WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

SANDRA BOWKETT

The scenario: my local council is organising a joint exhibition with its sister city in a majority world country. The exhibition will show art from both countries. It is assumed what is to be sent from my council will be the work of contemporary artists. My council would need to clarify who are the artists they wish to promote, who is the target audience and what are the desired outcomes from the exhibition?

In many post-colonised countries, two distinct creative streams exist: cultural traditional arts and the international art scene. Across this continuum, from where will the artists be chosen? Cross-fertilisation between the two happens to varying degrees. In India, for example, distinct cultural communities still exist as a result of an entrenched social system. The group of artists to be exhibited needs to be identified.

Traditional artists tend not to be part of a culture that attends galleries. If they are part of the desired audience, what is to be a suitable venue and how will the intended audience be encouraged to attend?

Sandra Bowkett is a ceramicist who regularly brings Indian ceramicists out to Australia; see www.sandrabowkett.com for her Crosshatched collaborations between Indian and Australian artists in Victoria, April 2009.

ARTISTS INVITED TO WORK WITH SISTER CITY

A number of practising artists were invited to respond to a scenario in which a local council asked them to organise an exhibition featuring local artists from a sister city in a third world country. It seems a noble gesture, but one fraught with potential missteps. How would they proceed?

PAT HOFFIE

The first thing I would be asking would involve questions like 'what did the council want out of this?' and then questions about how that might fit in (or not) with my own aspirations about what art can and can't do.

I would do some initial scouting around in terms of finding out about geography, local cultures and customs, dress codes, eating practices, religious and legal codes... the usual, and spend some time thinking about how those things might intersect with what's practiced and valued in my own city... Often you need to do just as much research - practical and otherwise - into your own city because you assume you know it and you really don't. In a project like this it would be best to spend a little time in the sister city. You need to press the flesh with some of the locals and doing business from a distance is always fraught... The aim is, after all, to make human connections - to make a project that brings people together in ways that go further than cheap sentiment, those 'aw gee those little brown poor people are really as good as us when you get beneath the surface attitudes.'

This stuff is awful if you embark on it thinking that you're going to do some good. There's no point to seeing your role in this way. If you do you're still a part of the next wave of missionaries. The point is you've got the gig, you've got time and money and an opportunity to exhibit, take it for what it's worth and milk it for what you can get. If you do that you might find yourself feeling out of your depth and that's good. If you're feeling uncomfortable and unsure of the compass points then that's even better.

Then I might start looking at some of the more 'out of the spotlight' cultural practices - the kind of things that might happen in clubs or small organisations here, and which only seem 'exotic' when they're practised elsewhere.

The best projects for me are still uncomfortable. They're still raising questions about what my role as an artist might be at this time in history. I'm very conscious of being part of that next wave of economic missionaries whether I like it or not... everyone wants the cash in your pocket and why not?

Perhaps one of the reasons I've engaged in so many cross-cultural projects is that they've taken me out of my comfort zone and I've enjoyed that - it often seems like FUN, and so much of art is work-a-day stuff.

Pat Hoffie is a visual artist and currently Director of SCAP (Sustainable Environment and Culture, Asia-Pacific), the research focus at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.

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