

Opened eyes on Australian exhibition history

Review of:

Australian Art Exhibitions: Opening our Eyes by Joanna Mendelsohn, Catherine De Lorenzo, Alison Inglis and Catherine Speck, Melbourne, Thames & Hudson, 2018, 432 pages, 396 col. Plates, 63 b. & w. illus., \$100.00 hdbk, ISBN 9780500501214

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As with any complex scholarly work, the level of comprehension of this prodigiously well-researched and consequently compendious history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Australian exhibitions is likely to depend on the degree of readers' involvement in the institutional history it covers. As an academic migrant to Australia from the early 1980s whose research focus has largely been tangential to Australian art, this reviewer has nevertheless had a slight acquaintance with some of the key players and events related in more than four-hundred pages of this text, splendidly illustrated by an equivalent number of often rare archival photographs that must themselves have cost enormous labour to collect, assemble and present. As a consequence, my fragmentary experience of the Australian art world at conferences and exhibitions has been enriched, clarified and reordered by the chronological warp and thematic weft of twelve chapters of sharply varying length respectively entitled 1) 'Taking the initiative: State gallery directors in the 1950s & 1960s'; 2) 'A national picture: the impact of Whitlam and the Australia Council'; 3) 'Exhibitions re-defining the nature of art' (60 pages); 4) 'Blockbuster exhibitions and their consequences' (34 pages); 5) 'Re-examining Australia's past: Colonialism and nationalism' (34 pages); 6) 'The centenary years and beyond' (36 pages); 7) 'Australian Modernism' (36 pages); 8) 'Modernism, feminism: what of the women'; 9) 'The Aboriginal art revolution' (44 pages); 10) 'Exhibiting the present' (38 pages); 11) 'A new Australia' and 12) 'Different modes of engagement'.

Having reviewed research supported over six years by large grants and assisted in collection by an army of curators, archivist and librarians, the four authors – all senior female academic art historians – came to a collective decision about the format the publication should take: 'we realised just how valuable a focus on exhibitions would be to our colleagues in art museums and, more broadly, within the fields of curatorial and art historical studies.'¹ This gives a clear enough indication of the volume's priority of targeted constituencies for whom the trees are less likely to be lost in the leaves. In reviewing this volume, one of its most prominent subjects, the distinguished Australian director Ron Radford, frankly addressed the advantages that academics enjoy over curators in compiling a vast survey volume of this kind. While acknowledging the contribution of the gallery

¹ Joanna Mendelsohn, Catherine De Lorenzo, Alison Inglis and Catherine Speck, *Australian Art Exhibitions: Opening our Eyes*, Melbourne: Thames & Hudson, 2018, 11. All subsequent references appear in main text.

workers who assisted the authors, he grants that, being less constrained by deadlines, academics are more able than curators to present 'a balanced view of rival institutions, the more so because the authors are drawn from three different states' (New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria).² With a kindred generosity of spirit towards curators, the author extolled the merits of curatorial display and writing. Whether working with contemporary or older works of art, 'skilled curators can alter perceptions' and are thus able to become greater agents of social change: 'Their methods for interrogation differ from those employed by art historians in that their selection, carefully displayed within the exhibition space, aligns the sensual and affective qualities of art within a wider narrative.' (pp. 375-376)

In choosing a pragmatic, hands-on approach, – 'We did not see our project as ideologically driven' (p. 11) – they clearly intended to aid and abet the best of Australian directors' and curators' progressive social purposes by delineating the branching varieties of exhibition history and how they were fostered by governmental, corporate and philanthropic funding initiatives. In this way, the primary purpose of this new kind of art history seeks both to emulate and enable arts administrators by charting an institutional history of the collective awareness curators, and their co-workers, have generated in the public mind on which further social agency can act:

Instead of giving special attention to individual artists and art works, this book presents an institutional model that foregrounds the role of art museums. It gives a grand narrative of the building of cultural capital through the knowledge and shared experiences of a generation whose exhibitions are the medium and the agency of communication that help shape the way we see ourselves. (p. 22)

This suggests that although grand narratives are usually regarded with suspicion in contemporary academic discourse, this one is acceptable because it has been compiled by female authors emulating female artists who, as one title in the bibliography puts it, are 'Drivers of ... Alternative Historical Narratives in Australia.'³ While by no means bereft of methodological awareness (though more attention could have been paid to the dissemination through tertiary education of French theory, particularly Nicholas Bourriard's theory of Relational Aesthetics, in the art discussed in the later chapters of the book), the quartet have avoided the higher theoretical reaches of institutional critique initiated by the Frankfurt School

² Ron Radford, 'Ron Radford reviews "Australian Art Exhibitions: Opening our eyes"', *Australian Book Review*, 40, January-February 2019, <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/current-issue/237-january-february-2019-no-408/5293-ron-radford-reviews-australian-art-exhibitions-opening-our-eyes-by-joanna-mendelssohn-et-al>.

³ My reference is to Juliet Peers, 'Women Artists as Drivers of Early Historical Activities and Alternative Narratives in Australia', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 4, 2011, 1-18.

and recast in George Dickie's institutional theory of art,⁴ but have not shied away from correlating exhibition history with other drivers of state, national and international culture that comprise what Donald Preziosi, revising Paul O. Kristeller's foundational essays on 'The Modern System of the Arts', has defined as

the modern discourse on art, a field of dispersion wherein a series of intersecting institutions – academic art history, art criticism, museology, the art market, connoisseurship – maintain in play contrasting systems of evidence and proof, demonstration and explicating, analysis and contemplating, with respect to objects both semantically complete and differential.⁵

Setting out on a more motivated account of institutional exchange than this, the opening chapters of the grand narrative give top ranking to state gallery directors and government policymakers from the late 1940s onwards. Oxymoronic gallery titles such as the National Gallery of Victoria are explained as relics of the nation's transition from state to federal organization. Directors' negotiations produced a matrix of inter-state allegiances (and enmities) on which the funding mechanisms of the Australian Council for the Arts could operate when it was established under the Liberal Government of Harold Holt through the managerial creativity of the virtuoso public servant Dr H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs, who efficiently implemented a Keynesian merger of national economic and cultural policy that switched from a British to a Canadian model of the arts in which government instrumentality enabled the avant-garde (p. 42).

Coombs brought another new broom to bear as an advisor to the new Gough Whitlam Labour Government in 1975 by radically restructuring the Australian Council of the Arts to greatly increase national access to greatly increased arts funding. Throughout the volume, the authors supplely interweave the fortunes of art institutions with the dictates of their paymasters by charting the fluctuations of arts policies under successive governments. The glossary of two hundred and sixteen abbreviations of Australian art institutions in the prefatory pages of the book, to which this reviewer needed fairly constant recourse, would alone give pause to readers who thought they knew the Australian world of art administration, particularly since the list includes many institutions located outside Australia.

Apart from the intrinsic value of its subject, the volume fascinates as an exercise in collaborative scholarship between four instead of the more usual duo of co-writers. In less thoughtful hands it could have become a committee job, marred

⁴ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, and George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: an Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974.

⁵ Donald Preziosi, 'The Question of Art History', *Critical Inquiry*, 18, 1992, 385. See also Paul O. Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: a Study in the History of Aesthetics", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12: 4, 1951, 496-527; 13, no. 1, 1952, 17-46, and James I. Porter, 'Is Art Modern? Kristeller's "Modern System of the Arts" Reconsidered,' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 49: 1, 2009), 1-24.

by erratic linkages and awkward changes of tone, whereas each author's academic specialization, whether in museology, three centuries of Australian art history, photography and Aboriginal anthropological history appear to cycle smoothly through the text with no voice left unblended, though for reasons to be given I agree to some degree with Sasha Grishin that the 'strengths of the book lie more in individual case studies than in the overall picture.'⁶ The consensus fell on an uplifting narrative of increasing inclusivity in race, gender and class, of which arguably class receives less attention than the others in this familiar triad: 'When we began to write, we described 21st century Australia as "a lively yet self-questioning multicultural society, vastly changed from its 19th century self as a culturally cringing former colony whose proudest export was its departing intelligentsia.'⁷ (p. 15). Optimism remains the prevailing impression of the grand narrative as museum and government policies ground an increasing number of touring exhibitions and regional galleries, widening representation of Impressionist, Modernist, Colonial, Feminist, Aboriginal and contemporary art, the introduction of balanced ethical critiques of all these movements, greater inclusion of artistic media beyond painting and sculpture, art produced by successive waves of immigrants, Vietnam veterans, AIDS sufferers, victims of rape as well as art displayed outside galleries through community engagement and performance art whose medium is social participation rather than finished objects. All of these advances vastly expanded art audiences since the 1950s. Early hopes for a triumphal conclusion to this narrative were dashed, however, by the return of chauvinist attitudes in recent times under neo-Liberal government and corporate policies that have eroded social cohesion and diversity by drastic cuts (or lack of rises against inflation) in public spending on the arts and other related areas of the economy:

In recent years there has been diminishing government support for the whole of the arts sector, which in terms of visual art exhibitions includes cuts to national, state and regional art museums, state and national libraries, and science and natural history museums. Curators, librarians and arts advocates are losing their jobs and some art schools and art libraries are threatened with closure. The evidence presented in our arguments points to the powerful effects of exhibitions on Australian life and the importance of maintaining centrality of funding for the cultural sector. (p. 377)

To this grim picture of recent times might be added government interventions in the Culture Wars to promote Western civilization in museums and universities and

⁶ Sasha Grishin, review, 'Best in Show: *Australian Art Exhibitions: Opening Our Eyes*', *Sydney Review of Books*, 1 March 2019, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/australian-art-exhibitions-opening-our-eyes/>.

⁷ Their most famous representatives are probably Germane Greer, Clive James, Peter Porter, and Geoffrey Robertson. See Bruce Bennett and Anne Pender, *From a Distant Shore: Australian Writers in Britain 1820-2012*, Melbourne, Monash University Publishing, 2013. The art critic Robert Hughes worked in America after Britain.

corporate policies at galleries that have thwarted the autonomy and specialist knowledge of curators in favour of incentives to scatter 'gold dust' over exhibitions in the constant quest to meet and surpass attendance quotas.⁸

While agreeing on their narrative, the authors readily admit to disagreements in 'a process best described as a constant self-critical peer review, and we would be lying if we said it were easy. This has meant that every assumption has been held up to the scrutiny of four strong-willed women!' (p. 12). It is possible to speculate on what some of these disagreements were. A plan to begin the sixty-year span of the book with The Field exhibition of American-inspired colour-field paintings with which the new National Gallery of Victoria was opened in 1968 was replaced by a different chronological span that took the starting date back to the Perth exhibition of The Art of Arnhem Land in 1957, the first state gallery exhibition of Aboriginal art.

At stake here is whether the starter leads of cultural rejuvenation reflected in exhibition history are exophoric or endophoric; whether, that is to say, the cohesion of that culture's many strands was triggered from outside its borders by the cultural stimulus of another dominant nation as at the Field (which in Bernard Smith's view was an example of Australian catch-up art) - or whether cohesion was galvanized by recognition of an indigenous core so remote from the country's received art history that it opened a void that was the destiny of Australian curators to fill by exacting a 'shift in perception of Aboriginal art from periphery to centre and to being understood as belonging within Australian Art.' (p. 244) The movement towards the centre is tracked in two dimensions: one from the exclusive exhibition of Aboriginal art from remote communities (thus preserving its exophoric exoticism) to the eventual inclusion of urban Aboriginal art; the other from 'out of the ethnographic museum and into the art museum' (p. 256), for in the art museum indigenous art was no longer stigmatized as 'primitive', or 'othered' by forensic anthropological study, and so could take its rightful place beside other manifestations of contemporary Australian art.⁹

Meanwhile successive waves of migration qualify the exophoric work of Vietnamese, Indonesian, Turkish, Afghanistani artists and those from many other countries for endophoric cohesion with Australian exhibitionary identity. What fits less smoothly with these rights of passage into the body corporate of Australian places of display, either from the core or from outside, are joint exhibitions of American and Australian landscape painting (p. 112) or joint exhibitions of First Peoples' art that bear witness to shared dispossession and massacre in Australia and Canada (pp. 374-5), shows about simultaneous processes taking place in distant

⁸ As far as I am aware the recent critique of the creative economy's responsibility for 'gentrification and rising property prices, with exploitative working conditions and enhanced inequalities' in European academic, activist and policy-making circles has not been taken up significantly in Australia. See Kate Oakley and Jonathan Ward, 'Creative Economy, Critical Perspectives', *Cultural Trends*, 27:5, 2008, 311.

⁹ For an incisive account of the strident cross-disciplinary tensions between anthropological and art historical interpretations of the Art of the Arnhem Land exhibition, see Catherine de Lorenzo, 'The hang and art history', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 13, December 2015, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/de-lorenzo.pdf>.

countries. Neither do biennials and triennials (especially the highly successful Asia-Pacific-Triennials staged at Queensland Art Gallery from 1990 onwards (pp. 334-340)) fit neatly into the overall narrative, for although they may have been inspired by immigration, such exhibitions reach out to the rest of the world as part of a global phenomenon that is not unique to Australia. As Robert Leonard, the first curator of the Asia-Pacific-Triennials, is quoted as saying: 'the APT was participating in a transformation in the wider art world that would soon make our Europe-American "cosmopolitanism" seem wishful, provincial, and out of date' (p. 339). Perhaps this remark suggests a further reason for the author's displacement of the American-inspired Field exhibition away from the beginning of the book's chronological scope, despite its pride of place in the first chapter where its prominence is due to marking the opening of the new National Gallery of Victoria building rather than the 'very narrow cultural spectrum' of its largely Anglo-Australian participants (p. 330). Meanwhile the authors are eager to lay claim to Australians who have migrated to exhibit overseas. If national identity has been nebulized in recent academic discourse by the hyper-inclusive theoretical arguments of the 'Stay, Go, or Come' variety,¹⁰ then what becomes of Terry Smith's advocacy in 'The Provincialism Problem' of 1974 of the regional artist's right to build identity at home without oppression from a misperceived sense of subservience to a world art system centred in New York?¹¹ Does handing the exhibitionary laurel mainly to 'anywhere people' risk further alienating the 'somewhere people' who compose half the population living out their lives close to their birthplaces and from whom the current surge of pro-nationalist popularism arises, even in 'an Australia engaged with a range of diasporas' (p. 339)?¹² True, working-class reaction to the artistic intervention on the Minto housing estate is addressed, but it ends on a note of consternation (p. 378).

This lavishly illustrated text by Thames & Hudson is such a new departure in Australian historiography and is of such unprecedented scale that it is easy to neglect its place amongst several recent exhibitionary histories of other countries, as well as *Seize the Day: Exhibitions, Australia and the World* (2008), which investigated the earlier history of Australian exhibitions.¹³ Like a portrait in an interior whose

¹⁰ The allusion is to an essay by Rex Butler and A. D. S. Donaldson, 'Stay, Go, or Come: A History of Australian Art, 1920-40', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 9:1-2, 2008-9, 119-144.

¹¹ Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', originally published in *Artforum*, 13: 1, September 1974), 54-9, reprinted in *Journal of Art Historiography*, 3, 2010, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/smith-provincialism-problem-1974.pdf>.

¹² In a political rather than an aesthetic context, these are arguments that David Goodhart applies to Britain and to a lesser extent North America in *The Road to Somewhere: the Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017. For a critique, see Johnathan Freedland, 'The Road to Somewhere by David Goodhart – a liberal's rightwing turn on immigration', *Guardian*, 27 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/22/the-road-to-somewhere-david-goodhart-populist-revolt-future-politics>.

¹³ *Seize the Day: Exhibitions, Australia and the World*, ed. Kate Darian-Smith, Richard Gillespie, Caroline Jordan and Elizabeth Willis, Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2008. For a few

external walls are invisible, the narratives of *Australian Art Exhibitions* are enclosed by invisible walls of nationality except for cultural connections radiating out of and into Australia. How could it be otherwise, given the Australian subject of the volume and why should it be otherwise, given that the tacit activism of the book needs a clearly delineated geographical arena on which to direct communal curatorial effort? Yet in examining the language of 'cohesion', 'core' and 'corporate body' that I have used, and 'centre' and 'self' used by the authors (as in the earlier cited passage on a 'self-questioning multicultural society, vastly changed from its 19th century self' (p. 15)), the personification of national identity based on the divergence and convergence of cultural strands embodied in exhibitions seems to hark back to the twin conceptions of nationhood and psychology that underpinned earlier generations' reification of the nation as a more or less immured personality intent on self-determination.¹⁴ That sits oddly with the rather anxious assertion that closes the penultimate chapter: 'Australia does not have a homogenous culture.' (p. 369)

Contradictory personifications of complex entities are probably inevitable in a survey book of this scope, but it is interesting to consider how its narratives might have changed in a differently conceived study focused on parallel curatorial processes in other parts of the world, given that curators everywhere have long looked elsewhere to achieve 'best practice'. I have already cited many instances in this volume, from 'Nugget' Coombs looking sideways at a Canadian arts policy to the joint First Peoples' exhibitions, but perhaps the most salient example it gives is in chapter four on Blockbuster exhibitions, where the authors cite the catalogue of *Australian Impressionism*, an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria sponsored by the Australian International Cultural Foundation in 2007, where the director Gerald Vaughan and curator Terence Lane

convincingly argued that the Melbourne artists had been a part of a wider international Impressionist movement simultaneously manifested in Europe, America and the British Empire in the last decades of the 19th century. While earlier writers had assumed an Antipodean exceptionalism in the way Australian artists painted, recent scholarship had shown that Impressionism was a worldwide movement. (p. 102)

recent examples of other countries' exhibition histories, in rough chronological order, see Brandon Taylor, *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public, 1747-2001*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999; *National Museums and Nation-building in European Museums 1750-2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*, ed. Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius, London: Routledge, 2014; *Art Museums of Latin America: Structuring Representation*, ed. Michele Greet and Gina McDaniel Tarver, London: Routledge, 2018; Sally Anne Duncan and Andrew McClellan, *The Art of Curating: Paul J. Sachs and the Museum Course at Harvard*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2018, and the series of books addressing the theme of 'Making Art Global' published by Afterall, London: <https://www.afterall.org/books/exhibition.histories/>.

¹⁴ For theories of nationhood based on psychology, see Glenda Sluga, *The Nation, Psychology, and International Politics, 1870-1919*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

The view of Australian impressionism as the country's earliest confident expression of national consciousness here gives way in exhibition history to the realization that the new style participated in a global means of nation-making that had started elsewhere.¹⁵ On the other hand, in chapter seven, the emphasis falls, amongst alternative explanations, on how Australian exhibitions made international Modernism their own.

Turning to chronology, this reviewer was at first disappointed that the early chapters had little to say about the long durée of Australian exhibition history. In his review of the book, ignoring the Aboriginal substitution in Perth, Sasha Grishin made a specific case for starting nine years earlier than *The Field* with the paintings of John Brack, Arthur Boyd and Charles Blackman and others at the Antipodean exhibition of 1959, which remains 'one of the most controversial and best-known exhibitions in Australian art history.'¹⁶ My own hypothetical inclusions are more general and would again unfairly require a different book when this one has delivered so much.

My sense of a lacking long durée was satisfied in some measure in chapter five, where a background of Australian collecting is given prior to descriptions of exhibitions from 1972 onwards that expanded representation of nineteenth-century sculpture, print-making, photography and other so-called decorative or minor arts. These exhibitions sharply reassessed Bernard Smith's characterisation of Australian art as 'an English tradition in minor key' (quoted on p. 121). Not only is the expanded collectability of early art noted but also its meteoric rise in market value even as early art's collusion in dispossession and genocide is increasingly admitted in catalogue essays. In these ways, late twentieth-century exhibitions illuminate the earlier history of art.

In similar fashion one of the earliest in-depth evocations of existential exhibition experience in the book is that of Jonathan Jones, Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi people's exhibition *barrangal dyara* (skin and bones), 2016, in Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens. It explores the issue of how the early collecting policies of European occupiers deprived Aboriginal artefacts of their original communal life in ceremonial rituals. It was, therefore, a kind of anti-exhibition that made visitors aware of pre-exhibitionary usages of indigenous artefacts. In doing so it folded out modern understanding into a remoter past. These methods of encapsulating object usages before the primary period of the book's concern commendably formulate institutional equivalents to Michael Baxandall's insight into artistic 'influence' as a causal force best thought of as working backwards rather than forwards in time, so that what counts is not what the earlier artist (in his example, Cézanne) did to the later, but what the later artist (Picasso) did to the earlier (in Picasso's case,

¹⁵ At the time of writing the 10th Annual Anne d'Harnoncourt Court Symposium at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on 10-14 April 2019 is to be devoted to 'Impressionism Around the World' with a keynote lecture by T. J. Clark. Unfortunately, I am unable to trace for the purposes of counter-argument the unintentionally funny account commissioned by the Canadian government as commentary of its nation's contribution to the South Kensington Empire exhibition in celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, 1887, in which John Hodges is supposed to have written that 'Impressionism will bring Empire to its knees.'

¹⁶ Sasha Grishin, 'Best in Show: *Australian Art Exhibitions: Opening Our Eyes*', n. p.

committing patricide on the forerunner).¹⁷ Yet I shall give two instances where a more conventional understanding of forwardly causative influence might have been illuminating. One concerns the early part of the twentieth century, the other the previous century.

A visitor would have to come from a very different country from Australia to find the character of its exhibitions wholly unfamiliar. Its blockbuster shows inherit what Francis Haskell called the 'Enduring Legacies' of 'Old Master' retrospectives in seventeenth-century Italy and bourgeois salons in nineteenth-century France that culminated in such shows as the Rembrandt exhibition in Amsterdam in 1898. Their nationalistic frame of mind was perpetuated after the First World War in international loan exhibitions serving soft diplomacy.¹⁸ Yet qualifying Bernard Smith's verdict on colonial Australia art as 'a second-rate British emulation, derivative in theme, technique, inspiration and aspiration' (quoted p. 134), the rollout of libraries, combined art galleries and museums and institutes of adult learning known as Mechanics' Institutes took place in a sequence in which Australian foundations sometimes preceded those in Britain and the rest of the Commonwealth.¹⁹

When it came to the training of gallery curators in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, university art history courses based on their own or partner galleries became part of the process of urban professionalisation across Germany, Britain, America and Australia, a process that was often compared to the professionalisation of medicine. Thus, in a letter published in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1930, the British art critic Roger Fry used arguments designed to spark national competitiveness in supporting the establishment of the Courtauld Institute, London, in the year before it opened. Fry envisaged a top-down spread of art-historically trained curators from the capital to the provinces. Reflecting sardonically on the composition of governing bodies of regional galleries where community leaders were convinced that an understanding of art is 'a heaven-descended gift which comes by the grace of God and not by study' but as a 'reward for their success in business activities,' Fry hoped that the availability of curators with a university training would have 'a marvellously sobering effect on these public-spirited, but over-inspired patrons' and so instill in them

something of the same hesitation in overriding the opinion of such a professional authority as they may now feel about neglecting the advice of their doctor. In the long run this might lead to our provincial galleries becoming centres of artistic influence comparable to the great provincial

¹⁷ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, 58-59.

¹⁸ Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition*, London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000.

¹⁹ See Bronwyn Lowden, *Mechanics' Institutes, Schools of Arts, Athenaeums, etc.: An Australian Checklist*. Donvale, Australia: Lowden Publishing Co., 2007, 44-79. Hobart's Mechanics' Institute, established in 1827, followed on the heels of the first Mechanics' Institute in England, which was in Liverpool four years earlier.

galleries of Germany and America. The difference that this would make in the cultural life of England is incalculable.²⁰

How often these issues recur in the fractious history of Australian directors' and curators' battles with Boards of Trustees!

Moreover, the foundation of the Courtauld took its place within a significant international sequence. The appointment of Paul J. Sachs to create the Museum Course for graduate students of museums studies through the Fogg Museum and Harvard University Fine Arts Department in 1921, which inaugurated the principle that museums should be clear, neutral spaces in which to display art, preceded by ten years the establishment of the Courtauld Institute with its extensive collection of mainly French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings under its first director William George Constable. This preceded by fifteen years the appointment in 1946 of Joseph Burke (with a museum background) as the foundation Herald Professor at the University of Melbourne, where art history was established as a 'training ground in Australia for expert staffing of galleries and art museums' that worked closely with the National Gallery of Victoria, 'so that both institutions became a nursery for generations of curators and directors as well as collectors and patrons of the arts.'²¹ (p. 30) It was not until 1968 that Bernard Smith was appointed the first Power Professor to teach art history and theory at the University of Sydney where he 'actively promoted Fine Arts as a humanities subject that could lead to careers in the arts' through the introduction of Honours studies in Museology and a postgraduate diploma in Museum Studies in 1971 and 1976 respectively (p. 236).²²

It is interesting to speculate on differences as well as continuities in curatorial policy debates spawned by these training schemes in different countries. Bernard Smith followed the British model where 'academic art history provided the intellectual foundations for applied art history in the museum'²³ (p. 259) and rejected the American model of Sachs' influential student Alfred H. Barr that largely prevailed in the acquisition of modernist works in Australian public galleries: 'Whereas one documented art, the other dictated art history', Jim Berryman has

²⁰ Roger Fry, letter, 'The Courtauld Institute,' *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 57: 333, December 1930, 318.

²¹ See also Jaynie Anderson, 'Art History's History in Melbourne: Franz Philipp in correspondence with Arthur Boyde (France Philipp Memorial Lecture 1988)', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 1: 2, 2000, 111-129, and 'Interrogating Joe Burke and His Legacy: The Joseph Burke Lecture, 2005', *Melbourne Art Journal*, 8, 2005, 89-99, repr. *Journal of Art Historiography*, 4, June 2011, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/anderson-on-burke.pdf>.

²² The authors are aware of other aspects of this larger international history. See Catherine Speck and Lisa Slade, 'Art History and Exhibitions: Same or Different?', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 14: 2, 2014, 141-50.

²³ Bernard Smith, 'The Role of the Art Museum and Public Accountability', 1988, quoted in Jim Berryman, 'Documenting Art: Bernard Smith, Academic Art History and the Role of the Curator', in *The Legacies of Bernard Smith: Essays on Australian Art, History and Cultural Politics*, ed. Jaynie Anderson, Christopher R. Marshall and Andrew Yip, Sydney: Power Publications and Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2016, 259.

observed.²⁴ Potent also in this volume are the kinds of issues that were regular topics of debate in Sachs' Museum Course at Harvard, for example on whether museums should serve the community or the educated elites, and the related question of whether their concentration should be on historical collections or contemporary art. On the other hand, did 'the period room dilemma' loom so large in Australian museology as it did at the Harvard Museum Course? By this is meant the question of whether the reconstruction of a historical environment attractive to mass audiences should take precedence over focus on individual objects of greater interest to the specialist.²⁵ Perhaps it has had resonance in Australia.

Another consideration of enduring legacy, formative context or forwardly-causative influence devolves from the authors' awareness of the dangers of writing about the culture of Australian states they have not lived in. Their concern reflects an old debate on the fair representation of separate states in grand narratives of Australian art history, and the authors do their best to compensate for their geographical disadvantages:

As none of us live in Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania or the Northern Territory we have been especially conscious of the need to explore exhibitions originating from those states. In the case of Western Australia, we have been almost entirely dependent on the recollections of those who curated exhibitions, media coverage and, most importantly, the exhibition catalogues that provide a priceless legacy of the reforms of the early 1970s. (p. 11)

Perhaps this was another contributory factor in the decision to start the books' chronological span (not its narrative) with *The Art of Arnhem Land* show in Western Australia's capital Perth in 1957.²⁶ On the whole, however, it seems fair to say that the author's value judgements on Western Australian curatorial prowess are, with notable exceptions, fairly negative compared to the Eastern States. As a resident of Perth frequently inspired by exhibitions that pass unmentioned in the book, this reviewer is hardly an impartial commentator but has noticed some mistakes. The Western Australian artist Trevor Vickers who took part in the

²⁴ Berryman, 'Documenting art', 267.

²⁵ See Belinda Rathbone, 'Museum Work & Museum Problems', review of *The Art of Curating: Paul J. Sachs and the Museum Course at Harvard*, *The New Criterion*, 37: 4, 2018, 13.

²⁶ Western Australia may also have been singled out for special consideration partly due to a symposium on 'The Undiscovered: a National Focus on Western Australian Art' at the University of Western Australia, 20 October 2014. Its organiser, Ted Snell, advertised the symposium in an article on 'Western Australian art is excluded from the national conversation', *The Conversation*, 17 October 2014, <http://theconversation.com/western-australian-art-is-excluded-from-the-national-conversation-32498>, in which he argued that Western Australian art is 'marginalised – peripheral to the periphery – and dislocated from both Australian and world centres of art production' compared to 'the Sydney, Melbourne and – more recently Brisbane – axis.' Catherine Speck, one of the authors of the volume under review, strongly argued from the audience of this symposium that Western Australians should take responsibility for promoting their own culture nationally and internationally.

Melbourne Field exhibition would be surprised to learn that he lives in Adelaide (p. 34). But suppose that the overall negative verdict on Western Australian curatorial achievement is justified on comparative grounds.²⁷ Can it be explained by incremental long-term factors in smaller opportunities for the state in the nineteenth century? Compared to Colonel Light, whose highly organized party of immigrants already employed drawing equipment in their tents on first arrival on South Australian beaches, Western Australians lacked cultural confidence and capital. According to Lise Summers, the state was smaller in population, poorer and less autonomous than other states. Thus, when it came to participate in intercolonial and international exhibitions of kinds devoted more to the display of local materials and commercial products than fine arts, its administrators demonstrated 'a reluctance to appear in a setting in which the colonists suspected they would be perceived as the "poor relations"', while 'the potential for invidious comparison caused Western Australians to choose their exhibitions carefully'. The authorities were also tardier in establishing museums, libraries and art galleries than some other states.²⁸ Yet however retarding such incremental disadvantages may be, cultures can improve quickly, as the cultural developments in Brisbane following the World Expo of 1988 attest and several new precincts recently constructed in Perth. Stereotypes die hard, however, and if these authors have tried to avoid them, snobbish asides against regional arts organisers by academics who pride themselves on impeccable Leftist credentials can still be heard at certain AGMs in the larger Eastern States cities.

To suggest a second hypothetic inclusion: curators, critics and art historians - secondary consecrators all - have powerful opportunities and responsibilities when imposing their taxonomies, but as works of art are batched and re-batched in collections and exhibitions, the compulsion to tell stories with works of art can reduce the polyvalent ambiguity of connection they may once have possessed in the studio. In what is now an old book of 1987, *La Peinture dans la Peinture*, Pierre Georgel and Anne-Marie Lecocq discovered a wealth of esoteric preoccupations that artists primarily transmitted to each other rather than to viewers over many generations. If a similar study were compiled for post-1950 Australian art, it is an open question to what extent it would resist or cut across the curatorial narratives recorded in this book. Far from discounting the political significance of class, gender and racial politics that absorb these pages, an artists' history might approach social and political issues differently, perhaps sometimes more reductively,²⁹ as well as

²⁷ It certainly accords with the sorry opinion of Perth culture that Jeff Kennett, the characteristically controversial former Victorian Premier responsible for the revitalization of Melbourne's culture industry, gave on a visit to Perth in 2007. See Pam Casellas, 'Antiseptic Perth is devoid of life: Kennett', *West Australian*, 9 March 2007, p. 3: "'Perth has a heart," he told the lunchtime audience, "but does it have a heartbeat?'"

²⁸ See Lise Summers, 'Hidden Treasure: Exhibiting Western Australia, 1860-90', in *Seize the Day*, 05.2, 3, 9.

²⁹ Consider the repetitive clichés of New York conceptual art shows that the anonymous critic of *Culturebox* complained about in 2000: 'Consumerism is bad. Sexism is bad. Censorship is bad. Corporations do not have your interests in mind. Art collectors are rich, mean, corrupt people who commodify art and use it for their own ends.' See Anon., 'Hans Haacke: Art or Punditry?', *Culturebox*, March 16, 2000, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2000/03/hans-haacke-art-or-punditry.html> and Richard Read, 'Art and politics: a

ramifying interactions between artists' imaginative worlds that would probably map unevenly over the social and political concerns of their times. Can the narrative tendencies of any exhibition history do justice to the more bizarre, anarchic, mysterious or deeper fantasy life of Australian visual imagination and might there not be an untold, rowdy history not only of competition between artists for prominence in group shows but of their resistance to the codifying institutional 'hang' itself, apart, that is, from art deliberately and oppositionally made for display outside home and gallery walls? Illustrated in the book are two works by the conceptual artist Peter Tyndall (pp. 62 and 304) that send up the entire apparatus of gallery viewing. Tyndall typically features an idealized, middle-class family from the world of advertising imagery who are shown revering a blank painting suspended on puppet strings in a gallery under the trademark title 'A Person Looks at a Work of Art/someone looks at something', but his art is only designated in the text with other works as 'ironically postmodern' (p. 305). One wonders whether it would have impaired the upbeat positivity of the book to have scrutinised the oppositional intentions of such cultural critique artists more extensively, together with the generous readiness of curators to exhibit them. More importantly, instead of exhibition history superseding conventional art history, perhaps it would have been better to historicize the tensions as well as the harmonies between all the discourses of art more rigorously.

Another alternative study prompted this time by the copious illustrations in the book is the history of spectating rather than curating. Many photographs illustrate exhibition posters or single works of art, and amongst these are some containing passages of dense text thoughtfully magnified to a scale at which leisurely or specialist readers can construe them (for example on pp. 73-75, 89, 363, and just maybe 82-85). The majority of illustrations are historical photographs of exhibition displays of which some show spectators attired in the fashions of their day. Though in the nature of their provenance exhibition installation shots of empty galleries outnumber spectator-scenes three to one, I still counted fifty-eight of the latter. The former reveal much about the history of lighting, wall colours, partitioning, spacing and geometrical display over several decades, but as flattened segments of three-dimensional shows, they cannot be expected to convey much about the twists and turns of an exhibition's linear 'logic' from end to end. Though the authors draw few conclusions from these photographs about overall changes in exhibition strategy over sixty years, at several points they are good at taking readers on verbal journeys through the existential experience of shows or community engagements, whether it is the aforementioned *barrangal dyara* show of 2016 in Sydney or the 'process as outcome' (p. 378) at the working class housing estate in Minto where artists posing as house decorators had uncertain encounters with residents in 2009.

Exhibition itineraries are initially theorized according to Robert Storr's principles of 'exhibition syntax': 'Galleries are paragraphs, the walls and formal subdivisions of the floors are sentences, clusters of works are clauses and individual

critic's perspective on Agnes Martin and Liberate Tate,' in *TransCultural Exchanges 2018 International Conference on Opportunities in the Arts: Exploring New Horizons*, ed. Mary Sherman and Ann Galligan, Delaware: Vernon Press, 2019, forthcoming.

works, in varying degrees, operate as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs' (p. 16). Though most curators would have some kind of thumbnail principle in mind as they work, there is something chillingly reductive about this one-for-one application of Saussurean linguistics to control the sidereal movements of spectators and their eyes through galleries. It assumes too much compliance on the part of the spectator. Later though, after the advantages of exhibitions over text-based art history have been explained, the immersive and restless qualities of display are foregrounded to soften those prescriptions (p. 64). *Australian Art Exhibitions* stands in an ambivalent position between text-based art history and exhibitionary display, since the plethora of photographs seems partly intended to immerse the reader and allay the allegedly tyrannical linearity of art history. Although the effect of having to leave the text to search for relevance in the illustrations is often interesting, many photographs that include spectators are peculiarly mute because the subjective responses of spectators in them remain ineluctably private and inscrutable. Like photographs of other ephemeral activities like dance, their charm is enigmatic rather than instructive. The most eloquent counter-example in this regard is a photograph of crowds viewing Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1906 when the exposure time of cameras was still so long that curious blurs mark seemingly impulsive migrations of flocks of spectators, while excessive definition of certain single figures shows them standing their ground transfixed with an effect of eternal intensity by one exhibit or another (p. 7). Yet still we cannot know what drove or arrested them, and the effect is lost in the instantaneous capture of modern photographs except for one fascinating example of double-exposure that is peculiarly appropriate to the ghostly mournfulness of the exhibition theme: Ted Gott's 1995 Sydney exhibition of *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS* (p. 311).

The authors are almost certainly aware of contemporary studies that detail the cursory concentration span that most gallery-goers devote to single works of art and their labels,³⁰ so it could have been the result of mischievous activism that the second photograph in the book, after one depicting children breaking the taboo of touch, features two spectators of whom one leans down to scrutinize the area below an oval chairback in E. Philip Fox's *Lamplight*, c. 1911, in a Brisbane exhibition of 2011 (p. 4). Few art historians would miss the analogy between this photograph and the duo of bewigged connoisseurs of whom one kneels in rapturous concentration before an oval painting propped on chairs in Jean-Antoine Watteau's eighteenth-century *Shop Sign of Gersaint*, at a time when prolonged aesthetic scrutiny of paintings was only just becoming fashionable. The choice of the Philip Fox spectators seems like an injunction to close-reading – and yet the sheer withholding of many of the photographs of spectating eludes the text's grasp and suggests a different kind of enquiry in an age of surveillance when private lives have never been so insecure. I am thinking of a history of spectating that would be different from mapping the trajectories of understanding that curators intended visitors to take and would be even more difficult to write.

This raises the issue of the cover photograph, a heart-warming image of

³⁰ E.g.: Isaac Kaplan, 'How Long Do You Need to Look at a Work of Art to Get It?', *Art Market*, 25 January 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-long-work-art-it>.

elderly indigenous women leaning into each other and holding hands as they sit mesmerized gazing upwards at the Dome *Travelling Kungkarangkalpa*, 2017, an Artwork Experience showing the Tjanpi sculptures *Kungkarrangkalnga-ya Parrpakanu (Seven Sisters Are Flying)* in the *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters* exhibition at the National Museum of Australia 2017-8. Though it is never directly explained, this photograph clearly symbolises the import of the whole book's plea for the joyous inclusion of minorities within exalted gallery spaces. I could not think of any other representative constituency of spectators I would prefer to replace them, and I do not doubt the generous motives in either photographing them or selecting their image for the cover, yet I confess to feelings of intense ambivalence towards the possibility that capturing their spontaneous enjoyment objectifies them as trophies on an industry hit list of ideal spectators. In his essay on 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order', Timothy Mitchell wrote of the strangeness that Arab novelists experienced on visiting the nineteenth-century European 'Object World'. There they discovered 'not just exhibitions and representations of the world, but the world itself being ordered up as an endless exhibition.' (p. 456) Their 'stories would often evoke the peculiar experience of the West by describing an individual surrounded and stared at, like an object on exhibit', taking in 'his dress and appearance.'³¹ Where this cover image is concerned, the other side of the argument is no less important. Why should a cover that promotes the enjoyment of indigenous people inside a gallery be avoided when so many Aboriginals still feel such places are not meant for them? My point is that the photographs in this volume are like works of art many-levelled documents that raise many more issues than the text could ever hope to adequately address.³²

If I have speculated on a number of alternative studies to the one under review, it is because this impressive and well-written work of scholarship will surely inspire many PhDs and books on related aspects of its history, perhaps including those published by overseas authors. As well as the prefatory list of abbreviations, the book is usefully equipped with three appendices on individual exhibitions, career paths in Australian art administration, and a selected bibliography. Despite the fifteen hundred entries in the index, it would have been useful to have page numbers for the list of exhibitions, for they are often difficult to find in the text. But the authors are to be congratulated on pulling off an extraordinarily difficult and worthwhile balancing act in which the wobbles are as thought-provoking as the resolutions.

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³¹Timothy Mitchell, 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order', *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 456, 458.

³² For example, the photograph on p. 74 of the butch Australian actor Jack Thompson posed in a suave green jacket reverently gazing at the sheep shearers in William Roberts' *The Golden Fleece* is ripe for a seminar on the semiotic evolution of the Australian larrikin. He had just opened the show.

Richard Read

Opened eyes on Australian exhibition history

and the visual arts and complex images in global contexts. His anthology on nineteenth-century American and Australian landscape painting co-edited with Kenneth Haltman will be published by University of Chicago Press in 2019.

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