heard a funder say ‘we fund those we know’. It’s not a simple thing being engaged with communities. You need to have a long term commitment with community. How can you critique meaning of a six week project? Meaning comes from trust, development. So funding affects outcome. The Flemington Theatre Company - we started working with them in 2004 and there is still a role for directors to engage with them in a dialogic process. Black Face White Mask will be performed in Malthouse and that will change the meaning of the work.”

A Forum Attendee offered her perspective, having worked for 13 years in Chile in community art, that there is “an opportunity to critique if there is a long term commitment.” She remarked that in Chile people do art, yet there is no funding. We need to go back to that” She observed that there were not many people her age (50s) at the Forum and suggested that the mentoring of younger people by older people is an important factor.

Marnie, reflecting on Dave’s comments about funders, added that “sometimes the funding paradigms set criteria for how practice is directed” and her commented elicited clapping from the audience.

A Forum Attendee discussed that community arts participation creates “a sense of belonging, whether it’s short or long. The sense of belonging or community kinship participants feel – it’s not necessarily reflected by bums on seats.” She argued that success is measured in how the participants have a sense of belonging and ownership.

Dave made the case for “developing clear

*“WE HAVE TO VALUE WHAT WE DO. WE PRODUCE THINGS THAT SPEAK TO PEOPLE.”*

and analytical language about how we practice. Creating community in a group of participants is important but also art form, aesthetics and communication.”

An audience member criticized programs that boast of world class artists etc with her belief that “the artist needs to be able to engage with community participants.” Dominic agreed, stating that “artists need to provide grounding. They’re an equal to the participant themselves; their job is to build capacity. There is not enough professional information to tell artists that this is a valuable career choice.”

For Liss, “I am an artist and artist practitioner who works with community. Part of our expertise is that we can play an interface role...that ability that we can speak to lots of different communities. Supporting communities to present their stories to their communities and back to their communities. Dropping an artist into a community is dumb and can do more harm than good.” Jennifer begged to disagree, stating that “I don’t like to be too prescriptive.... ‘you must take time’ etc. Some things are great with craft and great process and don’t take time. It’s about responding to need. “

For Dave, “The most interesting part of the day was hearing from marginalised communities. Hearing from the Flemington Theatre Company that ‘we value content over form’...the perspectives from the margins, and those socially disadvantaged. They have so much to tell us in the mainstream because mainstream white Australia is boring. They (non-mainstream Australian) have perspectives, values, stories that can teach us so much. I love it.”

Liss agreed that “We have to value what we do. We produce things that speak to people.” For Dominic what matters is “the engagement, the lived experience - being live and happening - and the dynamic between audience and artists/participants.”

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## EVALUATIONS

Forum Attendees were invited to give feedback on the day on the forum and the response was that attendees enjoyed most the panel conversation ‘Developing

a practice as a young artist’; wanted more time for brainstorming; and more room for disagreement and debate. In terms of what ‘people felt there were leaving with’ attendees included a ‘feeling of unity’, ‘a belief in being DIY and not relying on funders’, ‘Thankful that people weren’t afraid to talk about power dynamics’ and ‘Awareness that it’s a vibrant sector with new voices, it’s exciting.’

An online survey post the Forum gave people the opportunity to rate the Forum in terms of organisation and format and comment on what they gained from the day, highlights and their best and worst sessions at an online survey. 31% (49 out of 152) people completed the survey. On a scale including ‘Bad, Okay, Good and Awesome’ online feedback attendees rated the Forum as ‘Good and Awesome’ for: Networking/ meeting people 65%; Discussion/ Expressing Self 60%; Listening/Being Informed 89.8% ; Being Critically Engaged 61.7%; and Entertained 79.2%.

### *The range of comments included:*

Keep the young people as the key focus of the forum - it reminds us what is important and why we do what we do.

The performance and discussion by the Flemington Theatre Group (was a highlight) because it was young people talking about their work, and because it was vibrant, engaging and referred to something highly relevant to the day and a specific event that we were able to witness a part of.

There wasn’t really a spirit of questioning why arts is so professionalised, why it’s managed by ‘arts workers’ instead of community participants, who actually benefit. The day was missing a political context and an activist mindset.

Common feedback was the need for more opportunities for small group discussions with longer allocated time to allow for networking, deeper discussion and more of an “opportunity to develop key outcomes.”

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

The main recommendation from the forum affirmed the 2010 pARTicipation Forum

recommendation of the establishment of a community arts network (with an online presence accessible to young people and professionals) that engages with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Additional recommendations drawn from the workshops and sessions included;

- The need for artists and arts producers to design projects that provides support for participants after the project has finished.
- Increased networking amongst arts producers to increase the opportunity of joining forces and producing sustainable elements in their work
- Building projects around participants skills, ;rather than the other way round'
- Participants seen as 'free/individuals' rather than labeled 'CALD' and 'Refugee'

The opportunity of the pARTicipation Forum is an important one for Victoria's community arts sector in the area of engaging young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Attendees expressed the high value of this rare opportunity for networking, shared learnings and discussion.

*I think this participation forum is really excellent in the sense that you have a lot of networking that happens between different projects. I think that that discussion is really important for connecting people that are just starting out, starting their own organisations and with organisations that know what they're doing.*

*Daniel Haile Michael,*  
Flemington theatre group performer

*As soon as I've walked in I've seen these thousands of people from all different areas of government, local councils, different agencies, artists and performers. It's fantastic to see how many people have turned up. It shows that art programs can be treated just as significantly as literacy and numeracy and seeing how much support people can provide in an area that is often overlooked.*

*Thomas Campbell,*  
Youth Partnerships Secretariat,  
Department of Education and Early  
Childhood Development (DEECD)

Given the numbers and diversity of those who attended, the varying context of community arts and the brevity of the day the Forum was most useful as an opportunity for discussion, presentation and reflection. The need to evolve and promote best practice and make strategic headway requires a narrowing of focus and activity at the next Forum (or similar event).

Forum attendees expressed the below wishes for the next Forum:

- Inviting a wider cohort of artists to the next event.
- Attendees forming more partnerships with mainstream arts organisations.
- Inviting more mainstream arts organisations (National Gallery of Victoria, record labels, and 'mainstream artists') to the next Forum in order to get more of a perspective from mainstream organisations.

The Forum 2012 organisers additionally proposes that the Forum:

- Be staged yearly to provide for a frequent opportunity for networking and discussion. A yearly Forum would relieve, to some extent, the pressure of being 'all things to all people' and would increase the possibility for deeper dialogue and a progression on issues such as 'best practice' and the development of innovative programs and models.
- Be staged during school holidays
- Specifically focus on 'Developing Best Practice' as a theme and potentially limit Forum attendance to 90 people in order to provide an optimal environment for discussion.
- Provide more opportunities for small group discussion

Final word goes to performer and speaker Mazna Komba, "The forum was a great platform for organisations, artists and workers to create a continuing pathway for future artists, workers and leaders within the community arts. It provided people with a shared awareness of what others are doing to use art as a tool for social change and promote a sense of belonging within society."

