

1968-2008: Curated exhibitions and Australian art history

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This paper asks the question: to what extent have curated art exhibitions in Australia mirrored changes in society, functioned as drivers for change, or simultaneously reflected and enabled change? It seeks to build on earlier histories of Australian art by proposing that some of the generative changes within the discipline stem directly from visual arguments in the form of curated exhibitions in public institutions. Our argument develops from two premises, each briefly elaborated. The first is an overview of contemporary scholarship that has highlighted the interplay and dialectic between curated art exhibitions and art history. The second is an outline of how the discipline of art history in Australia on Australian art came to embrace a more inclusive repertoire of media and ideas from the 1970s. Mindful of both the theoretical literature on the interplay between the art museum and the art history academy, and of the global and local changes within the discipline in Australia, we then focus on some of the very specific factors that significantly impacted on the discipline of art history in Australia from the late 1960s.

Of the numerous forces that led to the flourishing of curated exhibitions addressing a wide range of ideas, the most significant was the federal government's investment in the arts. Established in 1968, the Australian Council for the Arts, which initially only focused on the performing arts, was transformed after the election of the Whitlam government in December 1972: an unprecedented opportunity arose for quality exhibitions by curators, many of whom were the product of the art history courses first taught in post World War II Australia. While most of these were employed by state and regional galleries, some were independent and university-employed art historians. With a revitalised and financed arts policy in Australia and an emerging new cohort of trained art historians some of whom work in art museums, curated exhibitions became a significant means of re-assessing the past. Scholarly catalogues are the tangible legacy of this activity. The challenge now is to see to what extent the spate of new exhibitions and catalogues especially from the 1970s and '80s were absorbed into the mainstream art histories. In this paper we provide evidence to show that ideas that may have had a limited circulation in art history circles, were first visibly and publicly expressed in these curated exhibitions and then absorbed into more general art histories. By identifying these patterns of innovation and uptake we seek to account for one of the factors that enriched the discipline in Australia.

At their best, exhibitions display objects in physical space, manifesting 'a network of forces – personal, economic, political and institutional that converge to shape them behind the scenes'.¹ Issues and events that cannot be sourced in documents or even given explicit attention in works of art can crystallise through the medium of exhibitions where visual connections can be displayed in a manner that is more immediately engaging than the printed page. Exhibitions guided by a curatorial vision are a space where a well chosen selection of works of art can provide fresh insights into individual works and shared ideas. In his paper, 'Curators and art history', Andrew Sayers points out that art museum displays both 'embody art history' and 'have led to new shapes for art history'.²

Even in small regional art museums or contemporary art spaces, exhibitions are by their nature collaborative events. The curator works with the designer, the public programs staff, the installation crew, other researchers, and marketing. The collaborative nature of the event means that the curatorial vision is constantly tested by non-specialists, in marked contrast to other scholarly endeavours by art historians which are initially more solitary. Partly because of this, exhibitions take on a performative role in which complex art historical ideas are presented before much larger viewing audiences than the smaller readership of published arthistories. Curated art exhibitions therefore present new research, often forged jointly by university based art historians and museum based curators, placed so they interact with mixed audiences, bringing the discipline into alignment with deeper cultural contexts. Christopher Whitehead, in exploring the connections between museums and the construction of disciplines in nineteenth century Britain, argues that the representation of art in museums is '*constitutive* and not merely *reflective*' because the institutional and spatial site of the museum encourages 'certain kinds of theorising' using the poetics of display.³ Charlotte Klunk establishes that exhibitions are the agent of change in her discussion of how the fledgling Kassel Documenta of 1955 encouraged the rebirth of a new Germany integrated into a European culture.⁴

Kathryn Floyd has recently noted that it is the ephemeral nature of exhibitions that 'makes them difficult to historicize' and as a consequence they 'receive far less theoretical and historical attention than their more permanent cousins, museums. This dearth of study is especially true in the sphere where they matter most – art history'.⁵ A further hurdle to a closer association between art history and

¹ Kathryn Floyd, 'Review of "Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that made Art History, vol. 1 1863-1959"', *Modernism / Modernity*, 17, 1, 2010, 264.

² Andrew Sayers, 'Curators and art history', Art History's History in Australia and New Zealand University of Melbourne, 28-29 August 2010.

³ Christopher Whitehead, *Museums and the construction of disciplines: art and archaeology in nineteenth-century Britain*, London: Duckworth, 2009, 20ff.

⁴ Charlotte Klunk, *Spaces of experience: art gallery interiors from 1800-2000*, Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2009, 174-185.

⁵ Floyd, 'Review of "Salon to Biennial"', 262-264.

museology can be found in the very definitions of the two professions, which has perpetuated a divide. Curators, as the traditional 'keepers', focused on working 'with collection items and associated material to develop a museum's collection and /or exhibitions',⁶ while art historians have tended to see themselves as 'engaged in exploring and analysing the construction and form of artefacts, and their functions, both practical and symbolic, in the time they were produced'.⁷ Even though university-based art historians have always engaged their students with available collections in public art museums, it is only in recent times that curatorship as such has been defined as applied art history, and that curatorial graduates emerge well versed in art history.⁸ The Clarke Institute attempted to explore the nexus between academic art history and museum-based curators with their publication *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University* (1999), and Bruce Altshuler more recently noted that in 19th century France, artist-selected exhibitions became 'critical moments of artistic empowerment'.⁹ Jonathan Harris too has suggested that 'all forms of museum and gallery displays of artworks are part, at least potentially, of the history of art'.¹⁰ Yet this larger discussion of the fluidity between the professions and the ensuing cross fertilisation and networks operating between the sectors, now being realised, remains largely unaddressed in histories of Australian art.

The situation in Australia provides a distinctive environment in which to consider the nexus between curated exhibitions and their part in making art history, and gives these exhibitions a particular significance. Both the culture of scholarly collections and the academic discipline of Australian art history are relatively new. Innovations in these two interrelated fields are especially significant as they coincided with the radical growth of public funding for the visual arts in the early 1970s. Of special relevance to curators in art museums and academic art historians in the tertiary sector was the funding made available at that time for exhibition programs and their supporting catalogues, leading to frequent collaborations between academic art historians and their curatorial colleagues.¹¹ The argument presented here acknowledges the fine scholarship underpinning histories by the Australian art historians who extended and questioned paradigms established by Bernard Smith in *Place Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (1945) and his more influential *Australian Painting* (1962).¹² Scholarly texts of the 1960s and

⁶ *National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries*, Appendix D, Glossary: Collection Australia Network. <http://keystone.collectionsaustralia.net/publisher/nationalstandards/appendixes/appendix-d-glossary/> (accessed 28/2/2011)

⁷ Marcia Pointon, *History of art: Student's handbook*, London: Routledge, 1997, 58.

⁸ Jonathan Harris, *Art History: Key Concepts*, New York: Routledge, 2006, 23

⁹ Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial –Exhibitions that Made Art History*, vol I, London: Phaidon, 2010, 13.

¹⁰ Jonathan Harris, *The new art history: A critical introduction*, London: Routledge, 2001, 18.

¹¹ To avoid confusion this paper uses the term 'art museum' as it is more accurate than the British/Commonwealth term 'gallery'.

¹² Bernard Smith, *Place taste and tradition: a study of Australian art since 1788*, Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945; Bernard Smith, *Australian painting*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, 1972. The 1991 edition was co-authored with Terry Smith. An important early work critical of the Bernard Smith paradigm was

1970s had defined Australian art as painting by artists of European descent, a minority of them women (although Robert Hughes' popularist narrative of 1966 noticed only one gender).¹³ This period saw significant new research on media not covered by Bernard Smith, such as photography, sculpture and architecture.¹⁴ Over the last forty years new histories of photography¹⁵ printmaking;¹⁶ architecture;¹⁷ design;¹⁸ performance and installation art;¹⁹ and a myriad of studies on works by women artists,²⁰ have populated the shelves of art historical discourse. Not only has Bernard Smith's methodology, which he came to define as 'identification, classification, evaluation and interpretation',²¹ been challenged by arguments that

Christine Dixon and Terry Smith, introduction by Virginia Spate, *Aspects of Australian figurative painting 1942-1962: dreams, fears and desires*, Sydney Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney in association with the Biennale of Sydney, 1984. It was followed four years later by Ian Burn, et al., *The necessity of Australian Art: an essay about interpretation*, Sydney: Power Publications, 1988. That these two critiques came out of Sydney University is worth noting, but outside the scope of this paper.

¹³ Robert Hughes, *The art of Australia: a critical survey*, Melbourne: Pelican, 1966 and 1971.

¹⁴ John Cato, *The story of the camera in Australia*, Melbourne: Georgian House, 1955; Graeme Sturgeon, *The development of Australian sculpture, 1788-1975*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978; J.M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia: a history*, Melbourne Canberra Sydney: F.W. Cheshire 1968; Robin Boyd, *The Australian ugliness*, rev. ed., Ringwood: Penguin in association with F.W. Cheshire 1963.

¹⁵ Gael Newton, with essays by Helen Ennis et al., *Shades of light: photography and Australia 1839-1988*, Canberra: Australian National Gallery, Collins Australia with assistance from Kodak, 1988; Anne-Marie Willis, *Picturing Australia: a history of Photography*, North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1988; Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, London: Reaktion Books, 2007.

¹⁶ Roger Butler, *Printed images by Australian artists 1885-1955*, Canberra, A.C.T: National Gallery Australia, 2007.

¹⁷ Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Solomon Mitchell, Peter L Reynolds, *A pictorial guide to identifying Australian architecture: styles and terms from 1788 to the present*, rev. ed., Pymble, N.S.W: Angus & Robertson, 1994; Ann Stephen, Philip Goad, and Andrew McNamara (eds.), *Modernism & Australia: documents on art, design and architecture 1917-1967*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2006, and *Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia*, Carlton, Vic: The Miegunyah Press, 2008.

¹⁸ Tony Fry, *Design history Australia: a source text in methods and resources*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger and the Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1988; Michael Bogle, *Design in Australia 1880-1970*, Sydney: Craftsman House; G+B Arts International, 1998, and M. Bogle (ed.), *Designing Australia: readings in the history of design*, Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 2002; Grace Cochrane, *The crafts movement in Australia: a history*. Kensington, NSW: NSW University Press, 1992.

¹⁹ Nick Waterlow, *25 years of performance art in Australia : performance art, performance & events*, Paddington, NSW, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1994; Adam Geczy and Ben Genocchio, Eds., *What is Installation? An Anthology of Writings on Australian Installation*. Sydney, Power Publications, 2001.

²⁰ Joan Kerr, ed., *Heritage: the national women's art book, 500 works by 500 Australian women artist from colonial times to 1955*, Sydney: Craftsman House, An Art & Australia Book, 1995; Catriona Moore, *Indecent exposures: twenty years of Australian feminist photography*, St Leonards, NSW Allen & Unwin in association with the Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1994, and *Dissonance: feminism and the arts 1970-1990*, St Leonards, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin in association with Artspace, 1994; Caroline Jordan, *Picturesque pursuits: colonial women artists & the amateur tradition*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005; Catherine Speck, *Painting ghosts: Australian women artists in the two world wars*. London: Thames and Hudson; Melbourne: Craftsman House, 2004.

²¹ Bernard Smith, 'In defence of art history', Part 1, *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 130, 2000, 6.

are at times polemical,²² reflexive,²³ and revisionist,²⁴ but significant insights have come from scholars in cognate disciplines such as sociology and anthropology.²⁵ The result is that the field of art history, in terms of both subject matter and methodology, has been radically changed, not least by the 'new' approaches of the 1980s. This is not the occasion to articulate a nuanced reading of this historiography, since other scholars in this volume will do so. Instead, this paper focuses on one previously neglected aspect of Australian art history, namely the extent to which it was informed by curated exhibitions from in the early 1970s.

There are distinct parallels between the construction of Australian art histories and Carol Duncan's analysis of 19th century French art histories in that they were from the first effectively created through the observation of significant exhibitions.²⁶ The earliest Australian art historians were critics (J.G. De Libra [1899] and William Moore [1934]) or artists (Lionel Lindsay [1899] and Herbert Badham [1949]).²⁷ They used exhibitions as primary sources to reconstruct their narratives of art production and appreciation.²⁸ Bernard Smith's first history, *Place Taste and Tradition*, arose from adult education classes, while his *Australian Painting 1790-1960* was informed by his experience as the education officer cataloguing the Australian collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.²⁹ Most of these authors, with the partial exception of Smith, honed their skills without the resources of a slide or reproduction library: they knew some of the international paradigms on art history and criticism, but their encounter with Australian art came through looking at the actual works, not their reproductions. This may not be a uniquely Australian story, but it is a significant characteristic of early Australian historiography. Our research seeks to understand some of the forces that led to the development of a more culturally and materially inclusive discipline from the 1970s, and propose that the

²² Dixon and T. Smith, *Aspects of Australian figurative painting 1942-1962*, 1984; Ian Burn, et al., *The necessity of Australian Art*, 1988; Rex Butler, *A secret history of Australian art*, St Leonards (Sydney): Craftsman House, 2002, and *Radical revisionism: an anthology of writings on Australian art*, Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2005.

²³ Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian art: the twentieth century - modernism and Aboriginality*, 2 of 2 vols. St Leonards, N.S.W: Craftsman House, 2002.

²⁴ Andrew Sayers, *Australian art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

²⁵ Vivien Johnson, *Papunya painting: out of the desert*, Canberra, National Museum of Australia, 2007 and *Lives of the Papunya Tula artists*, Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2008; Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal art*, London: Phaidon, 1998, and *Becoming art: exploring cross-cultural categories*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008.

²⁶ Carol Duncan, 'Art museums and the ritual of citizenship', in *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 88-103. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.

²⁷ Lionel Lindsay, *A Consideration of the Art of Ernest Moffitt*, Melbourne, 1899, was the first book published on an Australian artist.

²⁸ De Libra [James Green], 'The poetry of our painting,' *Australasian Art Review*, May 1899 and 'The fine arts in Australia,' *Australasian Art Review*, July 1899; William Moore, *The story of Australian art from the earliest known art of the continent to the art of today*, vols. 1 & 2. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1934; Bernard Smith, 1945; Herbert E. Badham, *A study of Australian art*, Sydney, Currawong, 1949.

²⁹ B. Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press. 2nd edition 1978, 15-19.

stimulus for scholarly exhibitions that came with the injection of significant national arts funding deserves recognition as a significant, if not unique, factor in the development of the discipline.

While Strecker and others have recorded the institutional history of art history in Australia and Speck has argued that exhibitions should become an art historical teaching tool, only Andrew Sayers in his essay in this journal has examined the crucial insights into art history that should properly be accorded to curated exhibitions.³⁰ Others have examined Australian international and national exhibitions from the nineteenth century in order to better understand the role of exhibitions within a wider context of global exchange and in nation building.³¹ We are especially concerned with the impact of curated exhibitions from the early 1970s on the shaping of recent Australian art historiography. Because exhibitions demonstrate institutional judgement and reception, a focus on the links between art exhibitions and art history, and the rich dialectic between the two, can generate new insights into Australian art historiography and its links with art institutions.

The proposal that exhibitions have been generative, even constitutive (in Whitehead's words), of disciplinary insights within art history, does not ignore complex arguments centred on exhibitions and the art museums that host them, and on the ideas in art history that lead to exhibitions and vice versa. For instance in 1987 Margaret Plant in her 'Lost art of Federation' article named Australian Federation era art as distinctively different from late Heidelberg art, an intellectual move that was later fleshed out by Ron Radford in his important *Our Country: Australian Federation Landscapes* show of 2001.³² Exhibitions therefore share some common attributes with other narratives of art history in that they include some text in the form of labels, interpretive panels, catalogues, etc., but differ in that they are in essence visual and performative events. The combination of images and text in space generates meanings that, along with interpretive exhibition catalogues, create a particularly active and public form of art history. Within the exhibition space Michael Baxandall has noted three constitutive elements: the maker (ie artist), the exhibitor (ie curator and institution) and the viewer.³³ At its best, the materiality of

³⁰ Jacqueline Strecker, 'Colonising culture: the origins of art history in Australia' in *Art history and its institutions: foundations of a discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield. London & New York: Routledge, 2002, 100-110; Catherine Speck, 'Looking Critically at looking at art', *Australian Art Education*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2002, 51-53.

³¹ Peter Proudfoot, Rosalyn Maguire and Robert Freestone, eds., *Colonial city global city: Sydney's International Exhibition 1879*, Sydney: Crossing Press, 2000; Judith McKay, *Showing off: Queensland at world expositions, 1862 to 1988*. Rockhampton and South Brisbane: Central Queensland University Press and Queensland Museum, 2005; Kate Darian-Smith, et al. (eds.), *Seize the day: exhibitions, Australia and the world*, Clayton, Vic.: Monash University ePress, 2008.

³² Margaret Plant, 'The lost art of Federation': Australia's quest for modernism', *Art Bulletin of Victoria*, no. 28, 1987, 118-125.

³³ Michael Baxandall, 'Exhibiting intention: some preconditions of visual display of culturally purposeful objects', In *Exhibiting cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 36.

an exhibition manifested via the medium of space is akin to experiencing performance art. It is not possible in an historic study to research the casual viewer, however it is possible to retrieve contemporary commentary, both from the perspective of the institution and from specialised viewers such as art critics and art historians, both of whom are engaged, according to Preziosi, in the discursive practice of 'museography'.³⁴

The most logical starting point for any examination of recent Australian art histories 'narrated' by exhibitions is 1968, the year the National Gallery of Victoria opened its new St Kilda Road premises with the high modernist and New York-inspired *The Field*. Although this established a standard of presentation and scholarship that other Australian art museums could only envy, within a few years, as already argued, significant government funding began to transform the presentation of visual arts throughout Australia.³⁵

From the perspective of the early 21st century it is difficult to conceive the radical nature of the changes that took place in Australian art museums in the second half of the 20th Century. Until 1939 when Sir Keith Murdoch arranged for Daryl Lindsay to be appointed to the National Gallery of Victoria, Australian art museums were essentially run by their voluntary boards, with the salaried director usually an artist having the status of administrator, but engaged in some curatorial work. However, many curatorial decisions (including purchases of art and the hanging of exhibitions) were undertaken by the boards of trustees, who were often either collectors or artists.³⁶ The transformation of the National Gallery of Victoria was relatively painless, but at the Art Gallery of New South Wales the struggle between the Director, the Public Service Board and the Trustees is well recorded in Hal Missingham's memoir, *They Kill You in the End*.³⁷ Missingham argues that the professionalism of the director and curators was constantly undermined by 'amateurs' on the Board.³⁸

A key ingredient in the professionalism and growth of curatorial expertise in Australian art was the associated growth of the academic discipline of Australian art history in universities. It is no coincidence that the first curator of Australian art, Brian Finemore appointed in 1962, was one of the first Fine Arts (art history) graduates of the University of Melbourne. However, public exposure to changes in art scholarship was muted until art museums were properly funded to create

³⁴ Donald Preziosi, ed. *The art of art history: a critical anthology*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 507.

³⁵ John Gardiner-Garden, *Arts Policy in Australia: A History of Commonwealth Involvement in the Arts*, Canberra: Dept. of the Parliamentary Library, 2009.

³⁶ For a more detailed account of the significance of Daryl Lindsay to Australia's art historiography see Ben Thomas 'No mere collection of interesting curiosities: Lindsay and the appreciation of Australian Indigenous art' in this volume.

³⁷ Hal Missingham, *They Kill You in the End*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973.

³⁸ This came especially into focus in 1944 when some of the trustees individually covertly participated in an equity court action against the Board of the Art Gallery of New South Wales: Joanna Mendelssohn, *Lionel Lindsay: an artist and his family*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1988, pp 206-215.

exhibitions, and even these had limited exposure until the 1973 government funding initiatives, which led to a flourishing of exhibitions supported by a combination of regional, state and, increasingly, federal funding for the visual arts. Consequently there exists a trail of funding applications, critiques and, eventually, histories that can be examined for evidence of the disciplinary up take of institutional intention and innovation.

A case in point is *Ladies in Landscapes*, the 1974 exhibition of a more feminised Australian Impressionism curated by Ron Radford, then Director of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. Funding from the Visual Arts Board of the Australian Council for the Arts and the Victorian Ministry for the Arts enabled an innovative exhibition, which then travelled to Sydney where it received national television exposure.³⁹ *Ladies in Landscapes* was therefore a necessary prelude to the generously-funded blockbuster exhibition, *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond*, of 1985. This was the first exhibition of Australian art to have paying visitors queuing in the streets, even though most of the works on display were from Australian public collections and only months before could have been seen without charge. Its success as an exhibition came from the considered, nuanced visual narratives that enabled visitors to more fully appreciate that Australia had a history in art. Through the agency of this exhibition, new insights on the markedly diverse responses to Impressionism by Australian artists were made clear to the wider public. The *Golden Summers* catalogue, which published original scholarly essays, including a detailed analysis of the works, sold over 30,000 copies, which made it the best selling publication on Australian art. As Mendelsohn has previously written, even before the digital revolution Australian art books were more likely to have a print run of 1500 than 15000, and because of the high unit cost of production were overly dependent on the good will of the subjects for copyright clearance.⁴⁰ Australia, as an English speaking country with a small population, must compete with an international market. Exhibition catalogues can incorporate initial costs as part of the exhibition budget, and as an average one in 20 visitors purchases catalogues it is possible to use these as a site for the publication of original research on Australian art history.

Ongoing support from the Australia Council and the exhibition touring agencies it funded for many years, as well as support from the states and local government, has enabled Australia to create more substantial and diverse exhibitions. With certainty of some level of financial support from public funds, arts organisations have been able to seek further funding from private and corporate sources. Healthy budgets are also a prerequisite for the publication of scholarly exhibition catalogues, and so became a crucial mode of publication for curators and scholars in the field of visual arts. It is often in these catalogues that new ideas about

³⁹ It should be noted that under present guidelines the Australia Council would today not fund an exhibition associated with art history. Ballarat Fine Art Gallery *Ladies in Landscapes*, Ballarat 1974, np.

⁴⁰ Joanna Mendelsohn, 1991. 'Problems with art publishing in Australia.' *Artlink*, 11(3 Spring): 42-43

Australian art history are first articulated.⁴¹

Original research is however not confined to the pages of the catalogue/book. The most easily tracked example of the significance of exhibitions in reshaping Australia's art history in contemporary times can be seen in the Bicentennial national touring *Great Australian Art Exhibition* (1988), which was the product of the collaborative scholarship between Daniel Thomas and Ron Radford at the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA).⁴² It was significant for the way it wove a complex visual history out of both images and objects.⁴³ Because the AGSA is not in a major metropolis, its curators were more easily able to take a national perspective, freed from inter-city rivalry that could be said to exist between Sydney and Melbourne. Through approximately 300 works, Australia was seen as a country of immigrants, with a living Indigenous heritage throughout all of its colonised history, a place where both men and women make art. According to the touring agency, Art Exhibitions Australia, this exhibition attracted over 237,756 visitors, a figure also indicated in the extensive media coverage.⁴⁴ The inclusive vision of *The Great Australian Art Exhibition* is reflected in its enduring legacy, the catalogue *Creating Australia*. This fully illustrated book included essays by 43 curators, art historians, librarians, artists and scholars in other fields. Because it accompanied a blockbuster exhibition and therefore had a large print run (25,000) with lower production costs and easy distribution, it sold at a relatively low price, and thus became the most popular of all Australian survey art histories. Its generous vision was also echoed in later scholarship, especially in Andrew Sayers' historical survey, *Australian Art*.⁴⁵

Insofar as *The Great Australian Art Exhibition* incorporated varied material from many different collections, it easily prefigured Howard Morphy's call for a more inclusive art history (Morphy 2001, 2009).⁴⁶ Art exhibitions are able to explore ideas beyond the visual. For example, in 2005 the National Gallery of Victoria's *Exiles and Immigrants*, incorporated ideas of Empire and the connectedness of Australian culture by drawing on the resources of scholars from Australia, the UK and the USA to ensure that art and ideas crossed both national and disciplinary

⁴¹ Mendelssohn, 1991

⁴² The catalogue for this exhibition is Daniel Thomas (ed.), *Creating Australia, 200 Years of Art 1788-1988*, Adelaide & Sydney: International Cultural Corporation of Australia and Art Gallery of South Australia, 1988.

⁴³ See reviews in Australian Bicentenary Authority [ABA] (ed), *Reviews1988*, Sydney: ABA, 1988.

⁴⁴ Letter from Carol Henry to Joanna Mendelssohn 31 August 2010.

⁴⁵ Sayers, *Australian Art*.

⁴⁶ Howard Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art in the gallery,' *Humanities Research*, 8 (1), 2001: 37-50 http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/publications/hr/issue1_2001/article05.htm, and 'Not just images but art: pragmatic issues in the movement towards a more inclusive art history.' in Jaynie Anderson, ed. *Crossing cultures: conflict, migration and convergence*. The proceedings of the 32nd international congress in the history of art (Comité international d'histoire de l'art, CIHA), 13-18 January 2008, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2009, 60-62.

boundaries.⁴⁷ In a slightly different manner, the National Trust of NSW's S. H. Ervin Gallery engaged heritage conservation expert James Semple Kerr to present *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* on the heritage and cultural consequences of the design of prisons via an exhibition, supported by a book with the same name.⁴⁸ Not only does new disciplinary blood enrich the quality of exhibition programs, but art histories quickly absorb the stories gleaned from exhibitions. A clear example of the impact exhibitions can have on the public and on future art histories can be demonstrated by the 1992 W.C. Piguenit exhibition in Hobart, which became a stimulus for Tim Bonyhady's *The Colonial Earth* (2000).⁴⁹ Exhibitions such as these generated new insights within art history in Australia and vice-versa, ensuring that both the discipline and the wider populace recognised the inherent hybridity of the field.

By their performative nature exhibitions are well placed to communicate complex meanings to scholars and informed viewers while simultaneously giving pleasure and educating the general public at a more elementary level.

Baxandall has argued for the efficacy of exhibitions in triggering new insights in viewers because:

the viewer, moving about in the [intellectual] space between object and label, is highly active. He moves with great vitality between visually pleasurable (or at least intriguing) objects and equally pleasurable cause finding; then he moves back from information about causes to visually interesting objects, scanning the objects for applications of these causes.⁵⁰

Baxandall's observation suggests that the broadly educative role of curated exhibitions in informing the wider public of key ideas is happening within and outside academic art history. Implicit within these comments is the idea of curated exhibition as agency, not just for the viewing public but within the discipline of art history. To date the authors have examined some of the survey art histories to see to what extent, if at all, curated exhibitions over the last forty years have further impacted on the thinking within the discipline.⁵¹ These preliminary investigations provide insights on exhibitions as drivers for change. With a rich and largely untapped collective archive awaiting investigation, there is a need to fully examine the process — from initial curatorial intent (sometimes stemming from art historical discourse) and retained in various institutional records, to the translation of these

⁴⁷ Patricia Tryon MacDonald, *Exiles & emigrants: epic journeys to Australia in the Victorian era*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2005.

⁴⁸ James Semple Kerr, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Australia's places of confinement, 1788-1988*, Sydney: SH Ervin Gallery, National Trust of Australia, 1988.

⁴⁹ Christa E. Johannes and A.V. Brown, *W.C. Piguenit, 1836-1914: retrospective*, Hobart: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 1992; Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press and The Miegunyah Press, 2000, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Baxandall, 'Exhibiting intention', 38.

⁵¹ J. Mendelssohn, C. De Lorenzo and C. Speck, 'Curated Art Histories', AAANZ annual conference, Adelaide, 5-7 December 2010.

ideas into the exhibitions and scholarly catalogues, their critical reception, and their direct or indirect uptake by other art historians. A forensic examination of these paper trails may throw light on the ways in which art history and art museum practice in Australia has taken on a distinctive cast, especially with regards to the acceptance of Aboriginal art from around the country as contemporary art.

For nowhere is the shift of thinking within the discipline more obvious than in the way Aboriginal art was absorbed into contemporary art exhibitions before quickly assuming a central place in Australian art history and mainstream Australian visual culture. The identification by curators of the pertinence of Aboriginal art to contemporary settler Australian art and culture has helped expand and enrich Australian art history. For example, Nick Waterlow wrote in *Australian Biennale 1988: from the Southern Cross*, the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of the same name, that 'the single most important statement in this Biennale... [is] the *Aboriginal Memorial* of two hundred years of white culture', an observation that has been endorsed by numerous art historians in the course of the following decades.⁵²

Participation in exhibitions has changed the research trajectory of some curators and scholars. In 1981 Bernice Murphy, as the first Australian Curator of Contemporary Art, appointed to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, demonstrated her awareness of a changing Australia when she included works by the Papunya artists Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Charlie Tjapangati. Vivien Johnson, who has written the most detailed account of the Papunya artists, curated exhibitions of Papunya artists informed by her original academic field of sociology.⁵³ These exhibitions fit as comfortably – and provocatively – within an art museum as they do within a national history museum.⁵⁴ Similarly, anthropologist Morphy's significant writings on Aboriginal art, and Yolgnu art in particular, cannot be seen in isolation from his extensive experience as a curator.

At a time when there were few curators of art and no university studies of art history in Australia,⁵⁵ the first scholarly field to value Aboriginal art was anthropology.⁵⁶ Indeed Australia's first professional anthropologist, Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer, amassed a significant collection of Aboriginal and settler art, which may well have led to one of the earliest, albeit private, exhibitions of both Indigenous and settler art.⁵⁷ His eye for the aesthetic in the work of his

⁵² Nick Waterlow 'A view of World Art c1940-1988' in *Australian Biennale 1988: From the Southern Cross a view of World Art c.1940 -1988*, Sydney: Biennale of Sydney 1988, 11. See also T. Smith, *Transformations in Australian art*, and Sayers, *Australian Art*.

⁵³ Johnson, *Lives*.

⁵⁴ See Vivien Johnson & Michael Jagamara Nelson, *Michael Jagamara Nelson*, Roseville (Sydney, NSW): Craftsman House, 1997, and Johnson, *Papunya Painting*, 2007, respectively.

⁵⁵ Jacqueline Strecker, 'Colonising culture'.

⁵⁶ Morphy, 'Seeing Aboriginal art'.

⁵⁷ John D. Mulvaney, 'Spencer, Sir Walter Baldwin (1860-1929)', in *Australian dictionary of biography*, v. 12, 33-36, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990, and online:

contemporaries, whether from the desert or the city, resonates with the Rayner Hoff-designed medal awarded to Spencer in 1926 by the Society of Artists in Sydney: it features a near naked draped female figure whose attributes of art, a brush and palette, almost double as a kind of digging stick and shield (figure 1).



Figure 1 Raynor Hoff, Medal – Sydney Society of Artists, Australia, 1924, Bronze, 52 mm. This particular version was minted in 1926 and awarded to Sir Baldwin Spencer. Museum Victoria, NU 35657.

Anthropologists were not alone in recognising the aesthetic and cultural significance of Aboriginal art: (non-Aboriginal) artists also played a significant role. In the years after World War I the modernist artist Margaret Preston became a passionate advocate for including Aboriginal art in public collections, and encouraged an Aboriginal aesthetic in contemporary art and design.⁵⁸In the 1930s, the watercolourist Rex Battarbee, in response to interest from western Arrernte

<http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120043b.htm>; Peter Sutton (ed), *Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia*: NY, The Asia Society Galleries, 1988; Ron Radford, *Our country: Australian federation landscapes 1900-1914*, Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2001.

⁵⁸ Margaret Preston, 'The indigenous art of Australia', *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, 11, March 1925, 32-45; 'The application of Aboriginal designs', *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, 31, 1930, 44-58; 'New developments in Australian art', *Australia National Journal*, 2, 6, May 1941, 12-13. For a more extensive listing of Preston's writings, see Roger Butler, *The prints of Margaret Preston: a catalogue raisonné*, rev. and enlarged edition, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2005, 357-366.

artist Albert Namatjira in Hermannsburg, Northern Territory, facilitated the artist's painting his country using European styles. Battarbee and Pastor Albrecht variously then organised exhibiting Namatjira's work in Adelaide. A few years later R.H. Croll, biographer of the leading Australian impressionist artist, Tom Roberts, wrote the foreword to ethnographer Charles Mountford's monograph on Namatjira, demonstrating the willingness for dialogue between disciplines and cultures.⁵⁹ This openness of Australian artists to the merits of Aboriginal art as art was apparent to Karel Kupka when he visited Australia in the 1950s and 1960s to familiarise himself with Aboriginal culture and collect bark paintings and other Aboriginal works for the Musée d'Ethnographie in Basle and eventually, the Musée Nationale des Arts Africains et Océaniens in Paris. Although he was advised by anthropologist A.P. Elkin and learnt much from the Yolgnu and other indigenous peoples he visited in Arnhem Land, his record of these travels clearly notes the enthusiasm of settler artists and designers for indigenous art.⁶⁰ At the same time artist-curators and directors Louis McCubbin (AGSA), Tony Tuckson (AGNSW) and Frank Norton (Art Gallery of Western Australia), through varied acquisition and publication initiatives, demonstrated sympathy with Aboriginal art and became its strongest advocates within the art museum sector.⁶¹ These belated activities within art museums became hooks for initiatives developed by the Australia Council, especially through the Aboriginal Arts Board, which in turn enabled Aboriginal art's international reputation.⁶²

While there were several pathways that led to the uptake of Aboriginal art within the art museum sector, the evidence is clear that by the early 1980s Aboriginal art was seen as contemporary art practice. In 1980 the Art Gallery of South Australia became the first gallery to acquire work from the Papunya Tula artists when it purchased Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Man's Love Story*.⁶³ The first permanent display to incorporate Aboriginal art within the wider trajectory of the history of Australian art was in 1982 at the new Australian National Gallery (later renamed National Gallery of Australia, abbreviated as NGA). As already noted, in 1988 Nick Waterlow incorporated the Ramingining artist community's *Aboriginal Memorial* as the focal point of the *Australian Biennale* for the Bicentenary of European colonisation.⁶⁴ The same year De Lorenzo and Dysart examined a more complex landscape of exchange in *A Changing Relationship* (1988) at the S. H. Ervin

⁵⁹ Charles P. Mountford, *The art of Albert Namatjira*. Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club, 1944.

⁶⁰ Karel Kupka, *Peintres Aborigenes d'Australie*, Paris: Publications de la Société des Océanistes, No. 24, Musée de l'Homme, 1972, 29.

⁶¹ Frank Norton, *Aboriginal art*. Perth: Western Australian Art Gallery Board with the assistance of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, 1975.

⁶² For example, *D'un autre continent : L'australie la rêve et le réel*. ARC/Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Paris: Association Française d'action Artistique, 1983.

⁶³ Ron Radford, 'Acquiring and presenting Aboriginal art in art museums: my first 30 years', 41st Annual Symposium of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, 19 November 2010.

⁶⁴ Nick Waterlow, ed., *Australian Biennale*, 1988; ABA, *Reviews*.

Gallery, Sydney.⁶⁵ In 1990 Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) abandoned traditional curatorial hierarchies to enable the Indigenous-based Campfire Group to curate *Balance*, an exhibition that examined connections between Aboriginal and Western art.⁶⁶ Throughout the 1990s 'traditional' concepts of Aboriginal art were challenged by younger (often) urban Aboriginal artists, and in this they have consistently been supported by curators in both state and regional art galleries. By the time Brenda L. Croft curated *Beyond the Pale* for the Adelaide Biennial in 2000, Indigenous Australian art was seen as aesthetically radical, socially significant and an accepted part of the Australian mainstream.⁶⁷ This coincided with Kleinert and Neale completing their national compendium of Aboriginal art,⁶⁸ and the following year Sayers placed Aboriginal art as a continuous strand throughout the narrative in his survey history of Australian art.⁶⁹ These examples from within art museums and art history, tardy though they may have been compared to anthropological engagement with Australian indigenous art, demonstrate a rapid and fundamental shift in thinking within the disciplines and in society as a whole.

The last forty years has seen the growth of exhibition catalogues as both a crucial mode of publication of more complex histories and as the 'memory' of the ephemeral exhibition. Scholarly catalogues have a significance that outlasts the critiques in the popular and specialist media. They are often where collaborations between applied and theoretical art history become most fruitful. These publications have articulated the incorporation of Aboriginal art into the mainstream of Australian visual narrative, extended the concept of 'art' to include photography and works once relegated as 'craft', brought minorities into the cultural fold, and noted that there were indeed two genders contributing to the visual and material cultures of Australia. Without the enduring advocacy of their catalogues the ongoing impact of exhibitions would have been diminished.

It is true that the histories of art as presented in exhibitions sometimes attract attention that can best be described as both negative and hostile. So one question which needs further examination is whether it is the curatorial or the critical view that prevails in the long term.

Further detailed empirical research analysed within a framework that enables new insights into the complex forces at play will throw new light on ways in which an essentially ephemeral and performative visual event is remembered by its material textual evidence. Some of the drivers for change have come from within the discipline, from curators, university based art historians and artists, who are

⁶⁵ Catherine De Lorenzo and Dinah Dysart, *A Changing Relationship: Aboriginal Themes in Australian Art c.1938-1988*, Sydney: S.H. Ervin Gallery, 1988.

⁶⁶ Michael Ether and Marlene Hall, *Balance 1990*. Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1990.

⁶⁷ Croft, *Beyond the Pale*.

⁶⁸ Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, eds., *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Daniel Thomas, *Grace Cossington Smith : a life : from drawings in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia* Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1993.

⁶⁹ Sayers, *Australian Art*.

hardly passive observers as to how their work is presented. Their distinctive if sometimes overlapping roles cannot be seen in isolation from the social and political contexts of the time, including feminism, the campaign for Aboriginal rights and the recognition of Australia's multicultural heritage. Nor is it possible to ignore the commercial climate of these years, in particular how the growth in corporate culture and the development of complex marketing strategies also impacted on art museums and their exhibitions. Not only is there a need to see exhibitions incorporated into the narrative of Australia's art history with the dialectic between the two fleshed out: there is also a need for a new paradigm of analysis to allow other perspectives, and insights in the writing of academic art history in Australia.

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