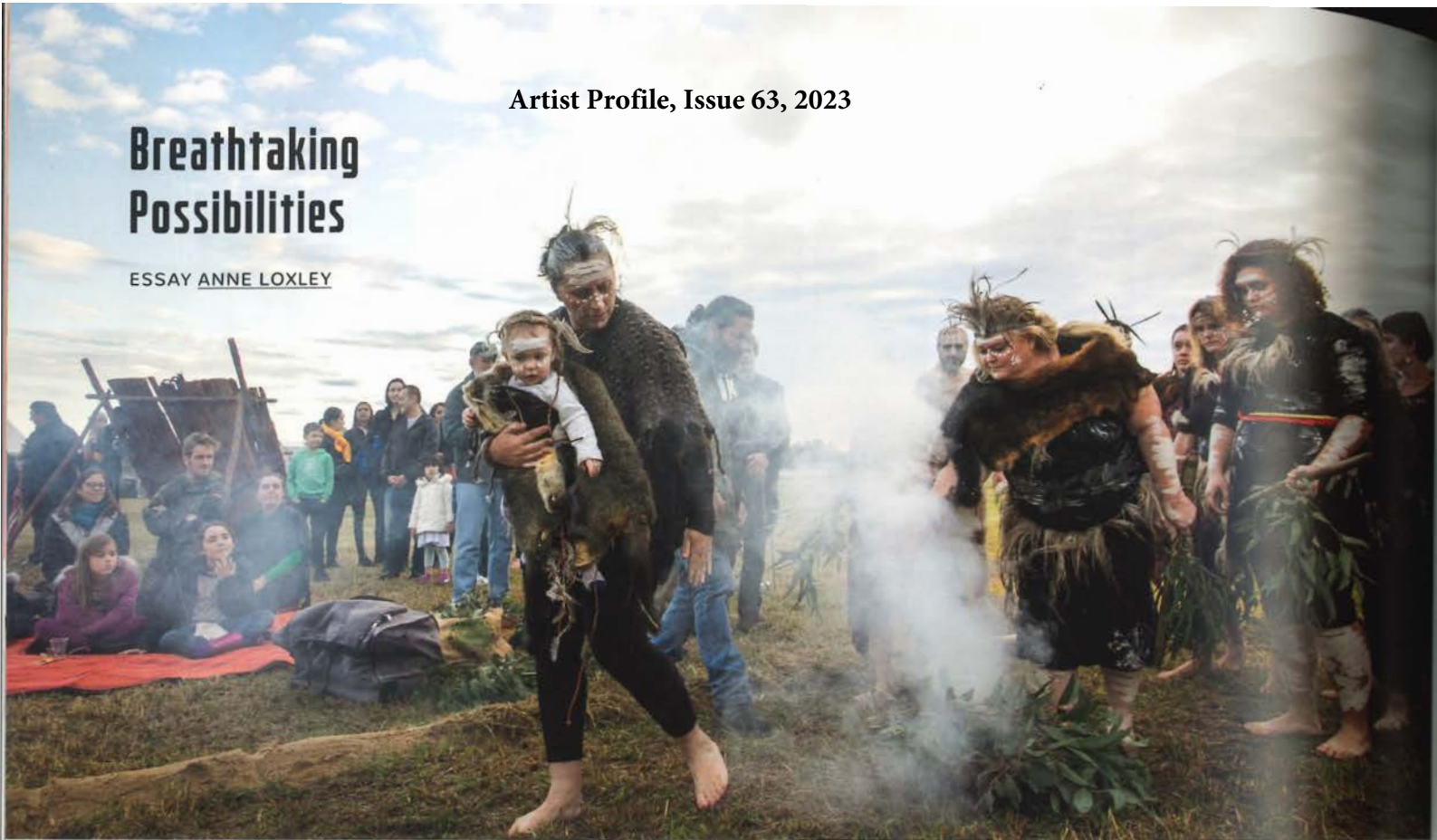


# Breathtaking Possibilities

ESSAY ANNE LOXLEY



01

Anne Loxley explores perceptions around community art and socially engaged practice, and discusses the relevance of socially engaged practice and Community Arts and Cultural Development within and beyond the visual arts.

I have spent more than three decades working with artists and communities both in and outside gallery contexts. I find this work profoundly invigorating and relevant. However, I have seen so many awful murals, ceramic projects and the like, made in the name of community art that the term is anathema to me. Since I started at Arts & Cultural Exchange (ACE) in 2020, I use the term community arts (note the plural).

Community art in Australia has a distinguished history. Responding to political action, and ongoing demand for social and cultural change, community-based artistic practice – known variously as community art, community cultural development, and community art and cultural development – has continued to develop from the late 1960s through to the present day. The 1970s saw the establishment of seminal organisations that still thrive today: Footscray Community Arts Centre (Melbourne, 1974), Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras (1978), Flying Fruit Fly Circus (Albury-Wodonga, 1979), Garage Graphix (Blacktown, 1981) and ACE, established in 1982 as the Holdroyd Information Van.

At the heart of this maelstrom was the artist Vivienne Binns whose longstanding practice is based in radical feminism, critical theory, a deep understanding of art history, and contemporary art. Binns remembers a time when many artists were questioning the relevance of art, and in broader society there was a feeling that change was possible if people came together; and, explains the rise of community art by identifying the binary oppositions at work in patriarchal capitalism:

<u>GOOD</u>	<u>BAD</u>
Single individual style	Eclectic referential
Individual artist	Collaboration
Power	Powerless
Order	Chaos
Art	Work
Art World & High Art	Community & Low Art
Real Artists	Pretend Artists
Painters	Dabblers, amateurs, Sunday Artists
Capital	Society
Men	Women
Public	Domestic/Private
Abstract	Representational narrative





02

American art historian Lucy Lippard visited Binns' 1982 *Full Flight* Central West Arts Project when the artist and her "art caravan" were in Lake Cargelligo. Lippard's experience of Binns' engagement with local people occasioned her to write in the *Village Voice* (New York) "the most impressive contributions to progressive art, and not only in Australia, are those which provide not only a new image or even a new form of language but delve down and move out into social life itself through long-term projects."

This idea of interlinking art, cultural activity, and communities as effective catalysts for social change has not diluted over time; artists and cultural producers have been working with people ever since. Broadly speaking, community art – now known as Community Art & Cultural Development (CACD) – has become the domain of the community sectors. Cultural producer, educator, and theorist, Dr. Paula Abood says a "fundamental aim" of her work has been to "cultivate a safe space for marginalized people to share their stories in their own language and on their own terms."

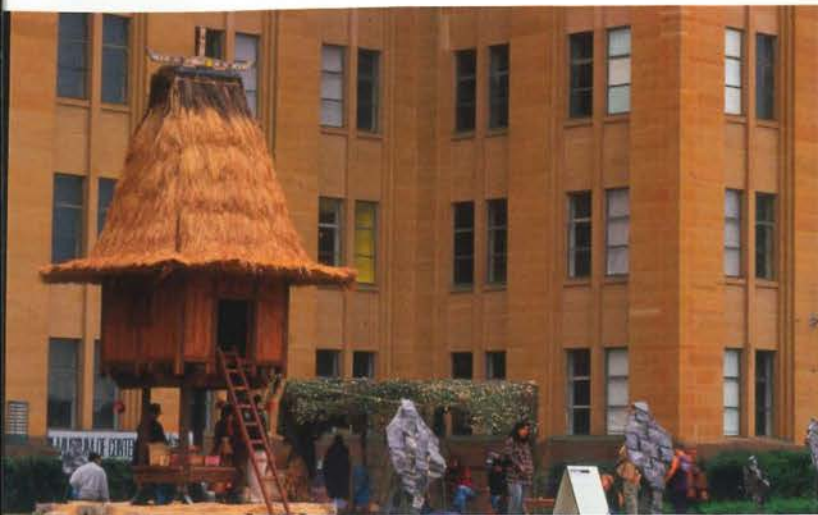
In the late 1990s, I curated *Tuba rai metin* – firmly gripping the earth featuring early career artist East Timorese Albertina Viegas, her countrywoman virtuoso weaver Veronica Pereira Maia and the East Timorese communities of Darwin, Sydney and Canberra. Viegas' circle of *katupa soldados*, human sized woven lead sculptures filled with rice encircled a traditional spirit house and Pereira Maia's *tais don*,



03

- 01 Traditional Darug custodians lead the Welcome to Country and Smoking Ceremony to launch *Ngara – Ngurangwa Byallara (Listen, hear, think – The Place Speaks)*, 2018, Oakhurst NSW, Blacktown Native Institution Project, co-commissioned by Blacktown Arts on behalf of Blacktown City Council and C3West on behalf of Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, photographed by Anna Kučera.
- 02 Artist Tony Albert with his work *Gubangala Gumadangyiningi (Let's honour his/her spirit)*, 2018. Installation view, *Ngara – Ngurangwa Byallara (Listen, hear, think – The Place Speaks)*, 2018, Oakhurst, NSW, Blacktown Native Institution Project, co-commissioned by Blacktown Arts on behalf of Blacktown City Council and C3West on behalf of Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. Image courtesy and copyright of the artist, photographed by Anna Kučera.
- 03 Artist Leanne Tobin (far right) with Darren Bell (far left) and Brook Andrew's work *Travelling Colony*, 2012, Blacktown Native Institution Project *Artist Camp #1*, 2015, Oakhurst, NSW, project co-commissioned by C3West on behalf of Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Blacktown Arts Centre on behalf of Blacktown City Council, and UrbanGrowth NSW. Image courtesy and © the artist.





04

## community artists and producers, more often than not are driven by purity of process and an intentionally unmediated community voice

traditional ikat weaving with the names of those killed in the November 1991, Santa Cruz, massacre in Dili. Ceremony, music, dance, prayer, poetry and conversation constantly accompanied the installation. Intentionally, we called it a “temporary public art project.” In retrospect, we should have called it a “participatory project.”

By the time of *Tuba rai metin*, the term community art was no longer in parlance for critically engaged artists like Binns (or curators such as me) who were working with communities. Times had changed. Socially engaged practice was becoming an important area of contemporary visual arts practice. It still is today. Many leading artists and curators work with people. Artists like Lara Thoms (Australia), Jeremy Della, (UK), Thomas Hirschhorn, (USA) and curators such as Claire Doherty (UK) and Nato Thompson (USA) are all critically acclaimed for their social projects. As Della states “I used to make things, now I make things happen.”

Compared with community art practices, socially engaged practice often involves shorter time periods of engagement with communities, and often the socially engaged artist takes a stronger lead in shaping the project than the community art cultural worker. John Kirkman, who led several key Western Sydney arts institutions (from Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in the 1990s to ACE in the 2010s) makes the distinction that “socially engaged practitioners are often more interested in aesthetic excellence, whereas community artists and producers, more often than not are driven by purity of process and an intentionally unmediated community voice.” Arts strategist Jenny Bisset says the aesthetic problems associated with community art resulted from the practice’s principle of equity:

“A mantra of everybody is an artist got in the way, perhaps, of making good work. And there was a perception that if you couldn’t make good art, you did community art. Early on, we used to talk about the process being more important than the product. There is – hopefully – a maturing now that sees the process as critical and product just as important but not predictable because it is collaborative.”

Call it what you will, artists working with people (communities) can lead to extraordinary things. For instance, film theorist and former Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, at the University of Sydney, Dr. Laleen Jayamanne was a PhD student tutoring in the University of NSW General Studies Department in 1979 when she participated in Binns’ iconic *Mothers Memories Others Memories*, 1979-81. She says this long-term participatory project about women’s personal histories allowed her “to put on display ideas, themes and traumas in a light-hearted way” and taught her invaluable lessons about “deep conceptualisation.”

“Artists are not categorical or censorious thinkers – they have many fine filters. Through making my work, and Viv’s commentary on it, I learnt to respect how the details of deep conceptualisation and crafting this stuff matters to artists. They go into dangerous territory. We all have tremendous sensory powers but we may not have the skills of deep conceptualisation. Artists have the skills to do that.”

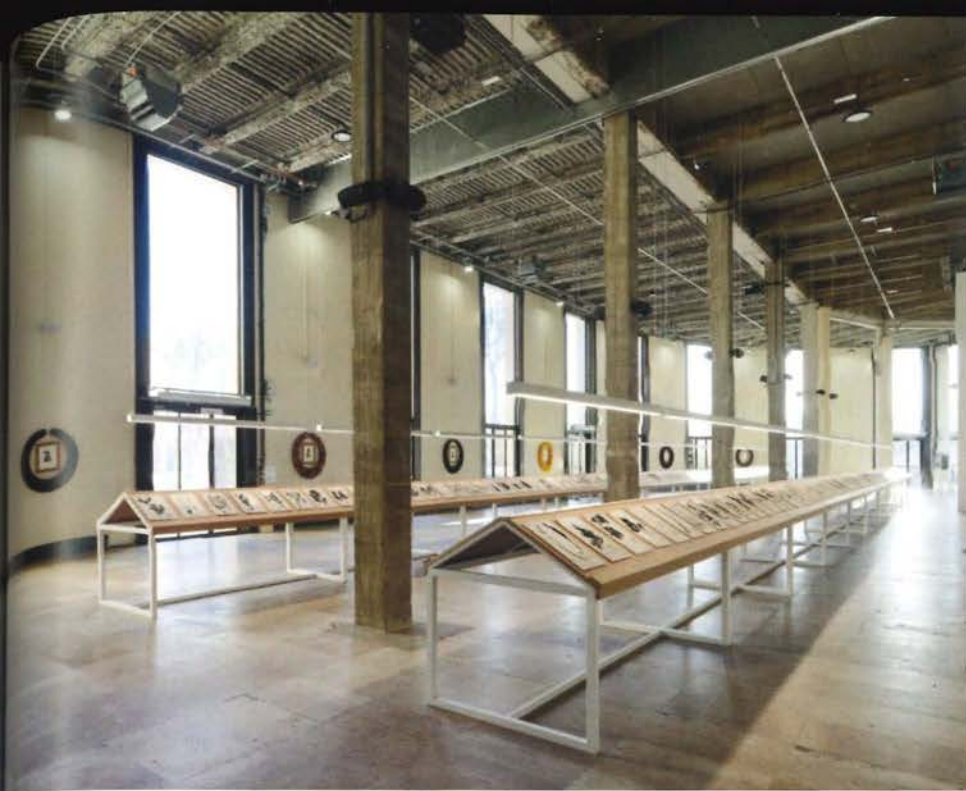
Contemporary art’s anxiety about community art persists; nevertheless there is widespread recognition within contemporary practice that breathtaking possibilities open up when artists and communities collaborate. This was the case in 2007 when then Museum of Contemporary Art Australia Director, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, and arts consultant, Jock McQueenie, established the MCA’s C3West program, which crafts non-arts funded contexts for contemporary artists to work with communities and commerce in Western Sydney, thus the cryptic half acronym “C3” in the title.

Among C3West’s most significant projects are the 2012-18 Blacktown Native Institution collaborations about the histories and futures of this important site. Dharug community collaborated with artists Leanne Tobin, Karla Dickens, Darren Bell, Steven Russell, Kristine Russell, Phyllis Stewart, Tony Albert, Moogahlin Performing Arts, Sharyn Egan, Blacktown Arts Centre, C3West and Landcom, and culminated in the site being handed back to the Dharug community.

Some of Australia’s most exciting collaborations between artists and communities are the work of First Nations cultural practitioners, who work from very different conceptual frameworks. First Nations curator Hannah Donnelly states:

“A lot of First Nations practitioners are informed by community and by outcomes for community that may be similar to the methodologies of CACD but if you asked many First Nations practitioners, they wouldn’t make the CACD connection. It is more about relationality and experiences: relationality to Country/ies they are living on, or a community they might work with or participate in. For me using





05

a label like socially engaged practice or CACD feels like explaining something very basic that is inseparable from the way I think about curating or producing projects."

For Yamane Fayed, Producer of ACE's Multicultural Women's Hub, her role as a CACD practitioner is to "bring forth the voices and talents of the people with whom we work" and to "facilitate the relationship between the artist and participants."

Fayed recently worked with leading Aboriginal artist Jonathan Jones on the key component of his multidisciplinary exhibition project *untitled (transcriptions of country)* co-commissioned by Artspace Sydney and Palais de Tokyo Paris – almost three hundred embroideries of native Australian plants from an archive assembled by Josephine Bonaparte in the early ninetieth century. Two hundred seventy of these were stitched by ACE's Embroiderers Collective, with Jones' guidance. Fayed recognised Jones' instinctive understanding of CACD principles – listening carefully with intent and respecting people's voices and stories, embracing differences, engaging in an appropriately - paced process of development and production.

"Jonathan valued the women's skills; he made no distinction between high end art and traditional craft. He brought the craft to the next level through his rigorous conceptual approach. He had a template, but he stepped back for them to do their magic as well."

Crucially, Jones embedded in the process a series of exchanges with and between First Nations knowledge holders and the migrant embroiderers. The eighteen months of gathering and making for *untitled (transcriptions of country)* yielded many remarkable outcomes, most significant for Fayed was the special bond that developed between the women in the collective, the metamorphosis of their skill



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sets and the discovery of deep understandings between the different knowledge systems of the various Aboriginal and migrant nations.

While I deeply value the CACD practice of enabling and empowering the voices of marginalised and under-represented communities, I am also excited by what artists bring to community practice. Artists can bring something unexpected, something necessary and profound into the space. Artists working with communities have the capacity to change ways of thinking and being, individually and collectively – and themselves be changed into the bargain.

Back to the all-important "s". While the community sector has seemingly never been prescriptive about community art/arts, within the visual arts sector the term community art is part of a descriptive lexicon: conceptual art, performance art, digital art etc. From early 2011 to late 2019 I curated the C3West program, and steadfastly described it as socially engaged practice. But socially engaged practice is only meaningful within the confines of contemporary art discourse. I dropped it soon after starting at ACE. I think of community arts as a combination of the best CACD/community art and socially engaged practice. "Arts" reflects multi-artforms and the interdisciplinary nature of socially engaged practice, and nods to its antecedents; conceptual and performance art, in so doing claims an art historical lineage and underscores contemporary relevance. ■

04 *Tuba rei Metin: Firmly Gripping the Earth* (installation view), Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in association with the East Timor Cultural Centre Inc., 1996, artists: Veronica Pereira Maia, Antonio Maia and Albertina Viegas, photo courtesy the artists and Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

05 Jonathan Jones's exhibition and collaboration with the Information + Cultural Exchange Multicultural Women's Hub, *untitled (transcriptions of country)*, 2021, installation view, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, 2021-22

06 Members of the Information + Cultural Exchange Multicultural Women's Hub who collaborated with Jonathan Jones on the project

07 Jonathan Jones in collaboration with the Information + Cultural Exchange Multicultural Women's Hub, *untitled (transcription of country)* (detail), 2021

Courtesy of the artists, MCA Australia, and Arts & Cultural Exchange, NSW