

The Social Responsibilities of Public Galleries

2/6/09

Jon Hawkes

Keynote speech at 'Into the Future', a forum organised by the Public Galleries Association of Victoria as part of their AGM in the Benalla Art Gallery

I must start by apologising for the title of this presentation. When Merle and I first talked of the possibility of me coming here, I mentioned that I had talked at a museums and galleries function on this topic some years ago. She responded that the issue was as relevant now as ever, so why didn't I revisit and update the ideas I had developed back then.

That seemed like a good idea at the time, until I began to imagine the reception I might receive: 'Who is this bloke? What would he know?'

So, for starters, let me say that I'm not about to tell you what your social responsibilities are, or even how you might go about fulfilling them. You know what you're on about far better than I. Indeed, if you don't have a clear sense of your social function, you wouldn't be here.

Second, I must admit to a relatively underdeveloped sense of 'public art gallery theory', as distinct from 'collection agency theory'. Yesterday morning, my wife asked me what the event was at which I would be speaking. When I told her, she asked the question that I imagine is in all of your minds: 'What do you know about public art galleries?'

Not enough, I admit. But I do know about public culture, cultural policy (or lack of it), public cultural funding and the function of both 'the arts' and 'collection agencies' in the development of cultural vitality.

I think this knowledge may be useful to you in re-examining your terms of reference, so to speak.

What I hope to do this morning is to suggest ways of describing and contextualising your social function that facilitate confident expressions of your social value.

That is, to explore ways of talking about what you do that increase the likelihood of folk clearly understanding and appreciating how important you are.

Let me start by stating the obvious: this was, is and always will be blackfella country. I am a boat person (literally). I thank those who know what it means to belong this country, for the opportunity they may offer my daughter (who was born here) to learn what belonging may mean. The fact that this gift may still be available, in the face of all that has happened in the last two hundred years, constantly fills me with wonder and gratitude.

But, if we really want to authentically belong this country, to transcend being simply occupiers, we must, beyond reaching a mutually agreed accommodation with the custodians, be prepared to learn from them what the responsibilities are that go with nurturing, rather than exploiting, country.

Amongst these responsibilities is the maintenance of keeping places: those sites of place, and of mind, where the heritages of cultures are kept. And this keeping is not just a matter of storage but of daily use. Just as blackfella culture is not some memory of a pre-invasion tribal golden age, but a range of living, dynamic and ever-developing responses to contemporary conditions and experiences, so it is, or should be, with all cultures.

The challenge for the custodians of the keeping places is twofold:

- to ensure that our keeping places house the full diversity of our heritages; and
- to ensure that our heritages remain connected to our daily lives.

These two responsibilities, in the language of the policy makers, can be summarised in two words: diversity and engagement.

I've been asked to speak today, not because I'm in any way an expert on places of exhibition, but because I've contributed, in a small way, to massaging the ideas floating around at the moment into a shape that appears to be relevant to contemporary issues, or at least to those issues that public planners are trying to grapple with.

The main focus of my work has been to draw connections between the role of culture in the development of wellbeing and sustainability in general, and in community building and capacity in particular.

Consequently notions of participation, engagement and empowerment have figured significantly in my thinking. The most coherent version of this thought appears in the small volume I've written for the Cultural Development Network of Victoria entitled, '*The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning*'.

In this work, I use 'culture' in what is known as its 'anthropological' sense (it is also the sense in which it is used in the 1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights).

In this context, the concept 'culture' describes:

- our values and aspirations;
- the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and
- the ways of life these processes produce.

While this outline is fine as a dictionary definition, it misses the heart and the guts of culture.

A more folksy description goes like this:

- Our culture embodies the sense we make of our lives; it is built on the values we share and the ways we come to terms with our differences; it deals with what matters to people and communities: relationships, memories, experiences, identities, backgrounds, hopes and dreams in all their diversity. And most of all, our culture expresses our visions of the future: what it is we want to pass on to future generations.
- Our culture connects our present with our pasts and with the future we imagine. It is with culture that we make the connections, the networks of meanings and values, and of friendship and interest, that hold us together in time, in place and in society.
- Our culture describes the ways we tell each other our stories, how we create our sense of ourselves, how we remember who we are, how we imagine who we want to become, how we relax, how we celebrate, how we argue, how we bring up our children, the spaces we make for ourselves.
- Our culture is the expression of our desires to be happy, our desires to belong, our desires to survive and, above all, our desires to be creative.

This description demonstrates that culture embodies those facets of our being that make us human; it embodies our essence. This usage of 'culture' can be summarised as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense together'. Of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; we need to recognise and facilitate this process in the ways we organise our society.

So, given that public art galleries are keeping places, what part do they play in 'making sense together'?

In the hope that I could make my life easier, I dug out the text of the talk I mentioned earlier, presuming that I must have already answered this question.

After all, its title was 'The Challenge of Active Community Engagement' and I'm still convinced that active community engagement exactly describes the fundamental social responsibility of all public cultural institutions.

But the more I read of the original text, the more uncomfortable I became.

I realised that most of the thinking I've done, and literature I've read, concerns generic 'collecting agencies' or 'keeping places', that is, libraries, museums and galleries. I further noted that, in North America and in Europe, what we know as public art galleries are often called 'art museums'.

Indeed, the author who has inspired me most in this field, one David Carr (a librarian), in his collection, 'The Promise of Cultural Institutions' takes it for granted that a cultural institution is one of these three types, and while eloquently expressing what their function is, or should be, never distinguishes between them. As someone with a background in performance, I was disturbed by his exclusion of performing arts 'institutions' from his catalogue of institutions.

And, as I thought more about who my audience would be today, I began to wonder if this lumping together of 'collecting' institutions made sense.

I have spent a lot of my life at war with dysfunctional concept juxtapositions. 'Art and Culture' is one I particularly hate, and as I wrote this, I began to suspect that 'Museums and Galleries' might become another.

Obviously public galleries and museums have much in common: they are community keeping places, and community showing places. In the case of museums, the conserved artefacts become frameworks for stories. 'And thereby hangs a tale' is an essential element of museology.

While the contextualisation of work is an important aspect of gallery exhibition design, a parallel, indeed opposite, function also informs gallerology. One might call it the 'de-contextualisation' of the work - facilitating the direct sensory experience of the witness. Given that the initial, and perhaps most powerful, response to an image is physiological, how is the witness assisted to feel this experience before its almost immediate overlay by layers of cultural expectations, assumptions, and backstories?

I wish that I could offer an immediate and simple answer to this question, but I can't.

I grew up on John Berger, so I understand that the way we see is culturally determined. It is simply ridiculous to hanker after some sort of pure 'natural' response to an image.

Nevertheless, redressing the balance between sensation and intellect seems to me to be a project properly within the ambit of public art galleries.

It was at this point in my musings that I began to realise that a gaggle of gallery folk (what is the appropriate collective noun?) would be likely to have a quite different slant on reality than a mob of museumites.

This realisation was consolidated by the conversations I had over dinner last night and has led me to discard much of what I written before I arrived. My thanks to my dinner companions for allowing me to test some of my contentions and for leading me down some new pathways.

While much of what I witnessed and overheard last night reinforced my fears that I was venturing into waters way beyond my depth, it also induced an illumination.

Since writing the 4th Pillar, and up until the end of last year, I have been working with a group called Community Music Victoria. CMV's mission was to transform Victoria into a state of singing. My contribution to this glorious folly was to develop the language that explained why achieving this state was essential to the wellbeing of all that reside in this land.

This led me down some fascinating paths – in particular, into the world of neuroscience. As is so often the case, I discovered that science can now confirm what we have always known – that musical capacities are innate in all of us and that our bodies fire up like new year's eve not only when we make music but when we listen to it.

What has this to do with art?, I hear you asking. Last night Adam said to me, 'If you're going to be talking about social responsibility and you don't talk about galleries being safe and welcoming spaces for kids, then bugger off' – or words to that effect.

One of the essential planks of the CMV music-making strategy has been the creation of 'free and fearless' spaces in which folk can come together to make music.

Adam's assertion led me to believe that perhaps I wasn't quite the stranger in a strange land that I had feared I was.

This moment of perceived solidarity caused me to spend a lot of last night re-reading that other book that I had brought with me on this journey – 'Chaos, Territory and Art' by Elizabeth Grosz. I cannot recommend it too highly.

Among many other things, she is saying that music and visual art offer meaning through the intensities and sensations they evoke in our bodies rather than through intention or representation, or as Marshall McLuhan said, 'the medium is the message'. Grosz's analysis paralleled what I had observed in our work with singing: we often assume that it is the message contained in the lyrics that attracts us to a particular song, but more often than not, the most powerful stimulant is the sound – the words are secondary.

To summarise:

- We make meaning in a myriad of ways other than with and through language
- These ways convey meaning that is inexpressible through language
- We implicitly recognise this phenomenon when we talk of making 'sense'
- With language, we create powerful metaphors for this **sense** that we **feel**
- To the point where we often end up believing that the meaning resides **in** the language, rather than in the sensation that inspired the language

And here I am beginning to be able to express what I think may be the fundamental social responsibility of public art galleries:

It is to liberate our 'visuality'; to enhance our capacity to take joy in seeing the world in new ways; to inspire confidence in believing our eyes and in recognising the feelings that images induce.

As Bob Dylan sang, we don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows – we don't need a meteorologist in order to enjoy a sunset – nor should we need an art critic to enjoy a painting.

By saying this, I am not denigrating either of these functions – both are useful. It is only when they impede the direct sensory experience that their function becomes problematic.

(Here ends the detailed text from which I spoke; the remainder of my presentation was cued from the following rough notes:

LANGUAGE

I'm uncomfortable with phrases like 'the language of images' and 'the language of music'. Language is a system of signs – the sounds and squiggles signify something beyond themselves – they are symbols, and unless one is familiar with the lexicon, the signs are impenetrable. Yes, image-makers create pictures that have symbolic resonances, but there are fundamental physiological and neurological impacts that are direct and don't need to be mediated by 'translation' – indeed may be diluted by it.

In Tom Wolfe's 'The Painted Word', he describes attending an exhibition where the gallery attendant informed him that he would be unable to appreciate the displayed images unless he first read the support theory. While Wolfe's hatred of non-representational work is silly, his critique of the contemporary function of art theory is worth pondering. I think that public art galleries have a responsibility to develop a language about their holdings that illuminates rather than obscures.

I fear that many arts managers share the common suspicion that art is really just decoration that should only be thought about after the 'real' issues have been dealt with (or at least that they suspect that their colleagues and superiors are of this opinion). The consequence is that a great deal of their rhetoric lacks a confident and grounded demonstration of what is at stake. Instead of bold clarity we get desperate and defensive rationales, new age sentimentality, aggressively enthusiastic corporate speak, dull bureaucratise, unsupportable quality of life claims, cries for the preservation of ancient rituals and obscurantist art jargon.

This realisation has led me to adapt Samuel Johnson's aphorism about patriotism to read: 'Hermetic language is the last refuge of the insecure'. Just as much as we need to build the 'art confidence' of communities, we need to build our own confidence. And this confidence should manifest itself in a language that is welcoming and inclusive.

DIVERSITY

Of materials: what is commonly known as 'craft' (and often dismissed as such) is not without visual impact. Just because an object has a real-life function or is made out of a textile or clay should not exclude it from being taken seriously as a stimulant of our artistic sensibilities.

Of ways of seeing: As I struggled last night to distinguish the public gallery's function from those of other collecting institutions, I came up with the idea that your primary function might be to **celebrate diverse ways of seeing**.

And by celebrate I mean to conserve, display and encourage visual diversity BOTH in image making and image viewing.

RELIGIOUS PARALLELS

Mediation: the Catholic tradition insists that the commoner can only communicate with the deity through an agent – either a priest or a saint. Protestantism developed a more democratic methodology – every individual has the capacity to commune directly with their maker. This reformist shift is worth thinking about in relation to art.

The power of ritual: one of my dinner companions last night apprised me of another, almost opposite, religious parallel: that in the catholic tradition, it is the ritual that is paramount –the costumes and the set, the call and response chanting, the incense, the formalised body movements – catholicism understood the attraction of ritual for its own sake (the sensory experience), over and above its symbolic meanings.

The death of god and the birth of the individual artist: with the renaissance and the reformation, western civilisation transferred the creative function from god to human. Unfortunately this resulted in particular individuals becoming idolised as if they were gods. Respect for obsession is all very well, but when it reduces the rest of us to being mere consumers of the visions of the pantheon, denying or trivialising the creativity of 'ordinary' people, we are still a long way from democracy.

SPORT

Sport, like the arts, has a professional and commercial aspect and is also an activity that continues to be practised by everyday people as a standard part of their lives. But, even though, like the arts, sport has been stratified and mystified, its 'lower' ranks have not been trivialised (as has occurred in the arts). Although there are superstar elites, this hasn't negated the general recognition of the value and contribution of the everyday, in-community end of the spectrum.

Public perception of sport, while acknowledging, indeed worshipping, the divine athlete, still includes recognition:

- of the health promotion function of physical activity, and of the co-operative values inherent in sports activities (particularly team sports)
- that community sport neither is, nor needs to be (indeed would suffer from becoming) a public performance ('spectator sport')
- that 'participation' statistics count those on the field, not those watching
- of the connection between community sports activities and commercially necessary/viable fan bases (direct participation in the activity consolidates appreciation of the wunderkind)

- of the social function and responsibilities of the stars in promoting widespread and active involvement
- of the need for the public provision of facilities for community use
- of the need for training courses for community sports co-ordinators
- of the need for the activity to be an integral part of the education process (rather than just its appreciation or vocationally directed programs)

If this sort of awareness informed the way that public arts policies were developed, we would be a lot closer to rediscovering, and being able to genuinely celebrate, the essential function that the arts play in supporting a healthy and connected society.

WATER

Perhaps because this resource has become a national obsession, I keep finding analogies that resound (perhaps ripple would be a better metaphor).

The state holds water in a variety of ways. Two of them are reservoirs and swimming pools.

Reservoirs are surrounded by wire fences and protected from public access; they are places of conservation. Swimming pools are for play and exercise. It will be obvious to you on which side of this dichotomy I think galleries should be.

Galleries should be places of joyful immersion, places where trained staff assist users to experience a different way of being in the world – free of gravity, magically floating and cavorting.

HOW MIGHT ALL THIS INFORM BEHAVIOUR?

Seems to me that there are two levels of engagement with their surrounding communities that galleries should be thinking about:

- Community engagement with the institution
- Community engagement with art

And in both cases it is about building empowering and sustainable relationships with

- Schools
- Local artists
- Art teachers
- Local arts groups
- Local business
- Public space

And in closely examining every aspect of the gallery's operations with regard to how local engagement might be enhanced in each area:

- Learning & outreach: what & who & how?
- Display: what & who?
- Conservation: who?
- Acquisition: what?
- Employment: who?
- Governance: who?