

## *Challenges to Reciprocity: Gift exchange as a theoretical framework of community arts practice*

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Community arts have the potential to develop and sustain relationships between artists and participants, which can create the desire for individuals to connect with communities. In an environment of diminishing arts funding, arts practitioners and supporters have placed an increasing emphasis on developing evaluation strategies that provide evidence for the social, cultural and economic impact of community arts. Most current evaluation strategies, however, do not adequately capture the various impacts, from the potential for long-term change for individuals to the level of training received by participants, and the diversity of career trajectories that open up. The absence of engagement in the theoretical side of the practice from within the community arts movement has long been recognised but there is no adequate response from either the scholarly or artistic communities that recognises the creative process unique to community arts. There is an urgent need for practitioners to be able to promote the effectiveness of community arts without compromising or overly simplifying what is a complex practice.

This article draws on research completed as part of my PhD thesis which aimed to provide community arts practitioners with a theoretical framework that will highlight the uniqueness and complexity of community arts as an art form, particularly in its capacity to achieve both social and artistic outcomes. To do this, I draw on gift exchange theory to articulate the creative process and the ways in which this theory explains the ties and connections with community participants. Community art builds social ties by creating and strengthening relationships between artists, participants and the broader community. I argue that these relationships are fostered according to the depth of the desire and associated obligation to maintain the gift exchanges. It is the obligations that are present within gift exchange that bind relationships and allow the gift to move.

By applying the theoretical framework of gift exchange to community arts practitioners' creative process, I argue that there is a need to refocus attention on the relationship between artist and participant. In order to develop evaluation strategies aligned to the values of community arts practitioners, this relationship must be acknowledged as integral to the creative process in community arts, and therefore essential to the assessment of the social and artistic outcomes. This article will analyse how gift exchange operates within the process and the performance of a community arts project. Once the first gift of a creative space and opportunity to participate in a collaborative artistic process is accepted by a recipient, this may lead to multiple gift exchanges.

The performance project *City Quest* will be the feature of this article. *City Quest* was performed by Powerhouse Youth Theatre (PYT) in December 2007 and was a community outdoor performance event played out in the format of a video game in the city centre of Fairfield, NSW. This case study will also investigate how a disruption to gift exchange may occur when there is a breakdown of trust between donor and recipient, and how this can be further destabilised by pressures that may emerge when commodity exchange and gift exchange are tied together. I will conclude by highlighting the correlation between the success of a gift relationship and the creative outcomes of a community arts project, and consider the implications this has on the development of community arts practice and its evaluation.

I will briefly establish the historical background of gift exchange theory in order to contextualise my arguments within a broader framework. Gift exchange theory has its origins in anthropological literature. Marcel Mauss's (1990) seminal essay *The Gift*, first published in 1922, is the initial starting point for the majority of theorising regarding gift exchange and gift economies within anthropology. His essay and the conclusions he draws about the presence of gift exchange in primitive and modern societies has led to the development of many contemporary theories around exchange, though his essay has also been much debated and contested since its publication. Many theorists debate the interpretations that Mauss drew from his research into primitive communities (see Lévi-Strauss, 1987; Derrida, 1992; Bourdieu, 1997), though this debate has also been integral to the development of understandings about human desires associated with the exchange of material and immaterial gifts (Frow, 1997). I will enter into this debate by recognising the obligations that Mauss argues are present in gift exchange, and how these can be identified within community art practice. This analysis of obligations and desires will allow the community arts field to move forward in theorising the functionality and value of community arts in society.

Mauss wanted to investigate the reasons why, in so many societies at different periods of time and in different contexts, individuals and groups feel obliged to give, and once having received a gift feel obliged to return a gift either of the same or greater value. Drawing from his research, Mauss identified that for gift exchange to occur three obligations must be present: to give, to accept, and to reciprocate a gift. A key question in Mauss' analysis of gift exchange is, 'in primitive or archaic societies what is the principle whereby the gift received has to be repaid? What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?' (1990:3) Mauss concluded that exchange develops social ties because of the nature of reciprocity. After conducting research on gift economies within Polynesian and Maori communities, Mauss argued that within a gift object there exists a spirit that compels the recipient to pay it back. Mauss's analysis, which takes place in both the immaterial and material spheres, argues that in these societies there is 'a constant exchange of a spiritual matter, including things and men, between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes and the generations' (Mauss, 1990:14).

I am particularly interested in the way a gift needs to keep its gift properties in order for it to move, and how integral reciprocity and obligation are to the capacity of an initial gift exchange to generate multiple gifts. As noted, Mauss (1990) argues that social ties are developed through gift exchange when the obligation to give and receive is present. The continual reciprocity of gifts strengthens social ties which in turn enables multiple gifts. Arvanitakis (2007) and Gudeman (2001) show that reciprocity is essential to the formation and development of human relationships. Within community arts, I argue, this reciprocity is integral to the trust formed in creative partnerships. As will be seen through this case study, when a recipient withdraws from the gift exchange, the capacity of a donor to continue the gift process is diminished. Gregory (1982) states that in a gift economy it is not the objects themselves that are at stake but the personal relationships that are formed and perpetuated by ongoing indebtedness. In fact, if community arts are seen as functioning as a gift economy, then the relationships developed within a project become integral to its continuation.

Godelier (1999) elucidates the difficulties in the power imbalance between donor and recipient. He argues that giving can result in an inequality of status between the two, and if this hierarchy is established the existence of the gift legitimises the imbalance. Power imbalance in gift exchange is an integral aspect to consider in community arts (Nicholson, 2005), particularly the impact it has on the creative process. The status of the relationship between the donor and recipient prior to the gift exchange is integral to understanding the impact the exchange has on the recipient. Giving decreases the distance between donor and recipient because it is essentially an act of sharing, but it can also increase this distance because one is now indebted to the other. Power emerges in the relationship and binds the recipient to the donor. The recipient accepts more than the thing; they accept the donor has rights over them (Godelier, 1999). The capacity of the recipient to return the gift can also have an impact on the relationship. If the recipient believes themselves to be unable to return a gift of the same or greater value, the power relationship can be cemented and the positive outcomes of the gift exchange reduced. Komter (2005) raises relevant questions regarding gratitude and gift exchange as important elements of community building. Komter shows that gratitude is essential for a recipient to reciprocate the gift, and questions the capacity of a recipient to fully engage with gift exchange if there is a lack of gratitude. An important product of gift exchange is that it recognises the value of the recipient as a person; however, there is also a great risk when identity is so intricately involved in a gift transaction (Komter, 2005).

The discussion around the relationship between the donor and the recipient is interesting here, as it foregrounds the notion that the donor and recipient are bound to each other. It is the donor's inherent desire to give that creates the impulse to circulate gifts and establishes binds. The donor has a dual responsibility – to give as well as to receive, and to give again – and this creates social binds and ties that are established over time (Mauss, 1990). This aspect of gift exchange is important to the central argument of this article. The obligation of the donor and their capacity to give quality gifts invested with the 'soul' of the donor mirrors the importance of the artist–community relationship in community arts. Any relationship that is beyond immediate personal interest and is of longer duration creates lasting social connections that cannot be reduced to utilitarian considerations (Komter, 2005). It is this relationship between community participant and artist that community arts practitioners are centrally concerned with, and that begins the process of gift exchange. As such, Nicholson (2005) argues that gift exchange theory can be used to analyse the positive and negative consequences of social interactions in applied drama. Similar to Hyde, though she does not draw on his work, Nicholson (2005) analyses discourses that place gift exchange within particular systems of value, and emphasises the importance of questioning the values of practitioners. In her analysis, she argues that gift

exchange theory allows the opportunity to acknowledge the risks and uncertainties of the relationships, and uses the theory to highlight ethical concerns within the process of community drama. Nicholson's analysis points to the tensions between the participant and the artist in community arts, and leads the way to discussions on the importance of this complex relationship to the efficacy of the community arts process.

Community arts organisations have certain responsibilities as they operate for the public good and produce public goods, but they also operate under pressures similar to those of a market exchange, affecting the capacity of the gift exchange to operate. Appadurai's (2003) analysis of gifts having a social life that moves between gift and commodity status can be applied to PYT's structure; in the case of *City Quest*, pressures on the artistic director to promote and produce a performance on a set date disrupted the time needed to establish trust between artists and participants. Difficulties, however, may also occur in community arts projects when the commodity exchange restricts reciprocity and the relationships between participant and artist. As Hyde (1979) contends, while commodity exchange can be present within gift exchange, when there is no gift, there is no art. There are instances within the project discussed in this article when the pressures to produce a performance in a certain time frame impacted on the capacity of the artistic product to be fully realised.

### *Producing City Quest*

I will now move to the analysis of the specific project featured in this case study. First, I will give a brief background to PYT and the motivations behind the development of *City Quest* then continue my analysis, focusing on the director and how she builds relationships within this production.

Powerhouse Youth Theatre (PYT) was originally established in 1986 at Casula Powerhouse, Liverpool, in response to a strong demand for local and accessible youth arts opportunities. Since then, PYT has provided contemporary community arts and theatre projects for young people living in western Sydney. PYT aims to produce creative projects that connect young people and the wider community with stories and experiences unique to the western Sydney region. In July 2002, PYT moved to Fairfield, into the School of Arts. Fairfield is the third largest municipality in the Sydney metropolitan area and is one of the most culturally diverse local government areas in Australia, with more than half of all residents having been born overseas, mostly in non-English speaking countries (.id, 2012)

The initial idea behind *City Quest* was an intention to connect two groups of young men; a Parkour group that trained at PYT's rehearsal space, and a group that had been involved in a past project of PYT and had shown an avid interest in video games. The combination of gaming and Parkour suggested an obvious connection the director, as Parkour moves could be related to the way characters in video games jump and leap through space, creating a dynamic basis for a performance. A theatre piece was developed and structured as a live video game, creatively applying the skills of these participants. *City Quest* was funded via an Arts NSW grant program that emerged after the Cronulla riots in 2005. Fairfield City Council also contributed funding for the production on the premise that the performance would incorporate local businesses, establishing the development of partnerships between cultural institutions and businesses within the council area. By directing an audience to the streets of Fairfield, the project also aimed to encourage an alternative view of Fairfield distinct from its negative portrayal in mainstream media (see Poynting & Noble, 2004).

Claudia Chidiac was the director of *City Quest* and, at the time of the project, artistic director of PYT. Chidiac is a significant figure in the community arts sector in western Sydney, and in Australia. In 2004 she received the Arts NSW Western Sydney Artist Fellowship, and in 2006 was awarded the Australia Council for the Arts Community Cultural Development Young Leaders Award. As artistic director of PYT, Chidiac was responsible for developing the company's artistic program and developing training opportunities for young artists. Chidiac's experience as a community artist and the way in which she navigates her practice were essential parts of the establishment of gift exchange within this project.

### *City Quest: The process*

The participants involved in *City Quest* ranged in ages from 13 – 26, and were predominately male. The participant attendance numbers differed between each rehearsal, ranging from three participants in attendance, to twenty five. In the final performance there were fifteen participant performers. Instead of the

usual twelve to fourteen weeks of rehearsal, which was standard for her in other projects, Chidiac decided to try an eight-week approach, with two rehearsals a week. A key reason for this decision was that in her experience it was hard to keep the young people engaged for the three-month period, and she thought an intensive eight-week session would be more productive.

To research Chidiac's work in this theatre piece I observed her in rehearsals, discussed at appropriate times what she thought was happening in rehearsals, and discussed how she was developing her practice. It was suggested to me by Chidiac that I also attend artistic meetings as she felt that was where a good part of the creative development was going to happen. This was a collaborative effort, and while Chidiac was the project director, the creative and technical workers had a huge input and effect on the final product.

In *City Quest*, a number of artists were employed within the project to work with the participants in their particular skill areas. Keith Lim was responsible for game design and composition, comedy was devised by AFI Award-winner Craig Anderson, Khaled Sabsabi was the sound and video artist, and Simon Wise was production manager. The first artistic meeting I attended was focused on developing the structure of the performance. With a reduced time schedule, it became essential for Chidiac and Lim to present to the group a set structure for the script, instead of working through ideas that perhaps in longer projects would have been developed by the community participants. This was critical for technical reasons as well, as there was to be a significant amount of technology within the show. However, it led to reduced capacity for the participants to share their ideas, and therefore less opportunity for them to be a part of the gift exchange. The production seemed from the outset to be ambitious, but with a large dedicated artistic team it appeared that the final production would achieve its intended outcomes – albeit at the expense of more input from the community participants.

The first rehearsal I attended involved the development of the missions that would take place within the video game. The community artists, in consultation with the young participants, had decided that the audience would undergo a series of 'missions' that they would need to complete in order to 'win' the game. This first rehearsal was about developing ideas for the mission in the context of the type of characters that would be a part of the performance, and in essence part of the live video game.

Within the participants of *City Quest* there was a distinction between the young men who had been a part of PYT shows previously, some younger participants who were sourced from the Fairfield Intensive English Centre (IEC) attached to Fairfield High School, and the young men and women from the Parkour group. The older, more experienced boys dominated the room with their loud suggestions and witticisms. To give the younger participants the chance to have their ideas heard, Chidiac would often split the group up and ask each group to come up with suggestions for missions that would take place in the video game.

Chidiac would often adjust her facilitation style dependent on which participants she was working with. In one rehearsal I observed, Chidiac stayed in the larger rehearsal space with the young group and I watched her demeanour change from one of boisterous energy with the older boys to a more quiet and calm persona, which quietly reprimanded if the chatter began to dominate discussions. These small and intimate interactions within the workshop sessions all built together to create trust between the artist and participants. By engaging with their interests, and slowly modelling the process in creating a piece of theatre, the artist allows the gift exchange to function and creates social ties between the participants and artists.

The structure of rehearsals was similar throughout the workshop period. Each workshop began with a physical and vocal warm-up, using activities to focus the participants, ensure they were physically ready to perform and develop their performance skills. Often the group would then be divided to complete an individual task towards creating the storyline and characters. The workshop period is a time when the gift's momentum continues. The participants, as recipients of the gift, work to contribute creative ideas and build relationships, including trust, with the artists as donors. Artists and participants are building up trust, an integral aspect of community building (see Arvanitakis, 2007) through the experience of drama and performance activities. The reciprocity evidenced in workshop rehearsals between artist and donor creates connections and binds between them. These binds in gift exchange, Mauss (1990) argues, create social ties. As the gift exchange continues in rehearsals, so does the ability of the participants to engage with the creative process.

In one workshop, the young participants were broken into groups and given writing exercises in order to produce content for the performance and develop character ideas. One exercise involved participants writing a list of phrases that started with 'I desire ...' From this list, the young people devised a short performance

piece that expressed some of what they had written. This was a particularly useful exercise that generated thoughtful and poignant pieces. One young man produced a piece involving no speech, but with dialogue conveyed using signs on paper. Afterwards he commented he was responding to a comment of Chidiac's given when they were observing the streets of Fairfield, when she urged the participants to 'listen with their eyes'. As they were creating their pieces Chidiac turned to me excitedly, saying that she felt that this was where the magic happens, when young people were being artists, creating. However, these pieces were not in the final performance, despite the quality of their aesthetic and social message, as they did not fit into the established scheme. These ideas that were not accepted as gifts from the participants caused the breakdown of trust between participant and artist.

There was also a considerable amount of time spent outdoors, exploring the streets of Fairfield and finding appropriate places for the performance to be staged. Some exercises involved observing the people on the streets of Fairfield and using the characteristics of the people on the street to inform the young people's characters. Another exercise involved each young person going out to the streets to observe the people walking through Fairfield, and then coming back to the group to perform three gestures they had observed in a person. The group would then decide what type of character they were. The rehearsals on the streets not only assisted in the character development for the final performance, but allowed the young people to become used to performing in public. By the time the performance dates came, the participants were familiar with the streets of Fairfield, and comfortable with acting on the streets with local people watching their performances.

In the gift exchange of creative ideas, Chidiac and the other arts workers constantly negotiated the ideas initiated by the young men and the ideas that would be suitable for a public performance. This negotiation formed part of the building of trust and relationships. Although Chidiac tried constantly to steer the group's ideas away from violent video games, the group would continually hark back to ideas of killing, soldiers and warfare. An idea from some young boys was that the premise of the game should be that Fairfield is attacked by aliens and the aim of the audience would be to save Fairfield from the aliens. One young boy wanted to play the part – as did his friends in the production – of soldiers attacking Fairfield. Again, the artistic team has wider concerns as they needed to consider the possible ramifications of a performance that involved young people from Iraq and the Middle East storming Fairfield while dressed up as soldiers.

Chidiac's response to these suggestions was to always support their ideas but question the participants about what these artistic statements might mean to an audience, particularly in relation to Fairfield. There were always a lot of suggestions in rehearsals from the young men that could be viewed as portraying violence. In instances such as these, it is obvious that Chidiac is managing a variety of relationships and stakeholders within a project that are important to maintain for future funding purposes. She has to negotiate the interests of the young people within the structure of PYT, which is funded in part by Fairfield City Council and by state and federal funding bodies. During a break in one rehearsal, I asked Chidiac and Lim how they give the young people agency, which is a key component of community arts, within this structure. Chidiac's response was that it was always important to talk about the suggestion, and to ask the participants about the context of their ideas. She said that while violence could be part of the storyline, it should not lead the trail. Lim commented that it was difficult in a performance to show the repercussions of physical violence when the performers do not actually hurt each other.

While the participants' ideas reflected the most popular video games, the personal life experiences of these young people, who were mostly refugees, also contributed to the narrative of their contributions. One young girl from Burma suggested, as an idea for a mission, that there was a group of people who wanted to take away the land of another group of people. The people who were on the land would get killed or leave to find a new land or country. A young boy from Iraq commented that the missions would always change so that there would continually be new missions. He said this was like America in Iraq who continually completed and changed their missions until they found something at the end. These ideas did not end up in the final performance because of the intention of the artistic team to steer the production away from negative stereotypes of Fairfield. I think the artistic process failed here to acknowledge the stories of the young participants; with more time and development, they may have contributed a critical edge that was lacking somewhat in the final performance. The end performance was a much more conceptual production that centred on the disappearance of the 'light of Fairfield', which does leave the central concept more open to interpretation.

Ultimately, however, not all gifts in the form of creative ideas were accepted and, I argue, were a cause of the breakdown in the relationship between the participants and artists. From the perspective of gift exchange, this shows how integral the acceptance of gifts is to allow the gift to move. As Godelier (1999) contends, gift exchange can highlight the power imbalance between donor and recipient, particularly if a recipient senses that they are unable to return a gift of equal value. In *City Quest*, the outcome was that the participants who presented ideas around violence and offered their personal experiences left the project. As I discussed above, there were valid reasons to not accept these gifts from the young participants, however there needed to be inbuilt processes within the workshop phase to perhaps experiment with these ideas and have longer discussions about the ramifications of their inclusion in the project. The participants need to trust the artists as first donors in the development of the final product. The creative outcome is the result of continual negotiation and the exchange of gifts, created to entertain and inform an audience.

To move the participants away from ideas about violence and aliens, Chidiac asked them to share ideas about what they love about Fairfield so as to make the show a celebration of Fairfield. Chidiac was intent on pushing the ideas of the participants and getting them to be conscious of the political ramifications of the show, though I do not believe there was enough time for the participants to appreciate these implications.

The rehearsal and workshop period is an important time for relationships to form. Consistent attendance by participants is integral to successfully achieving the outcomes of a community arts project, but also to the capacity of the gift exchange to continue after the conclusion of a project. Due to the shortened time frame for rehearsals and the increased demand for technical development, *City Quest* rehearsals would often run after the pre-determined time; however, the main cause for the increased length of rehearsal time was the tardiness of the young participants. Often they would be thirty minutes late and this would disrupt the schedule. Instead of fitting things into the allotted time, Chidiac would just request that the young participants stay back until the task was completed. The participants' late arrivals reflected their disengagement with the project and began the breakdown of the gift exchange.

Lateness and non-attendance at rehearsals was never resolved. Chidiac commented in the evaluation that she found this frustrating, as the young men had come up with the idea of the show and yet did not commit to the rehearsal process. I argue that as the relationship between artists and participants began to dissolve it affected the ability of the gift exchange to meet its full potential. The young people disengaged when not enough time and attention was given to their ideas and, I argue, began to feel a diminished obligation to return the gift and contribute to the creative development.

I see here that Komter's (2005) analysis of the importance of gratitude on the part of the recipient is useful to place a theoretical frame around why the community participants in this project stopped offering creative gifts to the project. Komter emphasises that a recipient of a gift requires time to appreciate the gift received before they develop the obligation to reciprocate. In this case study, while the participants did initially offer creative gifts, there was not enough time for continued reciprocity between the artists and participants to develop quality performance ideas to the satisfaction of both parties. The participants no longer felt gratitude for the project, and stopped offering gifts. The gift lost momentum and reciprocity halted.

With a reduced time frame for rehearsals, it was essential that the story continued to develop. Chidiac and Lim, however, still needed to make decisions without consulting the group so that the production would be ready for the opening performance. It was also important for the costume designer to know who the characters in the performance were going to be so she could begin to source costumes. At one rehearsal the artistic team was running a writing exercise with the young participants around a table, and one of the artists commented that there were more workers at the table than young people. I argue that Chidiac and the artists actually withdrew from the gift exchange with the participants because of the pressures of time, and therefore the reciprocity ended. The scale of the production was beginning to be realised on all levels, and the tension began to rise in rehearsals and artistic meetings. Extra rehearsals were organised, and there was enough commitment to the relationship and the final production for the participants to attend and continue to be part of the project. While the performance did not achieve all the desired outcomes, the artists and participants did produce a performance in the style originally intended, which achieved a wide and appreciative audience.

#### *City Quest: The performance*

*City Quest* culminated with performances over two weekends in December 2007. The performance was

continuous and ran from 11 am until 4 pm on both Saturday and Sunday. Audience members could register in fifteen-minute intervals between those times, and stay for as long as they wanted. Below is a recount of my experience as an audience member.

I attended a performance of *City Quest* on a Saturday. It was thirty-five degrees, and on arrival in Fairfield I felt sympathy for the performers who were in elaborate costumes. As the technical part of the production was completed outside the rehearsals I had attended, it was with much astonishment that I entered the theatre to find big screens and projection equipment sprawled throughout the performance space. As audience members first walk in, they were given an avatar – a virtual personification – and entered a small room to view a safety demonstration on a pre-recorded video featuring one of the young participants. From there, we were ushered into the main theatre space and received a map, along with instructions and clues on how to complete the game.

Walking out into the streets, there were different stations set up, with one or two performers on each station where the audience would need to complete missions and gather tokens that they could exchange for points at the completion of the game/performance.

The audience was led to a multilevel car park behind the main street of Fairfield where the climax of the story took place. When I first arrived in Fairfield and was walking to the theatre, I walked past Chidiac, who had a pair of bolt cutters in her hand. Even though they had pre-arranged for the car park to be open, it was still locked at the time that the show was due to set up, with no one able to arrive in time to unlock it. There was no choice but to break the lock. The best laid arrangements can often go wrong, and artists continually have to be ready to find solutions to any problems that may arise.

The production took the audience throughout the streets of Fairfield, and it encouraged them to visit the local businesses for lunch or to have a drink where they would often run into other audience members, swapping clues and discussing the answer to the games. It didn't only take them to the more attractive shops, but also geared the audience to the alleyways and back streets of Fairfield, among graffiti and piles of rubbish.

While not overly detailed in storyline or an underlying subtext to the action, the performance achieved Chidiac's goal of exhibiting Fairfield as a suburb that offers more than the violence that is often portrayed in the media. The structure of the performance allowed the audience to spend as little or as much time in the game as they wanted, with some audience members taking full advantage of their time in Fairfield, exploring the streets and shops. Once the clues had been gathered and the audience had achieved as much as they could from the stations, they were directed back into the theatre to hand in their tokens and watch a final exit video to find out what happened to the characters in the story.

A concentrated study of the impact of community arts projects on audiences would capture the extent of the effect of the gift exchange from the final performances. My PhD thesis concentrated primarily on the process and focuses on the participants and the artists, but I acknowledge that there is an important role that the audience plays in the proliferation of the gift exchange.

### *City Quest: Evaluation*

At the end of every project Chidiac asks all the artists to do an evaluation, and also conducts an evaluation with the young people. Even though Chidiac knows that most youth theatre companies do not conduct evaluations with community participants, she believes it is vital, even if she hears things she may prefer not to. The evaluation is part of the reciprocity of the gift exchange, as Chidiac aims to improve her creative process so that future projects achieve all outcomes. By using a qualitative evaluation process to enhance her skills, Chidiac is ensuring any further gifts she offers connects to the recipients, establishing greater opportunities for reciprocity and community building. In this section I analyse in detail the evaluation meeting between the artists and participants after *City Quest*.

The experiment to reduce the rehearsal time to eight weeks was considered unsuccessful. In hindsight, Chidiac and the artists realised that eight weeks was insufficient time to meet the technical requirements of the project, and the extra weeks usually allowed in the rehearsal schedule would have enabled a better outcome for the final performance. The shortened time frame severely impacted on the development of relationship between the artists and the participants, as was seen in the discussions of rehearsals. Without the time

needed to expand and perfect the participants' ideas, the participants withdrew from the reciprocity and the commitment to the performance. Processes that allow the time to fix difficult relationships that may emerge should be embedded in future performance projects.

These details highlight the importance of 'packaging' of the initial gift. The structure of the project needs to be suited to the project aims and the proposed participants. As Fennell (2002) argues, much time is invested in the object chosen to be gifted so that the recipient accepts the gift. While *City Quest* was produced with much forethought to the participants' interests, the negative complications produced by the pressures of time were not foreseen.

In the evaluation meeting, Chidiac admitted that at times she disengaged from the project and that she could have led with more strength. She acknowledged that she 'lost faith' during the development of the work. Chidiac could sense that the young people involved were not always motivated during the rehearsals and, as discussed earlier, would at times turn up late or not at all; this affected her ability to continue the gift exchange. Faith that a community artist can establish and maintain a relationship with participants and alter project directions to suit participants is essential to a successful project. From my observations of Chidiac during the artistic process, I can identify that the pressures of her role as artistic director, when combined with the need to produce a performance at a certain time, impacted on her ability to alter the workshops in order to re-establish her relationship with participants. Without reciprocity, the gift exchange halted, and the artistic process was compromised. However, despite the outcome not meeting expectations and some rehearsals not as productive as intended, Chidiac felt that the process really encapsulated collaboration, that the artistic team worked together 'naturally'; it wasn't 'brutal'. A few more weeks of rehearsals ('eight weeks, never again!') would have allowed the project to develop more fully.

The evaluation meeting between the young people and the artistic team was an open and honest exchange between the two groups. There was a positive atmosphere, and it appeared that all participants felt comfortable expressing which of their expectations of the project were fulfilled and which were unfulfilled. The presence of the young people at the evaluation is evidence that part of the gift reciprocity was indeed present. The participants had developed enough of a relationship to continue a dialogue with the artists about their impressions of the final process and product.

The young participants expressed that the highlight of the performance was the character development and their interaction with the audience. They felt they were part of a 'groundbreaking new performance' in which they felt they created a world, not just a show with 'acts' and 'scenes'. A major concern for the participants was their confusion about the way creative decisions were made about the artistic content during the development process. They felt they spent too much time writing script ideas, which some expressed as 'bludge' time, and that whatever initial ideas they came up with for characters were set in stone, meaning that they did not have the ability to develop different – and, in their minds, better – characters. They felt that the structure of the show was decided without the opportunity for them to comment or have more extensive input into its overall direction. These comments from the young men suggest they identified a lack of reciprocity.

When Nicholson (2005) applies gift exchange to community arts, she identifies the possibility that relationships between artists and participants may become unstable if the power position of the artist is not managed effectively. Godelier (1999) identifies the power imbalances that can occur in a gift exchange if the recipient believes that they owe something to the donor. The young participants perhaps sensed that they had less control over the content of the performance than was originally presented to them.

These comments came predominately from the young men in their early twenties who had some previous experience making films and who were recruited by Chidiac for the show *I Do... But*. The original idea for *City Quest* came from the interests of these young men, and for them to lose interest in the show so quickly meant that the enthusiasm for the rehearsal process was low. From my point of view – and this was stated by Chidiac and the artists at the evaluation meeting – the primary reason for this disengagement came from the shorter rehearsal period, which meant that decisions on artistic content had to be made quickly. Some participants were not always satisfied with their original ideas and wanted time to evolve them. This is ironic, because the shorter time frame was implemented to keep the young people more engaged.



There was also a lack of understanding from some of the participants about the process involved in creating a professional performance piece with set performance dates that need to be promoted. As Hyde (1979) argues, the market economy can impact negatively on artistic products if its needs contradict those of the gift economy working alongside it. In this case study, there was no time to spend on rebuilding the relationship with the young men, or to change the direction of the piece, because the performance had already been advertised and promoted. Because of this need to have the production completed at a particular time, the participants became aware that any creative output they developed in rehearsals had the potential to be in the final performance. Some of the decisions about what would be added into the storyline of *City Quest* were made outside rehearsals by the artistic workers, primarily because the plot and characters needed to be cemented to enable designers and production workers the opportunity to develop set and costumes. The artists withdrew from their obligation to accept the gifts from the artists and discontinued the reciprocity of ideas.

The positive outcomes of the production were the experiment with a new performance that engaged the audience to be part of a live video game. From my experience working in Fairfield, the final performance showcased the best of the suburb's features, allowing the audience to engage with the streets and publics of Fairfield.

### *Gifts reciprocating gifts*

*City Quest* is one example of Claudia Chidiac and Powerhouse Youth Theatre's engagement with community arts and their attempts to create new frames of reference for the young people and for Fairfield. *City Quest* is a part of PYT's continual gift exchange with young emerging artists and the community of Fairfield. Chidiac's intention for the outcomes of this project centred on her willingness to expand the creative skills of the young people in the production, and to allow the young people the opportunity to showcase their own particular skills in performance. However, Chidiac is not only responsible for the creative outcomes of the production; as artistic director of the company, she is required to continue to source public funding so that the artistic outputs of the company are maintained throughout the following year. The funding requirements of the majority of funders mean that Chidiac is obligated to produce artistic outcomes that contribute social outcomes equivalent to the government investment.

Each project that is conducted by producers at PYT is different because the groups involved each time are different, although members of past productions at PYT may return for subsequent projects. The artistic outcomes, then, are guided by the interests and motivations of the community participants – particularly young people in the case of PYT – and therefore would depend greatly on these factors. Chidiac, as artistic director, has certain strengths and artistic abilities that she will bring to her projects. Chidiac's intentions to experiment with artistic form and process in *City Quest* are, I argue, essential to the development of her community arts practice. At the time of writing, she had been in the field for sixteen years and had amassed a considerable amount of experience working with diverse groups. However, the artistic process is an evolving and dynamic one, and cannot be reproduced identically for each project.

The major flaw with single-project evaluations is that they can be used to argue for the value of a particular artistic organisation or for community arts in general. Powerhouse Youth Theatre's work is more than just the outcomes of one artistic project. The organisation has been based in Fairfield for ten years and was in western Sydney for fifteen years before that, and it has had an impact in the area that cannot be fully appreciated if one focuses on one artistic project. A focus on a single project cannot demonstrate the extent of the movement of gifts, but it does illustrate how continual exchanges of gifts within a project enable the beginnings of a relationship to develop between participants and artists.

The loss of participants' gratitude in *City Quest* raises important questions around the dynamics of accepting gifts in community arts. There were legitimate reasons why Claudia Chidiac and the other artists decided that ideas of violence and warfare were not suitable for a performance of the kind proposed. I argue that in some community arts projects there are some gifts that are acceptable and some that are unacceptable. It is important to acknowledge the wider implications of artistic projects, and the impact that ideas of violence or other themes may have on stakeholders associated with specific projects. However, there should be processes embedded within community arts projects that allow for the possibility of creative ideas that will not be able to be accepted in the final project. A community arts organisation must be able to respond to participants' ideas in a way that accepts the premise of their contribution but with enough time allocated in workshops to

revise them. It is also expected that some participants may leave projects if their expectations are not fulfilled, which is a fair outcome and does not necessarily imply that the organisation or artists are at fault.

Applying a gift exchange theoretical framework to the case study in this article allows the opportunity to present new directions in evaluating community arts projects. Gift exchange theory has highlighted the artist–participant relationship as an important element in determining the outcome of a project. Therefore evaluation strategies should focus on the process between artists and participants, which may lead to further understanding of how community arts produce a desire to create community. Evaluation strategies should particularly consider how an artist builds trust between themselves and the other participants through workshop and artistic outputs. The attention on process should also consider how organisations as a whole are structured and how that structure impacts on the artist–participant relationship at a project level. Evaluating the process of community arts in this way will allow the beginnings of an in-depth theoretical understanding of the social impact that community arts may have on participants.

The extent to which participatory arts can effect change depends greatly on the social framework and the conditions in which a project is developed. It is also contingent on the capacity of the community artist to engage with the project participants and enable them to participate. The technique of using art and creativity for these purposes invokes different ways of learning, and draws in people who may otherwise not participate. It allows the participants to engage in risk taking and to imagine a different approach to the construction of their place in society. One way in which this happens is that the practice of being involved in community arts allows participants the possibility of escaping the discursively constituted relationships of society. Rose (1997) argues that different practitioners prefer different artistic processes but what many share is a sense that the point of the process is to produce more process and more participation; therefore the process of participation is never quite complete. Gift exchange is a performance constantly reconstituting itself.

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