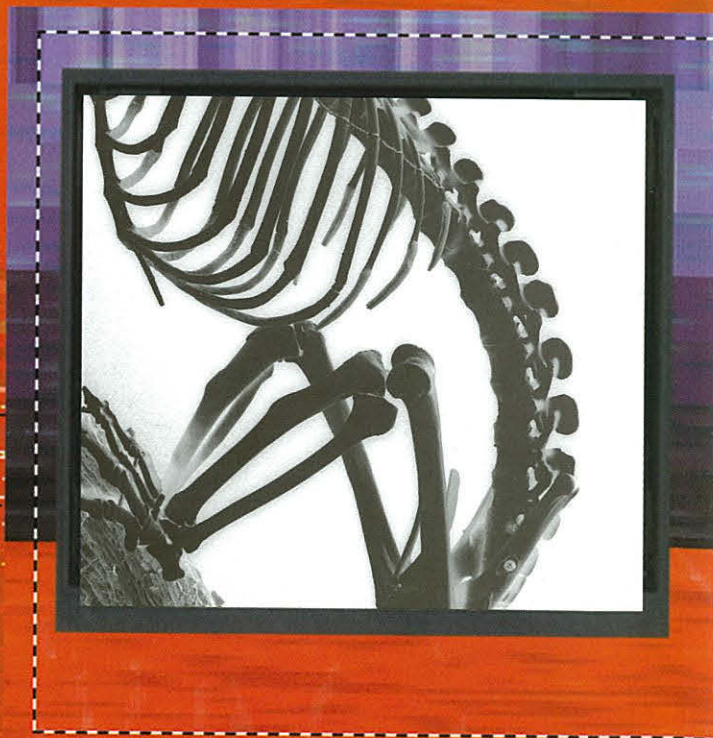


THE MAGAZINE OF MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA INC.

MUSEUM NATIONAL

VOL 8 • NO 3 • FEBRUARY 2000

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The next time New Years Day rolls around, our museums will be poised to take part in celebrations recognising the Centenary of Federation, a more comfortable celebration than Australia/Survival Day, the day I am writing Front Desk. And yet, Australian of the Year, Sir Gustav Nossal, has taken the opportunity of the occasion of his honour today, to focus on the program of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, working towards a *Draft Document for Reconciliation* to present to the nation on 27 May 2000. Composed of two parts, the first will be an aspirational document, the second an outline of national strategies for reconciliation and a series of action plans. Sir William Deane also used the opportunity of the address to the nation to speak of 'preventing and healing harmful divisions of our society'.

How museums address these divisions and work towards reconciliation seem to me the most important contributions we can make to our society, a society on the brink of one hundred years of nationhood. With museums located in many of the nooks and crannies of our land, we are ideally situated to open our doors to indigenous communities and to recognise the responsibility of caring for their cultural materials in trust or repatriating collections as required.

Speaking at the American Association of Museums annual meeting in 1998, then director of the South Australian Museum and vice president of Museums Australia, Dr Chris Anderson, said:

Museums and their relationships with indigenous peoples in Australia have come a long way in the last twenty years. Curiously, legislation and legal processes have been almost irrelevant to these changes. In addition, the debate has moved well beyond discussion simply of repatriation. A number of initiatives have taken place which suggest development of a more mature and fruitful indigenous people-museum dialogue and relationship, one not based on rigid legal structures and not driven by a presumptive, outcome-predetermined notion of repatriation...

Museums are changing and are being turned inside out in terms of recognition of the rights, obligations, knowledge and responsibilities of "outsiders" in our collections. This is not a bad thing!... it has created for us a network whereby museums themselves are working much more closely together. It has certainly enriched our collective relationships with the bush and with indigenous Australia, thereby strengthening our future capabilities to play a more significant role in defining and documenting a national identity.

Those old men, those wise elders from the bush have taught us something about the museum business: objects are about people. To recognise the originating human context for collections revitalises them; quite literally it gives them new and humanised meanings.¹

Extraordinary goodwill exists in our museums to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to see reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians a reality, as acknowledged in 1993 when *Previous Possessions, New Obligations* was launched by one of our predecessor organisations, the Council of Australian Museum Associations (CAMA). A plain English version was launched by Museums Australia in 1996.

'It's up to us', the slogan of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation proclaims. And indeed it is.

Sue-Anne Wallace
President

1 For a lengthy summary of Dr Anderson's speech see Des Griffin, 'The Return of Indigenous Cultural Property', *Museum National*, Vol. 7, No. 1, August 1998, pp. 7-8.

For news about Museums Australia's national network, please see Noticeboard.

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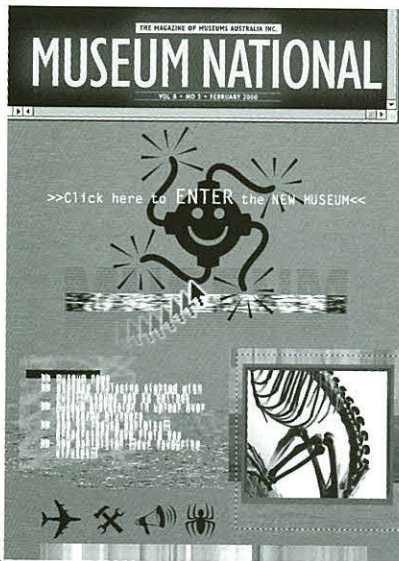
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The cover design hints at the theme for articles within this edition, 'Museum 2000, The Place To Go'. The design illustrates an online experience offered by museums that are addressing the challenging cultural and economic environment dominated by a complex range of digital and entertainment based opportunities.

Design by John Richardson with skeletal image, from the National Museum of Australia's image catalogue, photographed by Brian McNamara.

Museum National is published quarterly by Museums Australia Inc., and provides a major link between the association and its membership. *Museum National* aims to present news and opinions and to encourage debate on issues of museum practice, 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. The content of the magazine reflects the policies of Museums Australia Inc., and is guided by an Editorial Committee. Contributions from those involved or interested in museums and galleries are welcome.



Department of the Environment and Heritage

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MUSEUM 2000 – THE PLACE TO GO

-
- 4 Understanding a New Grammar
BILL COPPINGER WITH JANET MILLAR
-
- 6 Creating Audiences for the Art of Today
ELIZABETH ANN MACGREGOR
-
- 8 Content – a new currency
DAVID COURT WITH JANET MILLAR
-
- 10 Putting the Dynamite Back Into Culture
SALLY GRAY WITH JANET MILLAR
-
- 11 Bringing it all Back Home
GERARD VAUGHAN WITH JANET MILLAR
-
- 13 The Art of Counting Culture
PAUL COSTIGAN
-
- 14 Museums – whose icons are they?
WENDY MCCARTHY
-
- 16 Art Loans – Great Art Living Dangerously?
ANDREW T. KENYON
-
- 17 Design as a Language: the language of designers
LYNDA KELLY AND DAVID PRIDDLE
-
- 18 The Directors
PROFESSOR MICHAEL ARCHER, PATRICIA SABINE, ALAN DODGE,
MAJOR GENERAL STEVE GOWER
-
- 21 Conference Roundup – Janey Dolan, Derina McLaughlin, Penelope Aitken
-
- 25 Reviews

Noticeboard

The National Network
Conferences/Events
Professional Development
Publications
News

MUSEUM 2000 – THE PLACE TO GO

The last edition of *Museum National* had an extensive overview of the new building, renovation and extension activity across Australia's museum sector over the years 1998 to 2001. A quick tally of the figures reveals that the country has invested more than \$920 million dollars in museum buildings over this period. With this massive expenditure and confidence in the role of museums and galleries, Museums Australia considers it is more than timely to raise questions about how museums are relating to the many audiences within the many communities in Australia.

The overriding theme the association is addressing is: How are museums and galleries placing themselves to attract people, particularly young people, within the cultural and economic environment dominated by a complex range of digital and entertainment based opportunities?

The same theme will be used to underpin a series of conferences and seminars, including the main one this

year in conjunction with the opening of Melbourne Museum. To commence the debate in 2000, the following articles were sourced from a variety of people. As we hope to attract a range of people to participate in this series of dialogues, not all the writers and interviewees are from the museum and gallery sector.

Museums Australia would welcome replies and responses to these articles both through *Museum National*, the state branch and special interest group magazines and newsletters, and via the use of AMOL's online museum forum. (To subscribe search under <http://amol.org.au> then under museums craft and then museums forum.)

Paul Costigan, National Director

Guest editors for Museum 2000 are Paul Costigan, national director of Museums Australia, and Janet Millar. Janet was the founder and editor of *Smarts* magazine from 1994 until funding was stopped in 1999. She is now a freelance editor and writer in Canberra.

Understanding a New Grammar

Bill Coppinger is general manager of outreach services at Museum Victoria. He is responsible for delivering projects beyond the walls of a traditional museum, principally through Museum Victoria's website, ed-online. Originally a geography and history teacher, he has been instrumental in many telecommunications education projects linking Australian schools to those in other countries. In 1994 Bill Coppinger was awarded the inaugural Victorian Teacher of the Year Award. With his prize money he founded the Whalesong Foundation, which helps educators understand the issues facing modern education and how new technology can be used in educational reform. The foundation, in turn, created the Australian International Education and Resource Network (I*EARN) which operates in nearly 400 schools across Australia. Bill Coppinger spoke to Janet Millar for *Museum National*.

It's a mistake if people think that museums have to compete with other entertainments like cinemas, video arcades and theme parks.

That attitude misses the point altogether, according to Bill Coppinger, general manager of outreach services at Museum Victoria. The challenge is to understand the grammar of the medium.

'We have resources that are clearly unique, authoritative and will stand alone.

'The power of the network environment is that people will make connections that perhaps you and I can only dream of. A student coming to us may take resources from the State Library, Museum Victoria, Scienceworks, the Immigration Museum and something from the Getty – and they




will create something that is uniquely of value to them.

'It's a constructionist paradigm that the Net encourages. The networks that an individual will make won't be based on any pre-judgments of an institution or what it holds,' he said.

The fluid, tangential networking that the Internet can offer seems to align in direct opposition to what Coppinger calls the CNN-isation of world news where news and entertainment sources are being exponentially reduced in terms of ownership and focus.

It can highlight the parochial in the context of the global, providing 'absolute context and absolute meaning'.

'I think properly used these network builders will sustain cultures rather than destroy culture. In traditional mediums, if you couldn't broadcast or publish on a grand scale, then you had no voice. In the model that we currently have – the McDisney Soft corporation – everything is so homogenised that the unique or parochial has disappeared.

global classroom forums exhibitions registration resources

Why Global Classroom? The challenge for our learning communities is to understand and prepare our young people for what has increasingly become a rapidly and profoundly changing world. The term Global Classroom Project refers to the work of many hundreds of Victorians teachers and their international colleagues who have been developing enquiry based collaborative learning activities, using real-life situations with real-life outcomes.

Museum Victoria is hoping to support the work of the Victorian Education Departments Global Classroom Project by actively participating in and offering Global Classroom Projects.

Bioinformatics
Online access to over 100 years of Natural Science collections!


Oral Histories
The voices of the past, present and future.

Biggest Family Album
Open our database of over 9,000 photographs. Known as the Biggest Family Album in Australia.

Future Harvest
Your journey towards a sustainable future starts here.

Home or Away
A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Phar Lap
The champion online.



'How do we make sense of the events going on around us – how does one make sense of what's going on in Timor? How does one make sense of the reconciliation debate? Where do we turn to? Eleven and a half minutes of news on commercial radio? I think not, given the pay for opinion debacle we've been witnessing.

'The real challenge for the cultural sector is to understand that world and provide an authoritative alternative, not try and compete in it.

'Half the world is yet to make a phone call - so we shouldn't lose perspective.'

For a museum, the presentation of exhibitions via the online environment offers unlimited possibilities in the grouping and interpretation of the institution's collection. It is no longer constrained by the physical or the built to provide an experience.

In this context, Coppinger believes the online environment can negotiate new audiences and new markets for museums. His main focus in providing outreach services is to excite schoolchildren about the museum's online possibilities, especially what George McDonald, CEO of Museum Victoria, calls 'the lost generation' – teenagers.

'They demand highly emotive and quite deep experiences that need to change and adapt very rapidly.

'The lifecycles and timing of the refreshment of content or experiences in these newer mediums are not the same as apply to traditional exhibitions. It's a very difficult balance to achieve from an administrative point of view.'

According to Coppinger, the challenge in the online environment is to not be overcome by the amount of information available, at the expense of pursuing a deeper understanding.

'In the Gutenberg Elegies, Sven Birkerts referred to the challenge of the vertical versus the horizontal. We are [in danger of] sacrificing depth for breadth in the electronic age.

'Although one gains in the ability to span enormous numbers of resources, it is just as difficult to find the time to reflect on what's available, to process, to assimilate – to gain depth.'

In institutions, this challenge is manifested in managers confusing purpose with function. Organisations can get bogged down with very simple tasks – whether it's installing networks, getting on the web or implementing e-commerce.

'Unless they are part of some broader strategy, they simply become activities for activities' sake.'

The true potential lies in new networks evolving from new technologies and removing layers of administration. 'Then

you are really freed up to pursue your purpose in a more focused fashion.'

In the race to reach out to young audiences, Museum Victoria has set up ed-online for Australian students. Providing credible content has been a co-partnership with the Department of Education, with resources being written into textbooks right through to major curriculum-based collaborations.

'For the user, we are just one part of the jigsaw puzzle, not the whole solution.'

Museum Victoria also runs school-based activities, with Longreach School of Distance Education in Queensland – a community of about 250 students and their families – winning a recent competition.

Without an online capability, Museum Victoria would never have built a relationship with a school in Longreach, Queensland.

'That's where the real value lies. I've worked in community and education-based online networks in many countries around the world including Israel, China, Argentina, Korea, PNG, Japan, the US, Russia and throughout Eastern Europe. Access to these technologies provides a voice and an input into forums that would otherwise be invisible to these communities.'

And, likewise, these new markets become visible to Australia's cultural institutions. ■

Creating Audiences for the Art of Today

ELIZABETH ANN MACGREGOR

Britain has traditionally been considered a literary rather than a visual culture and hostility to the modern is well documented. Why, therefore, has there been such an unprecedented rise in public interest in contemporary art over the past few years? Visitor numbers for contemporary exhibitions have risen dramatically. The Tate Gallery, for example, has had to close its doors against the sheer weight of numbers during the annual Turner Prize exhibition.

There are a number of reasons for this phenomenon, the first being the recent flourishing of young British artists and the way in which some of these artists have used the media to spotlight their activities. This has had the effect of turning art into a spectator sport, which in the short term delivers the instant fix so eagerly sought in the highly competitive entertainment sector.

But this emphasis on spectacle has its dangers – the constant search for the spice of the new runs the risk of running out of steam. And there is a fundamental difference between museums and sites of entertainment, and that is the educational imperative. Many contemporary art galleries are committed to exploring new ways of developing the relationship between art, artist and audience in order to encourage a longer term engagement with art. The strong tradition of gallery education and commitment to widening access in Britain has led to the establishment of a range of programs designed to involve new audiences: small scale touring exhibitions for libraries, community centres, schools, hospitals etc., extensive school programs, talks, debates, lectures and workshops, outreach projects that bring artists into contact with the different communities, projects that aim to develop people's own creativity, and public art initiatives of varying sorts. Some of these initiatives are gallery led, others are undertaken by independent agencies. Together they form a spectrum of activity which is having a substantial effect on the number of people involved in the contemporary visual arts.

Within galleries, the key question is how to encourage critical dialogue: how to encourage the translation of visual literacy into verbal debate. It is precisely this possibility for dialogue and debate that makes working with contemporary art so interesting and, indeed, essential in a society where the opportunity to question is increasingly discouraged and the discussion of ideas is frowned on as 'intellectual'. The gallery can provide a special space for the discussion of issues that it might be difficult to deal with in any other context. Art can help to develop a spirit of critical enquiry, encouraging individuals to think and respond effectively. The gallery has a crucial role to play today in visual arts education: this feeds into wider debates about the calibre of design in our urban planning, the quality of architecture which affects all our lives, the kinds of public art which embellish our public spaces, what we buy to put on our walls, how we support a living, breathing contemporary culture in all its diversity.

So how can galleries encourage dialogue rather than consumption: how do they attract committed participants rather than cultural tourists? The first very vital strand in programming is exhibitions which address the issues of today, exhibitions which have a critical thesis and where art can be a springboard to opening up discussion of other issues, beyond the sacred spaces of the gallery. Artists are not some breed apart: many are dealing with topics which are of relevance to a wider audience and the days of the artist painting in the studio and waiting to be discovered have long gone. This realisation is another reason for the success of the young British artists: they make art which is about their lives, about the issues that concern them and which is likely to be of concern to others. It also explains why the age profile of visitors to contemporary galleries is predominantly under 45.

One of the biggest inhibiting factors to greater public engagement with contemporary art is not the work itself but the



Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art: '...the constant search for the spice of the new runs the risk of running out of steam'.

context in which it is placed. One of the biggest challenges for galleries is to overcome the way in which much writing about the visual arts only serves to confuse and alienate people. Exhibition guides and wall panels are an essential introduction to some of the ideas within the exhibition, if written in jargon-free language. This may be stating the obvious but it is astonishing how often galleries still fall into the trap of writing for the initiated. This is not a case of 'dumbing down' as has sometimes been suggested. Art of all kinds is complex and requires effort on the part of the viewer, but surely the gallery must make every effort to help that process. Curators spend hours talking to artists before deciding whether or not to show their work. Why then deny this information to the audience?

Many galleries are now looking seriously at the possibilities offered by new technology. There is great interest in knowing more about artists and video interviews have long been a staple of many galleries' practice. The Internet also offers new possibilities: visitors can visit specially created sites dealing with the topics of the exhibition and which give them access to other related sites, thereby adding to the layers of information available. And many artists are exploiting the

possibilities of new technology, which appeals particularly to young people.

Introducing a range of perspectives encourages visitors to realise that there is no one answer, that works of art can mean different things to different people. At Ikon Gallery we pioneered the concept of Children as Guides: a special scheme whereby eleven year olds were trained as guides to the exhibition. The scheme had many positive results for both the children, who gained communication skills, and the visitors to the gallery, who were delighted to be given an insight into the work through the eyes of a child. We have also tried staff having arguments in front of art works – to encourage discussion and dissent! And some of our best talks have been where we have set up opposing viewpoints.

Contemporary galleries in the new millennium must be lively, accessible and challenging meeting places for people and ideas, bringing new audiences to the work of the living artists.

Elizabeth Ann Macgregor is director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and former director of Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England.

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EXPECT THE WORLD



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Museums Australia goes On Line

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visit often for conference information and other events

download a membership form and sign up a colleague

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<http://amol.org.au> (check under Museum Craft)



Content – a new currency

David Court is founder of the web magazine, *Content Letter*, and is now director of Content Capital, a film financing company. He has long been an erudite commentator and writer on new technology and he recently spoke with Janet Millar about museums as content creators for the web.

In the *softmuseum*, its holdings are purely digital – a virtual collection of words, sounds, images and design. It is a distributed network of international experts working in formal and informal alignment, as researchers, curators, historians, designers, some with institutions and the rest independent.

softmuseum is David Court's hypothesis. Court, founder and former editor of webzine *Content Letter*, is now director of Content Capital, a company involved in raising finance for film.

Content creation and interpretation will direct the future relevance of the web. And as content creators, museums and galleries should be thinking much more strategically about their web presence now. As well as still housing physical objects in a built environment, museums will also have a 'softmuseum' capacity that in the future will be a crucial part of the institution's branding and revenue raising.

According to Court, the core of what museums do is not to store and preserve objects but to provide meaning and interpret their collections. 'They curate, they interpret and to me that's the valuable thing, and that's the part that can be on the web.'

'Two constraints currently operate to limit the development of the web,' he says. 'First is the current lack of band width and second is the fact that everyone is assuming that [revenue raising] is going to be based on advertising.'

'This scenario we're talking about now is just that bit further out. A bit more band width that can support video is probably

realistic in metropolitan Sydney in three years, elsewhere it's more.

'The other leg of it is subscriptions whereby people start to pay for what they use. Until that happens it's all fantasy land.'

Court says the whole idea that the financial viability of the web can be based on advertising is a misreading of the medium. Advertising is currently flat out paying for three free-to-air channels and will not be able to continue to support them, as well as the vast resources and demands of the web. That leaves paying for content.

Even if a museum's brand is never going to be strong enough to bring people in by itself, they can get mileage out of linking with other brands.

'What will happen is that people will start to pay for certain kinds of content. It will be micro payments or it will be embedded payments, part of the general subscription they make to some service provider. There may be elements of advertising but essentially it will rely upon a person subscribing.'

'The minute that happens you can get this tremendous specialisation in the content. As long as it's advertising based, it still turns on the lowest common denominator.'

'Assume I'm right for a minute and the band width is there to support it, then the potential of the web for content creators like museums is tremendous because for the first time it's economic. At the moment, if a museum was to get seriously into the web they'd just be subsidising their websites – it would be a cost centre to them, not a revenue centre.'

Court believes that eventually the payments could come from all sorts of directions – not just subscriptions, but governments could subsidise by making payments, corporations could sponsor/purchase, educational and research institutions could be aligned so there could be payments related to educational training, merchandising etc.

Currently, paying for information that is readily available free will undoubtedly stick in many people's craw but Court reckons that attitude is already changing.

'I think there's a whole generation of people who are going to choke on the thought of paying for what they regard as free. They won't change, they'll just be superseded because the generation coming through now will not think that.'

'What will make paying for content not only possible but lucrative is branding. And that is where museums and galleries will come into their own. They've got reputation, reliability, dependability and credibility.'

'So it's about how you persuade people that this is indeed quality – that it's reliable, dependable and something that your kids can use.'

Even if a museum's brand is never going to be strong enough to bring people in by itself, they can get mileage out of linking with other brands. 'What will matter is with whom they are branded, and how they connect to other brands and services,' he said.

To support a good strong brand, museums and galleries will have to take the development and design of their websites much more seriously. It takes real commitment – and real money – to get up a good one.

Once band width limitations are resolved, the whole idea of what makes a good site will evolve.

'I think the best sites, the best content will be expensive and, yes, you will be able to make your little home movie and put it up [on the web], but that's not competing.'

'I don't think you can assume that because the technology is so accessible you can simply zoom out there, collect your content, put it up and whizz bang you're in business. Yes, you're there but are you branded? No.'

The argument that museums and galleries are never going to have the dollars necessary to develop a good site doesn't convince Court.

'They will if they're making enough money from it,' he said. They've got protocol standards which are really important – not just to maintain but also in promoting their brand. And in terms of site development, they are likely to get more value 'if they hook up together to enhance that value'.

The crucial question, of course, is where is the content going to come from?

'It all has to be created. I'm in a company that has a Flickr licence at the moment. We're really interested to work out where the content is going to come from and what it's going to look like because all the existing formats that we're familiar with—the 48 minute documentary, the 24 minute soap, whatever—

they're all dictated by television and its requirements. They have nothing to do with the underlying content.

'So what we want to know is, when you free the content from those constraints what does it become? What works, what will people buy?

'We think there's an immediate opportunity for very, very short animations, maybe because you don't need as much bandwidth to pump animation through and because everything is so static and dull on the web that even little twenty second animations are absolutely captivating.

'I also don't think people necessarily want a lot of interactivity. It's boring. And it interrupts the flow. With movies you've got to suspend people's disbelief and it's the same with content – people want to go on a journey, they don't want to do all the work themselves.'

For a museum, it's about taking the information they have, making sense of it and making it available to people who don't have the time themselves.

Court says museums should be planning where to position themselves once the bandwidth is there and the payment

systems are in place. They should be planning the content they're going to build, who's going to build it, how they are going to build it – 'focusing on the curatorial challenge, I suppose'.

'Their real competitors are probably organisations like the ABC – in fact I would argue that it's the best media brand in the country because everybody trusts it.

'From a creative point of view the thing that bandwidth adds is the fact that you can put depth into content, which you can't as readily do in other media.

'It's like putting footnotes in a book. If you could also tag exhibits off what you're doing then it gets more and more interesting because you can put the depth there.'

Xml, rather than the current standard html, will allow site builders to create deeper structure from the start.

Court currently finds much of the web superficial and shallow; the good stuff is too hard to find and too isolated. But with greater bandwidth and payment systems that can support higher expenditure on site creation, the good stuff will be much more obvious. Museums and galleries now need to decide their own level of commitment. ■

Preserving the Unpreservable

'Where can I find a copy of every software application ever written? Where will this record be stored 10, 100 and 1000 years from now? To put this in perspective: I created my first computer file 15 years ago but have access now only to the past five, and direct access only to the past two. The first 10 were lost in the departures and upgrades and system crashes that are the lot of the long-term computer user, and the next three are as good as lost, too fiddly and time-consuming to retrieve. Under these conditions, how feasible can ordinary history be?'

Letter written by David Court to the editor of *Wired*, as quoted by David Court in his forthcoming book *Shakespeare's Fortune*.

Given that the *raison d'être* of a museum is the preservation of meaningful objects in order to interpret social and historical events, how the preservation of digital content is resolved should be of critical importance to cultural institutions.

'It's what archives do, it's what museums do. No one's thinking hard enough about it and it's a much more complex task than people imagine,' Court says. 'Take, for example, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. Disney decided they wanted to have a perfect digital copy of it so they built one.

I understand it cost about US\$7.5 million and involves a huge amount of disk space.

'At the time they did it, a few years back, it was a whole room of disk space and that's just one movie.'

While the technology is improving all the time, it still takes will and money.

'But we don't spend the money so things do get left behind,' he said. 'I've been on computers since 1984 and I can't get back to anything before 1991. This is a real problem. So the archival task of preserving digital stuff – even just down to preserving all the versions of Microsoft Word that have been invented, is huge.'

If you have a lack of preservation then you have a loss of history, and ultimately a loss of context and understanding. Films, photographs, videos, electronic material – anything stored on unstable material or using obsolete systems – is threatened.

'They're all going to go because no one will translate them. So in theory it's all there but in practise you'll never get it back. Once we effectively migrate to the web in terms of content then everything that's analogue will just disappear into the past.'

A bleak but realistic vision and one that governments cannot afford to continue to ignore.

Putting the Dynamite Back Into Culture

Sally Gray is a freelance curator and cultural consultant. She spoke to Janet Millar about the need for cultural organisations to engage in a creative dialogue with their audiences.

Like any large institution, cultural organisations are in danger of predictability and complacency. They are subject to constraints similar to those of any other large enterprise – historical and management constraints that can kill creativity. But within those constraints, it is incumbent on cultural institutions to find a creative dialogue that will engage their audiences.

They are mostly concerned with responsibility and accountability and rightly so, says Sally Gray, freelance curator and cultural consultant. But those very important issues often override the communication that the institutions might be able to engage in with their actual and potential audiences.

'Harvard Business School is producing endless speculative research studies as to why organisations become moribund. It's probably one of the biggest and most interesting questions at the end of the twentieth century,' she said.

'Large institutions need to find unique solutions to the problems that face them. This means maximising the human potential. To hamper people's creativity doesn't work. It's a very fraught area – much that's written about senior museum management suggests that directors of museums face more entrenched attitudes than the directors of other large organisations. And that to drag a large cultural institution into a change process is probably one of the hardest things that a senior manager could ever attempt to do.'

As a consultant in strategic planning and marketing for several cultural institutions in Australia and a 1993 Churchill fellow, during which she studied management and exhibition development in major cultural institutions in the UK and

Europe, Gray has explored the notion of workplace change and innovation in depth. She says it's the new museums, with limited resources, that more successfully rise to the challenge.

'I have found that, of all my clients, Casula Powerhouse has been the most receptive to originality and unconventional ways of solving problems, and I think it's a question of size. It's also a question of being at the periphery rather than at the centre and having to create something fresh and original in quite challenging circumstances, in terms of resourcing, that has led to some unique outcomes.

'The National Portrait Gallery is another example of an institution which at this stage is quite small – both in terms of the scale of its staff and the size of its budget – and is creating an edgy, interesting dialogue around what portraiture is or may be.

'What is essential for freshness and originality is the capacity to look outside the institutional framework in which one finds oneself – and small organisations with reasonably small budgets are forced to look outside themselves. Sometimes they do and become successful, and sometimes they don't because they model themselves on larger organisations.

'It's very hard to compare a new institution with institutions that in some cases are 80 years old or more, which have had chequered histories and have got huge, weighty constituencies who expect them to continue to behave in the same way they have done in the past. The inertia that's inevitable with large established organisations is very difficult to shift and it takes a very gifted leader to do so without alienating staff.'

Gray believes there's a tendency in arts and culture, like any industry, for there to be received orthodoxies and people measure their professional competence against those orthodoxies. 'That can be very stultifying,' she said.

'Where there are scientific and financial issues involved, like conservation and



The *Giant Birthday Candle*, Sally Gray and Ron Smith, 1998. Designed for the 25th birthday of the Sydney Opera House, the birthday candle signals a confident, dynamic and continually unfolding cultural future for Sydney and Australia.

accounting for budgets, you can understand why people stick to those orthodoxies but when you are actually entering into a creative intellectual enterprise that is communicating about culture, a lot of organisational structures actually impede that creativity.

'I'd like to see a creative and dynamic climate around the communication of cultural ideas and material through museums and other cultural agencies.'

Gray believes Australia is in the throes of an 'absolutely fantastic cultural moment, despite certain indicators to the contrary such as the Republican vote'.

'There's an enormous cultural energy in Australia at the moment that is both regional and metropolitan and it's wonderful to be working in the cultural arena at this time, because of that energy. I certainly think we've got the solutions to the problems within our midst. It might sound like a cracked record but I've always thought that open mindedness and creative thought can solve just about anything.' ■

Bringing it all Back Home

Before returning to Melbourne in 1999 to head up the National Gallery of Victoria, Gerard Vaughan had, since 1994, been director of the British Museum Development Trust. It was the pivotal post in the redevelopment of the British Museum. As director, Vaughan not only masterminded the planning of the museum's redevelopment once the British Library pulled out of its Bloomsbury site, but was also instrumental in raising much of the cash for its evolution.

Vaughan is interested in the interaction of art in society – the way people absorb art, use it, think about it. Collecting and the rise of museum culture are crucial to his interest in art history. He discussed his time at the British Museum with Janet Millar and his plans for the redevelopment of the National Gallery of Victoria.

The government gave the British Museum 40 per cent of the Bloomsbury site formerly occupied by the British Library. 'They said you can have the space but not one penny of taxpayers' money to develop it. If you want to develop it, raise the money yourself. So that's what we did,' Vaughan says.

While the British economy was in pretty good shape at the time – 1994 – the amount the museum set out to raise was unprecedented.

'When we started fundraising, getting a million pounds from a corporation was big news. But our aim – just for the Great Court Project, not including the refurbishment of the galleries – was 100 million pounds.

'By the end of the project, five years later, I think we'd helped change the culture of giving in Britain. The whole philanthropic environment was different and was, of course, enormously challenged by the creation of the National Lottery in Britain.

'All this new money was being pumped into arts projects, on condition that it was matched by the private sector, so there was a lot more competition. It meant that the private sector really had to think in quite fundamental terms about what it could and should be doing. The old fashioned "let's put a bit of money into this

and a bit of money into that" was no longer going to work.'

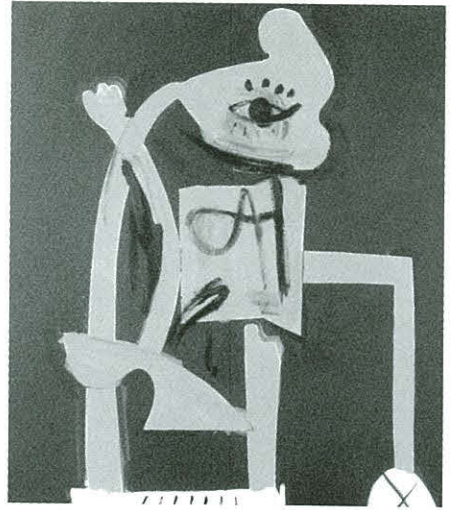
As has happened in Australia, the approach to the getting and giving of sponsorship and philanthropy has become increasingly sophisticated. 'Britain was simply beginning to adopt what had been common place in America for a very long time,' Vaughan says.

The redevelopment of the museum gave its managers and staff the opportunity to refocus what it was really trying to do.

'The Great Court Project provided the opportunity for a magnificent education facility and it was great fun being part of that. Obviously it was a big team and it was driven by the education services but as the head of the trust, I particularly wanted to put the resources of my office into it. We were able to bring significant sums into not just building the facilities but also a huge multimedia database project.'

Given the museum's collection – seven million objects – it was a huge commitment in resources and planning.

'We wanted to provide a very, very flexible way of using the latest technology to allow the public, whether they were at a remote site or actually in the museum itself, to get the most out of the collections and not just a kind of digitised catalogue.



Dick Watkins, *Miss Misology*, 1992. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 182.5 x 182.5 cm. Purchased, 1993, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

'We also wanted total flexibility to allow people to be almost multidisciplinary, to actually reach across, to break down the traditional department barriers that exist in a great institution like the British Museum.'

One pilot project, with an exhibition planned to come out of it, has been a spectacular success in crossing boundaries. It took as its subject the rituals of death and how such things are expressed in the collections of the British Museum.

'It is something that applies to every society, every civilisation and therefore it is one of the uniting issues across the collections of the British Museum. When you're talking archeology, the best things we have today survived because they were buried with bodies. That was a very, very fascinating thing.

'It was a theme that applied to every bit of the British Museum with its seven million objects. There were nine principal curatorial departments drawn together in a way that the public could explore.'

These are the kinds of skills Vaughan is keen to develop at the National Gallery of Victoria with its recent \$2 million decision to digitise the gallery's collection,

including a \$1 million grant from Multi-media Victoria.

'We're taking the 20,000 key objects in the collection and we're saying that within two years we'll have a digitised database of that collection, with key information. Then, once we've got that database, the challenge is how we use it in the future.'

'That's where I think there are some terrific opportunities for commercial sponsors for the NGV. We will be launching a major fundraising campaign for many tens of millions of dollars in the New Year and it will run in parallel with our ongoing sponsorship program.'

Although most of this will be directed at capital works, a component will target electronic development.

'I don't think in Australia any arts institution has attempted to raise money on the scale we're about to attempt,' Vaughan says.

The immediate shortfall is about \$15 million in the \$136 million St Kilda Road site redevelopment. The State Government is contributing \$96 million and the Federal Government about \$25 million.

'Quite apart from that, once we've paid for that I want to turn my attention to the Art Foundation of Victoria because it has an endowment fund income, which helps us to buy works of art.'

'But the truth of the matter is the income stream isn't enough, because of the decline in the value of the dollar. If the NGV is to continue to buy across the board in so many areas, and try to maintain the quality and range of work that we have in the past, we're going to have to do something about it.'

'That's not been the case in the last decade, for example, because the income just hasn't been there.'

While eager to tap into any available corporate sponsorship, Vaughan is realistic about the limitations in size and culture of the Australian corporate sector.

'I think we need to be realistic about what the corporate sector might and might not do. But I very much take the view that corporations, at the end of the day, are not like individuals giving money.'

'Corporations have to be responsible to shareholders, to boards of directors, the CEO, no matter what their personal enthusiasms are. That can be pure philanthropy but, increasingly, companies are saying we want a synergy between what this purpose is and what we do as a company.'

I'm very, very keen to do exhibitions that speak to younger people

'It's much more a partnership and we have to demonstrate to them that if they invest, if they go into partnership with us, they've got to feel that they've not only put something back into the community but they have got something out of it that they can justify to their shareholders. That's an entirely proper thing.'

High profile exhibitions are always a big ticket winner for corporate dollars, but Vaughan believes that pretty much all exhibitions and projects can appeal to somebody.

'The corporations that will support avant-garde art and unusual things will probably tend to be what I call new industries, particularly the media industry and new technologies.'

'I think you just make intelligent decisions, and the key to success is to have a bright, enthusiastic and switched on marketing staff. People who actually

have a feel for the market, who know what the enthusiasms of the world out there are.'

'There may be instances where I do think we need to do a big show, that perhaps we won't get the level of sponsorship we might normally get, in which case we try and subsidise it from some other source of income.'

While Vaughan believes that 'a broad visual arts institution like the National Gallery of Victoria' has to fulfil the role that is filled by maybe six institutions in London, he is keen to bring in younger audiences.

'I think that the Federation Square building is going to be a kind of campus where a lot of young people will come. We hope it will be open late at night and I'm very, very keen to do exhibitions that speak to younger people,' he said.

With Cinemedia next door – the Australian Centre for the Moving Image – providing access to material with more obvious appeal to young people, and Vaughan's ambition to mount exhibitions on Australian architecture and design, in an environment of late night activity, he may just hit on the right mixture. ■

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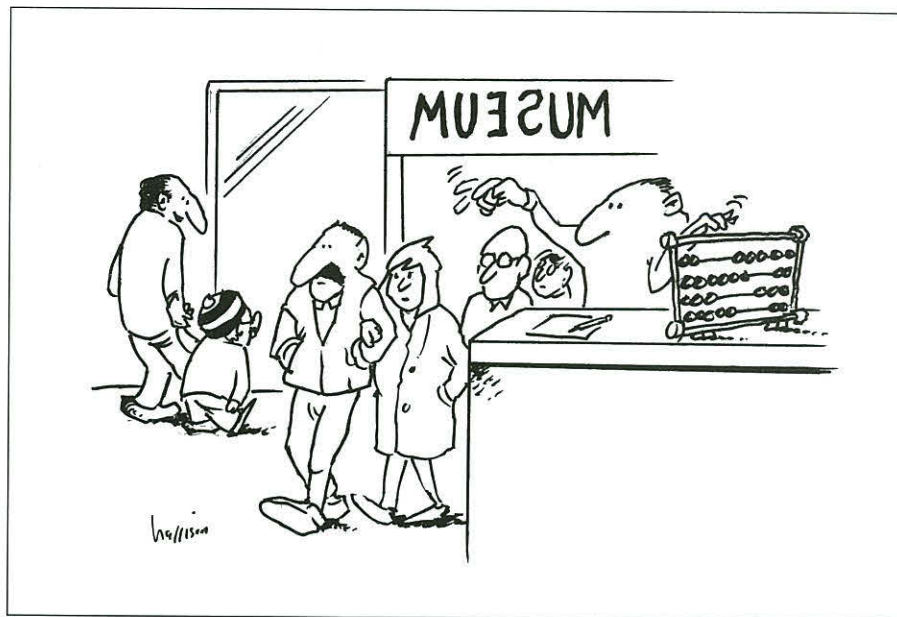
The Art of Counting Culture

PAUL COSTIGAN

On 13 December 1999, the Australian Bureau of Statistics published its latest household survey on participation, *Attendances at Selected Cultural Venues, April 1999*. The document is one of the key publications by which museums and galleries are being judged by the various layers of government in this country. In acknowledging this, be assured that this article is not about endorsing these reports being used as stand alone tools for making such judgments. Naturally, when the figures are positive, such data has been used to improve the situation for museums and galleries. However, in this case, with the figures at first looking negative, the government and industry have to be very wary of instant translations and the damage that could be easily done to the future of museums and galleries within the political priorities.

The report sets out attendances at the full range of historic types of cultural venues. In doing so it provides a complex range of comparisons, including those with the previous 1995 survey. Overall there is a slight downturn in attendances at these cultural venues, with the most obvious exception being cinema, which increased from 62.1 per cent to 67 per cent. As for museums, the statistics indicate that they suffered the largest fall in attendance numbers. Nationally for galleries attendance figures have moved from 22.3 per cent in 1995 to 21.2 per cent in 1999, while museums have fallen from 27.8 per cent to 19.9 per cent.

The devil of course lurks in the detail. The more significant falls are in the ACT where galleries moved from 41.6 per cent to 37.7 per cent, and museums from 45.4 per cent to 25.8 per cent. The reasons behind this can only be speculative at this stage until some thorough analysis has been done. Attendances at Victorian museums have also fallen dramatically from 26 per cent to 16 per cent. One of the most obvious explanations is that Victoria has closed its Museum of Victoria in anticipation of the opening of Melbourne Museum later in 2000.



© Stephen Harrison

While the tables within the document reveal all sorts of stories, an important issue is what the document does not tell us. As with much of the valuable work produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, what is missing are the interpretations and the linkages to other sets of industry data.

Nationally an assessment is overdue on how people have been trained to attend museums and galleries for the well publicised grand events, 'the blockbusters'. Anecdotal evidence suggests that audiences stay away until the marketing of another special event or exhibition is strong enough to entice them back. Many a museum and gallery goes eerily quiet for those times between blockbusters. The days of wandering along to the museum and gallery just to gaze again on a known object or work seems to be no longer a common practice. Could this be an education issue and a fault with marketing strategies? How much of the development and marketing dollars are being invested in the real value of collections and their every day exhibitions as opposed to short-term quick-fix hits for special events?

In the current cultural and economic environment, people have increased their spending on leisure activities - why is this not reflected in the statistics under discussion in this report? The area of research is based on people attending 'venues' for their leisure - what about the other leisure forms not classified yet by the Australian Bureau of Statistics? The electronic environment has produced a range of challenges both directly and indirectly for museums and galleries but I doubt very much that people are staying away because they can now visit through the web. The web site remains just one part of the museum's or gallery's means of marketing and, if successful, an extra enticement for people already committed to attend the real thing rather than just have a virtual experience of the collection. Festivals are not a 'venue' and therefore these statistical reports do not reflect the growth in this form of cultural pursuit that now dominates most cities' cultural calendars.

The obvious danger is that our museums and galleries will now come under pressure to increase their attendance figures at all costs. The shame will

be if in identifying with the competition – such as homogenised theme parks – museums and galleries may go for the obvious and adopt practices which mimic such competition. I would suggest that this would be giving away what museums and galleries do best – providing that cultural experience and links to the depths of the country's heritage and spiritual values. The general public have consistently shown their high value for cultural activities through such surveys as those carried out by the Australia Council, and while the presentation of exhibitions should be innovative and exciting, the public don't visit museums and galleries just to participate in another fun parlour.

It remains important that these statistical reports are produced regularly by the Bureau of Statistics. However, they remain just one source of information for setting benchmarks and applying an assessment of the investment of public funds. If applied in isolation without a far more complex interpretation and linkages to other sources, shallow judgments would be the predictable and erroneous outcomes.

It is significant that most national representative associations lack resources to monitor these statistics satisfactorily yet are constantly called on to respond to ministerial questions whenever a new set appears. The Commonwealth resources

available to Museums Australia for sophisticated responses and research seems to have declined, yet the needs and expectations have increased. During 2000 Museums Australia is looking to expand these debates and it is anticipated that there will be opportunities provided for such dialogues through national and state based conferences and seminars.

Paul Costigan is national director of Museums Australia.

Copies of the document can be purchased from the Australian Bureau of Statistics offices in capital cities or ring 08 8237 7449.

Museums – whose icons are they?

WENDY MCCARTHY

A museum defined as a building or place for the keeping, exhibition and study of significant objects is the custodian of the Australian experience. The significance of these objects is not just financial, but can also be artistic, historical, scientific, social, sentimental. They reflect back to us our sense of place and history. And they then become firmly locked to our unique interpretation of an Australian identity. But who defines the parameters of significance and who decides which objects contain that significance?

For me museums are all about heritage, the property handed on to each generation to help them understand the context in which they live. In its original meaning heritage was the property that parents handed on to their children, although in the wider sense it included intellectual and spiritual legacies as well. We now speak about our national heritage and we generally agree that keeping this is important for our collective psyche. Battles are waged about what we keep because this becomes part of our defining past. National celebrations are frequently used as benchmarks for the next round of national discovery. The Bicentennial cele-

Battles are waged about what we keep because this becomes part of our defining past.

brations had a significant impact on museology and it is likely that the Centenary of Federation will too. For how and where we keep and exhibit our heritage is most often seen as the function of a museum.

As the chief executive of the National Trust (NSW) for four years, I was the custodian of fourteen house museums and two art galleries. Their care and maintenance involved hours of brain and brawn, and if the bottom line was visitor numbers it was not worth the effort. Why we persisted was complex and simple: simply, these were sacred places for the safe-keeping of our narrative, the stories about us. The continuing challenge was to collect all the stories and to ensure their integrity. Of course the complexity was about property, money and management, none of which will rate a mention in the future. What matters is whose story is being told, for it is the story that will attract and connect the audience and

encourage them to be participants in the Australian experience.

If we include art galleries and libraries under the general heading of museums then we have a broad canvas and a lot of room to be innovative. Yet I see little evidence of that. Our cultural places are still primarily concerned with middle-class Anglo values, and a classical education helps access that. I recently published a book on Australian immigrants, *A Fair Go*, and I was struck by the absence of an immigrant presence in our museums. Yes, I know there are exceptions but the romance and achievement of the immigrant experience has been late in its acknowledgment and our museums have probably lost at least two generations of immigrant children as their visitors. Where could they find their images and stories? Not in school texts or museums, and nor, I regret to say, in National Trust places. *Making Multicultural Australia*, a multimedia documentary produced in 1999 by the NSW Board of Studies, is probably the friendliest and best researched approach to the issue.

Museums at their best are inclusive. They are there for all of us throughout our



BATS at the Australian Museum. Photo by Paul Ovenden. Copyright the Australian Museum.

lives, a constant source of individual educational nourishment. They must assume that as we grow we question our past and are critical if our favourite museums do not grow as well. When I recall the National Trust places I think of the indigenous stories that we failed to tell. The strength of the oral tradition in indigenous culture should have encouraged us to find those stories because they enrich the broad Australian experience. I think of Scandinavian museums I have visited where indigenous people have been included for well over 30 years. The rewards are greater than the individual experience, the nation's social history is shaped and understood by a wider group – an empowering experience and one which could be an important challenge for a museum.

Few museums have been founded with Georges Pompidou's vision of creating a multicultural institution with an interdisciplinary vocation. In a farsighted move, even the library was a part of the complex so the written word could be included. The narrative will be celebrated and integrated. This is a museum with a difference, a leader in its field, and its recent reopening after closing for 27 months for reorganisation and renovation will be watched with interest.

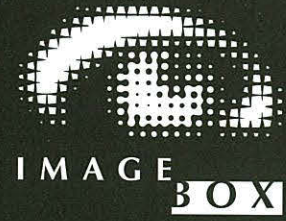
No article these days is complete without expressing a view about marketing, surely that is what gives a museum an edge. Well, there are many ways to market museums, and money helps, but we need to know what and why we are

marketing. The pursuit of visitor numbers is only one indicator. I am interested in the composition of the visitors and their experience. Do they want a museum to keep that sense of space to reflect and meditate? Is it important to be family friendly no matter where your family comes from? Will it tell your story and empower you to be a better citizen?

Watching the engagement of children at the 'BATS' exhibition at the Australian Museum recently reassured me of the magic of pure learning. Once experienced it could become a healthy addiction, surely a desirable outcome for growing citizens.

The governance of museums can offer leadership in the search for a more inclusive museum culture. Boards need to ask who are the current and future stakeholders and at the same time search for those who are excluded. They may have to change their own composition and better reflect the diversity of the society they serve.

Wendy McCarthy is currently Chancellor of the University of Canberra. She has assumed many major leadership roles in both the public and private sectors and has been an active change agent in women's health, education, broadcasting, conservation and heritage. She recently published a book on immigrant Australians, A Fair Go, Portraits of the Australian Dream. Wendy McCarthy finds it difficult to drive or walk past an open museum or gallery in case she misses the dream.



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Art Loans – Great Art Living Dangerously?

ANDREW T. KENYON

Do 'itinerant' art works need lawyers when they travel? Do museum professionals want to think about law? Museums and galleries lend art objects nationally and internationally. But the loans may occur in a village-like atmosphere. Art loans are a field

where trust counts for more than legal safeguards. In this world, things which are unique ... face formidable hazards. They may do so in conditions of extreme informality ... Lawyers may find, in this land of faith and goodwill, a beguiling innocence.¹

At the same time, lawyers may not be viewed sympathetically from within cultural institutions. More commonly, they are seen as producing overly legalistic work and lacking practical expertise. Not surprisingly, I would hope dialogue between lawyers and museum professionals can help change such perceptions and improve the practice of art loans.

Great Art Living Dangerously was a one day seminar that encouraged museum-law dialogue. The seminar addressed topical legal issues for loans, including anti-seizure statutes, holocaust-related art claims, indemnity schemes, inauthenticity, digitisation and copyright, and dispute resolution. More than 60 museum and gallery professionals and lawyers from eastern Australia and England attended the event in Melbourne during November 1999.

One topic raised in the seminar was the role of anti-seizure statutes. They have become a major legal question internationally. The statutes can protect an art work from legal action while it is on loan; for example, the work may be protected from a third party who wants to sue for possession of the work. The statutes exist in several jurisdictions in the United States, Canada and Europe. Anti-seizure statutes have been especially controversial since more claims have emerged to work removed from its owners in World War 2.

Australia does not have any specific legislation protecting works on loan in this way. Various legislation can be relevant, however, including these two Commonwealth Acts: the *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986 (PMCH Act)*

Do 'itinerant' art works need lawyers when they travel? Do museum professionals want to think about law?

and the *Foreign States Immunities Act 1985 (FSI Act)*.

The *PMCH Act* controls the export of art and heritage items from Australia. It also implements the 1970 Unesco Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Under section 14 of the *PMCH Act*, objects unlawfully exported from another country and imported into Australia are liable to forfeiture to the Australian government. Forfeiture, however, does not apply when work enters Australia for major exhibitions.

The *FSI Act* is not so commonly mentioned in relation to art loans, but it also can be significant. State or sovereign immunity is an old legal idea. It is now regulated under the *FSI Act*. The Act makes foreign states immune from suit in Australian courts for at least some of their actions. Local courts will be unable to hear claims relating to 'acts of state'. For commercial activities, however, courts will hear claims in the usual way. Thus, a standard style of commercial lease between an Australian property owner and a foreign state can be enforced in Australian courts.

What about art loans? Under the *FSI Act*, works lent to Australia by foreign states and national museums may be immune from suit in Australia. One question would be whether the exhibition objects could be classified legally as 'commercial property'. If the loans are commercial, the *FSI Act* would not prevent third parties suing to recover their property. It is probable, however, that many loans would not be regarded as commercial under the *FSI Act*. Thus the Act may operate as a type of anti-seizure statute and prevent third parties suing to establish they own art works. The whole area of loans and seizure may be a matter for specific legal advice and budget allocation. Currently, questions could arise most

obviously in relation to holocaust-related claims.

Many other topics were considered during Great Art Living Dangerously. Professor Norman Palmer from University College London gave a valuable address overviewing legal challenges. Australian lawyers including Shane Simpson and Dr Mark Williams and a wide range of museum professionals also added to the day. It is hoped that a sample of edited presentations will be available soon through the University of Melbourne website (www.unimelb.edu.au).

The seminar was organised by the Arts Law Centre of Australia, the Institute of Art and Law (Leicester) and the Australian Registrars' Committee. The Arts Law Centre of Australia (www.artslaw.com.au) is a national community legal centre, established through the Australia Council in 1983. Arts Law offers legal advice and referral throughout Australia, with significant pro-bono support from practising lawyers. Arts Law produces sample contracts, develops education programs, offers a national dispute mediation service, and takes an active part in law reform.

The Institute of Art and Law (www.institute-of-art-and-law.co.uk) pursues a policy of international education and debate on all aspects of law and material culture. This has included seminars in London such as Art, Law and the Holocaust. It sees Australia as an important destination for itinerant art, and as a source of innovative transactions in cultural exchange. The day also was supported by Melbourne's Immigration Museum and Hellenic Antiquities Museum through providing the venue, and by the enthusiastic contributions of many session chairs, speakers and audience members.

Andrew Kenyon is a member of the Faculty of Law, University of Melbourne, editor of the Media and Arts Law Review, and a director of the Arts Law Centre of Australia; a.kenyon@law.unimelb.edu.au

Reference

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Design as a Language: the language of designers

LYNDA KELLY AND DAVID PRIDDLE

Design has an integral role to play in facilitating the successful communication of museum intent and visitor impact. It is a subtle process. More than thoughtfully chosen objects or well written labels, design is responsible for constructing carefully planned experiences. Design, for all the effort and training it entails, is not always understood in either its conception or execution. It is not always an easy thing to get right as it requires solving many complex issues. Amongst the accepted obstacles of budgets, time restraints, space restraints and building requirements, communication within a cross-disciplinary team would seem a small matter. But it is an important issue.

An exhibition team of representatives from different disciplines needs to find ways to communicate issues important to the areas it represents. To do this there must be an attempt to understand each other's 'language'. The way decisions are made and the results judged will be affected by the different ways each discipline deals with complex issues and information. Exhibitions developed by multidisciplinary teams are usually the major way that a visitor interacts with, or experiences, a museum. This means there is an increased need for all members of a development team to share both a vision and a language for the interpretive experience.

It is also important to account for visitors' existing knowledge. Constructivist approaches to learning start with the learner. Individuals construct knowledge based on their prior knowledge, experiences and interests in some social context. The conceptual and physical design of the exhibit, incorporating content and interpretation, is the vehicle for visitor learning. To learn, we emphasise the *journey* rather than the destination. Design has a critical role in providing roadmaps and signposts for this journey. If the design isn't right, opportunities for visitor learning have been lost.

There is a vast literature on scholarship, curatorial issues, visitor research and museum education. Exhibition and museum design have been somewhat neglected. Researching these areas needs new approaches, new ideas and creative

**Designers wanted to know:
how can we evaluate feelings,
passion, emotion?**

**How do we find out reactions
to design elements of an
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**Are there different reactions
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different spaces?**

processes taken from a variety of disciplines and fields beyond the scope of traditional visitor and design studies.

To look at some of these questions a study was recently undertaken at the Australian Museum to fulfil two needs. Firstly, for the museum to find out the research questions in the areas of exhibition design and communication and, secondly, to contribute broadly to research in exhibition design and encourage debate. This project uncovered key issues identified by a range of designers and exhibition staff at the Australian Museum through in-depth interviews, interpretive analysis of data and debriefing/discussion sessions.

From the issues raised in the project, key themes were then identified for further research. The first was the role of design and architecture in museums - when should the influence of design in museum exhibitions begin, and how does design influence the total process?

Secondly, a theme was identified to look at the museum experience as an overall event rather than focusing solely on the built form and the content of stand-alone exhibits - how do people locate themselves in both the whole museum and in smaller exhibition spaces? Issues of circulation, orientation and wayfinding, attention spans and museum fatigue comprised the third theme.

Approaches to design from the past through to contemporary practice, and future possibilities was the fourth theme - how do these different approaches and

exhibit mediums affect learning? Linked to this were the integration of different approaches, techniques and ways to deliver information. Information technology was also an important theme, particularly directions in multimedia, web-based technologies and the Internet: what is the impact on exhibition design and the visitor?

The crux of the research focused on the theme of visitor research. Designers wanted to know: how can we evaluate feelings, passion, emotion? How do we find out reactions to design elements of an exhibition? Are there different reactions to the same exhibitions in different spaces?

The final, but critical, theme that emerged from the research was the links between design theory and learning theory: where do they cross, and how? And where do they diverge?

The task for us now is to turn answers to these questions into actions, learn from them and improve our processes. To do this we have identified the key projects we would like to pursue and how to implement these. A literature database has also been developed to allow exhibition and other museum staff to access up-to-date information about museum design and evaluation. This will become a living database which can be updated by anyone, anytime. It's a small start but one we will build on.

Learning a foreign language requires patience and diligence from each party involved. When the conversation is finally understood, the results are rewarding and learning happens.

Lynda Kelly is evaluation coordinator and David Priddle is a museum studies intern at the Australian Museum.

The Australian Museum Audience Research Centre is an initiative of the Australian Museum to facilitate and conduct research about museum communication and learning issues. We are looking for individuals and organisations interested in becoming involved in research projects. For further information contact Lynda Kelly, Evaluation Coordinator, Australian Museum, lyndak@austmus.gov.au or on (02) 9320 6413.

The Directors

Australia's museum directors are on the move. New faces are now heading many of our museums and galleries at national, state and regional level. In this issue *Museum National* begins an occasional series of profiles introducing the directors of Australia's national institutions and overviewing what they believe are the key issues facing museums today.

Challenging the 'Ho-Hum' Factor

**Professor Michael Archer,
Director, Australian Museum**



I took over the helm of the Australian Museum in January 1999 after former director of 22 years, Dr Des Griffin, retired. My interest in all things rocks, fossils, evolution, conservation and, of course, museums was sparked at age eleven when I prised out trilobites from glacial erratic boulders near my home town of Pine Plains, New York. I was ushered behind the scenes of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City to consult with a very patient invertebrate palaeontologist, Dr Norman Newall. I remember the sounds of my footfalls echoing in the vast corridors leading to his office, the thrilling 'clank' as Dr Newall opened the cabinets to show me prehistoric treasures I had only seen in pictures, and the delicious smells that wafted out of the museum's cabinets of fossils. For me, these visits were absolute magic and, more than any other thing in my childhood, determined the course of the rest of my life.

My museum career began formally in 1967, after I completed my BA in Geology and Biology at Princeton University, when I went to work at the WA Museum on two consecutive Fulbright Scholarships for palaeontological research. As curator of mammals at the Queensland Museum

(1972-78) I spent equal amounts of time on vertebrate palaeontology and modern mammalogy. My work on the major fossil discoveries at Riversleigh escalated from 1976, the year I completed my PhD. It became apparent that a much larger 'army' of co-researchers was needed and resulted in a shift (1978) to the University of New South Wales, where since 1989 I have been professor of biological science.

In 1999 I was also part of the exhibition project team developing 'Australia's Lost Kingdoms'. Compared to when I consulted on the Australian Museum's 'Australian Mammals' exhibition in the late 1970s, there have been many radical changes. And it is not just in this museum; all over the world museums have reflected on what they do and why, and have moved in innovative and creative directions. For example, exhibitions are now often developed by multi-disciplinary teams that acknowledge the importance of the knowledge and skills of staff across the institution. Another example is the exploration of new avenues for partnerships with corporate bodies and other institutions. Developing this exciting new exhibition has been a pleasurable learning experience, working with the museum's highly skilled staff, corporate partners, sponsors, animators and teams of palaeontologists from the University of New South Wales.

One of the major challenges facing museums is what I call the 'ho-hum factor'. This is the process whereby people are becoming increasingly desensitised as they are exposed to increasing amounts of information and experiences. In 1982 I watched gob-smacked as Darth Vader's gigantic starship cruised across the silver screen in *Star Wars* — yet a mere seventeen years later yawned uncontrollably at the special effects in *The Phantom Menace*. It will become increasingly more difficult for museums to engage and stimulate audiences. In order to engage, we need to be proactive, finding out how we can make our collections and information relevant to people's lives. We need to look to new ways to create personal memories through intense, experiential 'edutainment' and part of this may include rethinking the 'museum' in the physical

sense. Many of the museum redevelopments around Australia reflect these ideas to varying degrees. We are planning a radically different extension of the Australian Museum's city site and it aims to excel in all these areas.

Professor Michael Archer has been director of the Australian Museum since January 1999.

The Bite of the Real Thing Patricia Sabine, Director, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Finishing high school at the beginning of the sixties meant a career in teaching, nursing or commerce followed closely by marriage, children and the local tennis club! Opportunities to become architects or engineers, curators or designers were inconceivable, even to rebellious teenage girls.



A present in 1959, of a catalogue of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings from the Queen's Collection, was a revelation and even now I find my most passionate response is to exhibitions of drawing.

Visiting the 1960 exhibition of W. M. Turner's paintings from the Tate at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and, on the same day, at the Blake prize, seeing Stanislaus Rapotec's winning abstract expressionist work changed my life - I wanted to become a painter. The impact of the 'real thing' - that essence of the museum experience - had bitten.

After a NSW Education Department Teacher's Scholarship and during nine years teaching art in NSW and Tasmania, I also became involved in theatre design, filmmaking and art education politics.

Living in Tasmania in the early seventies were some wonderful gatekeepers to other 'ways of seeing': Jean Thomas (Daniel Thomas's mother); Bernice Murphy and Leon Paroissien, then lecturing at the Tasmanian School of Art. Bernice's monthly 'Forum' program brought speakers from around the world of the calibre of the Bizen potter Fujiwara, and curator of American

photography John Szarkowski. Ewa Pachucki had arrived from Poland, the Tasmanian Puppet Theatre was bringing Japanese directors to work with them and Nigel Triffit was 'test driving' some of his early experimental pieces.

My foray into museums began as the first art education officer seconded to TMAG in 1976, followed by a succession of museum related activities as education officer at the AGNSW; as executive assistant in the semi-commercial world of the short-lived Australian Art Exhibitions Corporation; and as exhibition co-ordinator for the Australian Gallery Director's Council. I oscillated between those fabulous opportunities of working with some of the world's most precious objects and the hard grind of administrative detail.

In 1980 I began a five year stint as senior exhibitions officer at the NGV.

I still draw value from that time of working with excellent curators, amongst some of the finest collections in the nation. Yet, having moved in and out of art museums across the country, neither can I forget the special meaning of outreach programs to people in Albany or Broken Hill, hungry for the cultural experiences taken for granted by those living in major cities.

Being out of the museum sector for seven years as manager of cultural development for the City of Melbourne, my appointment as director of the TMAG in 1992 highlighted the changes that had taken place in the museum sector. Survival in the face of economic rationalists – employment, intellectual freedom and accountability to society seemed the major pre-occupation. Reasserting the museum's value to an increasingly digital and virtual world and to the economy of the region continues as a major task.

The freedom to investigate and publish new discoveries, in both the natural world and in our understanding of our diverse pasts and products, the space to meditate or be enthused, all flow from the professionalism of those staff whose energy and intellects constitute that unique organism – the museum.

Our capacity as museums to be intimately linked into the society in which we exist, and to be able to contribute to the development and transformation of its core values is the subtle and vital clue to remaining 'a safe place for unsafe ideas'.

Patricia Sabine has been director of The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery since 1992.

No Turning Back

Alan R. Dodge, Director, Art Gallery of Western Australia



I have worked in the art museum world for 30 years, starting my career at the Portland Museum of Art (Portland, Maine, USA) in 1970 and, more recently, 21 years in a number of roles at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. I completed a BA in Fine Arts at the University of Maine (Orono) and a Masters Degree at Dartmouth College (Hanover, New Hampshire, USA).

It was a visit to my city's local art museum, when I was fourteen years old, which really changed my life. The Portland Museum of Art was a small art museum. Its collections included American paintings and sculptures from Gilbert Stuart to Andrew Wyeth, and the museum was presided over by the Portland cognoscenti. However, during a brief period in the early 1960s the museum was blessed with the presence of an inspired curator named John Pentcost, who brought some of the finest contemporary art exhibitions to Portland. On crossing the museum's forbidding threshold, I was confronted by the most bewildering paintings by two contemporary Italian artists: Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana. Burri's paintings looked exquisitely abstract, Fontana's works bore his hallmark slashing and stabbing. Nothing in my experience prepared me to understand these works as paintings and yet I was intrigued. The works stayed with me and irritated me to the point that I had to see more. From that moment on there was no turning back – I had to work with art in some way.

After a stint in the Navy, I returned to the Portland Museum of Art to assist the new director. The young director, John Holverson, had vision, he was strongly motivated, but most of all he had passion for art and for collecting. The Portland Museum of Art has not looked back from the kick start he gave it over the 1970s and 80s. He inspired me by his example.

Within a year I moved to Washington, D.C. I slept on a friend's floor for over

three months while I went twice weekly to the National Gallery and asked if they had a job for me. In the meantime I loaded and delivered hosiery displays, counted traffic for proposed petrol stations and did day work in warehouses. Persistence paid off and I was hired to work in the education department.

My career in art museums has spanned the time from when they were quiet and often empty cathedrals of contemplation, to today's vital institutions providing primary experience of the manifestation of ideas in visual form. When I arrived in Australia in 1974, there were still directors of major art galleries who were practising artists; the concept of art museum professionals was still relatively new. The emergence of the Australian National Gallery (now the National Gallery of Australia) was to accelerate change in Australia. Australia can now proudly claim to have the highest standards of professional expertise and networks all around the world.

I have participated in the movement from static collections, which were hardly ever changed, to the period of spectacular exhibitions drawing huge crowds. The era of the blockbuster as we knew it has come and gone. Although we still try to have dynamic exhibition programs, the excitement and response to major exhibitions is no longer assured. All museums are being forced to rethink how they make their material relevant and interesting to a public with increasingly pluralistic interests, and an exploding range of media competing for those interests. Attendance to pay exhibitions is dropping nationwide, while interest in gallery visits and the demand for events and services continues to grow. As a result there is great strain on the resources of museums and galleries at a time when economic rationalism has cut into their capabilities to satisfy a complex range of expectations which are not self-sustaining financially.

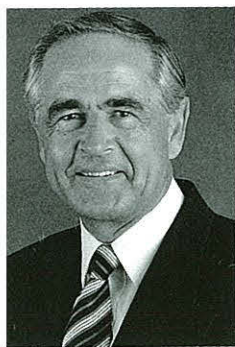
For the AGWA there are many challenges. We have completed a six-year period in which funding for the gallery's operations and maintenance has remained at best static. The 'new' gallery building is now 21 years old and needs major maintenance. It has been general policy to remove more and more responsibility from the government to fund museums and to expect the community to provide support. As a result many museums, theatre companies and academic institu-

tions are looking to a shrinking pool of sponsorship and fundraising opportunities. At the same time, issues of 'productivity' require that institutions become more efficient, which is welcomed, but the bottom line is 'lose staff'. The result is, I believe, a funding crisis for many museums and institutions which was brought home by the recent *Nugent Report* in the parallel area of performing arts.

Art galleries and museums must think smarter to survive. However, as we have learned at the AGWA, vision is not enough; it requires major investment. Recently, the AGWA launched a capital campaign to raise \$16 million in funds to build a Living Centre for Australia and the Indian Ocean Rim within the gallery precinct. The project proposes to provide cultural underpinning for diplomatic, trade and other initiatives in the area. But it takes generous public and government support to make such visions happen so that such an attraction can pay back by helping an area like Western Australia and Perth to be an important centre of vibrant and relevant activity to the larger community. It is a major challenge to see such a project come together in the present atmosphere, but I still believe that with persistence and imagination, anything is possible.

Alan Dodge has been director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia since January 1997.

Settle Only for the Best Major General Steve Gower AO, Director, Australian War Memorial



I was appointed director of the AWM without previously working in a cultural institution. Of course, this attracted some criticism at the time, particularly as the memorial was just emerging from a troubled and unsettled period.

Looking back, the controversy was rather amusing in its narrowness and insularity. It is not time spent in an institution that is important, but the range of skills and experiences possessed. Above all a director must be able to build, lead

and inspire a team of people who themselves have the many and different skills necessary to run a museum successfully. A director must also have the passion and skills to represent the institution externally.

The issue of relevance is of central importance to all in the museum sector.

I have a First Class Honours and Masters Degree in Mechanical Engineering, not the obvious tertiary background for a cultural institution, unless a science museum. However, over the years I gained project management experience which has been invaluable during the memorial's major renewal program. In high level Defence appointments I gained experience in important public sector management issues, particularly public information, outsourcing, training and workplace diversity.

That aside, I have always had a long-term interest in cultural institutions. I had written a book on military history (published earlier by the AWM) and when the position of director was advertised I was quick to register my interest. As a Vietnam veteran, I had followed the fortunes and development of the AWM over the years. It is an institution for which I have enormous respect.

I became director at the start of a period of major change, not only the gallery redevelopment program, but also other exciting initiatives, such as the development of a sculpture garden and a very much expanded travelling exhibitions program. With funding obtained for a new 3,000sqm exhibition hall (ANZAC Hall) and with work well advanced on new exhibitions in Aircraft Hall, the changes continue. I feel very fortunate to be at the memorial at such a challenging time, and it is both stimulating and satisfying to work with such a committed and capable staff.

The gallery redevelopment program has been the major highlight of my time as director, particularly the new Orientation Gallery. Orientation is traditionally not handled well – at least from my observation of many overseas institutions. We had

great trouble in creating a design that would be dramatic, but welcoming, convey key messages and then encourage visitors to circulate to the galleries of their choice. Designer Lucy Bannyan provided the answer and the result is a stunning glass mosaic wall that features a montage of uniforms and personal items, and culminates in a sequence of digitised graphics that brings alive an original Gallipoli landing boat.

Why did it have an impact on me? Apart from the splendid outcome, it reaffirmed my belief that you should always back your judgment (as shaped by your key advisers) and not settle for anything but the best – and that takes a lot of effort, commitment and creative interaction.

Multimedia applications are having a major effect on museums in terms of presentation techniques, the layering of information and the provision of 'experiences'. But I believe enhanced access from the Internet has been the major change in recent years. From a limited and ordinary site a few years ago, we now have a site that hosts over 200,000 photographic images, virtual displays and a wealth of information. The hit rate is phenomenal. We initially won the AFR/Telstra award for the best government site and were finalists again this year.

The major challenge for us is to ensure the memorial's continued relevance to all Australians, and this has driven our renewal program. Our visitor profile, unlike popular belief, is not elderly or skewed in gender balance, but is the normal cross-section of Australian society. We are placing great emphasis on communicating with our visitors, particularly the young, as the AWM represents their heritage. Many of the defining moments in Australian history have sadly been influenced by war.

The issue of relevance is of central importance to all in the museum sector. Without relevance, visitation will contract, and so will revenues for appropriation, entrance fees and commercial ventures. To prosper, museums must demonstrate their continued relevance to a broad base of the community and communicate effectively using the range of techniques now available. This is a challenge to be seized.

Major General Steve Gower has been director of the Australian War Memorial since March 1996.

Conservation vs Commercialism

Third National Remote Area Museums Conference, Tennant Creek, September 1999

JANEY DOLAN

The third National Remote Area Museums Conference focused on the theme Conservation vs Commercialism to show that they need not be mutually exclusive goals for cultural industries. Convenor Joanna Seczkowski must be congratulated for pulling off the near impossible – a museum conference that stuck to its theme! It got right down to business, addressing issues of local and global significance.

There was inevitably much discussion about mining, mining heritage and the often contradictory roles of mining companies in the preservation and destruction of social and environmental heritage. These issues were played out with the help of papers presented from the perspectives of ERA Ranger Mine and Dr Robin McLachlan, of Charles Sturt University, discussing the management of the Ophir Gold Field in NSW. Other difficult issues relating to museums and community histories were considered by Brett Galt-Smith, from the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs, and Mickey Dewar, of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory. Issues of commercial via-

bility in line with cultural sensitivity were discussed from quite different perspectives by Stephanie Hawkins and Gary Deacon.

The questions 'what is remote?' and 'what is isolation?' were keenly discussed, with the general conclusion that both are real factors of time and space, but are often unnecessarily rendered negative by external bodies. The overwhelming atmosphere of the conference was about moving forward positively. Out of these discussions also came the realisation that a strong network is one of the greatest needs of remote area museum people, who came from as far afield as Antarctica and Mount Isa. At a forum session the group resolved to maintain this network and to use it to continue to benefit the remote area museum sector.

It was great to see so many professional development opportunities. Workshops were available on several of the recent resource initiatives for museums: *reCollections*, *Cultural Tourism Best Practice*, *Significance Assessment*, AMOL and the digitisation of collections, the role of volunteers and the application of the *Burra Charter*.

The fun social atmosphere of the group made networking strong and easy. Being a small group in a small town full of incredibly hospitable locals meant that participants got to know each other in a way not often possible at larger conferences. A not-unrelated and impressive element was the food! There was lively after-dinner dancing on the final night, preceded by the most unusual game of lawn bowls I have ever played. Further entertainment was provided by local storytellers, bush poetry, a cynical hypothetical session, and a rather unusual dinner speech on the history of underwear, provided by one of Cobar's great performers, Kay Palmer.

This National Remote Area Museums Conference was the most rewarding and stimulating event I have attended in recent times. Congratulations to the RAM network, DoCITA, Battery Hill Mining Centre and the community of Tennant Creek!

Janey Dolan is branch coordinator of Museums Australia (WA).

Watching for Vultures that Perch in Trees and Other Cautionary Tales

The International Committee for Exhibition Exchange (ICEE) annual meeting, Montréal, Canada, September 1999.

DERINA MCLAUGHLIN

Pragmatists from across the museum industry – art galleries, science centres, museums and related commercial industries – gathered to discuss The Languages of Exhibitions at the ICEE annual meeting last September.

Re-thinking Definitions of Temporary

The opening presentation by Julian Spalding, research fellow at the National-

museet in Copenhagen, was lively and stimulating. Julian discussed his analogy that incoming temporary touring exhibitions are like a vulture sitting on a tree: they take all of the attention so that for the passer-by the tree and all of its branches are no longer noticed. No-one argued back with the counter-thesis that large temporary shows draw crowds who then stop to enjoy permanent collections, thus giving permanent objects more exposure.

Julian challenged institutional thinking, extending the concept of the temporary exhibition: permanent exhibitions, he ventured, are really just long-term temporary displays. All exhibitions could be visualised as two wheels, merely turning at different speeds. It is about money and time, and how they are prioritised between these apparent competing wheels.

Julian summarised the basic mission of museums in one phrase: to 'use collections

to increase understanding'. They do this by 'restoring wonder'. So, how does the new language and culture of touring exhibitions fit within the mission framework? The biological analogy presented was that museums should be 'inhaling' public opinion, research and societal changes, and treating temporary touring displays as 'superficial exhaling' which could, however, be incorporated into the overall exhibition planning strategy to explore new audiences. Staff who have set up five or six major incoming exhibitions a year, while also juggling other tasks, might think the term 'superficial' under-rates their role in bringing diversity and wonders of different kinds to new audiences. Perhaps 'superficial' should be deleted from this description, and all exhibitions should be seen as a necessary part of the 'exhaling' process?

How much text is too much?

Andrée Blais, head of program exhibitions at the McCord Museum in Montréal, suggested minimising exhibition text so that recreational visitors and those who equate reading with work do not suffer museum fatigue. However, as 80 per cent of visitors may read some text, it remains a precious interpretive aid. Andrée discussed the idea of text as a menu to navigate an exhibition, in much the same way as one navigates a CD-ROM or website. Some thought that numbers were all that were needed to identify objects. Visitors could then use those numbers to identify the object in a catalogue. However, if large volumes of text are felt necessary, they could be made optional. Additional text could be electronically downloaded from exhibits, to be printed and read later; large amounts of text could also be carefully concealed in the display design and revealed only to those who want to do more than stroll or browse. As people discussed their cross-cultural work, it also became apparent that the choice of text can have a political context. Any exhibition is really just one part of a story and the knowledge displayed is relative to the set of prevailing beliefs related to both the timeline of historic passage and the community from which it comes.

International Manual

Jan Crocker, manager of temporary exhibits at the Museum of Science in Boston, and Mariea Fisher, manager of temporary exhibitions at the National



International Committee for Exhibition Exchange board meeting, Montreal, September 1999. Present from left to right: Chairman Milton Bloch (USA), Jette Sandahl (Denmark), Derina McLaughlin (Australia), Alexander Basin (Slovenia), Anne Gosett (USA), Sandra Lorimer (Canada), Betty Teller (USA).

Maritime Museum in Sydney, shared their current work on an international tour manual. The manual will provide concise checklists to help those contemplating touring exhibitions over international borders.

Translating Science

Further discussions highlighted the differences between translation and adaptation. An interesting paper by Nathalie Duzuzeau, head of the international co-operation department at Cité des Sciences et de l'industrie in Paris, described touring exhibition encounters with Africa, Greece and Asia. Nathalie deconstructed the hypothesis that touring science exhibitions could be considered easier because 'scientific information is shared all the time by scientists, and there is a universal language for science and math?' La Cité took on the task of translating into Japanese an interactive display based on the French children's game *Rooster and Donkey*, which is based on the use of alliteration. It took a mathematician and a specialist in classic Japanese poetry to achieve a Japanese translation.

Helène Bernier, director, service des expositions thématique, Musée de la Civilisation in Québec, discussed the millennium project being worked on by a team of museums throughout the globe, including the Powerhouse in Sydney. It is described as a symbolic electronic collection that will illustrate key events and ideas at the end of the millennium, hypothetically meant for our descendants in the year 3000.

Tools for the New Millennium

The ICEE meeting was attended by people from a diverse range of cultural professions and countries, which helped in discussions about various museum practices. The differences we were encountering when examining possible standard operating procedures for international touring of exhibitions were often those of culture, cultural perceptions and communication. Whether you have a good contract or not, it was felt that exhibition tours are achieved through relationships founded on trust between the parties involved.

ICEE will continue to build tools that can be sourced and utilised internationally to assist people organising exhibition tours. These will be published in book format and on the ICEE website.

Conference hosts included some of the major museums of Montréal: the Biôdome, the Montréal Botanic Garden and Point À Callière, who provided excellent venues. Also thanks to staff at the Canadian Center for Architecture, The Museum for Contemporary Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, the McCord Museum of Canadian History and the Interactive Science Center. Special thanks to Johanne Landry, Conseillère en Muséologie Ville de Montréal.

Derina McLaughlin is manager of travelling exhibitions and international programs at Questacon, The National Science and Technology Centre, Canberra. dmclaughlin@questacon.edu.au

Art Crime: Protecting Art, Protecting Artists and Protecting Consumers

Australian Institute of Criminology, Sydney, December 1999

Art Crime, the first conference of its kind in Australia, attracted a diverse audience of artists, dealers, valuers, criminologists, lawyers, public servants, police, security experts and, from the museum trade, a gaggle of registrars, conservators and curators. Some 20 per cent of participants also gave papers, amounting to a very substantial measure of practitioner input. Of them all, the criminologists were the odd persons out, everyone else knowing several of the other groups. At the same time, the criminologists gave structured perspectives that were perhaps the most original ideas to the ears of museum people.

Robyn Sloggett, of the Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre at the University of Melbourne, was a major contributor to two sessions on fakes and frauds. They were augmented with tales from the mineface of dealers' and fraud investigators' experiences, reminding listeners that unless fakes are physically destroyed when identified, they survive to contaminate the market.

A raft of systematic responses to cultural property crimes was presented, showing that consistent records are central to managing the situation. Speakers referred to Interpol's register of stolen artwork; the National Fraud Database presently being developed by the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, which can include cultural property events; and the Art Loss Register, a commercial operation in the UK, US, Germany and Russia. The ALR sweeps the sale catalogues of a multitude of auction houses for matches against stolen items reported by owners and insurers, locating numerous pieces. Museums and collectors can also check prospective purchases with the ALR, an action fast becoming evidence of the test of 'due diligence' in bona fide buying.

Here the focus of the conference shifted to the illegal export of cultural property. Neil Brodie, of the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre at Cambridge, gave a devastating slide show of dismembered and decapitated Asian temple sculpture. Linda

Young of the University of Canberra discussed Australia's Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act, presenting the difference between the art/antiquities sphere of attention and the illegal export of antipodean heritage such as fossils and historic machinery.

Education rather than proscription as the solution to destructive practices was the topic of DCITA-staffer Damian Stevens' presentation on Aboriginal art. Further contributions reflected on questions of the 'authenticity' of indigenous art, its expression as intellectual property, and the role of Aboriginal art centres as facilitators and marketers.

What did the conference achieve? The issues raised probably opened the eyes of criminologists more than of museum people. Yet museum people have never met to share experiences and to update on the technology and risk management aspects of cultural property crime. It is now timely to introduce them to MA conferences.

Beyond the Future: APT3 Conference

Queensland Art Gallery and Brisbane Exhibition and Conference Centre, September 1999

PENELOPE AITKEN

One of the most compelling features of the Asia Pacific Triennial is its energy. With 3000 people at the triennial's 1999 opening at the Queensland Art Gallery in September, and 700 of them staying on for the conference, Beyond the Future, it could be argued that such a buzz is as naturally occurring as mice in a wheat silo. What brings so many people to Brisbane for an exhibition like this? The reputation of the two previous exhibitions is one answer, the lure of a conference with so many speakers of international standing is another, as are the networking opportuni-

ties. A third answer is that behind the scenes, in the years between shows, the processes of selection create their own energy.

Art is chosen for the APT by teams of selectors. Each team includes advisors from the countries represented and there are many curatorial voices involved. The 77 artists represented in APT3 (aside from the 100 or so other collaborating artists) were selected by no less than 64 curators. This ratio has had its critics although it is difficult to understand why such a plurality of vision should be condemned.

Still more voices are represented in essay form in the catalogue and as speakers at the conference. Such a collaborative model engenders a sense of ownership among many people.

Issues raised at the conference ranged from identity politics, globalisation, renegotiating traditions, multimedia and screen culture, censorship, street art and more. One early paper by Filipina commentator, Marion Pastor Roces, set the scene for much of the conference. She used the example of an Ifugao artefact from North Luzon, shown at one of the

European World Fairs last century. Pastor Roces, known for her critique of the role of museums in collecting and therefore isolating relics from their original contexts, contended that this object was not authentic in the way it was assumed to be. It was from the area as claimed, and doubtless made by an Ifugao craftsman, however, the scale of the object was that of a maquette suggesting it had been commissioned by the collector specifically for the fair. Thus, the only truthful definition of the object was that it was an authentic example of nineteenth century Ifugao expo art. This story, transported one hundred years to APT3, today's world expo equivalent, has interesting implications. There are people in the region who assert that a certain type of art is chosen for exhibition in the West. Painters who suddenly develop installation-based prac-

tices are sometimes viewed suspiciously as aspirants to the international expo art circuit. Pastor Roces' point was not to dismiss artists who are able to address different audiences at home and abroad but to point out that the phenomenon exists. As a new genre 'expo art', which could also incorporate 'tourist art', as was later discussed by Queensland-based artist and writer Pat Hoffie, is as interesting a study as any other.

Many papers called for new directions and strategies for the future. Again, credit is due to the organisers for allowing these discussions within the framework of the conference and it is commendable that recommendations from the last two conferences had been incorporated into this one, and the exhibition itself.

The art at APT is often political, personal and raw: it tends to be art about life,

not about art. Whether or not its presentation has been altered to suit an international audience is not as important as the makers' conviction that the issues they discuss in their works are genuine. Besides, the great number of curatorial voices guarantees a diversity appropriate to the scale of the project. Similarly, presenters at the conference are equally diverse, coming from places as far apart culturally and geographically as Pakistan and Paris. Being in the midst of such work and such discussion is an invigorating experience.

Penelope Aitken is an artist and visual arts project manager at The Asialink Centre, University of Melbourne.

(Please see page 25 for a review of the APT exhibition.)

Museums Australia

Women's Policy Guidelines for Museum Programs and Practice

The Museums Australia Women's Policy Guidelines for Museum Programs and Practice is published as an insert in this issue of *Museum National*.

The original draft of the policy was written several years ago by some of the members of the Women in Museums Special Interest Group. The authors based their writings on their own observations and experiences. Since that time, the policy has been revised and circulated again to women in the SIG.

In June last year the draft policy was also circulated to members of Museums Australia's national council. Their comments and suggestions have been incorporated into the present policy, which will be further revised by the SIG every five years or so, as circumstances change.

For information about the policy contact Judith McKay, convenor of the Women in Museums Special Interest Group, on (07) 3840 7685.



Beattie Dawson, Queensland state representative in basketball, cricket and cricko in the 1930s-40s is one of the women represented in a Queensland Museum research project, *Women in Sport*. Bruce Cowell Photograph, 1998, Queensland Museum.

Painting the Land Story

Geraldton Regional Art Gallery until 26 March, then Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, Adelaide, May–July

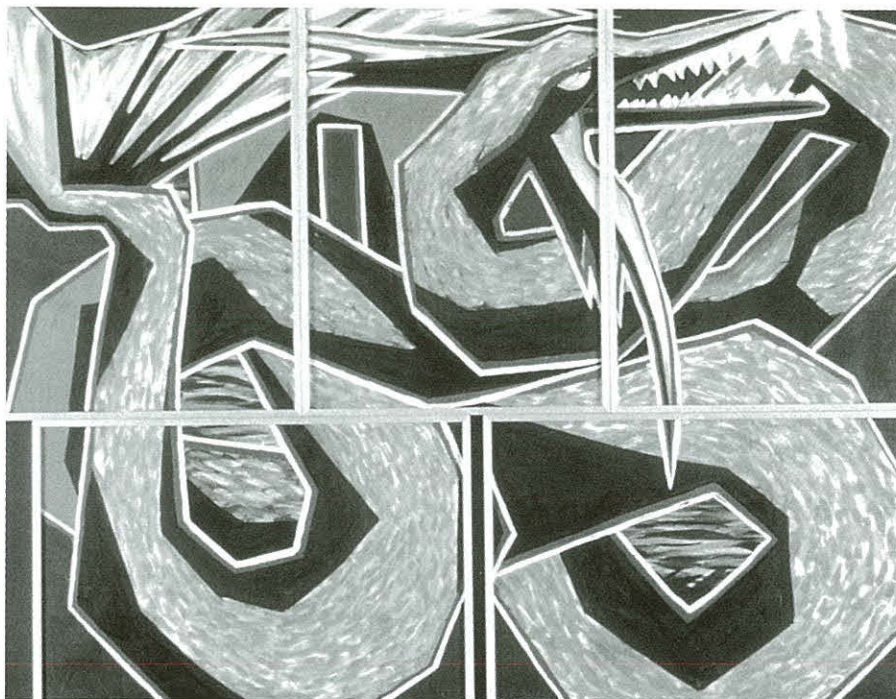
Painting the Land Story, edited by Luke Taylor, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 1999

Art helps to create identity in many cultures. 'In Australia the production of art binds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people together and to their world,' writes Luke Taylor, curator of 'Painting the Land Story' and editor of the accompanying book. This is an exhibition *about* art, rather than merely a display of art. The works on show contain specific meanings about the land they depict, and the meanings are interpreted as a way of owning and caring for the land, and hence its people.

The phrase 'painting the land story' is Wandjuk Marika's description of her motivation for painting. The exhibition presents the act of painting, whatever the medium, as a means of asserting identity through tracing a landscape — a self-defining experience that reaches into the spiritual dimension.

It's a message that has appeared in the catalogues and sometimes the labels of several of the more thoughtful art museum exhibitions of Aboriginal art. But 'Painting the Land Story' takes it several steps further by showing how 'painting the land' is an authentic practice that continues to be transmitted through the generations, across a diverse cultural geography, and with evolving as well as traditional forms.

For example, the show displays mask-like faces painted on board from Warmun, WA, produced by Paddy Jaminji about 1978. The designs represent a cast of characters seen by artist Rover Thomas in a vision of his country through the eye of a relative who died in an air ambulance en route to hospital, and translated by him into a cycle of song and dance in which the images were carried. The landscape the ceremony commemorates is presented as both the collective dreaming of people of the Kimberley region and the impact of Cyclone Tracey which also swept over that land, high as an airplane and drastic as death. The Western eye for abstraction reads these images as attractively bold and spirited. Knowing more about the culture that produced them sends the experience beyond aesthetics.



Jeffrey Samuels, Sydney, NSW. *Strength*, series of five paintings, acrylic on canvas, from the exhibition *Painting the Land Story*. Photo by Matt Kelso.

A different case of a similar dimension comes with a group of eastern Arnhem Land bark paintings by three generations of the Manggalili clan. Each generation paints stories of Possums, the Guwak bird (a koel) and the Milky Way, all of which relate to their lands at Djarrakpi. Likewise, a selection of different artists' barks from Kunballanjnja, NT, in western Arnhem Land, traces a typology of representations of Ngalyod, the rainbow serpent, each stressing aspects of this germinal character. One shows Ngalyod's creative potential as its body turns into landscape feature; another contains within its body the embryos of contemporary clan groups. But Ngalyod also represents destructive power, seen in its swallowing up other figures.

The dynamic changes in media that evidence the strength of traditional indigenous culture appear most brilliantly in a collection of silk batik prints from Ernabella, NT. The National Museum acquired the collection of Win Hilliard, crafts adviser there from 1954-86; she taught many techniques to Ernabella women, but batik was the one to which they responded most strongly. Over the years they developed a characteristic gentle, flowing imagery, community-based within mission society rather than inspired by the ancestors. Yet they still express connection with the land, identifying particular places and events.

'Painting the Land Story' is a beautiful and enlightening exhibition, but it is not always comfortable. Many images in the section on urban art confront issues of social injustice with which indigenous people cope daily. They demonstrate that Aborigines continue to express themselves through art in whatever media are available. No-one said the exploration of identity through art is easy.

Linda Young, *History*, RISSS, Australian National University.

Beyond the Future: Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art

Queensland Art Gallery,
9 September 1999 – 26 January 2000

It is refreshing to see hordes of people clamouring to get a glimpse of contemporary art. Usually it is the blockbuster exhibitions of yesteryear which attract such a crowd, but the opening night of the Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT3) at the Queensland Art Gallery was such an event. Visitors came not just from Australia but from all over the world. If this can be seen as a measure of success then the APT3 certainly filled the bill.

The APT3 is more a cultural event than a static display. It includes artworks from 20 countries and regions by more than 77

artists. Many travelled to Brisbane to participate in the opening events, including performances, artists' talks, cinema program and three day conference.

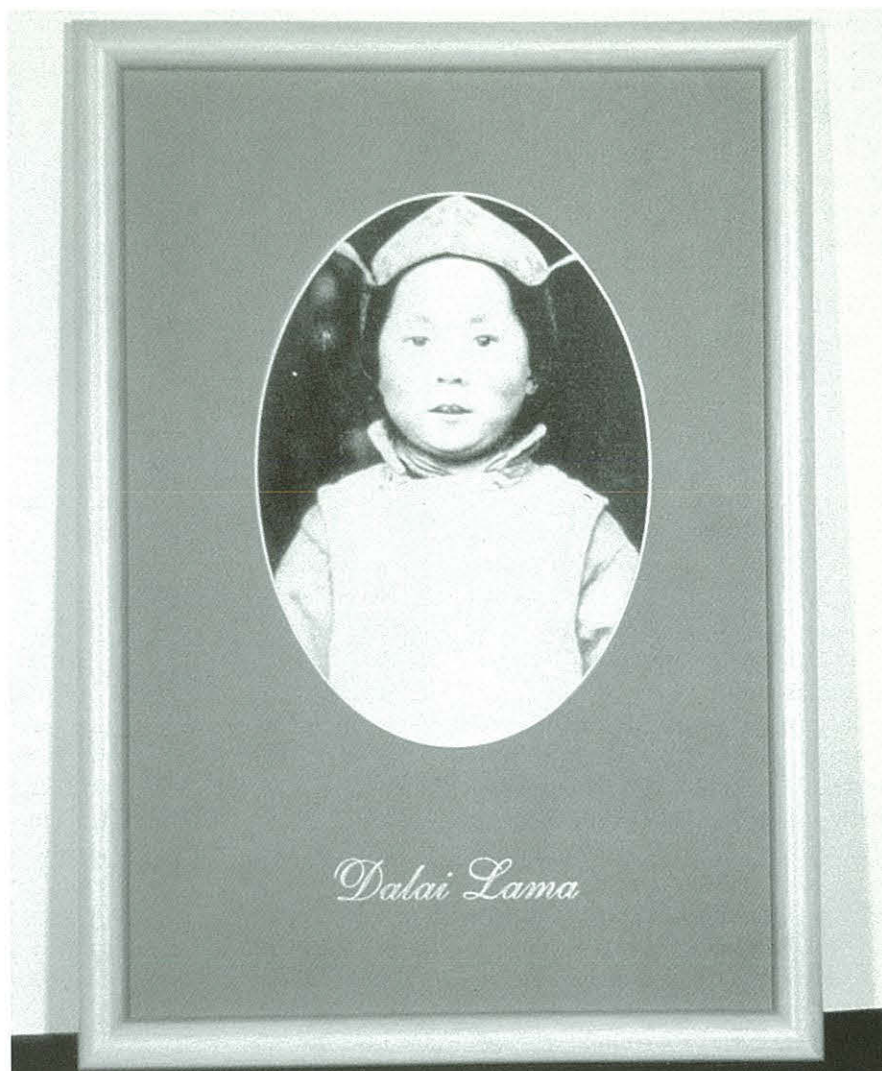
Many of the artists extended their stay in Australia to participate in the extensive visitor outreach program coordinated by the QAG. More than 50 art organisations, galleries and universities around Australia were involved.

An installation by Chinese artist Cai Guo Qiang dominates the downstairs gallery, consisting of an enormous bamboo bridge spanning the water mall and sprinkling water on those who cross at its midpoint. The work 'metaphorically allows viewers to cross into the future [as] it leads away from a symbol of conflict and sorrow of the 20th century. Visitors may ponder whether the next millennium will see history repeated or transposed.'

This quote provides welcome plain-language inroads to understanding the artist's intent. In fact, I believe part of the success of the triennial has a lot to do with appropriate labelling and texts accompanying the works, operating on a number of levels. For those who want a purely visual experience, the works are labelled discreetly with a minimum of information. Extended label texts do not dominate the space. Room brochures can be borrowed for those who simply want to know a bit more. There is a substantial catalogue for sale in the bookshop, with scholarly essays about each of the artist's work and background. The catalogue also offers information on the very complex curatorial processes of the triennial.

As part of KidsAPT — designed to attract a new audience from those of previous years — labels with the APT dragon logo mark works of interest to a younger audience. The labels are at an appropriate level for children to read themselves and include questions that provide greater insights into the works. There is also a dedicated area of the gallery to provide children with an opportunity to participate in artist-designed activities and to make their own artworks from bridge making to calligraphy to interactive computer works.

The triennial is an uplifting experience, quirky at times. One of my favourite pieces is the work by Mali Wu from Taiwan *The Sweeties 1999* — ironic childhood portraits of world heavyweights such as Adolf Hitler, Jean Paul Sartre and even Wayne Goss. Another intriguing



Mali WU. *The Sweeties 1999*. Installation comprising mixed media. Collection: the artist.

work by Japanese artist Tatsuo Miyajima uses LED-powered toy cars to communicate a message on time and space.

Many of the artists' works reflect the complex political and economic problems in their home countries. Indonesian Dadang Christanto's work comprises 47 burnt papier-mâché effigies *Fire in May 1998*, a confronting piece reflecting the turmoil which is unfolding in East Timor at the present time. Similarly Moelyono's *Animal sacrifice of Orde Batu (Stone Order) 1965-99* offers up a burnt out car on a pedestal; it is equally disturbing.

The exhibition is a huge undertaking, occupying 80 per cent of the QAG display space. Most of the works are large scale. As a result, the audience becomes participant in the exhibition, reinforced by the various interactive displays and devices within the space and thus maximising the experience.

If you cannot visit the exhibition in person, check out the Virtual Triennial

located at www.ap3.net. It features information about the exhibition and work by artists who use the Internet to create and present their work. There are also images from some of the performances.

Brenda Runnegar is member services officer, Museums Australia (Queensland).

reCollections: Caring for Collections Across Australia

Heritage Collections Council, Canberra, 1998

In *reCollections*, institutions responsible for the care of collections have a particularly valuable aid to guide them in their work. This will be an important and welcome addition to museum libraries and of special use to community museums. It sits well alongside recent conservation publications such as the WA Museum's *Conservation and Care of*

Collections, industry benchmark documents such as Museums Australia's *Caring For Our Culture* and other significant Heritage Collections Council initiatives such as AMOL.

It is an extensive package, attractively presented in seven coil-bound volumes housed in a sturdy magazine holder and slip case. The volumes *Damage and Decay*, and *Handling, Transportation, Storage and Display*, offer practical advice on preventative conservation. Two volumes, *Caring For Cultural Material 1 and 2*, provide more specific information on the care of items made from particular materials such as leather and wood, or the conservation of common types of items such as photographs or books. *Managing Collections* and *Managing People*, plus a glossary make up the final volumes.

The package is written by 'many of Australia's most experienced conservators' and designed 'for use principally by non-conservators'. It is a challenging task for professionals, often employed in comparatively well-resourced larger institutions, to write for an audience that is largely voluntary and working in often under-resourced smaller institutions. In the main they meet this challenge successfully with appropriate format, style of writing and content.

The presentation of the package in its multi-volume format rather than a single bulky tome is non-threatening and approachable, making the likelihood of its use greater. Within this format, chapters are clearly and logically presented in sections, featuring bold headings and sub-headings and short texts followed by series of dot points. Topics requiring special elaboration and points of caution are clearly highlighted. Collectively, the format allows the reader to obtain information in digestible portions without having to read through extensive text. Photographs and illustrations are clear and relevant. Self-evaluation quizzes and lists of further readings allow readers to reflect on the main points and research a topic further if desired.

A minor criticism of the format is that the volumes are not numbered. Numbering would make reference to a particular volume easier but, more importantly, would suggest a logical reading order especially for someone approaching the field for the first time. However, perhaps the main criticism of the format from a user's perspective is that it omits an index. On the other hand, the extensive

glossary is a useful tool and a considerable aid to understanding.

Overall, the chapters are well written in a style neither overly technical nor patronising. The key volume on damage and decay, for example, provides a clear summary of the key factors of collection deterioration and how to combat them, without being shrouded in scientific terms. Indeed the two preventative conservation volumes *Damage and Decay*, and *Handling, Transportation, Storage and Display* are excellent. Both contain a wealth of clearly presented, practical information that could readily be used as the basis for preventative conservation programs. The sections relating to handling and biological pests are particularly noteworthy.

Nevertheless, a weakness of these volumes and the overall package is the inadequate coverage of storage, specially in comparison with the more thorough treatment of topics possibly less important to the needs of community museums, such as the transportation of objects. The chapter 'Storage and Display' provides general principles, such as appropriate environment and siting for storage areas, and brief mention of suitable storage materials. Specific information relating to storing particular types of items is provided in the *Caring For Cultural Materials* volumes. Thus there are excellent sections on the storage of photographs, books, paper etc. It is important and appropriate information. However, while many items of these types are held by community museums and many of the principles described can be applied, more practical information is needed on affordable storage systems to accommodate the collections typically held by these institutions.

In particular, greater examination of storage systems and furniture is needed. This could include more on the advantages/disadvantages and relative uses of different systems (wooden shelving, prefabricated steel shelving systems, slotted angle iron etc). It could examine, for example, the various applications of affordable steel shelving that can be readily purchased, or the use of tray storage systems for small items. Similarly, while many excellent examples of containers are discussed, they tend to be very particular or, as in the case of solander boxes, beyond the means of many community museums. Information is needed on affordable, generalised storage containers for a variety of objects. Other

important issues that could be covered include the benefits and pitfalls of compactus and the design and maintenance of storage areas.

A positive feature of *reCollections* is recognition that the care of collections extends well beyond what is typically thought of as 'conservation'. This is evident in the two volumes devoted to the management of collections and people. The development and implementation of policies, planning and budgeting, counter-disaster planning, skills assessment, the management of volunteers and other topics included in these volumes all impact on the care of collections. However, it is surprising that with the exception of condition reporting, little reference is made to the importance of documentation to the care of collections. Furthermore, the rationale for including these two volumes, tucked away on p.4 of *Managing Collections*, is not given enough prominence. The care of collections in local museums is best provided by an integrated approach that includes all aspects of collections management, of which 'conservation' is a part.

The *Managing Collections* volume refers to the assessment of the significance of objects. While the content is appropriate and most points are well made, it is puzzling as to why no reference is made to the HCC's important work in this area. Indeed, while there is nothing wrong with the South Australian History Trust model for assessing significance, it may, if the recent HCC significance workshops are any indication, end up differing from the HCC's preferred model.

The two volumes concerned with the care of common types of cultural material are an absolute mine of useful information in community museums. A very pleasing feature of these and other volumes is the deliberate provision of information on the care of items in different climatic regions. Similarly, the adoption of a preventative approach rather than interventionist approach to conservation is another positive feature.

Treatments are outlined in some sections. However, they are firmly placed in a preventative context and suitable warnings to consult a conservator if in doubt are given in the introduction, the beginning of each chapter (in bold!) and throughout the text. The cautionary note on the use of the lubrication of leather is a good example of this approach. Words of caution are to be applauded and in the main are entirely

appropriate. However, the non-conservators amongst us may find it strange or even amusing to note that the 'consult a conservator' message extends throughout the package, including topics such as acquisitions, significance, planning and budgeting that are perhaps more the specialist domain of other professional colleagues.

Taken overall, while there are some omissions (thoughts for an additional volume or second edition?), this is a well written and presented package that is destined to be immensely useful to museums. It should contribute greatly to its goal of increasing the conservation skills of those responsible for protecting Australia's cultural heritage, and for this the Heritage Collections Council is to be congratulated.

Stephen Anstey is curator/lecturer, Museum of Childhood, Edith Cowan University.

Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage

By Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, University of California Press, 1998

Museums Australia members who attended the 1995 conference in Brisbane may remember a keynote address by Professor Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara (hereafter referred to as KGB for the sake of brevity), of New York University. One of her revelations was that promotional brochures in hotel rooms give a superficial and biased gloss of national and regional history. I remember it as a rather negative manifesto, employing a disempowering definition of heritage, and concluding gnomically that tourism is the museum of the consciousness industry. This talk is embedded in Chapter Three, 'Destination Museum', of KGB's new book, *Destination Culture*.

Museum staff and other heritage managers certainly need to be aware of contested issues; but I remember thinking at that time that we also need guidance and strategies to help us manage our operations to maximise the benefits of cultural tourism while minimising the downsides. But yes, first we have to recognise those (potential) downsides.

It is not hard to identify and (gently or otherwise) mock the inconsistencies and absurdities of any field as vast and heterogeneous as heritage or tourism. David Lowenthal does it with such fine irony that after some of his talks (I am thinking of his Australian visits in the 1980s, not his 1999 speech for the National Museum

of Australia) people are left wondering 'why do we bother trying to save heritage?'

An equally good question is: why does anyone bother being pedantic about popularisation? I am reminded of the insomniac Sidney Nolan wasting the pre-dawn hours going through the writings of Herbert Read annotating non sequiturs and self-contradictions. The history of science showed us long ago that accumulation of error is merely a contribution to the broad cultural shifts by which paradigms are replaced (Kuhn).

Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage expands KGB's ideas on some of the obvious and not-so-obvious problems at the ever-spreading interface of heritage and tourism, with a constructive dimension, as, for example, in a discussion of ways of avoiding the worst aspects of folkloric festival presentations.

When the editor says '800 words' for a review it is impossible to engage sensibly with a substantial book; but it is possible to say whether it's worth reading, and suggest why. *Destination Culture* is strongly recommended, because it offers a generally non-pedantic, well-informed, wide-ranging but still personal examination of some important issues.

Most Victorian-era institutions did not coyly hide their bourgeois cultural values, but were explicit even to the point of boasting. This does not stop some historians making themselves look silly by announcing, after rigorous analysis, the amazing fact that yet another old museum was guilty of imperialism and/or racism and/or sexism and/or elitism. KGB's analysis far transcends this, so her histories of display and representation are always stimulating, even if they sometimes ignore counter-examples and lead to sweeping judgments.

KGB makes much of the ways tourist-oriented heritage presentations package up and mask cultural difference as picturesque diversity. This relates to long-running arguments in Australia about Multiculturalism as manifested in local politics or semi-official agencies like SBS television. The issue of who decides, or whose voices are heard, is always around. While merchandisers trivialise cultural mores and differences through sugar-coating, some academics unwittingly trivialise them by deferential relativism. I am not accusing KGB of this, as her analysis is forthright, but while the world is being wrecked, some of us may feel the need for a tougher line on those

who play divide and rule or promote greed-based identity politics.

The business of cultural difference is all-important, today more than ever. Bill Clinton identified the real tragedy of our times: electronic technology offers the hope of global communication and cooperation, yet political reality includes war, repression, wage slavery, extinctions, environmental degradation, 'ethnic cleansing' and genocide. The official UN statistic was 42 armed conflicts of various sizes simultaneously raging on the planet at the end of 1999.

Nationalism, the usual suspect, is guilty of some but not all. Virtually all are manifestations of unmanaged cultural differences. In this context we must reflect before condemning even naive or commercial attempts to communicate, bridge gaps, build coalitions, or assert democratic values where religious fanatics don't want them. Better repressive tolerance than a Timorese militia rampage?

Destination Culture is assembled from a collection of talks and essays, and while it does not build up a monolithic argument, it is all the more readable for being a series of investigations of related themes. It is obviously an American book about a worldwide topic, and many Australians may be relieved to read about these issues without encountering the name of Hanson (so absurdly over-emphasised on the first day of the 1998 ICOM conference, after she had already met electoral defeat), or tedious Australian media clichés like 'baby boomers'. Equally refreshing is KGB's ability to discuss complex ideas without jargon, junk language, or culturally cringing to Derrida, Baudrillard and company.

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Risk Assessment for Objects Conservation

By Jonathan Ashley-Smith. Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford, 1999

Risk Assessment for Objects Conservation is an excellent book that fills an important gap in the conservation literature. Its aim is to provide the reader with mechanisms for assessing and quantifying the risks to their collections in their own particular circumstance.

As Jonathan Ashley-Smith explains: '...the discussions in this book should

make you more able to influence those decisions where you have input, and may make you feel more comfortable with those where you do not. To that extent it is an answer to the traditional prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference".

In the past, conservation as a profession has relied heavily on rules to impart information to those caring for collections about risks and the manner in which they should be reduced or eliminated. Examples might include keeping the relative humidity levels at 50 per cent +/- 5 per cent, or always wearing gloves when handling objects. All the rules have a sound scientific basis and if applied correctly will minimise deterioration of collection objects.

However, the use of such rules has problems. The first is that they tend to invoke a blind allegiance, even in circumstances where they will cause more harm than good. For example, wearing cotton gloves when handling objects with friable pigments may cause more damage due to loss of pigment onto the gloves than the transfer of oils and acids from your hands. Moving an object acclimatised to high RH levels into 'ideal' conditions of 50 per cent +/- 5 per cent is more likely to be the cause of damage than the prevention of it.

The second problem is that the rules do not include any consideration or acknowledgement of the costs associated with the elimination or reduction of damage to collection objects.

Over the past decade, the conservation profession has recognised the limitations of rules alone to guide the care of collections, and has moved towards explaining why certain factors may pose a threat to collections and how to determine the best way to reduce them in particular circumstances.

Important works along these lines for general museum workers would include May Cassar's *Environmental Management: Guidelines for Museum and Galleries*; the UK Museums & Galleries Commission series *Standards in Museum Care*; and the Heritage Collections Council's *ReCollections*. Important work along these lines for conservators would include that of Stephan Mikalski, Robert Waller and Suzanne Keene.

It is in this line that Ashley-Smith's book fills an important gap. *Risk Assessment for Objects Conservation* explains the mecha-

nisms of deterioration to museum collections and provides a series of risk assessment tools to quantify the risk each threat poses to a collection. Thus it provides a way to directly compare the risks posed by each threat to one another, and then to determine the cost-benefit of taking different courses of action for the long-term care of the collection.

Quantification is the key in providing new information to the debate about risks and standards. As Ashley-Smith points out, 'as far as cultural heritage is concerned no fundamentally new group of hazards has been discovered for 50 years'. We are well versed in the identification of risk to collections. The problem comes in trying to determine how much risk they pose. At what point do additional actions aiming to eliminate risk produce benefit, and how much? As the book succinctly states: 'the purpose of risk studies is to find out whether it is worthwhile reacting, and, if so, when and how'.

In examining the different models of risk assessment, Ashley-Smith covers an incredibly wide range. Decision trees, cost-benefit analysis, probability analysis, relationship modelling, matrixes, pyramid models, net present value: all are considered, and shown to reveal information that can aid decision-making about the long-term care of collections. For me, though, the most thought-provoking sections are those that cover the concepts of state and value.

The beauty of the book in my mind is that while some of the reader's assumptions about conservation in museums will be confronted, at no point is the reader made to feel that s/he has been on the wrong track. Rather, this new way of looking at the problem provides a very elegant and informative model with which to put the rules of collections care into context.

Sarah Slade is head of conservation, Australian National Maritime Museum.

Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States

By Alan Wallach. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1998

This collection of essays provides interesting insights into the development of the art museum in the US, but confirms the uniqueness of the American experience. It could indeed well be titled *The Museum as America*.

Through a series of case studies the author looks at ideological 'contradictions' in the establishment of art museums in the US in the nineteenth century, and 'contradictions' in the exhibition of art in US art museums post-Second World War. Alan Wallach is professor of art and art history and professor of American studies at the College of William and Mary. An American studies approach determines his focus on historical context and his critique of the widely-held view that issues of art transcend discussion of a work of art as an 'historical artefact'.

This is in reality two books. Both are somewhat frustrating in their brevity and the lack of connection with the vast literature on twentieth century American museums produced in the last two decades, especially on museums as social narrators. The nineteenth century component, Part I, provides an outline of the founding of several museums. Part II addresses a number of recent exhibitions, mostly on historical American themes, for example, discussion of the author's own exhibition on Thomas Cole's classic 'The Course of Empire', which contended that the series of five paintings 'was the artist's pessimistic allegory of Jacksonian America'.

Wallach notes that a critical history of the art museum in the United States has yet to be written. This book does open up a framework for such a history but a history lacking in a number of critical areas, including the international context for the post-Second World War period — the era of US international dominance. In the introduction, Wallach connects the highly antagonistic local response to the National Museum of American Art's 1991 exhibition 'The West as America' to the 'victory' of the US and its allies in the Gulf War, but this idea is not analysed in any detail in the essay itself. Nor is MOMA's significant international role during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War era mentioned in the essay on the history of MOMA. The phenomenon of the overseas expansion of the US art museum in recent times, including MOMA and the Guggenheim, doesn't figure in Wallach's study. Important opportunities to see how US art museums sit nationally and internationally in the 'American century' are not explored. The US art museum in this study appears to revolve around a static, inward looking world dominated by American issues.

Yet the historical contextualisation which Wallach contends is so contentious

there is happening elsewhere, particularly in Europe. In Australia attempts are being made to include in exhibitions a new understanding of indigenous experience (the main area of controversy in 'The West as America' related to the supposedly too 'PC' treatment of native Americans). In the US itself there is, as Wallach admits, a move to more critical approaches, especially in art history, but he sees museums as lagging behind in exhibiting controversy specifically in relation to American history.

Wallach's thesis is that the context in which art objects are shown is fundamental to our understanding of the art object: 'From the beginning the sacralization of art was the art museum's chief function. Demystification requires the thoroughgoing critique of its transcendental status, of the idea that art is somehow exempt from the mundane realities of history and contemporary life'. (p.6) It is hard to argue with his conclusion that in the US 'museums have always been deeply conservative institutions' (p.122) and not to share his concerns about the 'ongoing Disneyfication of much of American cultural life'. (p.2) But I would contend that he is presuming a hegemony of orthodox values which is already on the wane.

More challenging are the questions Wallach poses on public reaction. Art museums are not going to shape taste by giving the public what it flatly does not want, but it is not necessarily true that what the public wants is only a version of history and art that does not question previously held assumptions. There are attempts by many American museums to introduce new audiences, especially from minorities, and to engage with questions of relevance to those audiences; an early example, albeit one of great controversy, was the Metropolitan Museum's groundbreaking 1969 'Harlem on My Mind'. English historian John Gray has recently argued in *False Dawn* that the costs of current American economic success include high levels of social division. In an increasingly divided society, with an ostensibly democratic ideology, museums cannot any longer present one orthodox history without challenge.

Dr Caroline Turner is deputy director of the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University and was previously deputy director, Queensland Art Gallery.

Taking the Time: Museums and Galleries, Cultural Protocols and Communities: A Resource Guide

Compiled by Museums Australia (Queensland), 1998

Taking the Time is a resource guide primarily aimed at 'non-indigenous cultural heritage workers in small museums throughout Australia, who wish to work with their culturally [read ethnically] diverse communities, including indigenous communities'. It offers museums and galleries advice on how to identify, approach, listen to, build relationships and work effectively with the people who live and work within the local community. Thus they can ensure the museum broadens and cements its supporter base. It is also intended to be a teaching tool for trainers of museum professionals.

The guide is produced in ring-binder format, which allows a museum to add further information as it arises or to photocopy it for group discussion.

Taking the Time includes established policy guidelines and protocols; answers to concerns and questions that museum workers may have as they begin to work with their local indigenous and other communities; a list of organisations which can be approached for assistance; and published references. A substantial part of the guide consists of case studies drawn from museums, interpretive centres, galleries and local councils around Australia, explaining projects developed with their local communities and the working processes that evolved. The case studies offer proof of the rewards that come with taking the time to be inclusive in terms of museum collections and public programs.

The case studies, though, are museum-centred: the experiences are largely those of directors and curators. I would have liked the experiences of members of local communities as they worked with their local museum to be represented, or even the reaction of visitors to particular programs. How do local communities want museums to work with them? What does consultation and ownership mean for them?

The advice in *Taking the Time* is solid, practical and well-stated. The problems that a museum may encounter are dealt with openly and honestly. The clear message is to involve communities in all stages of a project. It is important to ask, look, consult and, as Elizabeth Close (then

of the Albury Regional Museum) says, 'really listen'.

All of this takes time, flexibility, patience and a willingness to step outside accepted ways of doing things. Building relationships and trust takes time. Museums need to make time to create culturally inclusive policies and practices.

Taking the Time is reassuring, though. It is a compilation of already-established policies and protocols that can be adopted and adapted, and the case studies show that it is possible. The guide also highlights that working with local communities is a constantly evolving process. A culturally inclusive museum does not arise out of one project alone. It arises out of clearly defined policies and procedures that inform the planning and development of a museum's ongoing programs. It arises out of knowing who the local people are and how that may change over time. It arises out of responding to new challenges and problems.

Potentially, *Taking the Time* challenges museums to rethink their attitudes, working processes and community relationships. It encourages a model of museum practice that is about local communities 'owning' their local museum and what is collected and displayed there. As compiler Ann Baillie writes in the introductory 'Note to the Reader': 'Be prepared to let go of your own power and allow the communities you are working with to have their own agenda. Do not be surprised if changes in direction arise because of the consultative nature of the project.' That is still a radical concept for many museums. *Taking the Time* challenges museum workers to be humble and — in the words of Greg Champion of *Could've Been Champions*, to 'take a good hard look at ourselves'.

Kate Walsh is curator at the Migration Museum, Adelaide.

Museums and the Future of Collecting

Edited by Simon J. Knell. Ashgate, 1999

There are many texts about managing collections in museums and about collecting methods — many of them based on time-honoured methods that have served the profession in the past. Critical examination of the implications of collecting into the future has been discussed less frequently. This book discusses the problems, the issues and some solutions.

There are three major sections with an Introduction by the editor. Simon Knell argues that the accountability imposed on museums has made the collecting situation difficult. He suggests that museums are defending the concept of collections rather than 'examining the true nature of the collections we have in our care or the processes by which they are created'. (p. 5) Other authors expand on this notion of examining collections and the collecting process within the concepts of each of the three sections.

In the first section 'Collecting in Context', Susan Pearce sets a simple and productive recipe for collecting and collections studies. The value lies in the ability of this method to link both the historical, impersonal past with the very personal present of the collector, as well as assessing the value of the antiquarian style of collecting specimens and gathering information.

The concept of museums without collections arises in Malcolm McLeod's fascinating account of the Manhyia Palace Museum in Kumasi, Ghana, where, because the objects only retain significance through usage, they are used and replaced when necessary, in contrast to a case study of eighteenth century collecting which resulted in the Ashmolean Museum. Throughout the papers runs the common theme that we should be learning from the deeds (I won't use 'mistakes') of the past in order to justify the present and future. As we move further into the world of rationalisation, museums face issues of meaningful collecting, ability to store objects and to reflect the changing face of fashion in their exhibitions. Richard Dunn, evaluating the changing collecting activities of the Victoria and Albert Museum, concludes that it is impossible 'to lay down for all time one fixed, objective and unbiased collecting policy'. (p. 35) Indeed, this applies to all museums. Circumstances have a habit of changing and museums should be flexible enough to adapt, within reason, to those changes, without losing sight of the primary goal.

Gaynor Kavanagh in the second section, 'Omissions and Dilemmas', comments on the gaps resulting from past historical practices, described as mute and impersonal. She sees the need for a rationalised approach to collecting with a widening of the net to capture personal lives not recorded in documents. This section includes contemporary issues such as

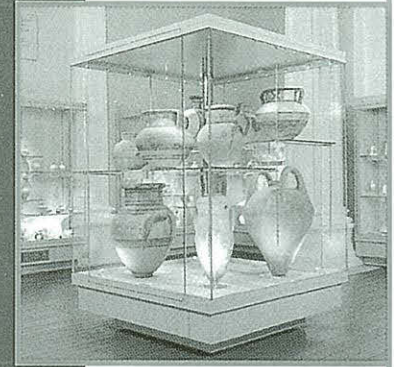
wartime collecting, how the change in the political climate of South Africa has affected museums, and collecting from groups not conforming to 'the constructed norm'. Legal and ethical issues, national collections and archaeological fieldwork collections are further dilemmas discussed in this section. For example, Janet Owen makes a plea for the involvement of museums in archaeological fieldwork through cooperation with the many independent consultant archaeologists. The problem of long-term curation of the resulting collections and the difficulties for museums with increasingly limited resources should not prevent a more active museum role in archaeology.

'Collecting Futures' is introduced by Linda Young, who advocates both the return of connoisseurship in collecting and making collecting decisions more systematic and explicit. These two elements would ensure that curators regain relevance to museums that have moved more into public programs and education. Material culture studies would ensure that connoisseurship would be evident in new graduates. No text on collecting would be complete without a reference to SAMDOK. The two papers included here give two views on the effects and problems of the project. Coordinating national collecting policies and the role of deaccessioning in collections management are among the proposals for restructuring collection strategies presented by other authors. Tomislav Sola concludes with some sober thoughts on the future role of museums, the concept of the object as an indicator of the past, but not the past itself.

Museums and the Future of Collecting provided me with lots of food for thought. It made me question many of my own practices and gives me confidence in the inevitable restructuring of my museum's goals. It also makes me examine the museological principles I expound to my students. I am intrigued by the absence of emphasis on the possibilities of electronic developments in managing future collections, other than Sola's reference. Nevertheless, there is much that can be taken from this book and applied to the daily practice and philosophy of the whole range of museums in this country.

May Abernethy is curator of collections, Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, James Cook University, Townsville.

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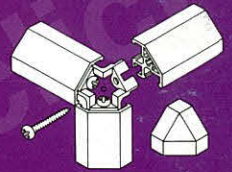


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