



Wednesday, 5 October 2011, 9:00 am.

Keynote session: People

Speakers

Tim Greacen, Director, Maison Blanche Research Laboratory, France

Jo Dorras and **Danny Marcel**, Wan Smolbag, Vanuatu

Moderator

Robyn Archer, AO, CdOAL (France), OC (Belgium)

Rapporteur

Libby Christie, Executive Director, Arts Funding, Australia Council for the Arts

Description of the session

This session focused on creative intersections between and among communities at all levels with particular emphasis on arts and health programs from both a theoretical and historical viewpoint as well as that of practical experience.

Tim Greacen talked the audience through the notion and history of biopolitics, which from the 17th century until today, has enabled a biopolitical medical model to develop with externally defined notions of “wellbeing” imposed on people and which has created programs and interventions to increase people’s efficiency and productivity. But, Tim challenged the audience to ask, who benefits from this biopolitical definition of wellbeing and its programs to increase efficiency and productivity of the society? Tim provided examples of how this biopolitical medical model has used art and creation as a diagnostic and therapeutic tool since early 20th century and in doing so set art and culture against illness. Art therapy uses art to provide ways to escape, build defences, reduce distress and reliance on medications and as a model for a better life.

He then described the alternative artist centred approach he works with. This has grown out of the 1940s and Surrealism and has been highly critical of art therapy for not emphasizing the artistic value of art initiated in response to medical/health situations. He described how user organisations are highly

critical of medical models which do not place the user at the centre. In particular he talked about how HIV/AIDS user organisations from the 1980s on have reclaimed the health discourse to give all people a chance to participate in and build health programs appropriate to their needs. This movement, which prioritises participation, uses creative and cultural activities as tools for users to express themselves rather than as therapy.

Jo Dorras and **Danny Marcel** then introduced the audience to their fascinating and very successful theatre company which is based in Vila, Vanuatu, Wan Smalbag, which means one small bag. When the company was set up, given its very limited resources, it aimed to make theatre with resources contained in just one small bag.

Jo Dorras described the history of the company, from 1989 when it started with an island touring theatre program focused on sex and HIV/AIDS which engaged deeply with island communities and led to important discussions with communities after performances enabling them to get more information about topics which they were not normally able to discuss. After core funding was provided to the company by the UK in 1994, Wan Smalbag then developed a community program in the squatter settlements of Vila which led to the establishment of 2 clinics for family planning and reproductive health services which have been a great success. Then to keep the subjects covered in their plays current, they started a weekly radio program involving their actors. Since 1999, with the help of AusAid, have opened a number of youth centres where children and young people come and can do programs in sport, computers, literacy, self defence and photography.

Danny Marcel talked about how he had started out as an actor, working in film and how he now stars in a locally made TV series, Love Patrol. He described how important this series has been as a way to talk about the same subjects Wan Smalbag has covered in their performances and also to raise pride among NiVan people. Not only has the TV series provided work for actors but they have also learned and taken on all aspects of production. And the popularity of the TV series is bringing more young people to the Youth Centres. While most of the work of Wan Smalbag is in the common language of Vanuatu, Bismala, the TV series is made in English and has been exported across the Pacific.

Creative intersections discussed in the session

All the speakers talked about how support from non arts organisations had helped them in their work. In Tim's case, the interest of commercial TV networks in featuring the artwork in prime time TV. With Jo and Danny, the support from AusAid, which although it came with a requirement to set up a youth centre which was a challenge to Wan Smalbag, once they had managed this has led to enormous benefits in terms of building communities.

Examples of good examples and practices

- El Caballero de Paris, a collaborative theatre project developed by mental health patients in Cuba

- Les Rencontres Video en Sante Mental, a partnership between organisations working in mental health which showcases/presents videos made by mental health patients
- A program with high school children and young adults to design posters, create short films and mobile phone pocket films to spread safe sex and drug abuse messages which has created brilliant work.