



DEVELOPING A MAINSTREAM AUDIENCE

Sue Roff
Executive Director
Arts Project Australia
www.artsproject.org.au

(Presented at Arts Activated Conference, Sydney, NSW, Friday 26 March 2010)

ARTS PROJECT AUSTRALIA – THE HISTORY

Arts Project Australia was founded in 1974 but its roots go back to 1951 when Johanne Hilgendorf was diagnosed – in the terminology of the times – as “mentally retarded”; and Myra Hilgendorf and her family began their long engagement with the attitudes and structures of a society which denied and segregated persons with a disability in institutions, rather than acknowledge and support them within the family unit. During the next twenty years they experienced all the stigma and difficulties of caring for a person with a progressive disability at home, when there were few supports, no facilities and no respite – except those developed by parents themselves, in voluntary organisations such as the Helping Hand and STAR, which Myra joined.

By 1974, Johanna, needing full-time care, had entered an institution and Myra, a painter herself, had seen in Johanna’s drawings the lively expression of ideas and feelings which Johanna could no longer convey through speech. Requested by STAR to collect, for exhibition in Adelaide, works by the “mentally retarded”, Myra was excited by the general vitality and expressiveness of the works. The potent quality of the images was, however, in striking contrast to the poverty of materials used in their production – with the exception of the works from the Mildura centre, which has close contact with the Mildura Gallery, and access to proper art materials. These paintings, so vividly different in quality, reinforced Myra’s perception of their expressive value and her desire to have them exhibited in regular galleries with the dignity accorded the work of practising artists. In such a setting, she felt, the work could be seen, detached from the negative context of disability, and its aesthetic properties recognised.

In pursuit of this vision, Myra, with a group of like-minded professional friends, all involved with intellectual disability, founded the Art Project for the Mentally Retarded in 1974. Encouragement from the Director of the National Gallery and the Professor of Fine Arts at Monash University, Patrick McCaughey, finally led to the Ministry for the Arts granting Arts Project \$4000 to mount an exhibition. The use of Georges' Gallery and the framing were donated and the catalogue was provided by the Swinburne Department of Design. Mrs Hamer, wife of the then Premier, became patron of the fledgling organisation. In 1975 The Age produced a series of articles on the residents of Kew Cottages entitled "The Minus Children". The Arts Project named this first exhibition Minus/Plus, wishing to counter the negative implications of "The Minus Children". The reviews were laudatory and Georges' – then a leading gallery – was flooded with interested viewers, from college students and their lecturers, to groups from the newly established centres for people with an intellectual disability. Art critics reviewed the show enthusiastically and the Minus/Plus show went on to tour the regional galleries of Victoria.

During the next few years many exhibitions were organised, mounted and framed by the Committee volunteers. In 1981 the Commonwealth Department of Social Services asked Arts Project to provide a show in Canberra to launch the International Year of the Child. A grant was provided to frame the work and James Mollison of the Australian National Gallery opened the exhibition.

In 1982 Cheryl Daye, a fine arts graduate from Philip Institute of Technology (later to become RMIT) was teaching art at Janefield Special School in Melbourne when she was invited to join the Committee. Her experience led her to envisage the scope of Arts Project beyond the collection and exhibition of paintings to the establishment of a studio workshop staffed by practising artists and supplied with artists' quality materials where people with an intellectual disability could develop their particular talents. She felt it essential that such a studio should not be based within existing institutional settings or dependent upon space being made available by other organisations, but should develop as an independent community-based entity.

Renamed Arts Project Australia, the change in community, political and institutional attitudes gradually enabled the organisation to acquire funding, first from the Commonwealth Schools Commission, and later from the state Department of Human Services. Over the next fifteen years it developed into its present notable form as an art environment for people with an intellectual disability previously deprived of an opportunity for expression and recognition.

ARTS PROJECT AUSTRALIA – TODAY

Today, Arts Project Australia operates out of its own premises at 24 High Street, Northcote. We were fortunate to secure significant philanthropic support to purchase this building 10 years ago.

The light filled studio space sees more than 130 artists attend the program each week (5.5 days a week), and our public gallery space houses 9 exhibitions each year (predominantly work by Arts Project artists, but also a number of collaborative and touring exhibitions). In addition, our artists' work features in numerous external exhibitions in both public and commercial galleries. We act as agents for our artists, and in 2008/09, artwork sales increased to \$155,000 from \$75,000 the previous year. Gallery attendance also doubled in the last year. We run a small corporate leasing program, and our artists' work appears in many public and private collections, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

We have two collections. The Sidney Myer Fund Permanent Collection comprises over 400 drawings and paintings which formed the basis of two early landmark exhibitions organised by Arts Project Australia. In addition, the Arts Project Australia Permanent Collection includes a cross section of significant artwork produced in the studio since its inception, in addition to correspondence, documents, photographs and other documentation pertaining to the history of our organisation.

We are predominantly funded by the Department of Human Services (Vic) and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. We have around 20 staff; however, as many are part time, a fulltime equivalent of 10.

HOW DID WE GET TO WHERE WE ARE TODAY?

There are obviously a wealth of reasons for the continued success and growth of Arts Project Australia – dedicated staff and board members, a commitment to its vision and ideals, broad community and government support. However, we are here today to discuss marketing and to answer the question – how did we develop a mainstream audience? Arts Project Australia has employed a range of strategies over the years to achieve its mission:

"to support people with disabilities to become practitioners in the visual arts, and to promote the work of artists with an intellectual disability within the broad spectrum of contemporary arts practice"

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Broadly speaking, we have employed the following strategies to develop a mainstream audience:

- Professional presentation
- Cultivation of supporters and networks
- Advocacy in the mainstream art world
- Effective and efficient communications
- Marketing tools and techniques
- Being proactive

Whatever your artform, these strategies will be relevant.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATION

• THE BEST OF THE BEST

One of the consistent practices in the Arts Project studio is that not all art is exhibited or sold. We recognise that all artists wish to retain or destroy some of their "lesser" work, and provide only the best or most appropriate for exhibition and sale. At the end of every term, our artworkers (staff) meet to review the term's work in every folio of every artist. As a result of their discussion and review (often in conjunction with the artist) it is decided which work will make its way to our stockroom for exhibition and/or review.

• HIGH QUALITY MATERIALS

The artwork in the Sidney Myer Fund Permanent Collection is a good example of what happens to artwork when it is produced using poor quality materials. Much of it is deteriorating rapidly. It is somewhat symbolic that artists with an intellectual disability 35 years ago were only given poor quality materials to use. At Arts Project Australia we place a high value on the art created within our studios, and we provide our artists with high quality materials to reinforce this. Not only will the artwork last longer, it also looks more professional.

• HIGH QUALITY CURATION

We give serious thought to each and every exhibition mounted at Arts Project Australia and beyond. Each show is professionally curated – either by an Arts Project Australia artworker, or an external curator. Each show has a curatorial premise and theme – a reason to be. Not every artist has work hung in every show (although we do ensure a work by every artist is included in our Annual Gala Show). We are engaging more and more external curators as this is another way of extending our art sector networks.

- **HIGH QUALITY FRAMING/PRESENTATION**

All artwork deserves to be presented in the best possible way. We have developed our own framing practice within Arts Project, and can thus ensure that artworks are framed appropriately – for the individual artwork, and the overall exhibition. 3D artworks (ceramics and soft sculpture) are presented on shelves and plinths.

- **HIGH QUALITY EXHIBITIONS**

All of the above go into making a high quality exhibition. We use professional installers, who have an eye for the best grouping and placement of works. We endeavour to have high profile speakers opening our exhibitions. We have a fantastic team of volunteers and staff who provide food and drinks at our openings, and if someone wants to purchase a work we make it as easy as possible to do so.

CULTIVATION OF SUPPORTERS AND NETWORKS

Arts Project Australia began cultivating supporters of its philosophy and practice right at the very beginning. As our mission is to promote the work of artists with an intellectual disability within the broad spectrum of arts practice, we focussed on gaining the support and interest of people connected to the mainstream visual arts sector.

We have continually endeavoured to engage with mainstream gallery directors and owners, curators, art academics, and artists themselves – to invite them in, to discuss our work, and to develop ongoing relationships with them.

Our animation program recently produced a DVD of 8 short animated films and we sent this to Adam Elliott, who won an Oscar for his own animation, *Harvie Krumpet*.

Adam responded with an email that we are delighted to add to our testimonials list:

To Whom it May Concern,

Just a very quick thankyou for sending me the compilation of animated films called ANIMAGINATION.

My team and I enjoyed watching them immensely, and I heartedly congratulate all the wonderfully talented artists, animators and filmmakers involved.

We receive many animated films sent to our studios from all over the world every week and it is very hard for me to have the time and watch them all. However, I was so thrilled to watch this collection; I laughed, I was moved, but above all I was thoroughly engaged. Storytelling is equipment for living, and these short animations each have a strong and potent story to tell. I wish all the filmmakers the very best with their careers and look forward to more enriching, entertaining and quality work from each of them in the future. Onwards and upwards!

My very best wishes, Adam Elliot.

The best form of marketing and promotion is MOUTH TO MOUTH. Developing supporters and cultivating networks outside of the disability sector will inform more people about your work, and they, in turn, will create new supporters through their own networks and word of mouth.

There are number of groups of people you should consider getting engaged and involved with your work.

- **LEADERS IN THE ARTS SECTOR**

It makes sense to think about your particular artform and the leaders in that sector and try to engage with them. In the case of Arts Project, an early association with Patrick McCaughey, Director of the National Gallery, not only assisted in other visual arts leaders hearing about our work, but also assisted us in gaining our first funding grant.

- **COLLECTORS AND ENTHUSIASTS**

Collectors are invaluable in the visual arts sector, and enthusiasts are invaluable in every arts sector. One Sydney based collector has been an enormous supporter of Arts Project over many years, and has not only purchased a lot of work, but has also curated shows both at Arts Project and externally – and he never wastes the opportunity to shout our praises when asked.

- **POLITICIANS**

It makes sense to put your organisation on the radar of any relevant politicians – local, state and federal. Don't just focus on politicians with disability portfolios – there's now a National Arts and Disability Strategy that was developed through the Cultural Ministers Council, not by the usual suspects associated with disability services and funding. Ensure that all relevant politicians are on your mailing list, are invited to events, openings and performances (and perhaps they could be asked to open the event).

- **PHILANTHROPISTS**

As many philanthropists prefer to fund "start up" projects, it makes sense to try to engage with them as early as possible. Once you have established your organisation and your work, you can maintain and strengthen these relationships. The philanthropy network is a close knit one, and indeed, the success of our building campaign relied heavily on the support and assistance on one well connected philanthropist, who encouraged others to give to our building fund. And you need to keep them informed and involved in your work along the way – this can have incredible spin offs.

- **NETWORKS**

It's easy to get caught up in your own work within your own walls, and it's really important that you develop networks across arts, business and government. Make the time to join professional associations, arts sector networking groups, and leadership fora, as well as maintaining your own personal networks to assist in promoting your work.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

None of the previous strategies matter very much if you don't have effective communication strategies in place. If you're difficult to find, or make contact with, you lessen your chances of attracting that mainstream audience. Similarly, if you don't let people know what you're doing and when you're doing it, how will they know about it? Here's a few tips:

- **GATHER CONTACT DETAILS**

Never waste an opportunity to gather contact details. These days, most people have an email address, and this is the quickest and most cost effective way to communicate with people. You should be asking people to join your mailing list at every show, performance, lecture, workshop, and meeting. Make sure there is a simple form to fill in or an easy way to register online.

- **INVEST IN A DECENT DATABASE**

This can be as simple as an Excel spreadsheet if you're starting out – or you can purchase a range of CRM (customer relationship management) databases that help organise your information. Arts Project invested in a database called Tessera, which is specifically designed for art galleries, and enables us to manage our mailing lists, as well as documenting artworks and sales. The most important thing is the ability to extract mailing lists and contact lists and TO KEEP IT UPDATED!!

- **WORK OUT A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

WHAT do you want to communicate? Be clear about the things you want to communicate externally – nothing is less effective than a vague message.

WHERE do you want to communicate it? Work out where you want the message to go – is your activity geographically specific?

WHEN do you need to communicate it? Long lead times are crucial for good communications – too many artists and organisations make the mistake of leaving communications until the week before. Many media outlets require 2-3 months notice, and as people's lives get busier they need to be able to plan their priorities

(and you may need to communicate something more than once to reinforce it)

WHO do you want to communicate with? If your database/contact list allow it, it's a good idea to segment your communications to target appropriate groups (VIPs, politicians, media, collectors, etc)

WHY do you want to communicate? Don't send out a newsletter if you have no news! Any communication should have a clear intent.

ARTS PROJECT AUSTRALIA COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

- e-invitations to every exhibition
- Hard copy invites to every exhibition
- Email reminder 2 days before exhibition
- Teaser email of works for sale to VIP clients/members the day before
- e-newsletter 4-6 times a year that drives readers to the website
- Annual Report mailouts

• KNOW HOW PEOPLE WANT TO RECEIVE COMMUNICATION

Some people prefer hard copy written information – if you ask the question when you gather their details, then you will know how to best communicate with them. The trend is towards e-communications, for environmental as well as financial reasons, especially where there are a large number of recipients. But remember that some of your special supporters may just prefer a personal phone call or an exchange of information over a special preview.

• A GREAT WEBSITE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A good website can be a godsend. While you can spend huge sums of money on them, it is still possible to get a smart, interactive and functional database for under \$5000. At the very least, people should be able to register to receive your information and find out how to contact you. You can link to videos on YouTube showing your work, you can showcase your work, and most importantly, you can keep it fresh by updating it yourself (this is vital for small organisations).

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

There are some simple tools and techniques to assist in developing your audience.

- Keep your website up to date. There is nothing more annoying than outdated information – try to give your surfers something new each time they visit
- Drive people to your website. Make sure you list the address on your business cards and everything you publish, and when you send an e-communication, make sure there is at least one clickthrough to your website
- Use personal stories. These are far more interesting than general arts jargon, and are more likely to engage the reader early.
- Learn to write in short sharp grabs. Regrettably, both the arts and disability sectors are renowned for extensive use of jargon and “art/disability” speak. Keep it simple and appealing.
- Use images – and lots of them! Good visuals attract attention and convey your work better than words (unless it’s purely literary!)
- Be responsive and timely. You make no friends by taking a week or more to respond to a request or an expression of interest. But being responsive can build your reputation for excellence.
- Build and reinforce your brand at all times. Ensure your message is always clear and that all your staff and participants are across it.

BE PROACTIVE

Finally, no one becomes successful by sitting back and waiting for opportunities. You need to be constantly on the lookout for opportunities to build your audience and make more people aware of your work.

- Follow up leads while they are fresh – things change quickly!
- Join networks, meetings, gatherings.
- Seek out presentation opportunities – conferences, lectures, affinity groups, service clubs etc
- Mail out to relevant organisations and people regularly
- Use other websites to promote your work (government information websites, arts and disability sector websites)
- Seek media angles and opportunities (they rarely just come to you!)