

Tuesday 21 March, 2023

## SUBMISSION: NORTHART Gallery and Management Board

The ACC Consultation document in relation to the Council's financial situation and proposed cuts in the 2023-2024 budget notes that support for exhibitions in council art facilities (p. 30) could be reduced (perhaps even terminated entirely). And the Kaipataki Local Board priorities (p. 70) include continuing support for 'local community organisations, within available budgets, to deliver services that meet the needs of our communities', while noting also that cuts are likely in 'Arts and Culture'. Such cuts would be damaging, socially, culturally and emotionally, to the local community, the wider North Shore and Auckland City at large.

Northart Gallery is both a community organization and an arts organization. In this instance, as with publically funded arts organisations, the two categories are not separate. While we recognise the severity of the financial situation facing ACC, in the submission to follow we argue that any cuts would make it either difficult or impossible for Northart to function properly (perhaps even at all).

A brief history of Northart provides a useful context. Founded 25 years ago, the Gallery has established an excellent reputation for the quality and diversity of its exhibitions, as well its extensive educational and public programmes for all age groups. The Gallery liaises with local schools and provides invaluable opportunities for them to showcase students' art. The founding Director, Wendy Harsant, had a long tenure, from 1997 until 2019. Her successors, Jessica Pearless and Jonathan Organ, share the one position, while the remaining staff, all part time, constitute another FTS (with a total FTS of two). That is the bare minimum to run a gallery and programmes of Northart's size. In fact, in order to do this, the salaried and waged staff work many more hours than they are strictly paid for. They are assisted by a Board of Management, at present made up of seven members, all of whom are experienced professionals in their various fields, whether arts, academic, legal or financial. They are all unpaid volunteers, who also put in many hours to support Northart (the dollar equivalents of which in wages would be considerable). Northart has been assisted too in various areas of necessary activity by other unpaid volunteers since its inception. In short, Northart is truly a community organisation.

Under to co-directorship of Jessica Pearless and Jonathan Organ, and despite the difficult conditions of the last three years, Northart has undergone revitalization, with a succession of most successful exhibitions in terms of critical reception and visitor numbers. Note, for instance, the recent exhibitions of contemporary Pasifika artists, contemporary Maori artists and veteran artists, such as Ron Left and Carole Shepherd, as well as younger and emerging artists and craftspeople. Northart's standing and its attraction to visitors, both local and from throughout Auckland and further afield, continues to increase. With the necessary financial support, Northart's reputation as one of the best and most invigorating arts organisations in Auckland City would be further developed and enhanced to the invaluable benefit of both the local community and the city at large.

It should be recognised too that Northart will be an excellent anchor for the Northcote Centre redevelopment. It would be a draw for talent and creative businesses to locate or re-locate in Northcote. Successful urban developments invariably have creative hubs like galleries at their core - for instance, as in Bilbao in Spain with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, as well as for Gateshead and Newcastle (UK) with the Baltic Contemporary Art Centre there.

It needs to be noted that Northart is the only visual arts entity in the Kaipataki Local Board that receives public funding. It covers a very wide geographical and social area from Beachaven in the west to the Northern motorway in the east, and from the harbor in the south to Glenfield in the north. This area is, socially and ethnically, one of the most diverse in Auckland. This region includes state housing areas and the lowest decile schools in Auckland - for instance, Birkenhead College, with which Northart has been closely engaged, since 2006 at least. There are three other publically funded galleries on the North Shore - the Depot and the Lake House, both in the Devonport/Takapuna ward, and the Mairangi Bay Arts Centre in East Coast Bays.



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The visual arts and accompanying activities are not just ‘entertainment’. Crucially and historically they are socially, emotionally and psychologically necessary, as people generally, have long recognized (Coincidentally, a recent neuroscientific research project demonstrated that attentive viewing of art strongly enhances brain function, in particular memory).

Creative and imaginative activities draw people together. They are fundamental to both individual and collective well-being and health. Consider the most striking recent example of Ukraine’s participation and win in last year’s Eurovision song contest. In times of stress and difficulty the arts are needed more than ever. It would be a false economy to make funding cuts that would undermine the abilities of Northart and other arts organization to continue to function properly - perhaps even in the particular instance of Northart endanger its very existence. The values of the arts cannot be quantified monetarily, and perhaps that is one of the reasons why publically funded arts organisations, unfortunately are ‘easy targets’ when it comes to proposed financial cuts by governments, city councils and universities. The social detriment of such cuts is easy to demonstrate.

We submit that the impact of the proposed cuts, depending on their extent and quantity, would have a damaging, even disastrous impact on the arts in general in Auckland and on Northart in particular. For Northart the planned increase (c. \$6,000.00 and almost ten-fold) in maintenance and leasing costs would further compound the threat to its ability to function as well as it has, even to its continued existence. We submit that this planned increase also needs to be reconsidered urgently.

In contrast, we envisage a well-funded Northart as a centerpiece (a ‘jewel in the crown’, maybe) in the reconstruction of Northcote town centre and its immediate housing environment, as well as a necessary and invaluable cultural and community organisation in Kaipataki and Auckland city overall.

We realise that in the present business and economic climate, Northart and its Board of Management should also explore the possibilities of additional sources of funding to both offset, if possible, any public funding cuts and further enhance the gallery’s already extensive range of community activities. Indeed discussions in these respects are already underway among the Board members and directors. Notwithstanding this initiative, though, we thank the Auckland City Council for its financial and other support to date, while strongly recommending that this support continue, and any cuts kept to a minimum (ideally nil), so that Northart can continue its work for the continued health and well-being of the people and communities it serves. It is noteworthy too that the Auckland Plan and Toi Whitiki Strategic Plan affirm Auckland City Council’s aim to provide support for arts and culture in order to help make Auckland the ‘most liveable’ city globally. Cuts to arts and culture organisations would undermine that aim.

The famous American writer, Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007), an American prisoner of war in Nazi Germany and survivor of the fire-bombing of Dresden in 1945, observed:

‘The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven’s sake.’

Please don’t ignore such hard-earned wisdom.

Associate Professor Leonard Bell, Chair  
The Northart Board and Co-Directors



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