Making Your Gallery Inclusive
Public Galleries Association of Victoria
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Dr Damian Smith

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES TO VICTORIAN ARTISTS FROM DIVERSE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

INTRODUCTION

It's a pleasure to be here and be amongst the community of professionals who manage our key arts institutions. Today's focus is on some of the ways that public galleries can provide opportunities to artists from diverse cultural backgrounds. While the first part of this presentation will be largely conceptual, there will be plenty of examples to reference later. However, as many of you will already be engaged in similar such projects, it will be more useful to provoke discussion about the deeper structures of the public gallery enterprise and how we might think about that template.

BACKGROUND

Before we contemplate those ways, let us first consider that the question of how to do this pre-supposes that the challenge of engagement is one that is presented 'to us' via the appearance of newcomers who are in turn challenged in their negotiations of a new cultural terrain. For those of us who are already integrated within our local milieu, the challenge then is to critically examine our own institutions (and pre-conceptions) and consider how a few small enquiries might radically shift our approach to cultural engagement. It is from this perspective – a perspective of Institutional Critique as methodological enquiry – that I hope to convey a few thoughts and share a few experiences derived from inter-cultural projects.

As gallery professionals – passionate, committed, vocational in our work - we tend to presume that the public gallery is a normative cultural benchmark. It is part of the fabric of our towns and

cities and by extension a key way in which society institutes its cultural expression. However, this is by no means a universal cultural standard, and hence the nub of the challenge at hand.

HISTORY OF THE MUSEUM

So, when thinking about ways of linking newly arrived communities with your institution, and vice-versa, the historical context for the museum is worthy of contemplation. And I say this really, as a way of considering those unique biases and peculiarities of the public gallery as an artefact in society, and one that may be quite unfamiliar depending on one's particular cultural experience. We might for instance, consider this in relation to some of the lingering cultural tendencies that persist within the local framework. For instance, we can observe that despite decades of multicultural policy, our current Federal Government, in the exact same budget that we see funding cuts to the arts sector, has allocated $48.9 million to celebrate the 250th Anniversary of Captain Cook's first voyage to the Pacific, all the way back in 1768. Clearly, the Eurocentric paradigm remains entrenched at many levels of governance; and as the Cook example reminds us, those Enlightenment ideals of the 18th Century persist there in the background.

In reality, the concept of a museum or gallery of art is a relatively recent phenomenon – which has been in play for about 220 years. It can be traced to the opening of the Louvre Museum in 1793. This itself was an expression of the French Revolution and the earlier Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789. This was the document that foreshadowed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Australia was a proud contributor to that document and for many years our immigration policy was underwritten, at least in principal, by our adherence to that statement. But make no mistake, 'man' in the earlier Declaration was not intended in any neutral sense, and neither was it construed as all men. The distinction of 'active' and 'passive' citizenship was made clear (and some might argue that distinction is still in play today, even in multicultural Australia). Active citizenship was applied to men who were French, at least 25 years old, paid taxes equal to three days work, and could not be defined as servants.

Whereas in the English-speaking world and especially in relation to the proliferation of public galleries in the new colony of Victoria, we can look to the establishment of London's Victoria & Albert Museum in 1851. This became a significant benchmark for our early colonial institutions. From the outset, the V&A was keen to engage with the working classes and embarked on a program to 'improve society' through the cultural enrichment of the masses. For example, the V&A was the first night time museum, which was scheduled, such that people could come after their working day had finished and view the artworks by the new medium of gas light. So really, from the beginning, public galleries have assumed that society is indeed improved through encounters with art, and through a culture that imparts a particular European order.

It is that European ordering that we are now required to examine.

ORDILINESS

As an offshoot of that European model, Australia has certainly delivered on the production of an orderly society and even one with multicultural characteristics. Though in recent years, various critiques of the means that enabled much of that social order to be instituted, have rightly been pursued – for instance the work done to recognise the Stolen Generations, and the overturing of the doctrine of *Terra Nullius* via the Mabo vs Queensland ruling in 1992. And with resurgent forms of xenophobia and racism, greater work is required if we are to build a social accord around diverse cultural interests.

In contrast to Australia's ordered and manicured ways, many who arrive in Australia as new migrants come from complex, destabilized, war-torn, partisan and ancient societies, and from contexts also, where the concept of Human Rights is not necessarily a given.

Now, a noteworthy feature of societies that have evolved to accommodate such complexities, or indeed evolved in ways that seek to deny plural identities, is the not so much the absence of public galleries, but rather, the recognition that culture, rather than being potentially containable in institutional settings, is ubiquitous, interconnected (what we quaintly think of as inter-disciplinary) and entirely complex. The myriad loci of cultural expressions can be seen as diffuse,

abundant and overlapping – culture intersecting with agriculture, ecology, religion, health care and so on. Artistic expression in this sense is capable of spilling into other aspects of life, and that demarcation of the white-cube space is not an aspirant value. The possibility of relegating those expressions to a single institution, such as a gallery of art, is not just impossible but entirely beside the point. In fact, spaces of control and orderliness are oftentimes associated with exclusion and power. Such spaces might even be threatening, especially where they are aligned with political interests. Hence, what might seem friendly and inviting to us, is not the case for all.

REFUGEE ART PRIZE

To give an example, I'd like to reference a few experiences around the Heartlands Refugee Art Prize, which Multicultural Arts Victoria delivered over successive years as a national art prize, on behalf of Adult Migrant Education Services (AMES). The termination of the project came about with the victory of the Abbott Coalition Government in 2013, at which time the project was no longer graced with public funding.

GARDENING

One thing that happened, when we installed the show at the Werribee Mansion, was a few artists conveyed their anxieties about what they termed, 'the uniformed officers coming out of the bushes'. Who were these threatening figures of authority that brought to mind encounters with paramilitary groups patrolling national and contested borders? Though they were not armed, the uniformed figures were still quite imposing and for some this was a threatening marker. In contrast, as someone who had grown up in Australia, I was able to explain that those people were not part of a security apparatus, but were in fact the gardeners. Parks Victoria, which manages parts of the precinct, is not unaware of the frequency of such anxieties. In fact, as part of their programming, Parks Victoria partnered with Werribee Park and AMES to initiate a gardening group with the *Karen* women who arrived in Australia as refugees from the border regions of Myanmar, and they have in turn developed a market garden at Werribee.

This example of a perceived threat, raises the question of what we mean by 'being inclusive and injecting the outstanding talent of diverse communities into all kinds of events large and small'.

Are we doing this, because, as the rhetoric suggests, we want to tick the inclusivity KPI, or are we seriously thinking about the formation of culture in society and the possibility that our institutions may need to change fundamentally so that they may keep pace with the changing nature of contemporary Australian life?

ECO MUSEUM

The model I like to work with is the Eco Museum, (or the *ecomusée*, which came to prominence in France in 1971), as in a museum that encompasses the whole of society both conceptually and physically. In other words, the work that we do is not just in that lovely white cube but is everywhere else besides.

WEAVING

By way of an example, another outcome of the Refugee Art Prize was a spin off project where textile artists were connected with the Australian Tapestry Workshop as a means of skills development. And from this small project, a weaving group was established led by Sara Lindsay. What were the outcomes? There were no shows. There were no press releases. Nothing got funded; there were no attendance figures and no annual report captured this paucity of data. But what happened was a group of artists from diverse cultural backgrounds continue to meet each month in Richmond to make work, to share stories, to build friendships and networks. In fact, to institute social relations embedded in the production of art and culture.

TIME

And this bring me to the question of time. If there is one thing that public galleries are good at, its setting a timetable. But not all march to the beat of the same drum. Neither are diaries a universal cultural standard, or 9 to 5 a concept worthy of recognition. Be prepared to take time. To take tea. To have a meal. To build connections and learn to linger as need be. This is how we find out about different ways of being, and how contexts of expression can be adapted to suit.

ALTERNATIVE PHILOSOPHIES

What can we learn from these protracted discussions and endless cups of tea? Did our qualifications in Museum Studies equip us to ask the right questions?

Within the many African communities that are new to Australia, what discussions might ensue from a contemplation of the Zulu concept of *Ubuntu* – that a person is a person in relation to other people? Or from encounters with the people of Nigeria, who suggest that the old Yoruba religion is viewed by many as a template for all later traditions, and thus is capable of establishing ecumenical dialogue with radically different faiths.

And in the context of Australia's growing Chinese community, can our appreciation of *Guanxi*, of reciprocity as a particular feature of Chinese cultural life, enhance our dialogues and partnerships? In my experience, it most certainly can.

And does an understanding of *Ahimsa*, that concept of non-violence so beloved of Mahatma Ghandi, enable new ways of thinking to enter our discursive relationship with those Indian migrants whose experience of Australia has not always been so accommodating?

DIPLOMACY

These are philosophical steps, but they are part also of our diplomacy as museum professionals. For some, this may be a new way of thinking, but perhaps an even greater part of our diplomacy will be in encouraging our Councils, boards and gallery Friends to accommodate ways of operating that may not conform to the old model of acquisitions, loans and display, but rather to a dispersed model of cultural engagement that opens up the entire public enterprise.

TE PAPA

For example, at New Zealand's national museum Te Papa, in Wellington, a key feature of the building is the inclusion of a Maori *Marae*. As a cultural institution that is both sacred and

communal, the *Marae* also has places for afternoon naps – the siesta to use a borrowed term, is recognised as a natural part of cultural, social and personal life.

LA BIENAL DE LA HABANA

In contrast, Cuba's *Bienal de la Habana*, which was inaugurated in 1984 as an alternative, Third World Biennale, took shape around the concept of a dispersed event. In other words, not only are the exhibitions presented in public galleries, but in squares, streets, neighbourhoods and even private houses. The whole of society participates within the celebration of art.

It is for the 13th Bienal that I am curating Australian participation, including residencies in the two countries and an exhibition on the banks of Havana Bay incorporating the district of Casa Blanca and the famed Hershey train line.

In terms of the insights I have gained from living in Cuba over a period of 12 months, working with the team at the Bienal and also with the national Ministry of Culture, is just how effective policies of universal cultural access can be. That egalitarian spirit for which Cuba is internationally regarded, flows through all levels of society. The embrace of the community, their solidarity with visiting artists, and an overall appreciation for the generosity of creative spirits, seems almost to amplify the role of art in opening the doors of perception and deepening the bonds between one another. Again, in the context of Cuba, it was there that the Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto – the great *Arte Povera* maestro - welcomed us in to his Third Paradise project. Initially, this took the form of a multi-disciplinary symposium, and later through participatory arts events. The gathering developed real world solutions to local environmental problems, through harnessing the knowledge and skills of professionals from all works of life. This naturally included artists, and as mentioned was the vision of one such individual.

MENTORSHIPS

Returning to Melbourne, one public gallery – the Walker Street Gallery in Dandenong, has instituted a mentorship program for artists from refugee backgrounds. Personally, having worked closely with artists through the Refugee Art Prize, and through facilitating representation with commercial galleries and art fairs, this is familiar territory. The program is largely one on one, and

encompasses a raft of activities, from gallery visits, time spent in the studio discussing art practices, meetings with other artists and curators and so on. Primarily, the aim is to facilitate career development, but as a mentor, I am also a beneficiary, both through working with a talented young artist, but also through learning directly about art practices emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan today.

The mentorship program has reminded me also of the possibility, that the array of experiences that artists from diverse backgrounds carry, might far exceed the realms of those who are more privileged within the local arts economy, even as they are perceived to be naïve or unknowing. The new models of socially-engaged practice, which are really only relative to the contexts in which they are enacted, the old models of bohemian life, and even the romanticised anarchism of 'temporary autonomous zones', seem rather shallow when contrasted with the experiences of artists who have existed within conditions on the very edges of societal structure. For it is here, in the interface between the newly arrived and institutions cultural or otherwise that our social contract will form anew. That is what at stake in our engagement with new communities, and why our work as professionals within public galleries and museums has ramifications beyond our immediate public programs.

AT HOME IN THE CITY

One such ramification was brought home to me, when various artists commented on the impact of the Heartlands Refugee Art Prize, on themselves and on their families. I want to convey this point, but feel also that it is important to state that our sometimes-vigorous discussions included an intense critique of an art prize that demarks an individual's status as a refugee, as if this was a marker they were obliged to carry with them through life. A consensus arose that the prize was a positive yet imperfect undertaking and hopefully only pertinent on the road to a more inclusive society.

But the story I wanted to convey, was that many participants stated that neither they nor their families had ever been in to central Melbourne of an evening, as they did not feel that they belonged. Holding the show at fortyfivedownstairs in Flinders Lane meant that this was an opportunity to be a part of the scene. And that was something I had underestimated, and from

which a sense of my own particular privilege was made clear in ways I had hitherto taken for granted.

INDIGENOUS CONNECTIONS

So sometimes, enabling processes and connections might be the very best we can do. For instance, building three-way connections between newly arrived communities, public institutions and local indigenous partners can be an especially compelling model.

During the recent Art At The Heart international artist residency in the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia, the curatorial remit was simply to deliver the project by working with artists from Nigeria, Japan and Australia. While the exhibition was to be held in the East Pilbara Art Centre, which is home also to the Indigenous art centre Martumili Artists, there was no expectation that my curatorial work should encompass Indigenous participation. But through negotiations, with the local commissioning Shire and the Indigenous community and art centre, the project acquired greater local significance by taking that inclusive step. And for the artists, greater awareness around Indigenous knowledge and beliefs meant that they felt more connected as well.

CONCLUSION

So, to conclude, I would like to recap that there are many alternatives to the display and collect model of a public gallery and in many instances, these will already be a part of your institutional program. However, more work can be done through processes of engagement that do not presuppose outcomes or timeframes. Simultaneously, critical reflection on our institutional structures, and their historical antecedents will help to change preconceptions and hopefully make for galleries that are more inclusive. Equally, in multicultural, post-post-modern Australia with its access to technologies that internationalise so much of our daily life, and where such technologies challenge what it means to be human today, the old rubric of linking individual faces to specific cultures and places, might be seen as part of our stories, but by no means the whole of the picture.