

# aeaf

australian experimental  
art foundation inc

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November 25 2009

To: Mr Donald Brook, Mr Clifford Frith, Mr Ian North, Mr Herbert Flugelman

Dear Messrs Brook, Frith, North and Flugelman,

I thank you for your letter dated 10 November, addressed to myself as Director of the Australian Experimental Art Foundation and to the Foundation's Council. I must firstly though, before I proceed with my response to the contents of your letter on behalf of the Council and myself, correct a factual mistake in the second line, in which you state that the Foundation has changed its name to the *Australian Experimental Foundation*.

In fact the Foundation has changed its name to the *Australian Experimental Art Foundation*.

The clarification of that misunderstanding might in fact render my response redundant but I shall proceed on the assumption that this mistake was simply an oversight on the writer's part.

Before I respond to each of the three points made in the letter let me say that both I and the AEA Council (Dr Linda Marie Walker, Chair; Louise Haselton, Deputy Chair; Professor Gavin Brown AO, Director, Royal Institute; Teresa Crea; Anton Hart; Dr Ken Bolton, AEA Deputy Director; Dr Brenda Croft; Mary Knights, Director SASA; Maria Zagala, Curator, Drawings and Prints AGSA; Brigid Noone, elected student representative) are most appreciative of the history of the Foundation and recognize with deep gratitude and admiration the crucial role you have all played in both its conception in 1974 and its first manifestation in early 1975.

I also have a personal history of engagement with the Foundation; I first met Noel Sheridan at the Mildura Sculpturescape in 1975 and consequently a keen friendship developed.

I exhibited at the Foundation in 1976, 1980 and 1994. During the last two years of Noel's life in Perth we became quite close (I was Head of the School of Contemporary Arts at ECU from 2001 until 2006) and I had the opportunity to discuss with Noel many of the ideas he had developed over a lifetime regarding contemporary curatorial practices, as well as many of the ambitions he had held and proposed for the Foundation during its early years.

**Point 1 from your letter:** *The concept of art that motivated the originators of the Foundation and guided the best of its subsequent development was universal, not local. In this respect Mr de Clario's assertion (in his note dated 1 October 2009) that 'At this time [of foundation] it did not expect to be necessarily operating internationally' contradicts the plain fact that the EAF was conceived as operating internationally of logical necessity, by virtue of the universality of its animating idea.*

I absolutely agree with the fact, as would most EAF observers and participants of that time, that the Foundation was originally motivated by universal concepts.

If I have erred by saying that '*at that time it did not expect to be necessarily operating internationally*' then I have erred in my assumption that the term '*operation*' most accurately describes an organization's strategic approach, and not its animating philosophy.

The point I was trying to make was that though the Foundation certainly operated internationally by virtue of the universality of its animating ideas it did not necessarily operate internationally in terms of the artists it involved in its projects.

Because the overwhelming majority of artists who have exhibited at the Foundation since its inception in 1975 have been Australian it has been they rather than their international counterparts who have been the primary beneficiaries of this first-time engagement with the universal.

An aspect of the AEAFF's future agenda, as an expectation our funding sources have of our activities, is also the promotion of Australian artists in a global context and the projection of local practices internationally. The Foundation's new name will clarify and energize this activity.

**Point 2 from your letter:** *'This idea of art as an experimental enterprise, rather than as a skillfully or tastefully aesthetic enterprise, was challenging to conventional art world practices at the time and it has won a reputation for the Foundation that is internationally respected. The EAF has remained internationally distinctive under its original name for more than thirty-four years.'*

I am in complete agreement with this statement and so is Council. We do not believe, though, that the addition of 'Australian' to the Foundation's name in any way erodes its credibility or its distinction. On the contrary we believe that this addition, in the context of the current proliferation of not-for profit art spaces, restores the Foundation to its rightful place at the head of the national, regional and international experimental art agenda.

I believe that the AEAFF is the institution that currently best fulfils the five points initially conceived by the EAF founders in 1975 as the EAF manifesto: art as the active and emergent apprehension of the world; art that only incidentally but not essentially concerns itself with the aesthetic; art that is concerned with all values and not particularly with beauty; art as the interrogator of the status quo, being essentially and not incidentally radical; art as experimental action, modeling possible forms of life and making them available to public criticism.

The addition of 'Australian' to the name was proposed by me in order to clarify our willingness to re-propose the above and in so doing restore the AEAFF to a leadership position in the national/international discourse regarding what might constitute an experimental art practice in 2009 and beyond.

The current funding landscape for an institution such as the AEAFF has changed dramatically since the Jam Factory in St Peter's was partitioned off by Noel Sheridan and others, the walls painted and the lighting home-wired in order to open the Foundation's doors to the public; you all know this well because you were there. The EAF was the first of what are now dozens of Australian contemporary not-for profit art spaces, all funded by national and state arts organizations.

The resulting intense competition for public funds and support that we currently face demands that the Foundation be responsive to the rapidly shifting dynamic in order to secure its own survival, and most importantly its philosophical vigour.

At this point I must add that both of our major funding sources, the Australia Council and Arts SA, have responded to the addition of 'Australian' to the Foundation's name with much enthusiasm and renewed support.

The reality is that in order to most effectively manifest this leadership and serve our philosophical purpose, re-aligned as it is now to the Foundation's beginnings, we must seek funds from outside both state and national arts funding institutions. We must seek philanthropic support within SA but also we must seek it nationally and internationally and from beyond state boundaries.

To unequivocally re-define the Foundation as a national body will assist us in this vital task.

It is my intention and the Council's to vigorously re-affirm the initial premises upon which the Foundation was conceived, both in terms of its philosophy and its determination to interrogate all values, model new forms, form new thoughts and propose new ways of being. In order to be able to do this we must broaden our reach, both within Australia and without. We must do so with the kind of confidence that both affirms a uniquely visionary heritage and reaffirm it as an equally distinctive vision for the future.

Herbert Flugelman, one of the signatories to your letter, offers this view in 'A Decade At The EAF' (1984), when discussing the need for institutions like the EAF to be responsive to change: *"I think that change and evolution of organizations like the EAF is inevitable and therefore desirable, as we must try and come to terms with what actually happens in the world."*

This is exactly our motivation and purpose in responding, after thirty-five years, to the dramatic changes that have taken place in contemporary art and contemporary art institutions since the 1970's.

**Point 3 from your letter:** *The imputation of specific locality (whether to Adelaide, South Australia or Australia) is a fundamentally parochial manoeuvre that only adulterates the Foundation's guiding principle. It is more likely to reduce than to enhance its influence and reputation.*

Whether the change in name enhances or reduces the influence and reputation of the Foundation is probably in the end a matter of opinion.

All the advice that was sought both within and without the AEF Council, nationally and internationally, pointed overwhelmingly to the urgent need for change and for the need to redefine the Foundation as *Australian*.

There are a number of other institutions both in Australia and in each of the world's nations that define their operation as national. Those definitions are not perceived as being parochial; rather they simply attempt to define both the critical reach of that institution and its responsibilities in terms of its broad philosophical ambitions.

Rather than '*adulterating the Foundation's guiding principles*' (that of the universality of its animating ideas) the addition of 'Australian' to the Foundation's name in our view (Director, Council and membership) clearly endorses those principles, both from a national perspective in an international context (as Australians we support these guiding principles) and from a regional perspective in a national context (as Adelaidians we support these guiding principles).

May I point out to you that as Honorary Life Members of the Foundation you all received notification of the General Meeting on October 1 at which this issue was to be discussed and voted upon.

This would have been the ideal context in which to have conducted this current dialogue regarding the Foundation's name.

The idea of the name change had been canvassed by Council over several years and has been discussed at length at various Council meetings since my arrival in May this year, as part of the agenda I proposed for a revitalized EAF.

A number of options were thoroughly considered and finally '*Australian Experimental Art Foundation*' was unanimously agreed to by all Council members as being the preferred name.

The motion proposing the change was put to the General Meeting of Foundation Members on October 1 and was also carried unanimously.

The new name was then lodged with the Corporate Affairs Commission on October 6 and was approved by the Commission on October 30.

As a result the name '*Australian Experimental Art Foundation Incorporated*' has been, since October 30 2009, the legal name of the Foundation.

\*

Clifford Frith, another of the signatories of your letter, in his introduction notes to '*A Decade at the EAF*' gives this perspective on the reasons why the EAF came into being: "*There were many venues which for one reason or another promoted art in a commercial context and it was felt that the need was for a venue for art forms which by their nature were ephemeral, time-based art, process, performance installations which were not looking for financial rewards. Art which had a positive view of the current thinking of the time.*"

The AEF has since my arrival re-committed itself to supporting this very agenda.

The name change underlines our vigorous re-engagement with the discourse that characterizes both its origins and its declared future as well as declaring the singularity of this distinctiveness.

*"The echoes of Donald Brook's devastating warning 'that the EAF could become just a hipper kind of CAS' never completely died away."* (Ian North, "*A Decade of EAF*" 1984)

Those echoes are still with us and it is in part because of them that we are making the changes we are.

We are determined to highlight the origins of the AEAF in such a way that all our visitors may be informed, via a wall text, of both the Foundation's guiding principles and of the individuals who created the initial vision and its subsequent manifestation.

It's also my intention to name the new project space to be installed inside the main gallery '*The Noel Sheridan Project Space*'.

This has been proposed by me to Council and subsequently approved for action.

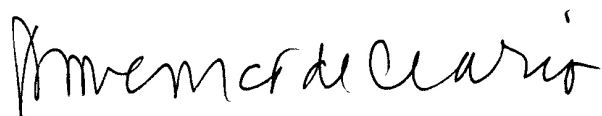
I would be delighted to welcome you all to an evening at the AEAF during which I would, along with the Council, clarify our vision and plans for the future.

It is both the Council's and my declared commitment that the AEAF should acknowledge its founding principles, both through its program and by various other means; it must also renew its engagement with them in a coherent and sustained manner.

I thank you for your letter and I sincerely hope my response has clarified for you the context in which the name change was conceived and implemented.

This was carried out in a spirit of great respect for the past and a keen enthusiasm for the future.

My best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Domenico de Clario". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Domenico

(On behalf of the AEAF Chair and Council)

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