

# COMMUNITY, COMMUNITY ART, COMMUNITY ART IN HOWICK

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With its founding declaration to 'promote the wellbeing of the community in the area usually known as Howick',<sup>1</sup> how is Uxbridge Arts and Culture today to fulfill its role? Founded in 1981 as a 'creative leisure centre for the community', the newly redeveloped centre comprises numerous studios for art education, a theatre for live performance and a brand-new public gallery, called Malcolm Smith Gallery, of which I am the inaugural manager/curator. If we take geography as one of the qualifiers for defining community, as we do when talking about community art,<sup>2</sup> then how are we to imagine a Howick community, and in turn, community art in Howick? In this article, I think through community as a concept and the genre of community art in order to offer a vision for community art in Howick.



The Bridge of Remembrance, Garden of Memories in Howick, 1954. Courtesy of Auckland Libraries, Footprint 01943.

In 2015, I wrote *The Adda Community*, an article in which I argued against the notion of community as collectivity—as fixed groups, as pre-existing and already unified peoples—even though the hopeless impulse toward collectivity haunts the very activity of community. Using the Hindustani word *adda*,<sup>3</sup> I posited that community can instead be a site of openness, for a coming-together and becoming-together without needing something in common. In other words, I wanted to re-think the terms of solidarity, without mortgaging community to identity, without flattening difference and fixing people to those things they hold in common as a group.

Local government's use of the term community, however, seems more oriented to territory than to people. In order to qualify their function as a servant-body of a diverse group of peoples, community is the term used to coalesce a collective identity on the basis of shared geography. But it is unusual to become intimate with neighbours in a metropolitan city; something made especially difficult by our differing backgrounds and languages. How, then, do we feel connected to the people in our neighbourhood and become motivated to participate in our local ward?

It is difficult to reconcile the desire for community in our society. I am of the view that in our individualistic, meritocratic and increasingly neoliberal system, the idea of community is desperation to fill a void. We are encouraged to break away, chase dreams and find ourselves, but to be part of a community is to be entangled, to be socially and circumstantially bound. It requires the relinquishment of a tight grip and control over our lives. It is to think, for example, not in terms of our freedoms—of speech, of education—but our *haq*, which are our birthrights-cum-responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> It is no surprise, then, that concepts like interdependency come out of collectivist societies. But even as we lament isolation and the loss of community, few are ready or willing to become helplessly, regrettably and very unromantically bound to and by others. Is community, then, just a collectivist dream?

Community art is a site of productive struggle. It is interested in the role of art in re-imagining civic life. It brings together two topics—art making and community development—and is caught between two competing visions for art: on the one hand, art as a tool for social cohesion, and on the other, art as a vehicle for social challenge. In any case, and in both instances, art is mobilised in service of socio-political vision.

Given the breadth of the term's use to describe a variety of practices, community art is difficult to define. Sometimes, it is indistinguishable from other forms of altruistic social activity. For the purposes of community arts funding, the government's national arts development agency Creative New Zealand defines community as: 'based around a place, a cultural tradition, or commonly held interests or experiences'. Following this,

the agency recognises three core strands of activity as community arts: 1) Community Cultural Development, 2) Maintenance and Transmission of Cultural Traditions and 3) Leisure and Recreation Activities. The first can be described as the collaboration of arts practitioners with communities to achieve artistic and social outcomes; the second as defined groups of interest (such as minority groups) maintaining and preserving their distinctive artistic and cultural traditions; and the third as community-based groups devoted to art as recreational pursuit.

At its best, grounded in socio-democratic principles, community art challenges exclusionary politics. With roots in settlement work and with social interventionist tendencies, community artists see social practice art as one of the few ways to address the most threatening needs and crucial issues—juvenile justice, public health, public housing, fair labour laws, child care and immigration reform. If community means a semi-autonomous group, a group that is mobilised by the same people the group serves, then community art feeds a self-reinforcing loop. Community artists develop visions for social change drawing from their own and their neighbours' local knowledge and experiences. It is a way of creating neighbourly solidarity in disenfranchised climates. It unifies people through politically charged social intervention and can increase self-esteem, affirm cultural difference and boost the political efficacy of people. Those who are socio-politically, economically or culturally marginalised can find strength in defining themselves as a group in opposition to an antagonistic mainstream, but among already wealthy and privileged groups, does such a model of self-reinforcing community art that is for the community and by the community preserve the privilege?

At its worst, community art is a painkiller, a cursory ameliorative for our times. In today's system that is guided by market logic, the connection between art making and community development is troublesome. Outsourcing the task of community development to art organisations and the subsequent push for accountability means more reliance on quantifiable outcomes, more proof of community success and more customer satisfaction. The trouble with art organisations being put in service of the social in this system of neoliberal governance means that the state can begin to divest its responsibilities towards its citizens, because art organisations are required to step into these roles of response and care. In chasing revenue to fund projects, art organisations find themselves further tangled in the philanthropic missions of patrons and businesses. In this system, artists, curators and art organisations vacillate between promoting the social value of art and worrying that such aesthetic instrumentalisation neutralises the power of art to stir its audiences. It turns artists into art administrators, because they assure the public that everyone can participate democratically in the spirit of community art and in the making of community artworks. Differences in the quality of artistic contribution are downplayed in favour of increased numbers of participants.

Aesthetic standards, critical reflexivity and conceptual rigour become secondary. No wonder there is so much bad community art that is lacking in integrity and making only surface-level engagement with the communities those artists, curators and art organisations choose to connect with, often more in service of their own careers than for the benefit of communities. On top of this, and paradoxically, community art has the propensity to promote exclusionary politics when it appeals to and privileges the leisure class, those looking for something to do, but at a time and place that suits them. Community art, in these instances, does not manifest as a response to immediate and threatening needs, but as an excess of the everyday politico-economic demands, occurring after the fact of earning a living or rearing a family. Community art is a contradiction in terms so long as it comes out of and is for the upper class, so long as artists' and curators' commitments to their communities remain weak, so long as art organisations are burdened by their entanglements.

In the eastern suburbs, Howick was first formed as a base from which to defend the fledgling settlement of Auckland from the Ngāpuhi and Tainui iwi. In 1846, six years after the treaty of Waitangi had been signed and in fear of a Māori attack on the new capital, Governor George Grey appealed to England and was rewarded with the Royal New Zealand Fencible Corps, retired soldiers who had served in other parts of the British Empire. 'In a scheme devised by Lord Howick, Secretary for the Colonies in the British Parliament, the men had to be younger than 48 (later dropped to 41, so great was the interest) with a minimum of 15 years' military service, be of good character, taller than 5ft 5in – 1.65m – and be medically fit for active duty, should the Māori attack.'<sup>5</sup> As many as 721 pensioners and their families were allowed to settle in Ōtāhuhu, Panmure and Howick, with a two-room cottage and an acre of land.

Today's Howick holds these memories dear, naming many buildings and companies after the British military representatives: the Fencible Lounge in the public library, Fencibles United soccer team, Fencible Law practice, Fencible Drive, Fencible Drycleaners and, of course, the 'living history museum of the Fencible Period', known as Howick Historical Village. Strategically isolated from the main city centre, Howick grew as a self-sufficient village surrounded by farmland on all sides until the 1980s. Even after becoming enveloped by suburbia, the descendants today preserve Howick's sense of being a unique neighbourhood, with its row of locally owned and operated shops welcoming you to 'the friendliest village' and encouraging you to 'shop Howick Village first'. In this way, the greatest impetus towards community building in Howick is in the rekindling of Fencible dreams, despite the changing composition of this neighbourhood. Howick is, today, a topsy-turvy gathering of various people. Close to 38.8% of the residents identify with an Asian ethnic identity, with Chinese as the largest sub-group at

21%, then 9.9% Indian. The Māori population is 5.2%.<sup>6</sup> Although the white settler groups enjoy the greatest visibility and close-to-exclusive representation in governing bodies, they make up the majority of the total population in Howick by only a 5% margin. Is it fair, then, to promote community art in Howick reflecting and reciprocating the majority of public sentiment? Does it not lead to identity politics of a troublesome kind—exclusionary, reactionary and protectionist? A model of community art can only be possible in Howick if artists, curators and art organisations are willing to work with and through difference, if they are unafraid to hold unpopular positions and if they are grounded in minor politics.

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- 1 Patricia Rose, *The Story of Uxbridge* (Auckland: Uxbridge Community Projects Inc., 1991), 13.
- 2 'Glossary' (Creative New Zealand: 2016).
- 3 'Adda is an Indian social practice of unrestrained palaver, but the word also refers to the place of practice—a roadside joint near a tea-shop, the outer parlour of a person's home, an office after hours. Adda is a perch for connoisseurs of company, a spot for friends to ritually meet and practice unhurried, informal, semi-intellectual conversation, at times lasting for many hours on end, and at other times easy-goingly brief.' Balamohan Shingade, 'The Adda Community', *Localise* 004 (October 2015) Special Issue ed. by Ioana Gordon-Smith and Lana Lopesi. The newspapers were published as part of the Whau Arts Festival.
- 4 The Hindustani word *haq*, which is loaned from the Arabic *al haq*, is 'not rights alone but a peculiar mix of rights and responsibilities that goes beyond the individual. [...] It is the birthright of being able to take care of other people.' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) 259, 294.
- 5 Jan Corbett, 'Fire and Loathing in Howick: The Tale of the Little Whare Once Called Torere', *Metro* 317 (December 2007).
- 6 Auckland Council, 'Howick Local Board Profile', 2013.