

Tools for social transformation

Making the personal creative and political

Pilar Kasat

MY understanding of the power of community arts was shaped as a child growing up in Chile, under the military regime of Augusto Pinochet. Its repressive influence penetrated the most private realms of family life fostering a culture of fear and self-censorship. I remember my mother saying: 'Never talk about politics in public.' So I didn't. This was not surprising – in 1973 the regime murdered and jailed thousands of civilians during and after the bloody coup d'état that toppled the democratically elected Chilean President Salvador Allende.

The voices of dissent were silent for a very long time.

For years, people were too afraid to speak out. The arts became a powerful vehicle to express dissent, to communicate, and to help people make sense of their reality. It is impossible to remember that time of my life without the music, and poetry of Victor Jara, Violeta Parra and Pablo Neruda. These artists became powerful icons and their work became emblems of the struggle of the people and their thirst for freedom.

I BECAME INVOLVED in politics at seventeen. Ideas of class, colonisation, power and privilege began to resonate with me as I witnessed horrendous injustices against students, peasants and Indigenous people.

A few years later and after a very intense time of political activism, I fled. I arrived in Perth in 1987 as a political refugee. I was just twenty-one. The process of *integration* to the Australian society was difficult and lengthy.

The need to understand and express aspects of my cultural identity became an important process that helped me make sense of being a Chilean in exile. I understood that in order to develop a sense of belonging in Australia I needed to find a *voice*. Armed with those insights and a desire to share my experiences, I found a sense of identity through the arts. I become involved in visual, performing, as well as filmmaking projects.

The awakening of my political consciousness left an enduring mark that has coloured the way I understand and view the world. It is not surprising that I found it comforting when I discovered that some of those who inspired me back home had influenced community arts practice in many parts of the world, including Australia.

Worldwide, community arts has been linked to human rights advocates, most notably Brazilians, Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. Freire became internationally known in 1970 for his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Continuum)*. Central to his philosophy is the vision of a free humanity in which the oppressed liberate themselves through a process of education and critical reflection. Boal, a theatre director, cultural activist, and a close disciple of Freire, created the social-dramatic form of *The Theatre of the Oppressed*. This has been widely recognised as grassroots activism where the participants are not just spectators or actors they became the *spec-actors* and therefore empowered to enter into the play and change the course of the dramatic action.

In the anthology *Community, Culture and Globalisation*, published by the Rockefeller Foundation in 2002, Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard provide a compelling case for understanding community arts as a global movement to foster pluralism and participation, and for encouraging communities to resist the homogenisation of world cultures by the forces of globalisation. Their anthology presents powerful examples of community arts in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. The vast majority of these stories have a common thread – poverty, military oppression, and/or colonial power.

An example of the transformative power of community arts in a western context can be seen in the Northern Visions' 2011 documentary *In Our Time: Creating Arts within Reach*. It traces the history of community arts in Belfast against the backdrop of the ethno-political and religious conflict that afflicted Northern Ireland during the 1970s and '80s. The documentary describes how

community theatre was at the forefront of bringing together, at the grassroots level, the divided community of Protestants and Catholics at a time when political discussions were leading to the historic Good Friday Agreement. As Martin Lynch said: ‘There was a kind of euphoria around what we had achieved, and what they [the politicians] had achieved, and in some way, what was happening at the political level through the political parties, was being mirrored by what was happening at the community level and that was an extraordinary feeling.’

Community arts practice in Northern Ireland was described as the catalyst for a creative force that assisted in providing a forum for the community to make sense of what was happening and to respond to the realities of the time. Overall, community arts was described as creating a sense of hope and civic normality on the streets of Northern Ireland, where festivals and parades were finally happening after years of deserted streets because of the armed conflict. In David Hyndman’s words: ‘The arts changed that very destructive and negative scene, something that all the combined troops, all the battalions of the British Army and the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] could not do, the arts did!’

IN AUSTRALIA, FOR decades politicians of all persuasions have been developing a range of social policies aimed at ‘dealing’ with Aboriginal communities. One of the most draconian of these policies resulted in what has become known as the Stolen Generations. In 1997 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission published the *Bringing them home report*. This landmark report contains heart-wrenching stories of the devastating impact this policy had, and continues to have, on Aboriginal communities across Australia.

Since then, many other studies have continued to highlight the entrenched disadvantage that Aboriginal people sustain. In the introduction to one of the most recent reports by the Indigenous Implementation Board in Western Australia (2011), the chair, Lieutenant General (Rtd) John Sanderson, provided the following bleak assessment: ‘The evidence is clear – the existing strategies are costly and do not deliver sustained change to the wellbeing and prospect of the majority of Aboriginal people in either the cities or the regions.’

These reports are clearly dealing with complex and multifaceted issues. However, all of these documents highlight the systemic disempowerment of Aboriginal people and call for models of engagement based on community development principles in which the centrality of culture and self-determination are respected. Here, community arts can play – and is playing – a vital role.

As the managing director of CAN WA I have had the opportunity to deepen and consolidate the community arts work of the agency by initiating long-term projects with Noongar people in the Wheatbelt region. The aim of these projects is to create diverse opportunities for Noongar people to express their cultural identity through the arts.

The *Narrogin Stories* project was conceived and developed by CAN WA in 2010 in response to a spate of Aboriginal youth suicides in the small town of Narrogin. This left the community shocked and ill equipped to deal with such a collective grief. During 2009, family feuds ensued, exacerbating an already complex and delicate community situation.

ABC News, September 2009

...the State Coroner is currently investigating the deaths of six Aboriginal men who are believed to have committed suicide within months of each other in Narrogin last year (Norman 2009).

ABC News, November 2009

Two people are recovering from gunshot wounds in hospital after a violent feud broke out between two families in Narrogin overnight. The brawl involving more than one hundred and fifty people erupted following the funeral of an Indigenous Elder (Bell 2009).

THE FIRST STEP for CAN WA was to understand the complexity of what was happening in the community directly from those involved. After many phone conversations over several weeks, a face-to-face meeting was arranged with three representatives of each of the feuding families. The tension in Narrogin had been escalating in the days before this meeting, and it was somewhat risky attempting to have a dialogue at this time. This was the first

time we were meeting representatives of the feuding families and certainly the first time we were all meeting together.

The tension in the room was palpable. As a way of introduction, I told the story of who I was, where I came from and why I was interested and committed to this work. I expressed my personal sense of loss for my culture, my family and my country and briefly shared aspects of the colonial history experienced in Latin America. This personal disclosure made me *vulnerable* and, as a result of this, more open to connect and communicate with the Noongar people.

I was being myself, which is considered by Aboriginal academics to be an important aspect of communicating and engaging with Aboriginal people.

The meeting was very difficult and both parties were voicing their frustration and despair. I remember vividly asking, ‘Who benefits from this family feuding?’ To my surprise, someone said, ‘no one’; this was echoed on the other side of the table. Answering this question was a very powerful moment. Together they *named* their common ground. This was a breakthrough.

Engaging a community artist with the skills and sensitivity to work with a community that had experienced trauma and grief required careful consideration. The search ended in Melbourne where I met Catherine Simmonds, a seasoned theatre practitioner with extensive experience in working with diverse communities. We met in a coffee shop in Fitzroy. As I began explaining the background of the project and some of my thoughts, I had an almost instant sense of relief. Catherine’s responses made it clear that she understood the complexities we were facing and the fragility of the community dynamics. Her experience working with refugees and trafficked women reassured me that she would be able to work with Noongar people in Narrogin.

The project brief was simple: to facilitate a new narrative in Narrogin. The current narrative was about pain, suicide, violence, and family feuding. The challenge was to creatively draw out a *new* narrative from the community. This is consistent with Indigenous researchers, activists, and educators who are calling for ways of working with Aboriginal people that privilege their knowledge, voices and experiences.

Geri Hayden, a Noongar woman employed by CAN WA, wove through the community, taking Catherine with her and spontaneously arranging

meetings as they saw people on the streets. Most of their conversations with community members happened over a cuppa in living rooms, sitting around kitchen tables and with small groups in the bush.

No! Nobody wants this. I don't want this for my kids.

Kids are dreaming about it. Even when it's fireworks kids think it's shooting.

I wanna forgive, but I don't feel like I'm ready to forgive yet.

When Catherine came back to Perth from Narrogin, she was full of information and emotions. She and Geri had been privy to some deep and painful conversations. We recognised that stories recorded would be a powerful testimony of the collective grief and also the beginning of articulation of hope. The soundscape had the potential to be the collective voice of the Noongar people of Narrogin.

There were some serious risks associated with playing the soundscape in public. The soundscape contained stories and voices of both sides of the feuding families. Thus it could exacerbate an already volatile community situation and open up deep wounds. It could also create a bigger rift between the feuding families and create more animosity. In addition, it could destroy all the positive work done previously and risk CAN WA's relationships within the community and with the funding bodies.

Nevertheless, the idea of playing the soundscape at a community celebration had remarkable potential. It could create the opportunity for a dialogue between the feuding families and begin a healing process. It could also begin improving community relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the town by demonstrating the willingness of the Noongar community to address their community conflict. Furthermore it could consolidate CAN WA's trustworthiness both at the community level and with the funding bodies.

ONE SATURDAY AFTERNOON, Geri and Catherine came to my place to figure out how the soundscape would flow as a story. Catherine spent hours listening to the recordings from the kitchen conversations. She had begun the process of selecting segments that were representative of the key themes the community had spoken about. Geri's input was essential during

this process. She knew the community's code about what material could be used and what could be damaging to include. She was able to gauge what was poignant but could be repeated in public, in contrast to statements that might sound harmless to *Wadjelas* but could be considered offensive to the community. Her insider knowledge was invaluable. The community recordings needed to come together in a narrative which would flow naturally, reflected what the community said and, at the same time, contain nothing that would be potentially inflammatory. Above all it had to be real.

Catherine showed us dozens of direct quotations she had transcribed from the recordings. She cut them on strips of paper and we scattered them on my kitchen table. We read them aloud. Some were very powerful and full of heartbreak, others were witty and funny. Some were a declaration of remorse and even admission of wrongdoing. There were also memories.

We used to all go out together as a mob, didn't matter what family you were from...

People were sharing meals together, singing together laughing together.

The themes of community (*moort*), knowledge and culture (*kaitijin*) were strong and consistent with elements of Noongar cosmology identified by Len Collard in *Speaking from the Heart: Stories of Life, Family and Country* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2007).

The second theme that emerged from the recording was the sense of loss, hurt, and forgiveness:

We need time to recover and heal.

If your heart forgives the darkness goes away top to toe.

Finally, the last theme that emerged was about their hope for the future:

At the end of the day, I want peace; I want it for our kids.

Makes you feel good, taking little steps towards a better future for everyone in this town.

A community narrative was beginning to emerge. The Noongar people had the opportunity to openly talk about and reflect on what was happening in their community, to express regret, and to articulate their own solutions to the community's problems. Most importantly, they had embraced the opportunity to imagine a better future, as they spoke about their hopes and aspirations for their families and in particular for their children.

DAYS BEFORE THE launch, I was in town talking to a few locals. I wanted to personally invite them to the event. The most memorable encounter was with the senior sergeant at the Narrogin Police Station. After my polite invitation he asked,

'Have you got security for this event?' I hesitated for a moment, and thought no, we don't have security. However, what came out of my mouth was, 'We don't need security; we build relationships with communities.' I felt frustrated; his response was not what I had hoped for. I was inviting him to come along and be part of this event. I was hoping for the police to show their support and take this opportunity in their community-policing role.

I left the station and a wave of panic hit me. His words about security began to haunt me. He could be right; the whole event could turn sour. CAN WA could be held responsible for bringing this event together without taking the appropriate precautions, given the level of antagonism that the community had experienced. That night I could hardly sleep. I called Geri first thing the next day. She reassured me. She had complete trust in the process. She knew that the community had embraced the project and that there would be no confrontation at the event. She told me one more thing: her sons and her mother would perform at the launch. They wanted to be there for her and the community at no cost to CAN WA. Geri's mother is a well respected Noongar Elder and sought-after performer of Welcome to Country. Geri's sons are also well known Noongar artists who have travelled the world teaching Noongar song and dance. Geri had made this event hers; she was prepared to invest herself and her family in it. This was a clear sign to me that the process was right.

June 24, 2010, the day of the performance, was a very cold, crisp and clear winter's morning. On the day that Australia heard it had its first female prime minister, Narrogin was preparing for a community event after years of

feuding. The venue was a hub of activity. People were coming and going, the valley of Narrogin was represented by a delicate cane and cloth structure with little paper houses on top and installed in the centre of the venue. Outside, barbecues were prepared and three big half forty-four-gallon drums had been mounted to hold open fires: as people came in they would see that the fires were burning.

Two hundred and thirty Noongar men, women, and children and a few Wadjelas packed the John Higgins Centre in Narrogin. The atmosphere was truly extraordinary. Aboriginal comedian Mark Bin Bakar was the MC for the evening. He was able to enrapture the audience with his outrageous and cheeky alter ego character – Mary G. Mary G was in charge of introducing the soundscape and ‘she’ was well briefed to ensure the introduction would be sensitively handled but at the same time not too overtly sombre or serious. Just before playing the soundscape, the people gathered around two large screens placed at each side of the room. Each table had a beautiful paper lantern on it. Children were invited to light the candles inside the lanterns. The fluoro lights went off, the soundscape was heard under the soft light of candles. At that point the crowd went completely silent. Everyone listened attentively. They were listening to their own voices, they recognised themselves and their stories.

That night people laughed and people cried. I truly knew then, we had made a difference.

This is tremendous; to see all the Noongars together like this. It just blew me away. That’s why I become a bit emotional. Last time I came up here they were so split. But tonight seeing the faces of all the people who were so against each other and seeing their children all mixing up on the floor. (Janet Hayden, Noongar Elder)

We have had so many issues in relation to feuding and anti-social behaviour issues in Narrogin over the past 12–18 months, it has been systemic. It’s good to see that these people are coming together as a collective, and they are actually working together. (Mick Williams, then Senior Sergeant Narrogin Police)

I think it's giving people a voice and empowering people, and allowing people to see that they are worth something... That's what it's all about, coming together. I think it has been a huge step forward, allowing people to feel good about themselves. (Mark Bin Bakar)

THE *NARROGIN STORIES* transformed the dominant narrative of violence, suicide, and family feuding to a story of a community coming together and of healing.

During the project, the community critically reflected on the reasons for the feuding and they grieved for the loss of their young men to suicide. At the launch of the *Narrogin Stories*, the Noongar people came together and listened to *their own* voices. The soundscape affirmed the hopes of each community member who spoke out about the need to reconcile and to build a new future for their children. The *Narrogin Stories* became a powerful public statement that helped consolidate the will of the community to move forward and demonstrated the transformative power of community arts practice.

In the days that followed the event at the John Higgins Centre in June 2010, we heard some extraordinary feedback. The most outstanding of this was a letter published in the local newspaper jointly written by Noongar Elders. The letter expressed the healing that had occurred that night and acknowledged the importance of the community coming together. Since then, there has not been a repeat of the damning media reports like those from the ABC in 2009. I would not say that the family feuds are completely resolved. That would not be true, however, the *Narrogin Stories* gave the community a platform from where to begin to reconcile.

Many positive news stories have emerged from the Noongar community of Narrogin since, including the story of the *Yarns of the Heart Noongar Dolls*. This project saw Noongar women travelling with their creations to the prestigious Sydney Contemporary Arts Museum to be part of a national textile exhibition. In November 2013 Narrogin hosted its first Kambarang (spring) Festival and celebrated a series of public art works honouring local Noongar stories on the banks of the Gnarojin Park.

The transformative aspects of such experiences not only affected the project participants, but also the artists and art workers who have been involved. We have been deeply touched by the stories we have heard since getting involved in Narrogin in 2009 and we have learnt about ourselves and 'others'. The creative process has made us more open and better able to challenge our own perceptions of power and privilege, race, poverty and resilience. Above all, the process has enabled some long-lasting and transformative human connections.

Despite the power of these transformative moments, there are dominant forces that work against the ripples of positive social change. Racism is one of them; it disguises and manifests in surreptitious as well as overt ways. So understanding community arts as a cultural empowering and liberating process poses some interesting questions about what happens after the community has found its voice: who is prepared to listen, and ultimately who has the power and the resources to make and support sustained changes? These are difficult questions and the answers lie in understanding that this work is powerful and makes a difference but it cannot be sustained within a short-term parachuting cultural engagement strategy. It requires the wisdom to acknowledge that solutions to complex social problems need long-term plans. Communities that have been disenfranchised need resources, opportunities to be heard, to heal, to gain skills and to generate solutions to their own community problems. Community arts are a first step to enable cultural dialogue, to tap into individual and community strengths and self-awareness and to foster self-esteem. Community arts channel the power of creativity rather than destruction and desperation. They foster imagination rather than hopelessness, enabling hope where there has been despair. Surely, imagining hope and a better future is all of our business.

References available at www.griffithreview.com

Pilar Kasat is managing director of Community Arts Network Western Australia (CAN WA) and a director of the WA Chamber of Arts and Culture. She has been involved in high-level national forums on arts, cultural policy, sustainability and cultural diversity for more than a decade, and has a Masters of Sustainability and Social Change.