



THE ART OF HEALTH & WELLBEING



There was a metaphorical sigh of relief when news filtered through the local community that Port Macquarie Hastings Council had confirmed their support for the continuation of AquaSculpture. A biennial event since 2003, AquaSculpture was conceived when Port Macquarie became the 4th City of the Arts under Bob Carr's state government scheme. The event has been a major collaboration, with partnerships formed between artists, environmental managers, cultural organisers and the Hastings community. Much of its early success was due to former Council cultural planners Janet Cohen, now Manager of Sea Acres Rainforest Centre and Wendy Hee, who recently took on the role of Executive Officer of Red Hot Arts in the Northern Territory.

AcquaSculpture 2009 is fortunate to have as its Project Manager, Jenny Hutchison who was one of the original sponsors of Sculpture by the Sea in Sydney and moved to Port Macquarie several years ago from Canberra. When it comes to sculpture, Jenny knows her stuff and AquaSculpture will benefit from her custodianship. Jenny says that her objective is to focus on quality artworks and developing opportunities for local and regional artists. An exhibition of small sculptures and maquettes will be held at Rydges' Riverside Room on the first weekend of Water Week, from 16

October to 19 October, 10am to 4pm. In addition, there will be larger outdoor sculptures developed in workshops coordinated by local artists and members of the Hastings Arts in Health Network.

Over the past two decades, arts in community health has become a small-scale global phenomenon, according to Mike White, one of the leaders in the field in the UK and author of the book Arts Development in Community Health: a social tonic.

Mike describes "arts in community health" as "a distinct area of activity operating mainly outside acute healthcare settings and characterised by the use of participatory arts to promote health. The development of such work within the interweaving strands of health, education and social policy suggests that arts in community health has not evolved simply as a result of the successful advocacy of an arts sector keen to demonstrate its relevance to health, but rather through the wider recognition of a phenomenological connection between engagement in cultural activity and wellbeing. It is due to this convergence, and not simply to the debatable effects of the arts acting as a sole instrument to improve health, that some credence

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can be given to the bold assertion by the Arts Council of England that the arts 'can have a lasting and transforming effect on many aspects of people's lives'".

In Australia, 'arts in community health' is emerging as strongly as it is in the UK. Just this week, Government News magazine reports on five regional and urban councils in Charters Towers, Queensland; Geelong, Victoria; Liverpool, NSW; Latrobe, Victoria; and Wangaratta (Victoria) which are committed to arts projects that they have helped design to creatively engage their local communities.

The Regenerating Communities project was created by the Cultural Development Network, Victoria and its manager, Kim Dunphy is coming to Port Macquarie to speak at The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing conference on The Contribution of Arts and Creativity to the Health of Rural and Regional Communities. The Regenerating Communities project tackles key issues such as climate change adaptation, improving indigenous relations, youth disengagement and providing for an ageing population, issues pertinent to our region too.

But there is a cautionary note for local governments that want to support arts programs

with health outcomes. As well as the value of the arts in terms of creating social inclusion, Chris Gibson, Associate Professor in Human Geography at the University of Wollongong, says that "in the past five years, the arts have become much more linked to economic development strategies as local governments increasingly see arts programs as potential incubators for creative industries. Councils are beginning to see the economic benefits from creating a thriving local culture. Progressive local governments are realising they need to plan more holistically so separating off community and economic development programs and local cultural programs as if they're separate concerns is false."

The Hastings has a rich history in community cultural development and AquaSculpture has the hallmarks of a valuable arts and community health project. To ensure longevity and continued support, a comprehensive evaluation process needs to be undertaken to demonstrate that these cultural events are vital for our community's health and prosperity. Ultimately, the proof is in a pudding that combines arts and health ingredients and tastes good too.

The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing international arts and health conference, Port Macquarie, 10 to 13 November 2009. For more details email info@artdandhealth.org or visit: www.artsandhealth.org or phone 02 6583 5040.