



The magazine of Museums Australia Inc.

MUSEUM NATIONAL

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Heritage Interpretation in Australia - an Overview

In November 1992 people from all over Australia gathered in Melbourne to form Interpretation Australia Inc. The 180 delegates to the first national conference came from museums, national parks, zoos, botanic gardens, historic houses, architectural and design companies, and academic institutions. Their conference was called 'Open to Interpretation' which captured the spirit of the participants and their commitment to build an association to raise awareness of interpretation and to develop professional networks.

The Conference adopted the Deakin Declaration

We believe that interpretation makes an essential contribution to the wise conservation and management of Australia's natural and cultural resources. By raising public awareness and creating opportunities for understanding, appreciation and enjoyment, the long term protection and conservation of Australia's natural and cultural heritage will be assured.

A newsletter now circulates, chapters in each state hold regular meetings and a further four annual conferences have been held.

The November 1996 fifth annual conference in Bendigo reflects current national concerns: the continuing and ever-present need for advocacy (especially in the face of economic rationalist managers who do not see interpretation/communication as a core activity of cultural institutions); exploring relations with the tourism industry; the constant exchange of new ideas and information.

In Australia most training for heritage interpreters takes place at university graduate level, as part of natural resources or environmental management, cultural resources management, heritage or museum studies courses. There is also growing interest from the tourism training sector.

Tertiary institutions which offer some studies in interpretation include:

QLD: University of Queensland, James Cook University

SA: University of South Australia

NSW: Charles Sturt University, Sydney University,

VIC: Deakin University, Victoria University of Technology,

ACT: University of Canberra

WA: Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University.

The high level of interest in the heritage interpretation courses reflects not only the growth and maturing of the heritage professions, but the demand coming from the tourism industry, from employers searching for imaginative communicators, and from agency realisation that successful communication with the public and with potential supporters and sponsors, is an essential part of good heritage management. Interpretation adds value to the visitor experience and creates support for conservation management.

Increasing numbers of cultural sites are preparing whole-site interpretive plans. Port Arthur Historic Site is currently an important example. Local government is

committed to developing interpretive centres for tourists and for community development - it is a noticeable and new trend.

In the immediate future training issues are likely to emerge in the face of decreases in government funding to universities, and the likelihood that all graduate courses will be full fee-paying. The tertiary sector will need to engage more closely with the profession to tailor training courses to their needs and interests.

Accreditation, professional ethics and standards of service are also in need of attention with the strong growth of private consultancies offering interpretive services. A very welcome direction is the gradual integration in management practice of 'natural and cultural' so that environmental/natural concerns are related to the historic and built environments, to moveable material culture and to social value. The communication of a site's meaning and significance nearly always suggests a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach. Finally, the issues of indigenous representation and control and the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives have become of vital interest to interpreters. These are closely associated with the land rights question, the future management and control of national parks, and the role and responsibilities of museums and other cultural institutions, as outlined in *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*. It links with a growing national discourse about indigenous knowledge systems, and their relationship to the settler culture.

There are more training opportunities in interpretation for traditional custodians and cultural site officers. At the same time non-Aboriginal students of interpretation are exploring the developing Aboriginal critique of the existing interpretation of indigenous issues in many fields.

Interpretation Australia Inc can be contacted by writing to PO Box 1231, Collingwood, Victoria 3066.

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This issue...

This issue of *Museum National* looks at the significance and contribution that professionals involved in interpretation are making to museums. My particular thanks are extended to Rachel Faggetter for her very welcome contribution as adviser to this issue. As the new Editor of this magazine I am delighted to be facing the challenges of producing a magazine that is thought-provoking, relevant and stimulating to our members. Naturally I would like hear from you with suggestions and ideas for content and how the magazine might be improved.

Marianne Wallace-Crabbe
Editor

Museum National apologises to Derek Gillman for publishing, in the August issue, a version of his conversation with Ian Galloway, which was not the final, agreed copy. *Museum National* apologises most sincerely for any embarrassment caused to Mr Gillman by this inadvertent error.

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Yasumasa Morimura, *Self Portrait (Actress) After Vivian Leigh 1996*,
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DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNICATIONS
AND THE ARTS

Museum National aims to present news and opinions and to encourage debate on issues of museum practice within art, history and science museums, including the business of the association as appropriate. It seeks to represent the diverse functions and interests of the many institutions and individuals who comprise Australia's museum community.

Museum National is published quarterly by Museums Australia Inc., and provides a major link between the association and its membership. Policy and content are directed by an editorial committee. Contributions from those involved or interested in museums and galleries are welcome.

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In Retrospect

By Des Griffin

In November 1996 I finish my term as President of Museums Australia. That I was the first President is a matter of both pride to me and something I have to feel humble about. Humble because, as anyone in this kind of position knows, nothing is achieved just by one person. Collaboration and mutual support together with a clear focus on a common goal and commitment are essential. I know that also from five years as (the last) Chair of the Council of Australian Museum Associations (CAMA).

I think three important things have been achieved by Museums Australia and its predecessors. The first is the formation of a single association representing the interests and aims of all museum people in Australia after decades of fragmentation. Of course the individual associations such as the Museums Association of Australia, the Art Museums Association of Australia and the Museum Education Association held major conferences and published important journals. Their conferences and publications were of great significance. But a *single* association can much more effectively bring people together, create a more united profession, ensure a commitment to greater understanding and integration. It is relevant to Australia that in Canada some museums have forced the amalgamation of science/scholarship and education as a way of achieving integration. Far too often the focus is on restructuring when it should be more on getting people to share common visions and values, on getting people to work together. (Studies of numerous organisations show that as the way to go.) To my way of thinking someone's voice is not being heard in some of these situations. Restructuring is done because Boards or government want integration and think there is no other way.

The second important thing we have achieved in eight years is the establishment of the Heritage Collections Committee. A joint initiative of the Commonwealth Government, museums, and State and Territory Ministries for the Arts: this group has advanced two projects. The database working group has focused quite rightly on the development of electronic communication through the internet. The outcome is communication which will connect museums with each other, and museums and their collection and information resources with the wider world, including schools. The conservation working group has developed national policies to assist all

kinds of museums. Initial resistance to the HCC in some quarters has changed to enthusiastic adoption and advocacy of its policies and programs. Museums themselves contributed \$600,000 to this exercise. That museums were prepared to put their money where their mouths were made a big difference. The enthusiastic response of Arts Ministries should mean more resources.

Thirdly, CAMA formulated the policy for museums and Australian Indigenous peoples, *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*. The right to self-determination over cultural issues as they are dealt with by museums is emphasised. The thirteen principles are quite explicit in recognising the importance of meaningful involvement of Indigenous peoples in museum affairs, from the return of human remains through to the appointment of Indigenous staff and Indigenous representation on Boards of Museums. A plain English statement ('de-Griffinised' as someone said) is being launched at the November conference. It will be used to further advance the agenda across all communities.

In the formation of the single association, sometimes disparate interests came together: art museums and other museums, educators, curators, conservators, maritime museum people, and friends and volunteers and others. Despite early differences of opinion and perspective, many views eventually came together. I have been able to count amongst my closest colleagues in the last five years a number of people from the art museum area. Anyone who has tried to bring disparate groups together would understand what that means. It is a symbol of all the striving and the commitment.

Why is this single association so important? One, because any group achieves greater influence the wider its representation – divided we fall. We *do* want to achieve better support for museums including both the recognition of the role of museums and, if we are honest, better financial support for museums. I refer particularly to smaller museums; in Australia they are supported perhaps to a lesser extent than in any Western country. Two, because museums of all kinds can benefit so much from sharing ideas and successes (even failures) about their common goals. Of course some museums are more concerned about connoisseurship or maritime history or science or conservation or education or security. But in the end,

all museums do basically the same thing, have the same goals. Each of us has things to say to the other of interest, importance and relevance.

Second and most important. We must see ourselves as one group for the whole of Australia. By this unity, we can open up a challenge for the whole of Australia. The structure of the Council with its representation of states and territories is most important. However, we must be careful to avoid the trap of seeing state interests say, as antithetical to larger interests or vice versa. It is imperative that we act together in a profoundly national sense and so reflect the value of an Australian identity.

Two challenges remain: to increase our membership and so provide better services and draw people together more, and to exert more influence, especially by gaining attention. Joining with allies in other arts and cultural fields will be important strategies in the latter.

Some might say that little political influence can be achieved or that we are too weak. But remember that extensive lobbying by the American Association of Museums (AAM) over several years achieved the cancellation of plans by the Federal Accounting Standards Board to have all museums value their collections. They (AAM) have many other significant achievements. It is true that some governments are far more resistant to objections than they used to be. It is *not* true that we might be seen as representing just our own interests if we lobby and engage in other political activities. Who else might represent our interests? And our interests *do* represent an important strand of life in an informed and truly civil society. One of the unique features of Museums Australia is that it can represent the issues facing all groups of staff, from the operations people to the managers.

In the last two years we have made representations on directors' issues – such as the failure of the Commonwealth Government to appoint directors to its major museums – and problems concerning arts and heritage policies of governments, and issues concerning opportunities for indigenous peoples.

Museums *aren't* dull and boring and only for the elite, except to those who haven't visited them for decades. Museums affect in important ways the manner in which we see ourselves and our place in the world. They increase knowledge and understanding and can even be a force for peace. Which is perhaps why, along with the fact that museums contain cultural icons, some conflicting parties do their best to destroy them in times of war.

I have one large regret: the National Museum of Australia has not even started to be a reality in the form envisaged by that magnificent document, the Piggot Report of 1975. Will it represent three integrated themes? Will it be something unique in the

world scene? Will it be even be at least partly built by 2001?

Museums Australia has already achieved a lot. There are more challenges and opportunities to be grasped and tackled.

Des Griffin

Immediate Past-President, Museums Australia

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Making a place for interpretation

By Rachel Faggetter

Does the word *Interpretation* sit somewhat uneasily in the museum world, a newcomer and a little strange?

We are used to the term in the translation of meaning in languages, exploration of meaning in theatre and music, in Biblical exegesis to decide the meaning of the Word of God, and to the activities of rangers in national parks, but perhaps it has yet to find a comfortable place in the museum. However, the recent appointment of four Interpreters for the new Museum of Victoria project has focussed attention on what interpretation is and what interpreters do.

For years 'interpretation' was the almost exclusive property of national parks and environmental conservation. It is associated with Freeman Tilden, a senior officer of the US National Parks Service who embodied the faith that if somehow people could experience the manifold wonders of nature, or indeed of the works of man, they would become active supporters of heritage conservation.

In 1957 he wrote a book called *Heritage Interpretation* which is still the best general introduction to the subject. Here he expounds his belief that the close experience of nature in its miraculous complexity and beauty elevates the character, inspires the spirit and invigorates body, mind and soul. He saw interpretation as both an art and a skill, as more than information and much better than instruction.

He offered rather tentatively a description which is often used as a definition. In fact it is suggestive rather than prescriptive: *an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experience and by illustrative media rather than simply to communicate factual information.* (Tilden 1977,8)

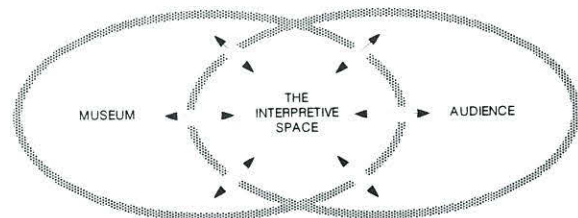
He buttressed this with a number of principles which emphasise interpretation as demanding imagination and creativity, the ability to make connections and the revelation of the spiritual, the 'indefinable fifth essence, the soul of things', as he called it. (Tilden nd., 9)

Tilden's emphasis on meaning finds echoes in contemporary cultural theory and its preoccupation with meaning-making. The nature and quality of the relationship between reader and text, or between viewer and object needs to be central. It keeps us honest about the interpretive role of the reader/viewer/visitor as active participant in the construction of meaning. 'We see things not as they are, but as we are'. (Stephen Weil 1990, 48)

So it seems that interpretation is a highly complex process of sharing knowledge, ideas and stories in order to make meaning, to make sense of the world and to enjoy its many wonders. How then does it

work in practice? Who interprets and how?

May I propose a model? Imagine two ellipses: The Museum and The Audience, and imagine the shape they create when they intersect and interact. This is the Interpretive Space. Here it is flat on the page, but I invite you to imagine it as three-dimensional, a thing of dynamic beauty and animation, moving in complex time patterns. A computer graphic representation would do better.



The specialists and the audience meet in this Interpretive Space. This is the place where someone with knowledge and someone who wants to know, engage in the conversation, exploration and sharing of ideas and the discovery of meaning which is cultural transmission.

We have all experienced that exhilarating exchange in which a spark is lit, and the light turns on. The Ah Ha! moment, memorable, enlarging and greatly satisfying. In a tragic sense all the planning and techniques of interpretation are a mere substitute for this person-to-person experience. Nonetheless today's complex, pluralist societies, large institutions and mass audiences create their own communication challenges.

The MUSEUM. Picture the exhibition team of curators, designers and people with creative communication skills who not only keep an eye on the big picture, but look after the details as well. These people may be called interpreters, yet we know that the whole team interprets through their

- decisions about the theme, goals of the exhibition and the experiences it might offer
- research to uncover the specialist knowledge attached to the theme
- selection of the objects to carry these meanings
- arrangement of the objects and the design of the exhibition
- development of the complementary programs to extend and enrich the basic arrangement.

In this model, the objects, ideas and stories are presented according to the team's interpretation and are arranged for the audience's interpretation in the interpretive space.

The AUDIENCE is the other partner in the interpretive process. Here come the visitors, for a host of different reasons and with widely differing

expectations, knowledge, values, attitudes, backgrounds and experiences. Some may arrive in families, some alone, most for a social experience which adds value to their lives.

I find it fascinating that audience research and visitor studies show that the more we find out about people and the more we observe them, the less we really know about them. The frantic search for certainty about visitors in the tourism industry, for instance, is mostly just guess work.

In post modern terms, the audience will each construct their own meanings, and carry away the pieces of knowledge which are relevant and of interest to them.

Of course, I hear you cry, in the best museums the Audience and Museum have intersected long before opening day. The potential audience has been involved in the concept development and design throughout the whole process.

That is why I have made the walls of the Space model porous and transparent, to encourage a free exchange of ideas. A Talk Back museum, if you will.

The INTERPRETIVE SPACE. This is the place where it all happens, though who can ever be sure about what will happen? We hope for a creative interchange, but the processes will be provisional, contingent, unpredictable. We hope for wonderful things.

Will the exhibition matter? Will it matter so much that our visitors will bring their families, tell their friends? What will they discover and enjoy?

Can we ever know what people bring to the exhibit or take home with them? Some new ideas, fresh stories, interesting connections, fascinating information?

What can the Interpretive Space provide? It is less a question of quantity or Gee Wizzery, than of quality and relevance. An exhibit can offer a critique; question orthodoxies; suggest different knowledge systems; design with style and wit?

The politics of representation are negotiated in the interpretive space where people liberate and enrich their minds, exchange ideas, construct meanings, enjoy themselves or just hang out.

We can never guarantee what will happen. Left to their own devices people do amazing things.

At this point we might reflect on the question which is often asked: what is the difference between interpretation and education? In the

very broadest sense education is concerned with cultural transmission, but in the general usage of the term it is usually connected with schools, students and structured learning.

Interpretation, as we have seen, is not susceptible to predictable outcomes. Museums are not schools. People plan their visit voluntarily, in their own time, at their own pace and according to their level of curiosity and satisfaction. We can guarantee no certainties, no 'messages', no outcomes. We expect and hope that visitors will enjoy themselves and have a worthwhile experience.

Further, to challenge a modern trend, if we see our audience as co-collaborators in the construction of meaning, as partners and interpreters, we are unlikely to want to call them 'customers'.

The logical conclusion of all this points to the need to arrange everything in the interpretive space with the greatest care and respect. Everything we do and say is interpretive, down to the last detail. No one particular element carries all the responsibility.

Let me illustrate.

Imagine the retrospective of one of Australia's best-loved painters. Wonderful work, astute selection and inspiring hang with the gallery walls repainted and a clever room-arrangement to ensure comfortable circulation: the catalogue destined to become the definitive work. Comfortable seating and a couple of quiet corners vary the pace; superb floor talks given by the distinguished curator. So far, so wonderful. But then we look at the text, the so-called interpretive text.

The copy comes straight from the catalogue and is far too dense for comfortable reading while standing up in a busy exhibition. The lines are too long, type too small, layout poor: a book on the wall. A few visitors persevere, most give up. In the end, this gives interpretation a bad name, as in 'Loved the show, hated the "interpretation"'. Eh? Since when is an extended label 'the interpretation'?

What are we to think about this? That the text wasn't important? That communication wasn't worth thinking through? Or that visitors should arrive well-informed about art in general and this artist in particular? Some galleries make a case for omitting text altogether. Fair enough, but if you do include text why not make it effective? Doesn't it deserve the same care and attention and respect for audience which the rest of the show received?



Peter Corlett, 'EveryBody' sculptures, Children's Museum at the Museum of Victoria.

Another illustration, this time about children and nudes, a small part of the 'EveryBody' exhibition in the Children's Museum at the Museum of Victoria. It was established with a brief to relate the collections and activities of the Museum of Victoria to children and their families in innovative and imaginative ways.

Much of the inspiration for the project came from Mary and Grant Featherston, distinguished Australian designers. After talking to children about what they would like in their museum, the Featherstons proposed an exhibition on the human body. Among their many suggestions, children made it clear that they were fascinated by the body and particularly their own bodies. They especially wanted to know what bodies looked like on the outside at various stages of life.

The interpretive challenge lay in creating design solutions which respected both the children's curiosity and interest and their museum's commitment to courage and honesty. Photographs, drawings, film, even bodycasts would not suffice. They were too limited in scope and susceptible to cliché. The Featherstons proposed commissioning an artist, Peter Corlett, to produce a series of sculptures of people with no clothes on.

Initially Corlett created a 'family' of seven: a young father holding his three-week old son, a woman in her thirties in very late pregnancy, two girls, a three-year old and a six-year old, a twelve-year old boy, and a man of 70. While they are sculpted as separate figures and in excruciating detail, they are nonetheless in relationship. The two girls hold hands to express trust and care, the pregnant woman is radiant with good health and smiling, the kneeling young father lovingly cradles his son, the young boy expresses shyness, and the elderly man stands holding his slightly disabled right arm, confident and secure. Later, by popular demand two more figures were commissioned: an elderly woman and a young woman in a wheelchair.



Peter Corlett, 'EveryBody' sculptures, Children's Museum, Museum of Victoria.

People in the disabled community were asked to select someone to pose for the artist and their discussions about the stereotypes of disability helped the staff think through these issues for the rest of the museum.

The brilliance of the interpretive idea lay in the Featherston proposal to commission works of art. In John Berger's terms, they are naked rather than nude. (Berger, 1972, 54) They are portraits of real people, without disguise. What children needed was the chance to get as close as possible to the real thing, to touch and feel in an environment of credibility and trust. The sculptures provide an opportunity for intellectual, social and emotional involvement precisely because they are works of art which express a relationship between artist and subject, and which demand a response.

The interpretive space worked in the most unexpected ways and produced an amazing variety of responses. The figures were carefully arranged as a group, somewhat apart from the main circulation track and plenty of seats were provided so that visitors, especially adults, could adjust in their own time to what was an unusual and challenging experience. Most small children showed no inhibitions and went straight to feel the interesting bits. Laughter, embarrassed or delighted, filled the space and adult visitors wrote repeatedly in the comment book that they had found the experience disarming and even liberating.

Unexpectedly, the figures became important for sight-impaired people, both adults and children. The opportunity to examine at their leisure the naked human body is very rare for some blind people. Many have not 'seen' a pregnant woman, or examined the wrinkles and folds of old age.

What this exhibition showed is that the right interpretive ingredients, mixed with respect and sensitivity, can produce wonderful things in the interpretive space.

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Interpretation by Accident

By Peter Timms

During a recent visit to the Prado in Madrid I was pleased to notice that amateur artists and students had set up easels in various parts of this vast and richly endowed museum and were busily making copies of the old masters. Some of them were taking their task very seriously indeed, establishing what amounted to mini portable studios around themselves. One had a teacher with him who was earnestly analysing the merits of his work-in-progress.

Until recently, it was quite common for artists and students to copy the old masters in museums. This was never, in itself, a method of learning how to draw and paint, but supplemented technical training by giving students some insights into the ways other artists have tackled familiar problems.

In the nineteenth century, before electric lights were installed, the Louvre Museum in Paris even allowed artists to take paintings from its walls onto the roof, where copies could be made in good lighting. The practice was stopped after a clever copyist stole the Mona Lisa by the simple expedient of rehanging his copy and walking out with the original under his arm (the story of what happened next is one of the modern art world's most entertaining anecdotes, but is too complicated to go into here).

Today, when mastery of technical skills is commonly deemed to be irrelevant, and it is widely held that we have nothing worthwhile to learn from the art of the past, the copying of old masters is hardly ever taken seriously as a means of art training.

In fact, when I was at art school in the 1960s, my teachers told me that copying was positively dangerous and would stunt my creativity. This seemed an exaggerated claim, given that Michelangelo, Rubens, van Gogh and Picasso all did it without apparently suffering much harm.

In any case, my pleasure at seeing these artists at work in the Prado museum last year was derived not so much from what they might have been getting out of the experience, but rather from the ways it appeared to be benefitting the museum's visitors.

Most people would be prepared to accept that works of art should be interpreted for the general public, but interpretation, as currently practised in art museums, is very often conceived of in terms of language, written or verbal. The interpretative label, the guided tour, the audio guide, the catalogue introduction, the room brochure, all place images in

the service of words. They all attempt to convince us that these messy, uncontrollable, anarchic works of art can be reigned-in, tamed and pinned down the moment they are explained to us.

Anyone who has had a real encounter with a work of art will recognise the severe limitations of this approach. It does not necessarily even take us in the right direction. Instead of allowing us to have some kind of meaningful encounter with a work of art, it tends to direct our attention away from the work towards other things. (Yes, I know that is one of the purposes of deconstruction, but let's assume, for a moment, that some benefit might be derived from encouraging people to focus on what's there in front of them.)

The aim of most interpretation is to tell us things. In that sense, at least, it is authoritarian by nature, since it must limit and direct the free imaginative experience of the viewer.

What I noticed happening in the Prado was quite different. People were not at all coy about studying the students' progress as they copied their chosen Goya or Zurbaran or Velasquez (or even their Lopez or Mengs or Mantegna, since their choices of subject were by no means predictable). Nor did the students appear to be in the least self-conscious, in spite of the fact that several of them were making a bit of a hash of it. They carried on, mostly pretending not to notice the interest they were creating.

In fact, everyone seemed to be enjoying this little game immensely. People crowded around, looking at the original, comparing it with the copy, carefully noting where the copy was going wrong, where the student seemed to have got it right. Wherever students had set up an easel, an amiable little critical group constantly formed and reformed around them.

One result was that a particular small and rather minor Claude Lorrain landscape was getting more attention, and being subjected to more thorough public scrutiny, than the Prado's prize Velasquez, "Las Meninas", in an adjacent room. 'Las Meninas' was attracting vast hoards of people, all clutching their guidebooks and brochures and earnestly reading the descriptive labels. But it was Claude Lorrain's little landscape that people were really responding to.

The reason is not hard to work out. The presence of the student copies encouraged us to look closely at the original and, by comparing the two, discover for ourselves something about its composition and

texture and colour and draughtsmanship. We did not feel we were being directed by anybody, or being instructed by somebody in authority.

So it boils down to power. As we watched the students we felt secure in the knowledge that they, not us, were vulnerable. No demands were being made on us, nobody had any expectations of us. This gave us a certain degree of power over them. A casual cock of the head, a snigger, perhaps, a furtive glance or a dismissive shrug was all it took to exercise that liberating sense of superiority over these poor saps

struggling away on Atalanta's foot. We, of course, could tell them where they were going wrong.

People get pleasure from this kind of unsupervised and undirected exchange, not just because they like to feel superior, but because they like to discover things for themselves. People don't like being taught. They do, generally speaking, like to be excited to learn. Museum curators and educators often confuse the two and end up asserting their own power, however subtly and unintentionally, and patronising the public.

The interest generated by the art students in the Prado suggests that museums in Australia could do more to open out imaginative spaces for their audiences, to provide more creative opportunities for undirected, uncontrolled, personal discovery of this kind. Visitors to art museums want experiences which are not purposeful or deliberately educative but playful, pleasurable and genuinely participatory (as distinct from the manufactured sense of participation that most museums encourage). People want to be able to feel that they are in control of what they experience and how they experience it.

Just for interest, I contacted a number of major art museums around Australia to ask them what their policy was on artists copying works in their collections. The National Gallery of Victoria used to allow it, but at some stage the policy was reversed. (It is permitted to make copies of prints and drawings in the printroom, but this is well away from the public gaze.) In response to a teachers' enquiry recently, the ban is being reviewed. I was told that staff at the gallery are sympathetic but the short answer is that at present you would not be permitted to set up your easel in the NGV.

The Art Gallery of South Australia appears neither to prevent nor encourage the activities of copyists. An individual artist wanting to copy a work of art in its collection would need to negotiate with the gallery. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no artist has ever asked, at least not in living memory.

The situation is much the same at the National Gallery of Australia. Security and safety regulations would make it difficult for an individual artist to get permission to set up an easel in the Gallery but, if you are prepared to persist, it is not entirely out of the question. None of the Education staff can remember any artist making such a request.

Of the four galleries I contacted, only the Art Gallery of New South Wales appears to actively encourage copyists. You are allowed to copy only works from the Gallery's permanent collection, you may not obstruct the public and you must provide floor covering, but other than that there are no special restrictions and no red tape. As a result, it is not uncommon to see amateur artists and students at their easels in the AGNSW. And Gallery staff report that members of the public love it.

Peter Timms, Editor, *Art Monthly Australia*.

MUSEUM NATIONAL

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Meanings in the Bones

Museum Futures and Indigenous Australians

By Des Griffin

On 1 December 1993 a new policy entitled *Previous Possessions, New Obligations* was launched at the annual meeting of the Council of Australian Museum Associations (CAMA). The policy is a comprehensive statement of principles and detailed policies covering relations between museums and Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples. The meeting also adopted a far-ranging resolution stating that the rights of indigenous peoples to their culture and cultural property must be recognised and respected.

The policy document has received wide attention since that time: when launched it included responses from over 50 individuals and organisations, indigenous and non-indigenous, museums and others. Since that time large numbers of copies have been distributed throughout Australia and overseas. My article in *Curator* describes the process of developing the policy and addresses some of the issues. (1)

I have followed the progress in other countries, especially Canada and the USA of developing relations between museums and indigenous peoples.

In Canada, *Turning the Page* was carefully developed by a Task Force representing museums and Native Canadians – the Assembly of First Nations. First peoples have applied for grants under schemes established after the publication of the policy. Many museums are considering what their policies will be.

In the USA, actions in accordance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) continue. It seems to me that increasingly numbers of museums, their curators, conservators and public program people, recognise the absolute appropriateness of forging close and meaningful relations with Native Peoples.

To return to Australia. Shortly after the formation of Museums Australia, and in accordance with the constitution of the new body, a new Standing Committee was established. It included a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and a number of non-indigenous people from museums. Lori Richardson, then of the National Museum of Australia, was the first co-chair with me. The Standing Committee developed programs and fostered continuing consultations between museums, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments.

Financial support from the Commonwealth Government's Department of Communications and the Arts assisted two programs initiated in 1993: both are being carried out by the South Australian Museum and the Standing Committee reviews both programs regularly. The first, under the guidance of Dr Colin Pardoe of that Museum and with the assistance of Ms Deanne Hanchant, seeks to provenance skeletal remains as far as possible so that the relevant community can then consider return of the items to them. It has involved consultation with indigenous people working in and advising museums and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to seek their views and obtain necessary consent to the studies.

The second program aims to catalogue all secret/sacred items held in major museums. Again, appropriate consultation is being undertaken with appropriate custodians and communities. Museums will then be able to discuss the future disposition of the items with the right community.

The Museums Australia Standing Committee has also recommended funding programs to support communities to receive human remains and other significant material returned to them. A number of grants have been made.

A year ago I wrote,

But problems still persist. They include

- *the attitudes and actions of some parts of some governments, especially those concerned with 'Aboriginal affairs' including sometimes a seeming ambiguity;*
- *the extent of the commitment, as well as the limited capacity in terms of resources, on the part of smaller and local museums, to implement the policy;*
- *the extent to which the policy can be a basis for action by indigenous people themselves, inasmuch as it is basically a policy prescribing actions to be taken by museums;*
- *uncertainties about the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be involved in projects relating to cultural material of significance; and*
- *the carrying over to this domain of issues concerning self-determination generally, land rights and claims for compensation flowing from the High Court judgement in the Mabo or Native Title case.*

I think I would be more concerned now in November, 1996. Indigenous community representation on the Standing Committee has been revised but the reduction in funding from the Commonwealth Government will make a difference to the frequency of meeting and the consequent resolution of issues.

Issues concerning self-determination and 'land rights' are still bound up in the minds of many with issues of land management when they are nothing of the kind! And the differences that might flow from recognition of self-determination as opposed to the continued focus on the application of social welfare are still not clear to many – to put it mildly! I have never understood why the richness of cultural diversity and the strength that that gives to people, in the context of a community or society which basically might share the same main ideals, has to be suppressed in favour of adherence to single cultural norms, beliefs and behaviours. Nuggett Coombs, I think it was, once said that Australians have difficulty coming to terms with 'the other'. If we want to end up somewhere other than the riots of the UK, the USA or Germany (although we should note the strong stand taken by Chancellor Kohl) then we had better learn faster. After all, confidence in one's background and pride in one's heritage gives strength

to people to cope with the stresses of difference.

Such problems flow over to museums. The National Museum of the American Indian, which opened recently in New York, tries to show that many voices should be heard, an approach strongly advocated by the very eloquent Director, Richard West. It has been criticised: some have asked where is the evidence of scholarship in the exhibitions. What does this actually mean in the context of West's statement at the 1991 AAM conference?

All of us can benefit immensely by bringing to bear on our interpretations of this magnificent [Heye Foundation] collection the voices and insights of its makers and creators.... We must be sure that all those elements which make up native cultures are represented. In addition to the valid and worthy insights of the anthropologists.... Our view of native cultures must expand to embrace the many other elements of culture by anyone's definition. This would go a long way towards eliminating our status in museums as the dead, the studied and the primitive, rather than as full living members of human kind....

If there are those that consider that museums can remain outside the political maelstrom then consider the fate of numerous exhibitions in Washington, DC in the last five years.

Large museums, despite their seemingly plentiful



Installation shot of 'The Native Born' exhibition of artworks from the Ramingining collection, 24 April – 22 August 1996, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. *The MCA has shown extraordinary courage and sensitivity in a number of exhibitions and has developed an exemplary relationship with indigenous people.*

resources, are having to reduce funding: many of them ask why they should make a special effort. As in so many other domains, change occurs when there is commitment from the very highest administrative levels. Sometimes that is not there.

And sometimes, not unexpectedly, any issue concerning identity or self-determination, is brought to bear on the actions of museums. This was the case, recently, at a launch of a CDROM on boomerangs at the South Australian Museum. Some Aboriginal people linked the Museum's actions with evidence given by a museum employee at the Hindmarsh Bridge Royal Commission. They left the launch. They are, of course, entitled to make their views known. But the media picks up on that. It seldom reports gains or progress in museums, the many returns of human remains, or the increased involvement of indigenous peoples with museums. The media still treats the whole issue as one of return of items that museums have been hiding away, as if its role is to be a commentator on events like those in the Colosseum, and worse. Such commentary can't be the determining force for museum actions. It certainly can't be an excuse for inaction by museums; nor can Commonwealth Government policies that appear, to some, to be overarching.

Let me return to *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*. A survey of actions and policies adopted by museums, and of recognition of the policy, was conducted at the end of last year, in accordance with the original policy. The survey found widespread awareness in large museums, and much less elsewhere. There is still a lot to do. The original policy has been rewritten in 'plain English' and will be sent out again. Consultations will be pursued with smaller museums and with indigenous communities.

Chris Anderson has said, talking about the rights and obligations of museums 'it is a matter of what does ownership mean?'. As the Committee proceeded to develop *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*, it became increasingly evident just how pointless it was trying to assert in the policy that somehow museums had inalienable rights to determine what they did with their collections of cultural material. Legally, of course they do. But is that the point? The policy states,

The basis of the approach by museums to the cultural heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples set out in this policy is the recognition that different and varying interests exist in it. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have special rights in respect of their cultural heritage: they have primary rights. They own their intangible cultural property, the meaning of the items expressed through the design, the dance, the song, the stories.

The issue is not 'ownership' of cultural material so much as it is access to the material and the information related to it. It is an issue of trust and purpose.

Ownership of an item might be better defined by asking who has the right to tell the stories about it. As Tom Griffiths says in his recently published book:

In a society where 'heritage' has been defined in material form as 'the things we want to keep' and where the historical context is one of invasion and dispossession, the modern reburial debate is frequently conducted in terms of 'who owns the past?'. But Aboriginal custody is not the issue, for that is conceded, even championed by most parties. Rather, the question is: does custody encompass the right to remains of any age or provenance, irrespective of their archaeological significance? In other words, what sort of meanings are in the bones, and who has the right to them? (2)

The management of cultural material and its use can have a profound impact in shaping public opinion, both indigenous and non-indigenous. Only a commitment to genuine co-operation with indigenous people that recognises their primary rights and interests will achieve that.

Every culture has an inalienable right to determine the way it is portrayed and how its cultural heritage is dealt with. Politics is not something that is outside the door of the museum but a part of everyday life, a way of balancing conflicting but legitimate demands as much as a way of marginalising and eventually suppressing identity.

A recent book review of a novel about Sarajevo stated, 'justice is ultimately a product not of laws, courts or police, but rather of human spirit'. (3) That sentiment is absolutely relevant to this enterprise. Major museums in Australia have committed themselves to substantial change, and to a collaborative process with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. *Previous Possessions, New Obligations* is a basis for action: for it to have meaning will require commitment. The outcomes will have to be meaningful acts. That will be the test.

Des Griffin
Director
Australian Museum

The implementation of the policy has been greatly enhanced by the appointment of Trevor Pearce as a full-time Project Officer/Museums and Indigenous People. His role is to review the policy, provide administrative support to the Standing Committee and to advise on indigenous issues to other Museums Australia programs. This position is funded by the Commonwealth Government's Department of Communication and the Arts.

References

- (1) Griffin, Des 1996, 'Previous Possessions, New Obligations: A Commitment by Australian Museums', *Curator*, 39/1 March 1996, pp 45-62.
- (2) Griffiths Tom, 1996, *Hunters and Collectors*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- (3) Olcott Anthony, review of *The Monkey House* by John Fullerton (Crown), *Guardian Weekly*, 22 September, 1996.

Statement of Principles in Previous Possessions, New Obligations

Self-determination

1. Museums support the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination in respect of cultural heritage matters.

Management and collections

2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in management of collections and information, and their use in the public programs and communication of museums, including exhibitions, education and publications is essential.

3. Objects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural property held by museums, and the information relevant to them, are of equal importance.

4. The special needs and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must be recognised by museums so that all activities and operations are culturally appropriate.

Access to collections and information

5. Museums must provide relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with information, in accessible forms, as to what is in their collections.

6. Access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander items and information must be appropriate as determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the management of cultural property and in providing training in research and documentation to people of those communities.

8. Museums must assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups in the care and preservation of objects. Conservation practice must adapt to cultural requirements, most particularly in respect of secret/sacred items.

9. It is appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to obtain funds for special projects and in such cases they may then approach a museum to be involved in the project. Such an approach puts the major decisions as to what is important in the hands of the community. Museums should assist and be involved in the project if requested by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Employment and Training

10. The employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in museums must be dealt with by application of anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunity legislation relevant to the jurisdiction. Museums must encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to apply for employment.

11. Training in museums and employment by them of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must start at as high a level as possible: in all cases training should lead to actual employment in meaningful jobs.

Policy formulation

12. There must be meaningful participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the highest policy levels of museums through such mechanisms as are appropriate in the local situation.

13. All museums have the responsibility to strive to obtain adequate resources to fulfil their role in respect of collections and programs. Museums should play a role in helping to obtain adequate resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to fulfil their aspirations in respect of their material cultural heritage.

Following is the text of the resolution, moved by Bernice Murphy (Museum of Contemporary Art), and passed by the last meeting of the Council of Australian Museum Associations (CAMA) in Hobart on 1 December 1993:

1. That the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the original inhabitants and owners of the lands eventually federated as the Commonwealth of Australia;

2. That the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples therefore be recognised as having unique, distinctive and different cultural traditions from all of those peoples who have arrived subsequently in Australia, and that they be recognised as having primary and inalienable rights of ownership in respect of their cultural property, its interpretation, transmission and continued development;

3. That the effect of such recognition should be that all statements of cultural policy development, while comprehending cultural diversity in contemporary Australia, should take care to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are accorded this unique and primary position in Australia.

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Previous Possessions, New Obligations

Review of Indigenous Peoples Policy

By Trevor Pearce

In December, 1991, Museums Australia adopted a policy entitled *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*, concerning museums and indigenous Australians. The policy set out principles to guide the way in which museums deal with collections, research, public programs and other functions. It stressed the essentiality of indigenous peoples having a strong involvement in the work of museums where their museums deal with the culture of indigenous peoples.

The policy was officially launched in December 1993, the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. An undertaking was given at the launch that the policy would be reviewed within two years.

In 1995, Museums Australia's Standing Committee on Museums and Indigenous People conducted a survey of major museums and galleries at a national, state and regional level as well as substantial contact with indigenous communities. The results showed that the majority of collection institutions had some form of policy in place for dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, and communities for dealing with their cultural heritage issues.

However, the number of responses from indigenous communities to the survey was extremely low. The Standing Committee believes that a full review of the policy must have substantial input from those communities that the policy was developed to assist, namely indigenous Australians. What this process highlighted to the members of the Standing Committee is:

- this policy was developed to establish relationships between indigenous Australians and collection institutions. However, it seems to be a policy 'owned' by the institutions and not 'owned' by both parties concerned
- surveying indigenous communities for their responses, and for any benefits they may have experienced in cultural heritage maintenance flowing from the policy, involves more than just sending out a questionnaire. Active dialogue with communities and individuals must take place.

The Standing Committee concluded that difficulties experienced by the lack of indigenous input into the review was because of access to the policy, and especially with the problem of 'ownership' of the policy itself. In order to address this predicament, the Standing Committee developed a 'Plain English Summary' of *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*.

The revised edition includes case studies from major institutions that deal with issues such as:

- repatriation of skeletal remains to a Queensland community
- cultural agreements between the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Maningrida community (Northern Territory)
- community outreach programs conducted by the Australian Museum
- access programs operating from the National Museum of Australia
- information on the National Skeletal Provenancing Project based at the South Australian Museum
- list of contacts in major institutions and government departments and a list of definitions of common terminology used by museums.

Another suggestion put forward to increase community consultation and awareness, is that a short video be developed on how the policy can be used by indigenous communities, thus creating greater ownership of the policy by using a different medium of communication.

At Museums Australia's national conference 'Power and Empowerment', the Standing Committee has organised a meeting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander conference participants to meet and develop networks, and to share information. From this meeting it is hoped that interested individuals will establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Special Interest Group to advise Museums Australia's Council on issues relating to policy matters, especially the further development of *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*. Please ring Trevor Pearce for more information (03) 9486 3399.

**Trevor Pearce, Project Officer,
Museums and Indigenous People,
Museums Australia (National Office)**

STOP PRESS

At Museums Australia's annual conference, the Interim Indigenous Australian Special Interest Group was established. The office bearers are:

Chairperson – Katrina Power
Secretary – Tina Baum
Treasurer – Peter White

The Politics of Interpretation: Interest Groups, Sponsors and Exhibitions

By Roslyn Russell

Gary Machlis said that 'in contemporary America, interpretation is a political act, and is increasingly intertwined with the chaotic democracy that is American politics' (Machlis and Field 1992). Recent events have provided well-publicised examples of this trend, which raise wider issues concerning the vulnerability of an interpretation to protests, and the pressure that can be exerted by powerful interest groups.

The fiftieth anniversary of the ending of World War two awakened many memories and passions that have lain almost dormant for half a century. The manner in which the war ended – with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – has been debated oft and long over the intervening half-century. Nevertheless, by 1991, two United States psychologists concerned with the techniques of persuasion and manipulation of public opinion could state that, 'It is currently fashionable for most Americans to decry that decision' (to drop the bomb) (Pratkanis and Aronson 1991).

So it is not at all surprising that the curators of an exhibition at the Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution set about the task of interpreting the 'Enola Gay', the plane that dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima, in a manner that permitted the questioning of this decision, and reflected the debate that had surrounded the issue since August 1945. Far from giving a distorted view of the debate, one commentator said of the exhibition text that 'On the whole, it is a fair and well-balanced account of a deeply controversial subject, and one that is scrupulously sourced' (McGill 1995). Another, in a review of a recent book on the controversy, *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, said that

The fault does not lie with the authors of the original text prepared by the Smithsonian to accompany the exhibition ... Historians – unlike many veterans, journalists and politicians – have been debating the history of the bomb for years without invoking God or the Devil. And their different views are admirably and concisely reflected in the Smithsonian script. All the controversies about the atomic bombing are touched upon: whether it was an act of racism; whether the bombs were dropped to warn the Soviets, and keep them from invading Japan; whether Truman should have paid more attention to Japanese peace initiatives; and whether there were better ways of ending the war swiftly (Buruma 1995).

The exhibit text was obtained by servicemen's organisations such as the American Legion and the Air Force Association. Their response was to claim

that the script smacked of the 'political correctness' so detested by American conservatives; and to 'ice' the original version by lobbying members of Congress, the President, and the Museum's Board of Regents. President Clinton, beleaguered by the triumphant Republicans who had seized Congress, dominated by Speaker Newt Gingrich, was quick to align himself with the museum's critics, saying that he did not believe that this celebration was 'the appropriate time to be asking about, or launching, a major examination of, that issue' (McGill 1995). A brawl erupted over differing estimates of anticipated American casualties from a conventional assault on mainland Japan. In a Republican-dominated Congress this spelled the end of the exhibit in its original form, as Congress threatened to cut the Smithsonian's budget and hold Congressional hearings on the matter (Cornwell 1995; Warden 1995).

Under these assaults from the newly ascendant power brokers of the political right, the exhibit was scaled down simply to a display of the fuselage of the plane and a video of its crew. The interpretation focused on the conservation work carried out on the 'Enola Gay'. Three months after this revision of the exhibit, the Museum's director, Dr Martin Harwit, stepped down, citing as his reason the 'persistent "controversy and divisiveness"' that the exhibit had threatened to cause (McGill 1995).

What had happened? How had the apparent consensus on the issue, described with such confidence by Pratkanis and Aronson in 1991, changed so radically that an interpretation could be totally reversed and a museum director made to resign? There are many possible reasons, including the fact that a major anniversary concentrates people's minds on a subject, and allows emotional responses which temporarily preclude rational debate. In this instance, though, the timing of the political shift to the right has been crucial. What is called 'liberalism' in America has been under attack in recent years, as conservative forces rally in favour of patriotic and pro-family, pro-gun, and anti-government causes. The 'Enola Gay' episode was the ideal platform from which to denounce any sentiments which ran counter to the preoccupations of interest groups who believed they had become marginal to the opinion-forming process in America.

Could it happen here? It is difficult at present to see from which direction a threat to the integrity of interpretation in Australia might come, or what its

targets might be. But then, when the Smithsonian's curators drew up their interpretation plan they almost certainly didn't anticipate the storm that would engulf their institution, and lead to the director's resignation. Interpreters in museums and exhibiting institutions should be aware that interest groups with sufficient influence can take advantage of a shift in the political wind to press their case.

But the activities of interest groups are not the only threat to the integrity of interpretation. Politics of another sort – ideologically derived decisions that flow from an elected government – also play their part, particularly those that emphasise economic rationalism, and the desire to curtail the role of government and encourage institutions to look for their finance in the corporate marketplace. Margaret Anderson recognised some years ago that corporate sponsorship, widely recommended as the solution to shrinking public funding for museum exhibitions, had the potential to distort or neutralise the messages which interpreters, particularly in the area of social history, seek to deliver through museum exhibitions. She claimed that, 'There is a clear sign that more radical exhibition proposals will be passed over in this scramble for the corporate dollar', and mentioned the Powerhouse Museum as one institution which she believed had fallen prey to this problem. Not only have 'crucial social history themes' been 'watered down', said Anderson, but the priorities operating in the allocation of space for exhibitions, particularly those dealing with the work of corporate sponsors, show clearly the way in which the social history concerns of the museum have been marginalised (Anderson 1991, 139).

Historian John Rickard has detected a similar problem in the Australian Maritime Museum. In a review of the museum he questioned whether certain subjects had been preferred over others for their 'market appeal', and reflected on the changing nature of the museum in the era of the search for the tourist dollar. Rickard challenges the museum profession to 'at least reflect on the way in which the role of our museums and galleries is changing: the gains in entrepreneurial professionalism and entertainment value may be offset by losses in historic relevance and social context' (Rickard 1994, 125–126).

There is no easy answer to these charges, and equally no easy solution to the problems they identify. In these days of economic rationalism, cost-benefit analysis, and performance measurement, the institutions which are regarded with favour by government are those which are able to raise money from the corporate sector.

A sponsor wants to place money in an institution in which the sponsorship will deliver maximum publicity. Popular exhibitions, for example, art 'blockbusters' such as those mounted by the National Gallery of Australia and some of the state art museums fulfil this requirement.

Art has its own 'pulling power': famous names,

Matisse, Turner, a whole gallery-full of French artists, attract people from all over Australia to the exhibiting art museum. Museum interpreters with other types of exhibition to finance cannot rely upon such reflected glory, and must work even harder to secure sponsorship. Institutions interpreting social and political history, for example, must learn to 'sell' exhibitions on diverse themes to the corporate sector. The onus is upon interpreters to co-operate with innovative designers to produce a product which may deliver a disturbing message, but has the power to attract visitors.

The classic overseas examples of this technique are museums of the Jewish holocaust of World War two. The Holocaust Museum in Washington, for example, tells a story of almost unrelieved horror, but is one of the most popular museums in the country. Holocaust museums are of course in a special category: not all museums wishing to drive home a message about human cruelty and prejudice would be so successful. But increasingly people have shown that they will visit exhibitions and sites whose stories are far from anodyne. Outdoor museums focusing on industrial life have also shown that people are capable of broadening their ideas of what museums should display when they are offered an opportunity to do so. Efforts should be made to convince corporate sponsors that the tang of controversy can enliven an exhibition, even one on a seemingly unpalatable theme, when it is well designed and interpreted.

Having achieved sponsorship, either from business or from individuals, an exhibiting institution may nevertheless find the going far from easy. Sponsor reaction to an interpretation can also lead to problems. The National Portrait Gallery in Old Parliament House found that two of its patrons, Marilyn and Gordon Darling, would go so far as to withdraw their support when the curatorial direction taken by the Gallery did not accord with their ideas about the role of a National Portrait Gallery. The National Library of Australia, which operates the Gallery, supported the interpretation developed by curator Julia Clark for 'High Society', the exhibition which was the target of the Darlings' displeasure, and has made a virtue of the controversy which surrounded the incident.

There are no easy answers to either of the problems described above that may beset interpretation in Australia and overseas. I have raised them so that we may be aware that the future of interpretation in museums and exhibiting institutions in Australia may not be troubled simply by lack of financial support from government, critical as this may be for the industry.

Roslyn Russell
Australian Heritage Projects

This is an edited and expanded version of a talk given at the fourth annual conference of the Interpretation Australia Association, Canberra, November 1995.

References for this article are available on request from the national office.

Fear of the 'master narrative': reflections on site interpretation at the Museum of Sydney

By Guy Hansen

Narrative, or the telling of stories, has always been a key technique for the interpretation of historic sites. Stories can be about people or incidents associated with a particular site and can work to construct a broader narrative which makes a claim for the significance of the site. The Museum of Sydney (MoS) is challenging this use of narrative and is experimenting with a new style of site interpretation. The new model employed by MoS consciously rejects the imposition of a 'master narrative' upon a site. In making my comments I am aware that MoS has already provoked considerable discussion and controversy, both in the interpretation industry and in the broader community. I am indebted to Linda Young's review article which provides a good summary of the controversy. (1)

I see this controversy as a healthy sign for our industry, as it forces us to re-examine the way we interpret sites for the public. I encourage everyone to visit MoS and reflect on its approach to site interpretation. I first heard the phrase 'master narrative' from Dr Peter Emmett at a seminar at MoS. Dr Emmett,

the curator at the Museum, was explaining why there is very little explanatory text in MoS. Unlike most historic sites, there are virtually no major text panels or individual object labels within the Museum. According to Dr Emmett, orthodox interpretive techniques such as tour guides and label texts are overly didactic. These techniques, he argued, impose a 'master narrative' on the past which destroys other possible meanings and privileges certain aspects of the site's history. In effect the narrative leaves us with only one possible reading of the site. In keeping with this philosophy Dr Emmett has developed a new approach to site interpretation.

At MoS visitors encounter a range of objects, quotations and audio-visual displays from which they can construct their own meanings. Within the Museum there are no didactic text panels that outline why the site has been preserved. There is no simple or clear statement of the site's history. The large text panels mainly consist of quotations from primary sources and fictional accounts which address the idea of Sydney. While the theoretical motivations for not

providing didactic text are persuasive, the actual visitor experience can be confusing.

In one part of the Museum there is a viewing platform that looks down onto the forecourt in which the original building's foundations are traced in stone. To the uninformed visitor this pattern has no particular significance. No label text is provided in this area to explain what the visitor is looking at. It is not inconceivable that a person might visit the Museum without realising that it is located on the site of the First Government House. The display of artefacts without labels



Copyright Museum of Sydney on the site of the first Government House. Photo: Jaime Plaza 1996.

deprives them of their provenance. While the displays are magnificent, they provide very little information. The past in this context becomes aestheticised – reducing it to a pleasant backdrop for an afternoon out.

Ambiguity is a deliberate curatorial tactic used at MoS. Archival sources and fictional representations have an equal status in the Museum's exhibitions. The Bond Store component features a number of audio-visuals in which fictional characters tell stories about Sydney. The provenance of the stories is ambiguous. The visitor has no way of knowing whether the stories are based on texts from Sydney's colonial past, or are the musings of a late-twentieth-century audio-visual producer.

From the perspective of the Museum this question about the provenance of the stories is of no importance, as there is no intention to provide a 'factual' account of the past. There is also a major display centred upon a collector's chest created by artist Narelle Jubelin. The chest contains a diverse range of artefacts juxtaposed with text in a series of seemingly unlinked ruminations on Sydney's past. It is not clear whether the chest is intended as an artwork or as an historical display. Again the work is deliberately ambiguous. How the general public understands this ambiguity is unclear. I suspect that visitors, conditioned by their visits to other museums, view the displays as authoritative accounts rather than fictional or artistic responses to the past.

It would perhaps be useful if MoS were to provide more information on the artistic status or intention of their displays. One of the worrying absences from MoS is any direct treatment of the question of the colonisation of Australia. First Government House has strong associations with the colony's early administration, and is one of the most important sites of colonial history in Australia. While many of the displays and audio-visuals are suggestive of issues relating to colonisation, their commentary is at best

tangential. I suspect that one of the main reasons for rejecting the 'master narrative' in the context of First Government House may have emerged from a fear of being seen to celebrate the process of colonisation. This was avoided by simply not addressing the topic directly. I would argue that, taken overall, the Museum's displays serve to depoliticise our history.

MoS's approach represents an important challenge to interpreters. The techniques employed are consistent with the aim of not imposing a 'master narrative' on the past. The experience of the past provided is suggestive, but also very contingent and partial. Clearly MoS does not wish to dictate to its visitors what is important about the First Government House site. Rather, visitors can construct their own meanings from the wide variety of materials available in the Museum.

I found MoS's approach troubling. The rejection of the use of didactic text and the deliberate use of ambiguity in the presentation of artefacts did not open up new possibilities of meaning, but rather left me frustrated at not knowing what I was looking at. I also came away with a strong sense that the Museum represents a triumph of aesthetics over content. The material remnants of the past are not being interpreted, but rather being used as props in a larger artwork. Finally, the failure to address the issue of colonisation directly depoliticises our history.

Guy Hansen
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National Museum of Australia

This is an edited version of a paper given at the fourth annual conference of the Interpretation Australia Association, Canberra, November 1995.

Reference

- (1) Linda Young, 1995. Exhibition Review, Australian Historical Studies No. 105, October 1995, pp. 666–7.

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Testing the Boundaries: Possibilities for Interpreting Old Parliament House

By Susan Tonkin

Old Parliaments — The Challenge

I sometimes begin my tours of Old Parliament House with the words 'Welcome to the most significant man-made structure in Australia'. Few other buildings would mean as much to as many Australians; a physical embodiment of the nation's aspirations for 61 years of extraordinary history, and to many Australians still the 'real' Parliament, home to the giants of political history such as Curtin or Chifley, Menzies or Whitlam. Visitor numbers exceed 100,000 a year and their expectations are huge. This is where our interpretive challenge begins. Visitors vary enormously in age, in political outlook, knowledge of history, familiarity with the Parliamentary process, and of course in expectations of what a museum can be and should do. Our interpretive programs must serve them all. Where to begin?

A sample bag of the different approaches begins in the Senate Chamber:

- the Architectural ('The style is what we call stripped classical...');
- the Dramatic ('It was in this very room in 1975...');
- the Analytical ('Let's examine the peculiar role of the Senate in the Australian Constitution...');
- the Procedural ('When a division is called, the Clerk of the Senate rings the bell...');
- the Personal ('Bronwyn Bishop commenced her political career when she occupied this seat...');

and doubtless a few more. Experience has taught us of course to vary the blend according to the needs of the audience.

Interpretation is all. For visitors with the right background information, this chamber is historic holy ground and being allowed to enter it and actually sit on the benches is an awe-inspiring experience. With no interpretation, others will glance in and see just a shabby old room with a regrettable colour scheme.

What *can* you do with an old Parliament? No, the sky was not the limit. Money, staff and time put constraints on us as they do upon all of you. But at least there was a precedent of sorts – in Adelaide, where curators, education officers and designers had by then spent more than ten years interpreting their own Old Parliament House.

Old Parliaments – Interpretive Possibilities

The building

We might start with the physical context. The building is bound to be of historic interest, expressing the aspirations of its time and embodying at least the architect's (and arguably society's) hopes for the Parli-

mentary process and the enduring significance of the institution. Its visitors are not inside just another anonymous show hall; you need to make them mindful of their surroundings as a first step, perhaps using models or archaeological cross-sections to show how the structure has been adapted and extended over the years.

The chambers

The main assembly chambers have a more complex message to offer, and this is where the real interpretive fun starts. Let's face it, an uninterpreted Parliamentary chamber is just a room full of old chairs. Bringing it to life, revealing the hidden meanings, bridging the *imagination gap* is crucial. In Adelaide, we relied on guides to explain the basic layout, and a computer-driven sound and light show to add some drama to the space. Thank heavens for Hansard – it's a complete record of everything said for official purposes within these walls, and an unbeatable resource. In this at least old Parliaments have a distinct advantage over other historic buildings.

Political issues past (and present)

Politics is probably going to be the next interpretive step, and here we enter upon really dangerous territory – the museum of ideas. Curators and even the general public seem to be more comfortable with artefacts. Political history does have its artefacts, but they tend to be visually underwhelming: documents and photographs. Political ideas, on the other hand, have inspired and still inspire passionate debate. They provide an opportunity to go boldly where interpreters have never gone before.

One venture in Adelaide was called Speaker's Corner – named for the old soapbox style of oratory, but in this case a community access gallery, Australia's first, I believe, in which absolutely any organisation with a point of view could contribute simple cardboard display panels setting out its principal ideas and invite public reaction. Speaker's Corner played host for over fifteen years to more than a hundred organisations, including the Adelaide Homosexual Alliance, the Prostitutes' Union, the Public Trustee, the Liberal Party, the Communist Party, Anangu Pitjantjatjara, the League of Rights, the Relinquishing Mothers' Association, National Action, the Women's Electoral Lobby, People for Public Transport, Hearing Australia and Victims of Crime – you name it, we exhibited it. Sometimes the result was unpleasant publicity and we found ourselves bitterly disagreeing with the views expressed within our walls. The interpretive rationale was simple: this building was a house of debate. Political controversy did not cease on the day its doors closed; current issues are a legitimate concern as well.

Exhibitions

A museum of ideas is free to employ metaphor, if it chooses, rather than artefacts. An exhibition explaining the absolute powers of a colonial governor might display some personal memorabilia, but a pipe, a pen or a walnut writing desk doesn't necessarily say much about colonial politics. A cheekier and perhaps more effective method might be metaphor or cartoon: the governor as a rooster strutting in his own little territory. Or cartoons enlarged to life-size to show 19th century Sir Humphreys pondering the challenges of colonial administration. This method, of course, particularly appeals to children: politics is as capable as any other subject of being delivered in a lively and effective way to younger audiences, and parents and teachers will obviously bless you for it too.

Tours, programs

These need to be infinitely variable to suit different audiences. Some love furniture and woodwork; some want anecdote and humour. Many in fact want to tell *you* about their memories of the building or their political opinions, and you must allow room for this. Interpretive tours must always be a judicious mixture; serious but not stuffy, lively but not frivolous. Balance is all. An effective guide (human, written or audio-visual) allows for *all* expectations and experience should enable you to reach most of the people, most of the time.

Other uses

Parts of Old Parliament House are also available for hire. Meeting in the old Senate Chamber in (fairly) solemn session can be regarded as an interpretive exercise of a kind. After all, while you're sitting on the artefacts and enjoying the atmosphere you're also getting an insight into the working life of a Senator between 1927 and 1988. There are problems, of course. You *are* sitting on the artefacts, and while we can trust a room full of professional interpreters to respect the historic fabric, do we feel the same way about the business seminar which might be here next week? This chamber is also hired out for musical and theatrical performances – is that a valid use? Hiring policy should be an extension of shared understanding about the building's purpose. There are some things which you presumably shouldn't do in an old Parliament, either because they endanger the fabric or run counter to the building's interpretive policy.

Interpretive limits

What isn't possible? The money, the staff, and the time you really need. And also:

Pleasing everybody

Political history has too many clients. To some former Members and Senators, the building is a sacred site and a respectful memorial to their brilliant careers. To other former Members, staff, or journalists it was just the office, a battered and ordinary old building where they once worked. To thousands of tourists it's a day out, a place which should be cheap to enter (or even free), fun for the kids, and a place to sit down and have a cup of tea, buy some souvenirs and not have to queue for the

toilet. To the Department of Finance of course it's a burden on the Budget which has to justify its existence by generating as much income as possible. And to the Prime Minister it's probably a State Dining Room with quite a nice old building attached.

Political bias

A political history museum in particular must be aware of its visitors' agendas. Visitors could be ardent supporters of a party viewpoint. Scrupulous objectivity is the only solution. Numerous questions have been asked in Parliament about apparent bias within this museum. Purely factual explanations of the nature of a republic, the Franklin Dam dispute, or the Mabo judgement have been described as politically biased. Of course, to those who complain, the fact that we are even discussing these subjects is proof of bias. Such accusations are tiresome but it's much worse if nobody complains – that means you've probably come up with an exhibition so scrupulously devoid of controversy as to be hardly worth the price of admission. When we put on the Powerhouse travelling exhibition *Australians and the Monarchy* last year, about half of the complaints accused us of royalist bias and the other half accused us of making republican propaganda. I guess that means we got it about right.

A guarantee of survival

If you offend too many people, don't get the visitor numbers you promised, cost too much to operate or simply occupy desirable real estate with potential rival uses, you can be history. Parliament ought perhaps to be the greatest supporter of Parliamentary museums but it sometimes has other priorities. In Adelaide, Old Parliament House has now been resumed as Parliamentary offices, in spite of its successful fifteen years as a museum and outcry from a public which rather thought that the building's value as a historic and educational resource outweighed its usefulness as office space. But we have been talking about the art of the possible, and in times of economic restraint even a museum's continued existence is open to debate.

Wisdom Got?

Australian interpretation has in my opinion much to be proud of by international standards. Its strengths include a willingness to challenge what Guy Hansen calls the 'master narrative', even to excess. Exploring alternative viewpoints with freshness and humour and even risking offence to achieve interpretive impact has been a speciality of Australia's first two political history museums. How this experience shapes the interpretive profession in years to come, however, will depend on our public as well as ourselves. The 'bottom line' of all interpretation must always be:

Did the visitors enjoy it? Did they understand it? *Did they keep coming?*

Susan Tonkin
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This is an edited version of a talk given at the fourth annual conference of the Interpretation Australia Association, Canberra, November 1995.

'Jurassic Technologies Revenant': the 10th Biennale of Sydney
 27 July to 22 September 1996, The Art Gallery of NSW, Artspace & the Ivan Dougherty Gallery

For many viewers the 10th Biennale of Sydney has proven to be a mixed experience. With its somewhat cryptic, thematic reference to archaic technologies and their reawakening in the arena of cultural production, the Biennale suggests a backlash against the digital fever-pitch of the 'nineties. Inherent within this is a sense of nostalgia, a yearning for the tangible presence of the image in place of the immaterial and the virtual. Thus the traditional reproductive technologies associated with the camera (film and video, photography, animation) and their manual counterparts (including silkscreen and batik) take precedence in the current exhibition.

In contrast to earlier displays, the 1996 Biennale spans just three venues:

the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Artspace and Ivan Dougherty Gallery. Prompted in part by budget cuts, this reduction of scale nonetheless allows for a tight conceptual package in contrast to the thematic looseness and sheer immensity of the Biennale's precursors. Just 48 artists from 24 countries comprise the backbone of the exhibition, a far cry from René Block's 1990 'Readymade Boomerang' and Tony Bond's 1992 'Boundary Rider'. Artistic Director Lynne Cook says of the Biennale's focus, *'this exhibition does not attempt to survey the field. Instead it seeks to explore in depth the work of certain leading contemporary artists as they grapple with time-honoured methods of image-making at a moment when prevailing forms and principal means of visual representation are undergoing radical revision.'* (1) A questionable feature of the Biennale has been the decision to split the event into two segments: the 'Biennale of Ideas' talkfest of July 1995, and the 1996 component comprising the exhibition, film program and artists talks.

Perhaps the most poignant of all the works in the current Biennale is Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape for Roni)*. A subtle exploration of the process of disembodiment, the installation of gold cellophane-wrapped sweets, captures beautifully the tension between presence and absence, corporeality and disappearance, as viewers remove and eat parts of the work during the course of its display. This metaphor has become all the more powerful, in light of the artist's recent death. Other references to consumer culture are more obvious in the work. Despite its poignancy, however, this and several other works sit uncomfortably within the predominantly photographic/reproductive thrust of the exhibition. Hiroshi Sugimoto's highly evocative, photographic seascapes also effect a

tension between presence and absence, mediated by the dividing line of the horizon.

Nan Goldin, Yasumasa Morimura and Matts Leiderstam explore the politics of gender and sexuality in slide-based, photographic and mixed media installations. A distinct trend toward photo-realism is also evident in the work of some European artists including Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff and Jean-Luc Mylane. Gursky displays large-format, photographic images of architectural sites including the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank and Schipol airstrip, which are accompanied by 3-dimensional models made by the renowned architectural firm of Herzog and de Meuron. Others use the medium of film to examine notions of seriality and repetition (Stan Douglas, Claude Cloksy) and cultural stereotyping (Ruben Ortiz-Torres).

Interestingly, so far, there has been more criticism than critical acclaim of the current Biennale. Why is this so? One reviewer has described the event as a rapid retreat from the public and political scene, smacking of 'defeat and powerlessness'. Others have questioned the inclusion of manual reproductive practices in addition to their photographic counterparts, while another critic questioned the inclusion of only three artists from Australia. This last criticism surely misses the point given the clearly stated, international framework within which the Biennale is traditionally formulated. Similarly, the inclusion of manual techniques including batik (E. Kngwarreye, Fliam & Ismoyo), silkscreen (Glen Ligon), embroidery (Alighiero e Boetti) and wax printed textile (Yinka Shonibare) fleshes out the concept of reproducibility as much as it shifts away from the purely mechanical apparatus of the camera. Ann Hamilton's installation sits at the intersection of both, fusing the mechanical and the man-made with a slowly revolving hoop of black silk organza into which the viewer steps and is enveloped. Eulalia Valldosera's playful installation of backlit stereo turntables and revolving domestic objects casts wall-shadows in much the same way as shadow puppetry and early optical devices associated with cinema.

A number of works within the current Biennale reflect, moreover, quite distinctly the role of the artist as social and political commentator. Such is the case of Johannesburg-based artist William Kentridge, whose quirky



Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-Portrait as Movie Actress (after Marlene Dietrich 1)* 1996, cibachrome print, 120 x 95 cm, collection of Kohsaku Nishida. Reproduced courtesy of the Biennale of Sydney.

animations address issues of race and nationhood in contemporary South Africa. Likewise, Northern Irish artist Willie Doherty's eerie, devastated landscapes and borderlines document a land under perpetual siege. Nan Goldin's confronting slide-installation *All By Myself (Self-Portrait)* examines personal issues including domestic violence, documenting with stark honesty, black eyes and bruises, a breakdown and hospitalisation. Far from retreating from the world of social and political reality, these artists choose to confront issues head-on within their work.

While viewers (and reviewers) may debate the overall success of the 1996 Biennale, one thing is clear. Though small, the Biennale contains some gems. There is certainly an overall thematic unity despite a rather clumsy exhibition title and the odd questionable inclusion. An unfortunate if dated choice of reproduction for the accompanying catalogue, Alighiero e Boetti's *Mappo (Map)*, depicts the countries of the world as represented by their national flags. Australia is placed prominently, draped by its Union Jack and stars. Nonetheless, the point is clear: the Biennale of Sydney situates Australia firmly within the world of international contemporary art.

Rachel Kent
Curator, The University of
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Reference

- (1) Lynne Cook, 'Jurassic technologies revenant': the 10th Biennale of Sydney, exhibition catalogue, Biennale of Sydney, Australia, 1996, p.15.

The Birth of the Museum: History, theory, politics, by Tony Bennett. *Published by Routledge, London, 1995*

The Birth of the Museum provides a comprehensive analysis of the nature of museums, their history and their politics. A collection of Tony Bennett's earlier essays on museums published in journals like *New Formations* and *Continuum*, the book adds some new essays to bring together his broad ideas about museums. Sometimes this means that it contains traces of Bennett's shifting position in relation to museums, which some readers may find confusing; this reader, at least, finds the book interesting not only for

what it says about museums but also for what it says about Bennett's own intellectual journey.

On the whole, *The Birth of the Museum* is informed by a Foucauldian approach to the study of institutions, an influence clearly articulated in the title with its reference to Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*. According to Bennett, the book's focus is to provide a genealogy of the museum, 'an account of the museum's formation and early development that will help to illuminate the co-ordinates within which questions of museum policies and politics have been, and continue to be, posed' (p.5). The book is therefore motivated by three Foucauldian concerns. The first is an understanding of all culture as governmental; the second, with the use of culture as a disciplinary and regulatory resource; and the third, with the use of culture in the building of citizenship. Thus we have a concern with how museums reflected governmental imperatives such as developing cultural technologies which would train a growing number of citizens in proper ways of social behaviour, as well as instilling a sense of belonging to a national community. Bennett is interested in how museums became institutions for civic reform through the use of culture rather than through the use of confinement. As he says it, museums were part of 'a response to the problem of order' but they 'sought to change it to a question about culture – a question of winning hearts and minds as well as the disciplining and training of bodies' (p.62)

One of the ways in which this was achieved was through the development of what Bennett calls the 'exhibitionary complex'. The 'exhibitionary complex' was a set of institutions involved in the display of objects: museums, department stores, fairs and international exhibitions. This interest in the technologies of display leads Bennett to study museums alongside other institutions involved with objects in an effort to understand not only the role of objects in western culture and the kinds of ideologies or narratives which they were used to support, but also the way in which the display of these objects was used to control the behaviour of crowds. Thus with the development of displays came the idea of linear chronologies which not only ordered the objects into narratives which supported an evolutionary conception of history, but also taught those narratives by encouraging viewers to walk it. Physical activity in

the exhibitionary complex becomes a pedagogical tool.

As an attempt to understand the cultural role of museums this is a powerful and important book. It is a welcome addition to current museological literature, particularly as it highlights the institutional and policy contexts which inform museum practices and histories, moving criticism away from an exclusive concern with textual issues. My only concern is that contemporary museums are affected by an increasing range of contexts such as tourism, technological change and competition from an ever-growing number of other cultural industries. The book would have been strengthened by a final chapter which links museums to these new influences, exploring whether or not they changed the way in which public museums are thought about, particularly their civic role. But I have no doubt that this is a book to put in any museum studies reading list [make any museum person think?].

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Museums: A Place to Work: Planning Museum Careers, by Jane R. Glaser with Artemis A. Zenetou. *Published by Routledge, London, 1996.*

So many of the testimonies amply scattered through this book attest to the fluky origin of people's museum careers that you could wonder about the purposeful tone of the title. But it's clear that things have changed. The serendipity that brought me and perhaps most Australian museum people of more than ten years standing into our business is now replaced, at least for entry-level positions, by academic and vocational education.

Jane Glaser skates quickly over the question whether this is a good thing. Myself now a teacher of such programs, I regret the reduction of idiosyncrasy in gathering the staff of museums. At the same time, I recognise that graduates in museum and heritage studies are not only self-selected for enthusiasm, but are infinitely better informed and equipped than the rest of us who bumbled into our wonderful trade and learned on the job.

Museums: A Place to Work is much

more than a vocational guidance reference. The kind of job descriptions listed in Museums Australia's *Careers in Museums*, by Susan Abasa, occupy just 53 of nearly 300 pages. Before them come chapters on ethics and governance which situate museums as the trustees of heritage material and museum people as essentially social service workers. This powerfully moral approach to museum work creates the principled rather than idealistic framework which Glaser sees underlying 'the culture of the profession'. It's carried further in the subsequent chapters' overviews of museums throughout the world and in the future. These well-researched and thoughtful pieces make the book a real contribution to the literature of museology today, worth reading for information, ideas and inspiration.

For individuals already in museum work, the job descriptions offer a sticky-beak interest in comparing oneself with the published standard. There are more PhDs recommended than we find in Australia as yet, though the new jobs such as collection manager and exhibition planner have already taken root here. I was surprised not to find library/archives training listed among the qualifications for registrars; I think it is not at all uncommon.

For people at the beginning of museum careers there are interesting quotes from a major series of interviews with museum professionals conducted by co-author Artemis Zenetou. There is clearly no such thing as 'normal channels' of advancement, though the opportunity to work as the director's personal assistant seems to be an important jumping-off experience for many of the non-technical-expert jobs in museums. The authors suggest that experience in *any* aspect of museum work is an advantage that can be leveraged into further museum work; likewise that volunteer or intern experience is the most productive source for the initial hurdle of job experience – definitely the case in today's Australia. Of course, personal opinion varies, and can be quite oppositional, as in the relative advantages of a first job in a big museum (you learn lots through contacts) or a small museum (you learn lots because you have to do it all).

Museums: A Place to Work is optimistic yet realistic about getting into museum work. There were only 148,225 full- or part-time paid jobs in US museums in 1991! (There are about 6000 in Australia, and about a

third of those are security jobs). Opportunities for minorities are immense, and not necessarily tokenistic. For others, the advice is to get a foot in the door, and then go the extra mile to be noticed.

Glaser surveys the field today to write a chapter on the future – always a bold effort. She suggests a handful of topics as significant issues, including cultural diversity, the growth of the older adult population (such a change from being told we're aging), technologies, gender equity and financial constraints. Then follow three and a half pages of further ideas in point form. I'm specially taken by the prediction that traditional barriers between program and curatorial staff will crumble as both roles are reinvented.

A series of appendices concludes the book. Bibliographies relating to the topics discussed, mainly large scale reference works; a list of professional museum organisations (which hadn't caught up with the formation of Museums Australia in 1994); a handful of mission statements and organisational charts (Queensland Art Gallery among them). The appendices may be useful in some circumstances, but the strength of *Museums: A Place to Work* is its ethically-grounded snapshot of the museum profession.

Linda Young
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Archaeological Displays and the Public: Museology and Interpretation, edited by Paulette McManus. Published by the Institute of Archaeology, London, 1996.

This book is a compilation by various authors involved in museum design, interpretation and museum studies, most with some archaeological training. Unfortunately, two thirds of the chapters are British, with two from Spain and one each from the USA and Australia. The book would have benefited from a wider view of the world. Certainly I found it strange that Canada was not represented, given the Canadians' excellent work drawing on the results of archaeological excavations, eg, the Red Bay whaling display at the Canadian Museum of Civilisation in Ottawa.

The foreword by Peter Ucko points out problems in past archaeological

interpretations, such as the substantial gap between rhetoric and action, and the difficulties of deciding what messages need to be communicated. Many Australian archaeologists would acknowledge the need for improving public access to the results from archaeological investigations but few have actually attempted to do something about it.

Part 1, 'The Institutional Setting', consists of three chapters looking at the role played by archaeology and archaeologists in three very different organisations. The first is the archaeological site of Empuries, Spain, which has successfully transformed itself from part of a large, bureaucratic administration to a small, independent non-profit-making organisation. The author makes an important point about the need to develop methods to ensure the quality of the archaeological message in the face of increasing trivialisation of the visitor experience. The issue of evaluating success on the basis of the quality of the experience versus the number of people through the door is familiar to museum professionals in Australia. Unfortunately there is no indication of the pricing structure for this 'archaeological park'. In the current climate of financial stringency in government, archaeologists would do well to look at a model like this.

The second chapter is more archaeological in focus and provides detailed descriptions of the uses of historical archaeological investigations in the largest living history museum in the North Eastern United States, Old Sturbridge Village. The story of the Bixby family is an excellent example of the practical application of archaeological research in interpreting particular aspects of the past. Unfortunately, author David Simmons was left off the list of contributors, so the reader wonders about his position at Old Sturbridge Village.

The chapter by Jim Specht and Carolyn MacLulich of the Australian Museum, Sydney, is the highlight for Australians. It chronicles changing relationships between the Australian Museum and indigenous communities through an examination of issues such as the repatriation and reburial of archaeological material and the training of indigenous people in museum work. This subject is of considerable importance to a number of museums in Australia as they attempt to come to terms with the demands placed upon them by cultural stakeholders; as Specht and MacLulich

suggest, 'It would be foolish to pretend that the current situation is perfect or has been reached without occasional mistakes' (p.40).

Part 2, 'Archaeology Indoors: Museum Exhibitions', consists of some very useful 'how-to' chapters. The first chapter in this section describes the revamping of an exhibition in the Prehistoric Gallery at the Museum of London and the second is about the development of a travelling exhibition about archaeology as an activity in an attempt to explain what field archaeologists do and how they go about doing it. By far the most theoretical chapter in the book is Beverley Butler's application of approaches drawn from Roland Barthes and Slavoj Žižek to the Titanic exhibition at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK, in 1994–95. The Museum was well aware that it would be a controversial show, and sought to defuse criticism of their display of artefacts raised from the wreck by commercial salvors. Butler critiques the way the Museum constructed the exhibition to eliminate people and to focus on the high technology associated with the salvage work. She analyses it as cynical manipulation of visitors in order to manufacture public 'consent' for what was clearly an unethical exhibition and one which was arguably in contravention of the recommendations made by the Underwater Archaeological Committee at the Barcelona meeting of the International Congress of Maritime Museums in 1993.

The final part, 'Archaeology Outdoors: Site Interpretation', feels vaguely unsatisfactory. Certainly it has some useful, brief 'how to' material on audio-tours, guidebooks and travelling boxes as practical ways to interpret archaeological material outside a museum. Most of the section is devoted to two chapters on the increasingly popular use of costumed interpreters, providing only limited references to other forms of human interpretation such as guides. There is nothing on signage, brochures or heritage trails – the most serious weakness of the book. Perhaps this reflects the museum background of many of the authors and the lack of contributions by government and site-based archaeologists who are more familiar with such approaches to archaeological interpretation.

Generally *Archaeological Displays and the Public: Museology and Interpretation* is a useful contribution to an area which is only just starting to get the attention it deserves from archaeolo-

gists. The book highlights the point that the bottom line is not the archaeological excavation itself and its associated report but the interpretations and public displays which are drawn from this archaeological work.

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Archaeology
Flinders University of South
Australia

Evaluation of Museum and Gallery Displays, edited by Patrick Sudbury and Terry Russell, published by Liverpool University Press, 1995.

The benefits of evaluating museum exhibits – to both curators and visitors – have been propounded for many decades. Yet until recently the relatively rare evaluation study was a sporadic afterthought rather than an integrated component of exhibition design and development. The fear of evaluation as judgement, of judgement as identifying failure, and of the socio-political implications of failure, explain this discrepancy between theory and practice. In taking up the challenge to evaluate their exhibitions, Australian museums and galleries have been slower than their overseas counterparts (although evaluations of displays and educational material in Australian natural heritage areas have been more common). In recent years, however, the demand for accountability and the developing professionalism of museum staff has started the ball rolling. The first Australian conference on evaluation in museums was held at the Powerhouse Museum in 1995, and one outcome was the formation of a Museums Australia Special Interest Group for Evaluation. In this expanding area of activity among museum professionals, therefore, the title of this book will spark much interest.

However, the first minor disappointment comes quickly. Although the title suggests a general text, this slim book (83 pages, including appendices) is actually much more specific, being the report of an evaluation project carried out over several years (1986–1991) at the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (NMGM) in Liverpool, England. The NMGM, created in 1986, is an apparently unique administrative grouping of local museums and galleries, several of which have very

significant histories and reputations as individual institutions.

The formation of the NMGM became the catalyst for the evaluation project described here, as for the first time a Board of Trustees was able to take a broader view of people as visitors to Merseyside museums and galleries in general, rather than as visitors to a specific venue. The first feedback came from efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of the substantial advertising designed to increase annual visitation from one million to one and a half million. Suddenly, the NMGM realised that about 800,000 people (54% of the Merseyside population) had probably never visited any of the NMGM venues, and that at least half of these people were unlikely to visit in the future. The big question now became 'Why not?'

There followed a series of evaluation studies, largely in collaboration with the University of Liverpool, to discover how to change these visitor attitudes. Sensibly, the dissemination of the findings and their implications among NMGM staff was given as high a priority as the actual collection and analysis of visitor data. From the outset, the evaluation ethic was devised to be one of participation and co-operation, with an acknowledgement that evaluation could not be value-free (but that the assumptions and expectations underlying those values could be examined and clarified). Agreement was reached as to the balance of qualitative and quantitative methods, and of formative and summative evaluation strategies. With the rationale for evaluation being openly to 'improve' rather than to 'prove', the emphasis was on formative evaluation to maximise the effectiveness of exhibitions from the very start. A significant program of staff consultation and education allowed the ideas of what, and how, to evaluate, and how to use the results, to be developed in an atmosphere of realisation and negotiation. The outcomes from the staff workshops, and from the evaluation studies themselves, have provided NMGM with a very solid base on which to plan the future development of their museums and galleries.

Although definitely not a how-to text, and presenting little new in terms of theory, this book does present an easy-to-read summary of how evaluation can be introduced successfully into a range of museum and gallery environments. It provides some very good summaries of the processes involved in developing high-quality

working relationships between evaluators and curatorial staff, and stresses the needs for ownership, commitment to change, market research, management for quality, and the overriding need to get the message across.

While this book is a useful administrative case-study for the shelves of those involved in evaluation, I would particularly recommend it to anyone who is still unconvinced of the benefits of evaluation in a museum context, or who wants to leave evaluation in the 'too hard' basket. Evaluation need no longer be feared as 'a move in some political game', as described by Roger Miles and colleagues in 1982, but instead muse be welcomed as the most likely move to keep the game going!

Elizabeth Beckmann, Evaluation Consultant and Lecturer, Heritage Communication, University of Canberra

Presenting Arms, Museum Representation of British Military History, 1660-1900, by Peter Thwaites, published *Leicester Museum Studies Series, Leicester University Press, Cassell PLC, 1996, 42.50 Hb, ISBN: 0 7185 1534 X.* (Contact Julia Kitchener-Smith, Cassell PLC, Tel: 0171 420 5555, Fax: 0171 240 8531.)

Presenting Arms is an excellent book. Its overview of military museums in the United Kingdom will enable museum professionals and museologists to better understand the constraints under which they operate. Of particular interest are the stories these 200 military museums have to tell: they represent the largest group of specialist museums in the United Kingdom and they are very popular, attracting five million visitors each year.

In the initial chapters the author discusses the nature of military museums and how their collections have developed. This he does in a lively manner, providing interesting and informative examples. Soldiers have always collected interesting souvenirs, and these generally found a home in their regiment's museum. Sailors, on the other hand, were at a disadvantage as there was little room on ships to store personal souvenirs or relics.

Peter Thwaites, Deputy Director of

the Royal Signals Corps Museums, classifies military museums into two groups: national museums, which were to become the focal points for a superstructure of technical support and scholarship; and the corps and regimental museums which hold the 'family' collections. Many of the latter have merged with local authority museums for survival. Mostly run by amateurs, Thwaites says military museums are not well regarded within the British museum profession. Cuts in defence expenditure have forced them to modernise in order to survive.

There are, he says, problems in the presentation of war. Statistically, a unit can expect to be in battle for five minutes every fifty years. But in most military and naval museums, only the heroic victories of the past and the great leaders are portrayed: defeats are not mentioned, and the common sailor or soldier is overlooked.

An interesting discussion concerns the difficulties of portraying the violence of war in an acceptable manner. For example, how can a museum show the violent physical effects of a bodkin arrow through plate armour, or of Napoleon's cannons on humans? The Royal Army Medical Corps collection does include paintings of wounds from the Battle of Waterloo, and photography arrived on the battlefield in the Crimea in 1854 but exposures were too long to record battle scenes. It was not until the American Civil War that Matthew Brady's team of photographers produced the first images of death and corpses on the battlefields. Thwaites stresses the need for museums to consider the wider issues, the morality of war in particular.

Another area of deficiency Thwaites highlights is the omission of women in many military museum displays. They are part of the soldier's life and sometimes share in that life as wife, nurse or camp follower. Only six wives were allowed in each company of 100

soldiers, and married couples lived behind a blanket screen in the soldier's barrack room. Thwaites believes the social history of soldiers and their families is not well told in museum displays, although some have attempted to tell the story of camp-followers. Mrs Dan McKiddy is portrayed at the National Army Museum carrying her wounded husband during a retreat in 1812, while in another role-model switch, Private McBain can be seen in the Royal Scots Museum with his infant son in a haversack on his back at the Battle of Malplaquet.

The final chapter discusses the next century. The claim is made that some military museums are ahead of their civilian counterparts: they have heard the new buzz-word 'experience', and many are using new technologies, such as animation and interactives. The Imperial War Museums has the 'Blitz Experience', in which visitors experience a bombing raid in Second World War London; the Royal Marines Museum is building an assault course and a boating lake, complete with small landing craft, for visitors' use; and at Aldershot, an army base for many years, museums are combining to use simulators and other audience techniques learned from the Disney Corporation to convey the movement of war.

Australia has its military collections, some still in small rooms in army drill halls. There is plenty of scope for students of museum studies to help with the transition of these collections into museums which address how the military have contributed to the social history of Australia. *Presenting Arms* provides an instructive and thorough coverage of the subject, enlivened by fascinating human detail, and thoughtful comment.

**Major William Billett
Curator of Arms,
Museum of Victoria**



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WORLD 1

Since November 1994 the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand have been working, under a joint venture agreement, towards establishing a state-of-the-art electronic search and delivery access service. The National Document and Information Service (NDIS) Project will deliver the WORLD 1 service to Australian libraries and a separate service to New Zealand.

WORLD 1 differs from other recently established technological information delivery systems in that it will make the information immediately available to the user. Increasingly, the National Library is digitising all material in the collection as it is catalogued, including a large part of its Pictorial Collection. With WORLD 1 where a document exists in electronic form, it will be instantly available to the seeker. The Australian Bibliographic Network (ABN) and the Ozline database will also be available through the service which will be accessible to any registered user with an Internet connection.

WORLD 1 is being marketed as more user friendly than systems such as ABN because of its facility to assist the user to make more precise and useful requests when searching for information. Two methods have been prototyped for its use. The first, uses Netscape World Wide Web browse where readers can search from any terminal with access to the Internet and a web browser. The software can be loaded onto any Macintosh or IBM-compatible personal computer. This system will most probably provide all the searching normally carried out in a main reading room – where a library may wish to

provide the service for its readers.

The second method prototyped utilises Client software and requires a more sophisticated computer (at least a 486 PC). With this method a library is able to conduct a search on a specific subject on a weekly basis, across the WORLD 1 databases or its own databases, and the information will be delivered on the searcher's e-mail.

WORLD 1 is also being developed with a collection management and document delivery service but these will not be implemented until the search service is on-line and initially, to use the system, searchers will need to register as users with an account which will be billed monthly. Users will be charged per search and per view, so that more proficient users will have a cost advantage, but the user-friendly nature of the system means that this is not likely to be very great.

The NDIS Project is unique in the sense it is a 'true' partnership where responsibilities, risks and costs are shared equally and both libraries have to agree to all planning decisions. There have been a few problems within the partnership, however, the two libraries have had close associations for many years, so are accustomed to working together and by pooling expertise they have been able to contain costs in a financially daunting environment. It is believed that WORLD 1 will have a dramatic effect on both library users and librarians and once up and running in Australia will be able to be marketed to other countries in the region who could take the system and adapt it for their own purposes.

Building Bridges in Adelaide: The 1996 CAUMAC Conference 7 – 10 July

The sixth annual CAUMAC (Council of Australian University Museums and Collections) conference boasted a remarkably high participation rate for a national group organisation, with fifty of the seventy members attending the Adelaide meeting. The theme was 'Building Bridges' focusing on communication and collaboration between university museums and collections, the wider museum profession and the general community.

Apart from the formal sessions, conference organisers produced an excellent program of tours to university museums, special exhibitions and facilities, and social events. There was a high level of interest in the conference by senior university administrators with a number of Vice-Chancellors attending the welcome reception and Professor Mary O'Kane, Acting Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide, delivering the keynote address on the second day.

Working under the title 'External Bridges', the first

day dealt with the relationships between university museums and collections, the museum profession, external granting agencies, education professionals and the general public. The key-note speaker was Tristram Besterman, Director of the Manchester Museum at the University of Manchester, a large campus-based, multi-disciplinary museum employing 53 people. He opened his address with a brief review of UK initiatives, over the last two decades, comparable with the 'Cinderella Collections' document, sadly reporting that many of these have sunk without a trace.

Besterman discussed the tripartite relationships between the university museum, the academic sector and the public sector. He spoke of UK government agencies funding science research which are now recommending that 1% of research grants be spent on the public understanding of science, providing an obvious opportunity for science-based campus muse-

ums. He emphasised that museum staff should undertake their own collection based research and be involved in teaching programs, even though it is not highly regarded by granting agencies and is often derided as 'stamp collecting' by colleagues. He suggested what is needed, therefore, is a system of qualitative output measures to put the research of curators in proper perspective. Besterman compared this to an interesting schizophrenia developing in the natural sciences where systematics is in decline as a scholarly pursuit, yet international government protocols concerning bio-diversity and conservation require systematics as a sound empirical foundation.

Besterman also pointed out that in times of diminishing budgets, a university's attention becomes focused on teaching and research income generators, increasing the vulnerability and marginalisation of museums and collections. He suggested to cure this problem, the evolution of new management structures that can alloy strategic planning with opportunism, is needed.

There was a panel discussion on university museums and community liaison. Peter Cahalan, Director of the History Trust of South Australia, argued that the most important issue facing universities in relation to their museums and collections was that of governance (preferably by statute or incorporation). Universities have to set up an over-arching structure or advisory committee that gives some form of durability to collections if they want to be taken seriously by external granting agencies.

Education Officer Bob England, made the pertinent points that senior students sought innovative forms of access (three dimensional and virtual) and teachers were seeking curriculum linked experiences from university collections. Simeon Kronenberg, gave an outline of the major concerns and activities of Museums Australia and encouraged closer links between CAUMAC and Museums Australia.

The second day focused on 'Internal Bridges' and dealt with relationships between university museums and collections and other arms of their host institution. Professor Mary O'Kane echoed observations from the previous day that university museums are marginalised by formula funding for the tertiary education sector. She saw that more effective cooperation within the host institution could overcome many of these problems and pointed out there were lots of sensible recommendations relating to staffing, policy development and building effective management structures for university museums and collections within the 'Cinderella Collections' report which could be implemented with little or no cost. Professor O'Kane noted that potential partnerships between industry groups and university museums and collections were under-developed and the Mawson Project was cited as an example where a cooperative venture included a state museum.

Most of the questions that followed drew on Professor O'Kane's experience with the ARC Institu-

tional Grants Committee and how museums and collections could access funding. The key to successfully utilising these various funding strategies is the effective collaboration and communication with the University's Research Office. Senior university administrators must understand the research value of the collections and their requirements, and the Research Office must be as familiar with them as they are with other research instruments such as electron microscopes.

Leon Yow, the Foundation Development Manager at the University of South Australia, spoke of the need to develop personal relationships between donors and recipients. He argued the need for all external fundraising to be centralised through one office which sells prestige, credibility and profile to potential donors. Louise Dauth, spoke of the relationship between campus museums and museum studies courses. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of tertiary museum studies programs over the last ten years and these courses attract large numbers of students from many disciplines. Unfortunately, there are few opportunities for graduates in the museums' sector, however, universities continue to encourage these studies programs.

The final day consisted of a discussion of responses to the CAUMAC initiative; the 'Cinderella Collections' report. Barrie Reynolds noted that no Labor government will ever initiate a similar report, i.e. the 'Cinderella Collections' report of 1996 and the Pigott Report of 1975: in both instances, the government of the day was voted out of office within a month or so of delivering the reports.

Peter Stanbury presented a 'stock-take' of the major recommendations from the 'Cinderella Collections' report and indicated progress on many fronts. The remaining recommendations discussed dealt with activity at host institution level. A small number of projects were briefly outlined, including the Action Learning Project at the University of Queensland (Museum National, February, 1996) and, developments at Macquarie University as they related to specific recommendations. He indicated that wide dissemination of any written output from these individual projects will act as a mechanism for prompting action on other campuses. A number of universities reported the formation of committees or advisory groups consisting of museum and collections personnel.

The final day closed with the CAUMAC Annual General Meeting. Barrie Reynolds passed the presidential reigns over to Brian Shepherd and delegates charged the new executive with a mandate to pursue affiliation with Museums Australia. Erica Green and Yvonne Routledge are to be congratulated for organising a stimulating conference, the hallmark of a good conference is when informal discussions are as valuable and intense as those during the formal sessions.

Andrew Simpson
University of Queensland

Cinderella Collections: University Museums and Collections in Australia

In 1992, a group of university curators formed the Council of Australian University Museums and Collections with the aim of mutual support and advocacy for attention to their industry. In 1994, the Department of Employment, Education and Training commissioned a review of university museums and collections through the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. Chaired by Don McMichael, a former Director of the National Museum of Australia, the review committee published its report in February 1996 entitled *Cinderella Collections: University Museums and Collections in Australia*. It concluded that there are 250 museums and collections in the 37 universities in Australia (44 are university art collections) with more than five million objects worth in excess of 500 million dollars.

The report contained ten major recommendations, and over 50 secondary recommendations. Actions already stimulated by these recommendations include:

- Several universities including Macquarie, Sydney, Charles Sturt, Queensland, Northern Territory, Tasmania and Adelaide have set up committees, employed people, drafted policy, developed partnerships, applied for grants, held museums Open Days, published brochures or newsletters.
- The Council of Australian University Museums & Collections, which is equivalent to the UK university museum group, has sought closer links with Museums Australia.
- The New South Wales Vice-Chancellors' Committee has established a standing committee on university museums and collections to

coordinate cooperative action, for example, the organisation of joint travelling exhibitions with the state.

- The Department of Communications and the Arts has given a grant to Museums Australia to develop a common set of guidelines for museums across Australia. It is hoped that this will form a basis for a simple accreditation scheme for a range of museums.

Although the time may have been ripe for the 'Cinderella Collections' report, the timing has been hardly judicious. The report came out at a time of change of government and the new government's agenda for reducing the financial deficit means that it is unlikely that more than a fraction of the funds needed to tackle the backlog of conservation alone required by university collections will be forthcoming in the next two years. However, it was introduced when the climate was right for changes in management practice, for the application of information technology and for increased access to this significant part of the Distributed National Collection.

The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee has now obtained a grant from the Commonwealth Department of Communications and the Arts for a new phase of action on university museums. It will be used to assist in: establishing an overall policy for university museums and collections, assisting universities to recognise their more important collections so they can be maintained in the long term, identification of items of national/ international importance and the collection of data to develop a strategic conservation plan.

Looking out, looking in

The Young Curator Program at the Performing Arts Museum

In 1995 the Performing Arts Museum established its Young Curator Program. The program developed out of a recognition that the Museum needed to become more in tune with the interests of young people, and to develop strategies to research, collect and exhibit in this area and engage with contemporary culture generally. Its purpose was also to provide the opportunity for an individual to acquire curatorial skills and to work within a museum environment.

As the first Young Curator, I was presented with a brief to investigate the intersection of youth culture and the performing arts, with a view to developing an exhibition for the 1996 Next Wave Festival, as well as an outline for collecting and documenting contemporary culture for the Museum. I was faced with an immense task. The focus from the outset was music

and youth culture.

I saw my role as a researcher and as an observer. One of my first discoveries was that in the area of youth culture – and by extension contemporary culture – I needed to be constantly looking at what was happening around me, whether walking down a busy street, reading newspapers and magazines, or listening to the radio. The number of sources dealing with such material was overwhelming. Early on I was able to find some key sources: the youth culture magazine *Voice works*, the many fanzines featuring the interests of young people, and the street press. Naturally, some of the best information came from the people whose interests we were trying to explore.

I also needed to find and establish contacts. In the area of youth culture and music, I was fortunate to

discover the organisation, The Push, which provides young people with access to bands playing the independent pub and club scene.

In the early stages of researching the project I cast a wide net. I searched for possible definitions, however, as I progressed, it became clear that fixed definitions were impossible as there were many complexities to be acknowledged. Issues such as social and economic backgrounds and geographic location played a part in determining the interests of young people. The last thing I wanted to do was to generalise. Also, I did not want to make their cultures static, and fix them under glass within the Museum. Therefore, I decided to narrow the focus, and to document a fraction of the diverse possibilities of music and youth culture.

The cultures of young people, and contemporary culture generally, have an ephemeral quality. This influenced the focus of the project. An element of chance was built into the process – what may be recognised as popular at one moment could be of little interest to young people a short time later. Making predictions of what might be significant, what should be documented for the Museum, was difficult.

While considering the formulation of a collection policy in contemporary culture, some of the same issues arose. One of the best approaches I came across was to focus on a glimpse, to try to portray a slice of what is happening at the moment. This idea came from Dr Brian Crozier, Senior Curator, Social History, Queensland Museum, who wrote of documenting a cross-section. Part of my research into contemporary collecting included contacting many institutions for ideas. A lot of them supplied their collecting policies, and some responded to questions, such as how they define 'contemporary'.

The focus of the exhibition became Melbourne's independent pub and club scene. I was lucky to meet a young photographer, Shellie Tonkin, who was working in the area. We commissioned her to document the scene with a series of photographs over two months. Her knowledge was important to the development of the project.

How to present the material was the next hurdle. Artist Ian de Gruchy helped us to realise an idea of exhibiting the images as an outdoor installation. Acknowledging the idea of contemporary culture being highly visual and ephemeral, the use of slides offering a brief, constantly changing, series of glimpses, worked on many levels. The images were shown outside the Museum on the River Terrace, thus keeping the culture within the public domain where it came from, hence the title, 'OUT THERE: Images at the edge of Melbourne's music scene'.

The two projects I worked on under the program were interconnected, one acted as a practical trial for the framework for the other. The evolving nature of

contemporary culture means that no fixed framework is desirable. The boundaries defining the framework to collect and document in this area need to be flexible and should be revised and reviewed on a regular basis. The title of the exhibition reflects the Museum's commitment to look outside itself and actively seek projects and keep abreast of changes in contemporary culture, and contemporary youth culture.

Angela Jooste

The Young Curator Program

Performing Arts Museum – Objectives and Outcomes

The Performing Arts Museum's Young Curator Program was inspired by a similar program at 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, and by aspects of the Tate Liverpool's Young Tate. (1)

The objectives of the program are to –

- provide training for a young person in museum skills
- ensure that the Performing Arts Museum is relevant to youth
- increase the Museum's awareness of performing arts trends that are currently enjoyed by youth
- increase awareness about the importance of preserving cultural heritage now and for the future
- develop links between the Museum and performing arts companies and groups to ensure the regular deposit of material.

The program was funded by the CRA Foundation for the Arts, and in July 1995, the Museum appointed the inaugural Young Curator, Angela Jooste. Major outcomes of Angela's work included the installation 'OUT THERE: Images at the edge of Melbourne's music scene'; the establishment of a contemporary independent music collection including photographs by Shellie Tonkin, and posters, photographs and other ephemera donated by bands and their agents; and the preparation of a draft contemporary collecting policy. The research undertaken, and the draft document will be used as the basis from which the Performing Arts Museum's contemporary collecting framework will be developed.

It is intended that the Young Curator program will be biennial. Although the focus of the Young Curator will remain on the documentation of contemporary performing arts, the subject matter will change. The Performing Arts Museum is currently seeking funding for the 1997/98 program.

Janine Barrand, Director,
Performing Arts Museum

Reference

- (1) Toby Jackson, 'Moral Tales: Reading the 80s', paper given at Museums Australia's inaugural conference, 'Identity, Icons, Artefacts', Perth 1994.

Ways of Seeing: Looking at Models of Exhibition Critique

Presented by Museums Australia (NSW) in celebration of International Museums Day, Friday 17 May 1996, at the Museum of Sydney on the site of First Government House.

The inducement for the full house in the Museum of Sydney's lecture theatre was an opportunity to consider some of the languages and methods that may be applied to a critical analysis of museum exhibitions. In particular, by actually looking at a specific exhibition entitled 'In the American Spirit', an exhibition of 'folk art' from the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

In 1995, Museums Australia (NSW) members were surveyed in order to identify their primary professional concerns. The greatest demand appeared to be for conferences and seminars that provided museum workers with a capacity to be reflective and self-critical. But this desire points to a delicate problem. The fact that little critical analysis of our work has entered the museological or theoretical debates around the country necessarily implies the difficult political dilemma that exposing our work to criticism brings. The corollary of this, of course, is that publicising any critical debate in these specific terms has the damaging potential to alienate and cause the adoption of adversarial positions. The problem, then, is to find a context in which this kind of discussion can occur without intimidation or offence.

It is notable that Dr Peter Emmett, Director of the Museum of Sydney and curator of 'In the American Spirit', and vicariously, Dean Lahikainen from the Peabody Essex Museum, from whose original exhibition the 64 works were drawn, gave themselves up (as it were) to this kind of focused debate. Indeed, in the first session, Peter discussed the motivation and development of the exhibition and, in so doing, provided a conceptual framework against which the criticism could be founded and someone to whom the criticism could be directed. His willingness to submit to the strategy and the sensitive nature of this kind of activity was recognised by Kylie Winkworth, chair of the Museums Committee of the NSW Arts Advisory Council. Whilst recognising the sensitivity, she encouraged the development of a vigorous museum critical discourse. She foregrounded the fact that while most government funding domains are subject to rigorous public scrutiny and criticism, grants to museums and museums themselves appear to be protected from that kind of interrogation. While this has provided some with an open space in which to work, Kylie argued that critical discussion would assist in the social assurance of the museum's viability. Indeed, she suggested that the audience should lobby for the employment of museum critics in the larger media organisations.

Kylie's political view rounded off the preceding two presentations that focused more critically upon the exhibition. Linguist and journalist, Peter White, provided a humorous and sharp analysis of what could

be read from the exhibition's entrance, the internal spatial arrangement, and more particularly from the labels. He highlighted some of the divergent 'voices' that speak over one another from a single label or form: in one phrase the position taken is factual and documentary, in another it is moral, in another it is aesthetic – all of which are judgemental. While suggesting that these differing positions are perhaps necessary to the museum's various demands, Peter argued that their contiguity produces confusing inconsistencies.

It was the concept of the museum's/exhibition's voice and sound that Jane Connors, social historian and radio producer, focused upon. Comparing strategies used by museums and by radio in producing meaning, and reflecting on the unpretentious way the Museum of Sydney combines space and sound with objects, fragments and text, Jane considered the social voices that were speaking through the exhibition and from whom she would have liked to have heard more. But these voices, she argued, must also be recognised as communicating with someone. In making the comparisons, she suggested the extensive research that radio performs in identifying and characterising its audience should be equally important in the museum. The effectiveness of exhibitions would benefit significantly from that kind of knowledge.

This focus and interrogation was given context in the keynote address delivered by Dr Diane Losche, senior lecturer, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, whose background is in anthropology and curatorship. Her brief was to explore various models and methods of exhibition critique, and in so doing provide a scope for the theoretical and philosophical positions that might be taken in producing a critique. By using a sophisticated strategy of articulation and modelling, Diane questioned the value of privileging one theory over another to produce a meaningful critique. The result was a sound argument for withholding the application of an appropriated theory, in favour of exploring a highly sensitive and personal response to the exhibition's complexity. Then, in sharing that sensitivity, a discourse emerges that is potentially theoretical in itself and which may connect with other existing theories.

The extensive discussion which followed clearly declared the intense interest in this kind of critical reflection and the demand for contexts in which it can occur without intimidation.

Dr Campbell Gray
Coordinator, Postgraduate Studies, Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Western Sydney, Nepean, and Chair, Museums Australia (NSW) Professional Development Sub Committee

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