

Artstate Lismore Rapporteurs' Report

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Artstate NSW was held in Lismore from 30 October to 4 December, 2017 in partnership with the local Regional Arts Development Organisation, Arts Northern Rivers. The aim was to deliver a regional conference/arts festival that demonstrates regional excellence and build on the partnerships and opportunities presented at the national regional arts festival and conference held in Dubbo at ARTLANDS in 2016. Still recovering from a major flood, Lismore presented both challenges and opportunities; to showcase the new Regional Art Gallery and Quadrangle and utilise spaces in the city that had been emptied by the climate event and highlight the potential of creative arts to contribute to the local economy. The two days were ultimately a demonstration and celebration of creative practice and creative partnerships, the resilience of the local community and the value of the arts in creating meaning to contribute to public life and growth. Both Regional Arts NSW and Arts Northern Rivers should be congratulated for a successful event that will have long term benefits for the sector and the community.

The great diversity in regional communities in Australia which impact on arts practice reflects their history, geography and First Nations peoples. The opening night started with *Djanda Mandi Gingerlah* at the new Quad – a gathering of Widjabul Custodians, Elders and dancers from across the Bundjalung Nation directed by Rhoda Roberts AO. Coinciding with Artstate was the opening of a new dance theatre work from Norpa, *Djurra*, inspired by a Bundjalung Creation Story. Both those events provided a strong foundation for the conference and participants which recognised the strength and significance of Aboriginal culture and arts in the region. The participation of Aboriginal artists and speakers throughout the festival and conference foreground their contribution and demonstrated the commitment of the organisers. *This needs to be maintained as a priority of future events.*

The exhibition, 'We're Closer Than You Think', questioned the very notion of regionality and the perception that artists working outside metropolitan areas are hindered by location. It was clear from the conference presentations that what makes regional arts distinctive is not disadvantages of distance or infrastructure, as challenging as those can be. Rather, the conversations emphasised intimacy, as Esther Anatolitis put it so eloquently in the opening of that exhibition, and the importance of relationships. The proximity of audiences and artists in regional areas inspires a certain 'burden of responsibility' that demands accountability that may be lacking in larger metropolitan centres, and this needs to be recognized as having its own challenges and potential. This was demonstrated by the attendance of the Minister for Arts at Festival Club where undergraduate Arts students had the opportunity to talk to the Minister. *Integrating more strongly the festival and conference program would open this conversation up to shared experiences and strategies between arts practitioners and organisers.*

Creative practice in rural and remote areas is connected than with everyday life and not distinct from it. This was made particularly clear in the role of the arts in responding to climate events and the environment (as diverse as these were, including floods and droughts for example), which was emphasized in the conference program as well as arts

festival. The increasing role of the arts in health and wellbeing followed the same theme. Such connections demand long term partnerships across disciplines and sectors. As Edwina Johnson suggested, they cannot be one night stands in a small place. The time required to initiate and maintain relationships generally are often outside the scope of normal funding cycles and often their criteria. *The significance of place and environment should be highlighted throughout the Artstate conferences. Given the expertise of participants allowing more time for conversation by encouraging more interactive workshop style sessions, rather than the delivery of papers would be valuable to maximize on the expertise in the room.*

In line with this, a strong theme emerging from the conference was the interdisciplinarity of arts practice and partnerships throughout regional NSW. The arts are integrated in rural and remote areas within the community, traversing the barriers and silos that can be built around specialist areas of expertise and disciplines in more populated areas. This also follows from the intimacy created by proximity. Breaking the concurrent sessions into different themes, of performance, visual arts, screen and so on was valuable in terms of realizing the diversity of the arts and distinctive features of those practices. However, the plenary sessions, which covered a range of those forms were both well attended and spoke across those to generate shared conversations and strategies. While there were specific panels considering Aboriginal creative practice that also acknowledged culture, partnerships with and leadership from local Aboriginal communities did also resonate in other sessions. In the performance of *Djurra* the three brothers explain lore by saying it is integrated – culture, lore, practice, way of life, past and present, not fragmented into different disciplines and practices and this was an important reminder to learn how to relate those together. *Using a thematic rather than disciplinary structure to organize the concurrent panels will generate conversations that can build capacity around subjects and creating meanings that transcend specific art forms and build opportunities for artists and arts organisations to respond to the contemporary and priorities. Reducing the number of concurrent sessions through this approach will also ensure that the audience is not spread too thinly across the program to enrich the conversations.*

Priorities are not always shared across the community, and the values underpinning them do not always sit comfortably with the people we interact with every day, even as we are accountable to them and have a responsibility to the places and communities in which we live and operate. The arts need to be complex and provocative, for the purposes of opening up wounds that matter as well as healing. For that reason *there needs to be space for rebellion and deep engagement and resilience. Those relationships need to be authentic and rich, starting from the places we live and work.* This requires leadership and the recognition of this as an approach not bound by position. As Rhoda Roberts reminded us, we learn from young and emerging artists. *Providing the space for experienced and emerging artists to work and learn from each other, to support each other, is an important function of building the network that Artstate offers.*

The diversity, the excellence and the importance of the role of creative arts in NSW is clear and was demonstrated so effectively by both the conference and the festival program at Artstate in Lismore. While the profile and activity of metropolitan areas can be a function of their size and proximity to specialist centres, regional arts practitioners and organisations contribute to the growth and health of their communities and could be involved in creating

meanings that extend beyond geography to a wider audience. The stories they tell, the way they build relationships of ethics and accountability, the history and geography that they experience in their contemporary everyday make them important to the communities in which they are located, but beyond that to artists and arts organisations more generally. Partnerships with the agriculture sector, which is so significant to many regional and remote areas would also appear to be a priority that integrates craft and art and function. *Since food is one of the primary ways we initiate and maintain relationships that also connect us to nature, or place, a stronger focus on local foods would be worth pursuing.*

Recommendations:

- 1.** Maintain the priority to engage with First Nations peoples and Aboriginal Arts practitioners and organisations;
- 2.** Integrate more strongly the festival and conference program;
- 3.** Continue to highlight the significance of place and environment;
- 4.** Encourage more interactive workshop style sessions;
- 5.** Use a thematic rather than disciplinary structure to organize the concurrent panels;
- 6.** Reduce the number of concurrent sessions;
- 7.** Provide space for experienced and emerging artists to work and learn from each other, taking a different approach to leadership;
- 8.** Showcase local and native foods as a part of bringing together history, place and relationships.