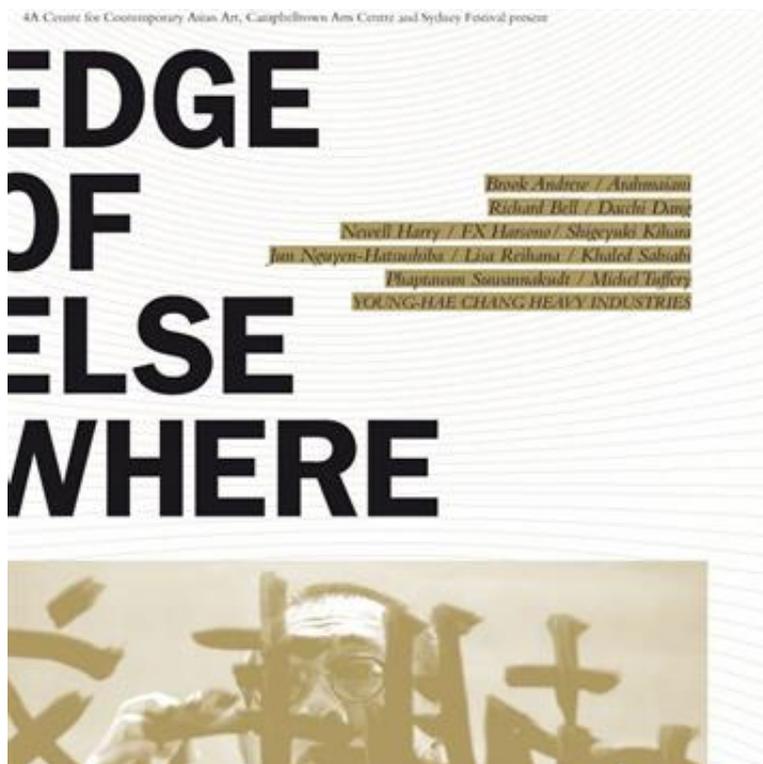


Edge of Elsewhere: The value of a community

ANGELA STRETCH

The community has become a confusingly fluctuating and ambiguous term. To some, community is nostalgia, an attempt to resurrect merry Australia dancing round the maypole and all the common folk having a sit-down together.



"When people overseas ask me where I'm from, I naturally say 'Australia'. When people interstate ask, I say 'Sydney'. When people in Sydney ask, I say 'Blacktown', and they look askance, as if to say, 'Where the bloody hell is that?'" Sunil Badami, writer, Edge of Elsewhere Project

The community has become a confusingly fluctuating and ambiguous term. To some, community is nostalgia, an attempt to resurrect merry Australia dancing round the maypole and all the common folk having a sit-down together. For others community is simply where we live, the streets in which we have a nodding acquaintanceship with your neighbourhood barrista, where our children have friends, where we adults can drop in nearby residencies, borrow a cup-of-sugar and call the pub 'our local'. Community art in Australia has links with the history of socially concerned art as well as with community organisations. *Edge of Elsewhere* was initiated as a series of contemporary art projects that would engage in cross-cultural dialogues and develop

partnerships within communities across Sydney and the wider Asia-Pacific regions, the impetus to model innovative artistic practice and provide space for community healing. The Campbelltown Art Centre and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art partnered collaborative projects as part of the Sydney Festival, 2010-2012. *"Here in Sydney we are all, in some way, on the edge of elsewhere—be it Asia or the Pacific or Indigenous Australia or the demise of Australian Eurocentricity."* Lindy Hume, Festival Director & Chief Executive Sydney Festival *"Our sense of the world is shaped by myriad influences—the cacophony of ideas and information that contribute to the ongoing reshaping of our perceptions of contemporary life."* Lisa Havilah, Executive Director, Carriageworks and Former Director, Campbelltown Arts Centre 2005-2010 *"Edge of Elsewhere—is challenging us to think differently about what we believe we are privileging, to be aware of the danger of safely idealised narratives..."* Aaron Seeto, Director, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art This year is the final instalment of the three-year project that has featured 13 artists across a range of mediums. Artists were invited to participate in exchanges of identity in contemporary cultural compositions of everyday social realities. Melbourne based artist Brook Andrew featured in 2009, with a site specific installation inspired by his Wiradjuri traditions exhibited images of a hand-painted caravan, *The Colony*. Andrew has since undertaken his first major commission in *Travelling Colony*, multiple painted caravans that each reveal stories as part of *Black Capital*, a presentation of the urban Aboriginal community of Redfern, displayed at the industrial heritage site, Carriageworks, curated by former Campbelltown Art Centre Director Lisa Havilah, now Director of Carriageworks. Other participating artists were Aboriginal social commentator and artist Richard Bell, Sydney based Vietnamese artist Dacchi Dang, and Indonesian visual artist FX Harsono, whose work *In Memory of a Name*, offers tools within which to express the reality of a cultural world he knows by rewriting the erased. In 1967 under the Suharto regime Indonesians of Chinese descent were forced to adopt Indonesian names. The rewriting shows Harsono methodically copying out his original Chinese name in traditional calligraphic manner using an ink brush and placing each titling in a grid formation. This impels a value that cannot be measured simply in terms of its bias or by the fact that it exists. Its potential is not realised until that it exists. Its potential is not realised until connections are made and community is engaged in the healing. In 2011 Harsono's *In Memory of a Name* became a project into its own for emerging critics and cultural practitioners to contribute the growth of critical culture by seeking to develop a framework for social research. Proposed by participant Vietnamese Australian artist Mai Ngyen Long, *Celebrate-Obliterate-Recreate*: is an invisible ritual of shared sacrifice) a 3-stage process involving aspects of celebrating, obliterating, and recreating personal narratives and identities, associatively exhibited next to Harsono's, media poem, *Writing in the Rain*. An additional outcome is a min-symposium to be held on Saturday, February 18th, which involves interviews, stories, critical analysis and performance. The ever-shifting realities of contemporary cultures within communities require constant rethinking. The region of Western Sydney is the fastest growing in Australia and is estimated to have a population of 1.99 million people. At the conception of *Edge of Elsewhere* there was also another community art project forming, Pop-Up Parramatta. In 2010 Parramatta Council rolled out an initiative to forge connections between the arts community and local business to create a more vibrant community to live. The aim is to develop and support more emerging artists and explore opportunities to reclaim empty spaces for creative enterprise. *The Refugee Art Project* is one such enterprise that has found domain in cosmopolitan quarters. Established by a small collective group formed mainly by academics who share a concern for the plight of refugees and asylum seekers detained in Australian detention centres. Their operations provide support networks through artistic endeavours and practices that extend to those who have been recently granted refugee visas and are settling into the community. In 2011 they operated regular art therapy sessions for detainees in the Villawood

Detention Centre. The practice has since been blocked by Government. Community projects have the potential to teach visual skills at a local level. Their role, is to introduce the notions of visual literacy and production support material for local community action. A further design conceived by At the Vanishing Point Gallery, *Solid Ground* provides participating refugee artists (visual and electronic media artists of any mediums from amateur, emerging to established) the time and space to get together to share, discuss, design, develop and undertake activities that will support and nurture their art-making practices. This form of participation involves prior collective discussion or agreement about the aims behind the exhibition, or the point of view being expressed. The participants are expected to seize the opportunity to learn about local life through each other's experiences and consider how they might give support. These exhibitions are seen by many community organisations as a means of enabling people to express themselves and come to terms with concerns, of alerting people to subjects of immediate concern such as literacy, housing, urban design and sustainability, and providing a focus for meetings and discussions. *"Our art must not be separated from life and become mere decoration. Art must be able to encourage a new awareness of humanity and a new social consciousness."* Arahmaiani Yogyakarta, *Manifesto of the Sceptics*, Edge of Elsewhere Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, furrowing together in a common effort to understand the reality they seek to transform. The ideal form for community development and learning to take is in which a group of people initiate the process using outside technical help to meet needs they themselves have defined. If the objectives of 'community art' were to promote mass participation in the mass media, there could be no better starting point than a group of people seeking to extend their artistic practices to their neighbours. The 2012 exhibitions of *Edge of Elsewhere* unequivocally states points of view about Australian culture but also successfully undermines dominant images and attitudes about these subjects. The visual devices used in these two exhibitions have grown out of the projects experience of previous exhibitions in which their visual art devices overcame limitations: juxtaposing naturalistic media images, text, montage and graphics, in order to raise the question of identity and connect the image of the social and economic relations that are not obvious within it'. When you are working with people you begin to understand what they require, what their needs are and how they see their art. There are many complications in establishing such projects for the benefit of the community from within a framework of constraints, such as maintenance of long-term funding, or charitable status and allegiances, all of which are often outside the experience of and inaccessible to the very people whom it is intended will 'represent themselves'. It is important that in replying to the challenge, conscious of its seriousness and complexity, we do not give in to the temptation of perfectionism. We must do what we can today with whatever small resources we have. Only in this way will it be possible to do tomorrow what we could not do today. **Edge of Elsewhere artists: Brook Andrew, Arahmaiani, Richard Bell, Dacchi Dang, Newell Harry, FX Harsono, Shigeyuki Kihara, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Lisa Reihana, Khaled Sabsabi, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, Michel Tuffery and YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES. Exhibitions:**

- Edge of Elsewhere: FX Harsono's In Memory of a Name Curatorium Mini-symposium Saturday 18 February 2012 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art 14 January – 3 March 2012 181-187 Hay Street, Haymarket, Sydney <http://www.4a.com.au/edge-of-elsewhere-2/> Campbelltown Arts Centre 14 January – 18 March 2012 Art Gallery Road, Campbelltown, Sydney <http://www.campbelltown.nsw.gov.au/default.asp?iNavCatID=3780&iSubCatID=3786>
- Travelling Colony Brook Andrew 8 January – 4 March 2012 Carriageworks 245 Wilson Street, Enter at 229 Wilson Street, Eveleigh <http://www.carriageworks.com.au/?page=Event&event=Travelling-Colony>

- Solid Ground – ATVP Refugee Artist’s Network 2012 2-19 February 2012 At The Vanishing Point - Contemporary Art Inc. 565 King Street Newtown, Sydney www.atthevanishingpoint.com.au
i.Sunil Badami, writer, Country And Western, Edge of Elsewhere publication, © Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010 ii.Foreword; Lindy Hume, Edge of Elsewhere publication, © Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010 iii.A Suburban Rethink, Lisa Havilah, Edge of Elsewhere publication, © Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010 iv.The Unpackaged Community; Aaron Seeto, Edge of Elsewhere publication, © Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010 v.The Refugee Art Project, <http://www.therefugeeartproject.com/> vi. Solid Ground, Exhibition 2-19 February, At The Vanishing Point Gallery, www.atthevanishingpoint.com.au vii.Manifesto of the Sceptics, Arahmaiani Yogyakarta, Indonesian July 2009, Edge of Elsewhere publication, © Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010

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Angela Stretch, is a Sydney based artist, writer and presenter of Talking Through Your Arts, 2SER-FM.