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# **Reclaiming and sharing aspects of the sacred and the spiritual on sites of conflict and contestation as peace-making through The Arts and Arts Education.**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper encourages new thinking about how peace studies and artistic practice, learning and research can inform each other in transformatory ways. It proposes a community-cultural-development model that is based on the principles of democracy, sustainability and ethical cross-cultural engagement as a means to facilitate positive social change through partnerships in art-making. An Indigenous Cultural Place-making Project in public parklands surrounding a town harbour on the Australian east coast, that reclaims and shares aspects of the sacred and the spiritual on sites of conflict and contestation, will be the focus of the presentation.

## **Biography:**

Dr. Glenda Nalder Lectures in Visual Arts and New Media Education in the School of Vocational, Technology and Arts Education at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. In this role she prepares tertiary students to teach Visual Arts and Media curriculum in early, middle and senior years of schooling, and adults in formal and informal learning contexts. She is currently involved in art-making, art education and research projects as a member of two Indigenous Australian communities in coastal and bay island locations: her grandmother's country (the Quandamooka, or Moreton Bay) and at Cudgen on the Tweed Coast (Bundjalung country) where she lives. (Contact details at the foot of the paper)

## **Introduction:**

Any discussion of the potential for art and arts education to contribute to peace must consider how the prevailing social, cultural, environmental and economic realities of a given context inhibit or facilitate social harmony. Placing such a discussion in the context of World peace means that we are addressing a problem of global proportions: that is, the repercussions of the violent birth of a new World order attributable to the shift from an internationalist industrial economic model of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's trans-national, capitalist, information economy. That there are no precedents to inform the development of strategies to address conflict that takes the form of apparently spontaneous eruptions of violence at seemingly random, disassociated, sites makes this a rather daunting task

If our discussion aims to arrive at practical outcomes, then it must not only also address the complex question of what form agency in peace-making might take, given the absence of guidelines for action, but also examine past, current and potential uses of Art-making and Arts Education for this purpose. In these present circumstances, where the only certainties are the fast-paced rate of change, and the systematic erosion of human rights, adaptability and resilience have become familiar catch cries for Arts Educators. However, we must be cautious in adopting these attributes.

*As artists, researchers and educators committed to world peace, we need most of all to seriously consider just what it is that we are adapting to, as well as at what point resilience makes us complicit in inflicting social and environmental harm.*

### **The Arts and Arts Education: Politics and Policies.**

Historically perceived as ‘civilising’ influences’, The Arts and Education have, in Australia as in most of the so-called ‘developed’ world, received the majority of their funding from government sources. Thus in the main, our activities are subjected to policies that are always politically invested.

During the late 20th Century, left-wing governments supported innovative, radical and activist ‘high’ art practices, education was provided free of charge, and affirmative action introduced to redress inequality. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with the shift of power to conservative right-wing governments, support is re-directed to traditional Arts and Education programs that appeal to conservative tastes. Consumerist values underpin a socially inequitable agenda, which favours private schools, and ties the limited funds for government education institutions to privatization initiatives, including increased tuition fees for university students, and, recently in Australia, the abolition of compulsory student union fees. Thus a monetary, rather than intrinsic, value is attached to both the Arts and Arts Education.

Ideologically-driven strategies are aimed at reducing the potential for resistance to the values and imperatives of any regime. The impact of the imposition of a commercial organizational and financial model is evidenced in the formulation of policies that direct academics in humanities-related fields – traditionally the site of the critique of the excesses of consumer capitalism - to forge a new relationship with private enterprise. There are few models for the kinds of relationships that Arts educators might establish with partners in the corporate sphere. Such a ‘match’ would need to be carefully considered.

The political imperative to establish partnerships and to undertake research ‘with industry’ has forced artists and arts educators with a social justice agenda, such as peace-making, to either devise strategies to meet policy goals without ethical compromise, or to seek sympathetic alliances. Where there are tiers of government (national, state, and local), there exists potential for opposing ideological standpoints to be present through a mix of right and left-wing politics that either facilitate or impede social justice and human rights-values-oriented arts practice and education. Although the recent shift of Australia’s left-wing political parties to centrist positions has led to some common ground. For example,

the policies of parties across the spectrum from right to left encourage artists and arts educators to forge partnerships with community. This emphasis may be viewed as government abrogation of responsibilities on the one hand, or opportunities for authentic learning and/or professional training on the other.

The dilemma for educators who seek to establish links across the public-private divide is the perceived incompatibility of interests and standpoints. The demands for ethical practice could not be met if principles of social justice were abandoned.

*The issue for artists and arts educators seeking active creative engagement in peace-making thus becomes one of identifying the context, role, strategies and strategic alliances.*

### **‘Realising’ Agency through productive partnerships**

An ideological shift from a policy of cultural and social cohesion based on assimilation into the dominant culture to one that promotes cultural diversity and values heritage has occurred in the local government sector in regional and remote areas of Australia. This shift responds to a downturn in traditional rural industries and their replacement with service industries such as tourism and hospitality, which rely on the preservation of the cultural heritage, a local aesthetic in constructed environments, and natural environments as markers of regional ‘distinctiveness’. This shift has provided the conditions under which agency in achieving positive social change might occur.

A core responsibility of an academic institution is that of providing research and education as a public service and for public good. Community service (20% of my workload as an academic) undertaken in residential as well as cultural and professional contexts provides an extended and authentic network for research and learning. It makes sense for the Arts Education sector to enter into partnership with the local government sector, which has in place an existing community development network, to ensure that culture, as a key indicator of community vitality and viability is part of that development.

A strategic initiative of the Community Cultural Development Network in Victoria, a southern Australian state, at the beginning of the new millennium, was to commission research and writing aimed at providing a rationale and a model for the strategic inclusion of The Arts in local government planning. The resultant text, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture’s essential role in public planning* (Hawke, 2001) not only overcame the blind-spot in the ‘triple bottom line’ approach (which gauged performance on the basis of economic, social and environmental, but not cultural measures), but also provided a practical tool that financial managers could use to justify expenditure on Arts programs.

*The Indigenous Public Place-making Project (IPPP)* that is the focus of this paper arose from a partnership between Griffith University and the (local government) Council of the Tweed Shire in which I am a resident, fostered through my participation in the Tweed Shire Council’s (TSC) Community Cultural Development Advisory Committee. TSC’s

Cultural Development Officer, with the support of a working party from the committee, was successful in 2002 in winning a NSW Ministry for the Arts *City of the Arts Program* competitive grant of \$300,000, extended through sponsorships to a total budget of \$1 million (Australian). The grant application was successful because the program it proposed was based on the principles of equity and community consultation. The funding supported a comprehensive program of arts activities during the years 2003-2005 to implement the Shire's cultural plan. The cultural plan operationalised the TSC Cultural Policy, including its newly developed Public Art and Public Place-making Policy – *Shaping a Distinctive Environment* (SADE). The policy called for an “Integrated Cultural Opportunities Assessment” (ICOA) to be undertaken that required research into the history of a site prior to proposals for public art, and reflected the community's aspirations for the Tweed Shire to retain its distinctive natural environment in the face of pressure for ‘concrete, steel and glass’ development that was excessive for proposed beach-side sites as well as environmentally unsustainable.

The SADE program began with a policy launch and *Forum on Innovation in Sustainable Public Place-making* in February 2004. Residents and other stakeholders – town-planners, artists, designers, engineers, architects, heritage specialists, environmental scientists and property developers were invited to participate. Multi-disciplinary panels were formed to answer the following questions:

How is sustainability defined in your sector?

How is the environmental/cultural distinctiveness and significance of the site decided, understood and reflected in your work?

What is to be sustained by the built form?

Is what is to be sustained actually sustainable?

Australian artists of international standing, including Aboriginal artists, whose practice is innovative, ‘green’, and in public places, provided keynote presentations. Property developers who had proposed major developments for approval in the Shire were invited to identify aspects of their proposed development for the incorporation of public art which would form ‘hypotheticals’ for small-group workshop responses, which were informed by the Shire's new Public Art and Public Place-making Policy (*Shaping a Distinctive Environment*). Commissions for artworks leading to the training and employment of local artists was an unanticipated outcome from the forum that resulted from the interaction. Other substantial outcomes are yet to be documented in the final report which will appear in the future on the website: <http://www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/cityofthearts/index.htm>

*For agency to occur, the nature of the intervention must be appropriate to the site of intervention, and equal to the prevailing relations of power.*

### **Art-making as reparation: learning to be peaceful**

Equitable access to resources, respect for difference, care and consideration for others and the natural environment, and acknowledgement of and reparation for past transgressions

are core tenets that the Peace Movement shares with the human rights, women's and environmental movements in the quest for sustainability. As in all of these fields, sustaining peaceful relations requires vigilance and on-going activism if even small gains are to be maintained. Artists have made significant contributions to social harmony through culture – from applying The Arts in therapeutic ways with victims of war, to the creation of objects and places that commemorate people and events in highly public ways that contribute to reconciliation and healing. But to practice art and to teach ethically, we must always remain open to learning.

Non-Indigenous Australians have much to learn about peace-making from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Despite being subjected to acts of genocide, land theft and attempts at cultural, linguistic and other forms of annihilation dating from the British invasion of Australia in 1788, Indigenous peoples have resisted, and survived, to share spirituality and culture practiced in harmony with the natural environment through story, song, dance, drawing, painting, shaping, carving and weaving over countless generations, spanning a history in this country of over 40,000 years. Whereas Australians of European descent, in this country for only 200 years, have impacted on this culture and environmental custodianship in highly adverse and destructive ways.

The 1988 bi-centenary of Australian colonization and other internationally significant events such as the (British) Commonwealth and (World) Olympic Games have been a catalyst to the dawning recognition and appreciation of the richness and uniqueness of Indigenous Australian culture. As well, since 1992 when the Australian High Court ruled in favour of Torres Strait Islander, Edward Koiki Mabo in his land rights case against the State Queensland, which effectively destroyed the legal doctrine of *terra nullius* (empty land) by which Australia had been colonized, reconciliation has been the impetus for an on-going program of community arts projects that celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. However in many cases these projects did not act to sustain community and harmony because they were bureaucratically driven, and, for that reason, damaged by expediency and inability to follow Indigenous protocols.

The project to which I refer in this paper could not have proceeded without adaptability and resilience on behalf of all participants. As project manager, I needed to find the most appropriate way to fulfill this honorary role. Earlier in this discussion I referred to the value of local government's established networks. The extent of this value will become clearer in the telling of my story of the project. (Using the term 'my story' acknowledges that there will be as many 'stories' of the project as there are participants).

### **Symbolic expressions of identity, and connectedness to the land**

The project site, known locally as "the old border caravan park" is flattened and filled ground with a grid of crumbling bitumen pathways, sandwiched between a servicemen's club on the west, a state border between the "twin towns" of Tweed Heads (NSW) and Coolangatta (Qld) on the north, a headland known as "Point Danger" (after Captain Cook's 1770 map) on the north east, and the Pacific Ocean on the east, and a shopping

mall on the south. The site is on the shore of a body of water known as “Jack Evans Boat Harbour”, artificially created when a back channel of an estuary (of what is known as the Tweed River) was filled in to create the shopping mall in the 1970s. Mr. Jack Evans was an entrepreneur who fashioned a cement pool at the water’s edge to house the dolphins he captured and trained as profitable tourist entertainment venture in the 1950s. Prior to British invasion, this site was a sandy isthmus.

Despite its current usage, and its status as crown land, the site and the land and sea surrounding it remain significant sites within the country of an Australian Aboriginal clan, the Ngandawal, of the Bundjalung Nation. In the mid 1990s, descendents of the traditional owners approached the Tweed Shire Council to reclaim, re-vegetate and rename the site. This request was incorporated into the SADE (CoA) Program, as the Indigenous Public Place-making Project. A

In the interim, the Tweed-Byron Local Aboriginal Land Council (TBLAL) submitted a land claim in the vicinity; commercial property developers sought approval to build massive high rise buildings abutting the harbour parklands (to which the town’s residents objected); the NSW government appointed a taskforce to develop a ‘master plan’ for the town of Tweed Heads; and the TSC appointed a Landscape Architect to prepare a design for the foreshore public parklands, to include the project site.

While these interim developments considerably widened the ‘stakeholder’ group having an interest in influencing the project outcome, the protocols and locus of decision-making for the project, in the main, have remained those of the AAC. The AAC comprises Aboriginal Elders, traditional owners, Indigenous community members, representatives from state and local government funded organisations active in the Shire, and the Chair and members of the TBLAL. Tweed Shire Councilors and Council officers also attend the meetings to present reports and seek approvals.

The Indigenous community held a design gathering and BBQ to workshop a design brief for the site. A call for expressions of interest from Aboriginal artists living in the Shire to undertake the paid work to develop the design was widely publicised. A workshop was convened to assist interested aspiring, emerging, and professional Aboriginal artists to prepare their submissions. A joint selection panel from the Cultural Development and Aboriginal Advisory committees viewed the submissions, and the three successful artists are currently working with the Landscape Architect to complete the design for incorporation into the town plan.

When complete, the site will become a green and serene place that is special to the Indigenous community, that will tell its stories – ancient and contemporary - and educate visitors about the unique history of the site. Symbolic expressions of culture will be reinscribed into the reformed and reshaped landscape, using vegetation – trees, bushes, grasses – indigenous to the site. Orientation markers will reference locations of spiritual and cultural significance that can be viewed from the site, but which have been destroyed through appropriation for grazing, agriculture, civic, commercial and domestic buildings

and infrastructure. Paths, seating, drinking fountains, children's water playground, a natural amphitheatre for performances, and other infrastructure will be of unique design and bear embellishments that commemorate significant people and events – hostile and peaceful – that have occurred on and around the site. Stories of heroic deeds and courageous acts by Aboriginal Australians to save the lives of Europeans whose ships were wrecked crossing the sand bars to the river, or whilst swimming, as well as the contribution of local families who also have a rich South Sea Islander heritage, to the fishing industry, will also be referenced through art.

*Crucial to our ability to contribute in meaningful ways to the creation and evolution of an inclusive and sustainable culture is the necessity to begin with a shared understanding of and respect for historical circumstances.*

### **Conclusion: Peace as a way of life**

As educators, we can use our capacity to convene and participate in public forums to initiate dialogue. Adaptability and resilience can become positive attributes that encourage us to step outside of the security of our institution, to bring together stakeholders with conflicting ideologies, and provide opportunities for diverse sectors of the community to have their views heard, and to reach a common understanding. An argument that harmonious relations, engendered through inclusive cultural pursuits, can have economic benefits is a strategy that adopts the language of policy makers and the corporate sector. This strategy underpins a community cultural development model for social change.

Those from the West can learn from non-western ways of knowing and being in the world, where, for example, in India, the word for peace (chant or mantra) in its 3 guises signifies firstly, the making of peace with one's self, secondly, with our fellow human beings; and thirdly, with the natural world or cosmos. This ecological world view, a familiar one within traditional cultures, understands that good and bad resides in us all, and seeks to nurture and grow the seeds of love and peace; it does not seek human domination of the natural world, but rather to open our minds to the process of the universe and the laws of nature. It sees national interests as illusory, and respect for the land - reverence for 'Mother' Earth as paramount.

*Human agency, strategically enacted in culture and society through the arts, can bring about new, shared understandings where peace can be conceptualised as more than the absence of external conflict or war. Rather, it can be conceptualised as that which sustains a whole way of life where people care for each other, share with each other, and care for the natural environment.*

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#### POSTAL

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